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The Level Game

Architectures of Play in American Fiction and Theory, 1968–2018

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Declaration

The word count for this thesis is 79,632.

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Eleni Violaris

Abstract

This thesis investigates the theme of 'levels' in postmodern and contemporary American fiction, as manifested through levels of reality, levels of architecture and levels in games.

Postmodern fiction engages levels in the ontological sense, employing literary devices such as reflexivity and narrative embedding in order to interrogate the nature of fictional worlds. In the later stages of postmodernism, approaching the millennium, technological developments contribute to a terminology of levels in video games. Here, levels come to be associated with goal-oriented hierarchies, and are adopted by the corporate world as motivating tools. Throughout these examples, the navigation of levels is associated with play, and I conceptualise the spatiality of levels through the phrase 'architectures of play'. This applies both abstractly (architectures *of* narrative) and concretely (architectures *in* narrative).

My introduction defines the concept of levels, detailing their role in my period of study. Chapter one discusses the work of Jean Baudrillard, interrogating the relationship between play and ontology through his remark that 'reality has passed completely into the game of reality'. Chapter two analyses John Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse', where I suggest that the spatial navigation of architectural levels in physical funhouses corresponds with the conceptual navigation of narrative levels in this text. Comparing Barth's story with David Foster Wallace's 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way', I illustrate how Wallace uses the same literary materials as Barth but experiments with their arrangement. This is exemplified by Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, which my next chapter examines in relation to the *mise en abyme* and the play within the play. I conclude by suggesting that the physical traversal demanded by the novel is a means of restoring the boundaries of play to the infinite jest.

Chapter four further probes the physicality of texts, studying the material levels of two formally experimental works: Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*. Chapter five contrastingly explores the thematisation of digitality in fiction, where levels are used in a teleological sense to denote progress in video games and commercial gamification strategies. Chapter six elaborates on the theme of technology by discussing levels in relation to networks, comparing Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) with Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018). Both novels depict worlds structured as networks, but I draw attention to the prepositions of their titles, arguing that one must travel through levels in order to realise the network's connections.

Exploring the ludic capacity of levels, my study asks: what do levels *do*? How do we play with levels – architecturally, digitally, and narratively? How do these different media interact in postmodern and contemporary fiction?

Through the above six case studies, I delineate the effects – and affects – associated with the figure of the level, identifying a pervasive 'level game' in postmodern and contemporary literature and culture.

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Introduction

The Level Game

I. Levels we Live By

From video games to shopping centres to car parks to corporate hierarchies, many aspects of contemporary society are organised in terms of levels. Levels are a formalisation of the spaces we navigate: a means of codifying and communicating one's relative location, whether within an abstract environment (progress in a game) or physical surroundings (position in a building). Yet the term is also used in more abstract contexts, where to speak of 'levels of reality' evokes a hierarchy of being. My thesis explores how postmodern and contemporary literature engages with levels, probing the relationship between physical and metaphysical manifestations of such structures.

There are multiple precedents for delineating the development of an abstract figure through different cultural modes. In the domain of philosophy, Peter Sloterdijk's trilogy *Spheres*, with volumes published in 1998, 1999 and 2004, investigates the work performed by figures of enclosure on different scales.[1] In 2016, Clifford Siskin's *System* examined the terminology and evolution of 'system' as a concept from the enlightenment onwards.[2] Another figure that has received widespread critical attention in recent decades, and is perhaps closest to my own study, is the network. Patrick Jagoda's *Network Aesthetics* (2016) studies how networks function in various media from video games to fiction, investigating the experiences and emotions involved in a subject's interaction with such structures.[3] This thesis might similarly be considered a kind of 'Level Aesthetics', where 'network thinking' finds a parallel in 'level thinking'. I focus on the medium of fiction, approaching other media such as television and video games via their literary depictions. Just as Bruno Latour remarked that 'networks are

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[1] Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres. Volume 1, Bubbles: Microspherology*, trans. by Wieland Hoban, 3 vols (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), I; Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres. Volume 2, Globes: Macrospherology*, trans. by Wieland Hoban, 3 vols (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2014), II; Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres. Volume 3, Foams: Plural Spherology*, trans. by Wieland Hoban, 3 vols (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2016), III.

[2] Clifford Siskin, *System: The Shaping of Modern Knowledge*, ed. by Geoffrey C. Bowker and Paul N. Edwards (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

[3] Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

simultaneously real, like nature, narrated, like discourse, and collective, like society' [sic], there are respective examples of levels in architectural floors (real), narrative diegesis (narrated) and organisational systems in schools and workplaces (collective).[4]

The use of levels as a mode of conceptualisation is rooted in embodied experience. In the spirit of Lakoff and Johnson's work, levels form an inherent part of our conceptual systems because the way we move through space involves a stratological awareness. In *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson articulate the physical basis for metaphors ingrained in our language, arguing that 'human *thought processes* are largely metaphorical'.[5] Chapter four is titled 'Orientational Metaphors', where the example 'MORE IS UP; LESS IS DOWN' is grounded in the fact that 'If you add more of a substance or of physical objects to a container or pile, the level goes up'.[6] Similarly, 'HIGH STATUS IS UP; LOW STATUS IS DOWN' because 'Status is correlated with (social) power and (physical) power is up', while 'GOOD IS UP; BAD IS DOWN' because 'Happiness, health, life, and control – the things that principally characterize what is good for a person – are all up'.[7] These schemas can be cumulative; 'VIRTUE IS UP; DEPRAVITY IS DOWN' is based partly on 'GOOD IS UP'.[8] Lakoff and Johnson conclude that 'Most of our fundamental concepts are organized in terms of one or more spatialization metaphors', qualifying that 'verticality enters our experience in many different ways and so gives rise to many different metaphors'.[9]

This propensity towards vertical categorisation contributes to a vocabulary of levels. The correlation of higher levels with progression, whether in a game or career ladder, corresponds with several of the schemas outlined above: 'MORE IS UP; LESS IS DOWN'; 'HIGH STATUS IS UP; LOW STATUS IS DOWN'; 'GOOD IS UP; BAD IS DOWN'. Uses of 'level' in a cognitive context, such as a 'higher level of thought' or 'higher level of awareness', also have a physical correspondence; a subject located at a higher vantage point perceives a greater expanse of space. Collectively, a community which settles on a hilltop

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[4] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 6.

[5] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 6.

[6] Ibid., pp. 15, 16.

[7] Ibid., p. 16.

[8] Ibid., pp. 16–17.

[9] Ibid., pp. 17, 19.

possesses the advantage of being able to spy on advancing attackers and better defend themselves, reinforcing an association between height, perception and power.

But what distinguishes a level from a hierarchy? The term 'level' etymologically derives from the Latin 'lībra', which had two senses: 'a balance, pair of scales', and 'the Roman pound of 12 oz'.[10] The contemporary meaning of 'level' similarly evokes both balance and a unit of measurement. The latter, which comes closest to the aspects and usages of the term discussed in this thesis, is expressed by the OED as follows: 'A position (on a real or imaginary scale) in respect of amount, intensity, extent, or the like; the relative amount or intensity of any property, attribute, or activity' (3d). A key word here is 'position'; a level is a *location* on a comparative scale. The term implies a fixed reference point and common standard of measurement, drawing attention to the way that an object interacts with a hierarchy. Hierarchies can be static, but 'level' is often used in goal-oriented contexts (such as gaming) where movement is solicited through a scale.

Levels refer to a position on a scale that does not necessarily take vertical form, yet evokes spatial extension. Spatiality is significant here; in *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), Lakoff and Johnson contend that 'Spatial-relations concepts are at the heart of our conceptual system': 'Our sense of what is real begins with and depends crucially upon our bodies, especially our sensorimotor apparatus, which enables us to perceive, move, and manipulate'.[11] This is evinced by categorisation, a cognitive act performed by all neural beings and driven by an animal's sensing apparatus.[12] Yet categorisation involves two spatial directions. On one hand, most categories are 'matters of degree' with 'graded concepts characterizing degrees along some scale'.[13] On the other, 'When we conceptualize categories in this way, we often envision them using a spatial metaphor, as if they were containers, with an interior, an exterior, and a boundary'.[14] Categorisation engages a dialectic of inside-outside as well as up-down, and the former is also engaged when discussing 'levels of reality'; literary formulations such as stories within stories and plays within plays often draw upon a vocabulary of embedding, expressed through metaphors including McHale's 'Chinese Box Worlds'.[15]

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[10] D. P. Simpson, *Cassell's Latin Dictionary*, 5th edn (London: Cassell, 1968), p. 345.

[11] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), pp. 30, 17.

[12] Ibid., p. 17.

[13] Ibid., p. 20.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2004), pp. 112–30.

According to Lakoff and Johnson, embodied experience facilitates a universality in human organisational frameworks: 'our conceptual systems draw largely upon the commonalities of our bodies and of the environments we live in. The result is that much of a person's conceptual system is either universal or widespread across languages and cultures'.[16] The use of 'levels' in conceptual systems is indeed evident across time periods and cultures. In the Western tradition, an engagement with the idea of 'levels of reality' can be traced back to Plato's allegory of the cave, where the story of a prisoner ascending out of a cave towards the sun forms an allegory of knowledge and enlightenment. Here, ontological progression (ascending through realities) is mapped onto a spatial movement upwards and outwards. I must qualify that I follow Brian McHale's specific use of the term 'ontological' here, as opposed the broader sense of studying the nature of being with its various philosophical appropriations from Democritus to Heidegger. In *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), McHale uses 'ontological' to suggest 'world-making', where postmodernism's 'ontological dominant' refers to an interest in the construction and nature of worlds.[17] I similarly use 'ontological levels' to refer to the levels of reality evoked in domains such as fiction or theology, with hypothetically 'more real' and 'less real' worlds.

Returning to the allegory of the cave, Platonic philosophy was reinterpreted through a theological framework during the early centuries of Christianity. This movement was called Neoplatonism, and its ideas were absorbed by Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, where the ontological and hierarchical also converge. Dante's theology describes a system with three levels: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Each of these is divided into further levels; for instance, *Inferno* comprises nine circles, and the eighth is a large cavern containing ten further concentric caverns as subdivisions of fraud. The depth of Dante's circles of hell indicates the severity of the sin and therefore the punishment, in keeping with the schema that 'VIRTUE IS UP; DEPRAVITY IS DOWN'. Similarly, Purgatory is a mountain with seven terraces from pride to lust, its summit culminating in the Earthly Paradise. Here the pilgrim meets Beatrice, his new guide who takes him up through the celestial circles of *Paradiso*. At the highest level of *Paradiso*, he glimpses the level where levels break down – which is necessarily inexpressible. This is the end of the world system as defined by apophatic Christian theology.

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[16] Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy*, p. 6.

[17] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 10.

The levels were the pilgrim's ladder; upon transcendence into God, they collapse into immanent unity.

The levels in Dante's *Commedia* have sustained an enduring fascination across eight centuries, both in academic literary criticism and popular culture. Dan Brown's *Inferno* was published in 2013, with a film version emerging in 2016, and 2010 saw the release of a video game called 'Dante's Inferno'. Here, players control the character 'Dante' who travels through the nine circles of hell in order to rescue Beatrice from Lucifer. The structure of the video game, with its levels of progression and embedded games, mimics the structure of Dante's epic poem. Dante's levels lend themselves to visualisation, appealing to a human instinct for imaginative navigation and progression through a formalised system.

The ascension through levels of spirituality, and its appropriation in a context of games, is not limited to Western religion; the popular American board game 'Chutes and Ladders' is derived from the British 'Snakes and Ladders', which in turn originates from an Indian board game called *gyān chaupar*. The latter depicts religious advancement in a manner not unlike Dante's *Commedia*. Andrew Topsfield describes how the various Vaishnava, Jain and Muslim versions of the game are fundamentally similar, involving a progression

> from the lower squares, inscribed with the names of hellish states and earthly vices, to the higher, representing more advanced spiritual states and heavenly realms, and thus ultimately to the winning square, the abode of the supreme Deity or final Liberation. On the way the player's piece may undergo rapid promotion or demotion by means of the ladders and snakes incorporated in the design of the board.[18]

Topsfield goes on to discuss how the snakes and ladders game device was brought from India to England by colonial families during the time of the British empire, where it was adopted in games of 'Kismet'.[19] Participating in a tradition of morality games, 'Kismet' contained eight ladder squares including 'Penitence, Kindness, Pity, Obedience and Self-denial' while the thirteen snakes spanned vices from pride to cruelty.[20] Snakes and ladders games were popular at the turn of the twentieth century in England, although as the decades progressed references to their Indian origins gradually disappeared and the game evolved into the secular form in

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[18] Andrew Topsfield, 'The Indian Game of Snakes and Ladders', *Artibus Asiae*, 46.3 (1985), 203–26 (p. 203).

[19] Ibid., p. 213.

[20] Ibid., p. 214.

which it appears today. In the U.S.A., the ‘Chutes and Ladders’ variation of the game replaces snakes with slides, further translating mystical Indian symbolism into imagery from the contemporary entertainment industry.

The above instances suggest something simultaneously moralistic and ludic in the navigation of levels: a sense of reward in ascending a scale, encapsulated by the ‘GOOD IS UP; BAD IS DOWN’ schema. The property of progression ascribed to levels in games, theology and corporate systems is rooted in the perspectives accessed when physically higher, and may also be linked to the fact that the head, as the locus of thought, is the highest part of the body. Due to the workings of gravity, ascending requires greater exertion than descending, contributing to a valuing of ascension as more difficult to achieve. Such physical features condition the conceptual correspondence between the ontological and the hierarchical: formulations of a higher or greater reality that is above or outside us. Level thinking thus invokes the two geometries of verticality and containment, corresponding respectively with height and depth.

As evident in the above examples, the ways in which levels have been employed in literature and otherwise could be examined through multiple case studies. However, my thesis focuses on the most recent uses of the figure, exploring its function in literature from the past fifty years. Postmodern fiction, flourishing in the mid to late twentieth century, particularly engages ‘levels’ in the ontological sense, employing literary devices such as reflexivity and narrative embedding in order to interrogate the nature of fictional worlds. In the later stages of postmodernism, approaching the new millennium, technological developments contribute to a terminology of levels in video games. Levels come to be associated with goal-oriented hierarchies, and are adopted by the corporate world through the phenomenon of ‘gamification’: the use of game mechanics as tools that stimulate motivation in commercial contexts.

From postmodern paradox to video games, the navigation of levels is often associated with play. On one hand, the playfulness of postmodern metafiction is frequently attributed to a lack of teleology; there is a sense of trick and optical illusion, where exits or endings are obscured by forms of infinite regress. On the other, the playfulness of levels in corporate and video game contexts is deliberately goal-oriented, where the feeling of progression is a motivating factor for the traversal of a virtual environment. I trace this dynamic in my thesis, conceptualising the spatiality of levels through the phrase ‘architectures of play’ which can be applied both abstractly (architectures *of* narrative) and concretely (architectures *in* narrative). I explore how and why texts play with levels, how these levels might be subject to circular or

teleological organisation, and how they emerge through different media with the advent of digitality.

The scope of my thesis sets three constraints: America, fiction, and the time span 1968–2018. Since the mid-twentieth century, the economic, cultural and political dominance of the U.S.A. on the world stage (encapsulated by the epithet 'The American Century') has made America the forefront of what Jean Baudrillard terms 'hyperreality'. This quality is not limited to America, but America has been the cultural centre of developments featuring a preoccupation with 'levels' in both the hierarchical and ontological senses. The first is grounded in a competitive compulsion towards ranking and measurement in large corporations and social media. The second emerges in the representations of alternative realities driven by consumerism (advertising, branding, entertainment) and technological innovation (television, computers, smartphones). With the dominance of the American entertainment industry, explorations of life as a simulation have formed the content of much American media, as evinced by films such as *The Matrix* (1999) and *The Truman Show* (1998). The mid-late twentieth century has also seen a proliferation of American metafiction, which my thesis considers as an instantiation of level thinking.

In the context of literature, fiction is the key literary form through which themes of reflexivity and levels of reality have been explored. While level thinking in the Renaissance found primary expression in theatre, with devices such as the play within the play, the postmodern preoccupation with levels has largely emerged through narrative forms which vary in style and scale. Short stories such as those collected in Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968) foreground the storytelling process by experimenting with levels of diegesis. At same time, there are vast 'megafictions' that interrogate world-making such as Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996). McHale discusses how these megafictions are characterised by a 'shared preoccupation with ontology', as well as frequently containing 'an internal scale-model of themselves: a mise-en-abyme'.[21] I examine both kinds of texts, considering the role of levels in form and content. Formally, there are levels of diegesis whose hierarchies are often twisted into paradoxical equivalence. Thematically, there are depictions of worlds within worlds, where the inset worlds are often expressed through other media such as television and video games.

[21] Brian McHale, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 75.

I take 1968 as my starting point to coincide with the publication of John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*. This text encapsulates the key themes of this thesis – namely levels, architecture, play. Concluding in 2018 provides a neat fifty year span and brings my research up to contemporary fiction. It must be acknowledged that there are authors whose works fruitfully explore these themes (Borges, Pynchon, Nabokov, among others) who are absent from the discussion, with some of their writings preceding the time span I have chosen. Rather than offering 'coverage' of the period, my thesis examines a series of case studies, moving through the later phases of postmodernism and considering how fiction has engaged with technological developments. The idea is to trace 'level thinking' through its instantiations in postmodernism and beyond.

My thesis comprises six case studies of the relationship between levels and play in American fiction and theory between 1968 and 2018, progressing in roughly chronological order. I will now go on to outline the role of levels in the literary and theoretical contexts within which my analysis takes place, before moving on to a discussion of play.

II. Postmodern Levels: The Origins of the Ontological Dominant

In *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987), Brian McHale uses Raymond Williams's concept of the 'dominant' to describe the emphasis of each literary epoch, arguing that the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological while the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological.[22] If modernism foregrounded questions such as 'How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?', postmodernist thought asks: 'What is a world? What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?'[23] Ontological foregrounding involves creating worlds with internal contradictions, exposing the boundaries of a world through metafiction, and foregrounding the act of narration. Yet why did this interest in world-making – with its attendant interest in 'levels of reality' – emerge? While this thesis focuses on the functions and effects of levels in specific literary texts rather than the reasons for their existence, I will briefly outline several contextual factors contributing to a particular stratological awareness during this period.

[22] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, pp. 3–11; Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 121–27.

[23] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, pp. 9–10.

As popularised by the title of Fredric Jameson's famous work, the economic substrate of postmodernism is 'late capitalism' – an era characterised by consumerism and globalisation, facilitated by technological development.[24] In his introduction to postmodern science fiction, Larry McCaffery discusses the 'rapid proliferation of technologically mass-produced 'products' that are essentially *reproductions* or *abstractions* – images, advertising, information, memories, styles, simulated experiences, and copies of original experiences'.[25] Distributed through technologies from television to computers to cameras, these commodities have 'interpenetrated our daily lives with their "virtual realities"'.[26] Bran Nicol suggests that this saturation of media and information has caused a shift in our engagement with reality: work often involves 'engaging with symbolic representations rather than real, tangible objects', while 'much of our leisure time is spent engaging in simulated experiences or consuming more information'.[27] As a result, 'existence has become more "virtual" than real'.[28] This sensation was examined in Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), which analysed the presence and power of the image in 1960s culture. In the following decades, Debord's work was developed by Jean Baudrillard, whose ideas regarding simulacra and simulation constitute the subject of chapter one of this thesis.

The work of Debord and Baudrillard illustrates how the economic conditions of consumerism filtered into changing social conceptions of reality, and Patricia Waugh links the literary emphasis on world-making to two leading ideas in the field of sociology at this time: the sense of reality as a construct, and 'framing' as the activity through which it is constructed.[29] She describes how 'contemporary metafiction draws attention to the fact that life, as well as novels, is constructed through frames'.[30] Erving Goffman produced key works in this domain;

[24] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

[25] Larry McCaffery, 'Introduction: The Desert of the Real', in *Storming the Reality Studio: A Casebook of Cyberpunk & Postmodern Science Fiction*, ed. by Larry McCaffery (London: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 1–16 (p. 4).

[26] Ibid., p. 5.

[27] Bran Nicol, *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 4.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1984), p. 28.

[30] Ibid., p. 29.

The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1956) explores the notion of self as a performance, while *Frame Analysis* (1972) studies framing as the organisation of experience.[31] A cultural preoccupation with ways in which life is mediated, framed, performed and composed of multiple 'realities' in the economic environment of late capitalism feeds into literary investigations of these themes. Waugh remarks: 'The present increased awareness of "meta" levels of discourse and experience', expressed through terms such as 'metapolitics', 'metarhetoric' and 'metatheatre', 'is partly a consequence of an increased social and cultural self-consciousness'.[32] In response to the increased mystification of late twentieth-century power structures, metafictional writers turn 'inwards to their own medium of expression, in order to examine the relationship between fictional form and social reality'.[33]

In keeping with this inward turn, another factor contributing to the preoccupation with literary 'levels of reality' involves formal developments regarding the novel. As has been frequently noted, variations on metafiction and reflexive fiction are by no means specific to postmodernism; embedded narratives feature in Homer's *Odyssey*, frame stories in the *One Thousand and One Nights* and reflexive narration in Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. In his introduction to the ontological dominant, McHale cites the 'old Analogy between Author and God' in the work of Philip Sidney.[34] Linda Hutcheon also notes the 'Aristotelian concept of mimesis' in her study of metafiction, discussing how Miguel de Cervantes in the sixteenth century 'demonstrated that in the novel form the narrative act itself is, for the reader, part of the action'.[35] She asserts that 'Modern metafiction is largely what shall be referred to here as a mimesis of process', alluding to Northrop Frye's distinction between Aristotelian and Longinian impulses in fiction: a 'view of literature as product and the view of literature as process'.[36] In this scheme, postmodern literature is simply one manifestation of the 'process' impulse, as literature across contexts cycles between these phases.

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[31] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Allen Lane, 1969); Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

[32] Waugh, p. 3.

[33] Ibid., p. 11.

[34] McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, p. 29.

[35] Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980), p. 5.

[36] Hutcheon, p. 5; Northrop Frye, 'Towards Defining an Age of Sensibility', in *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), pp. 130–37 (p. 131).

The sense of reflexivity as part of the novel's generic development was voiced by John Barth in 'The Literature of Exhaustion', where he articulates the 'used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities'.[37] Barth continues that 'one way to handle such a feeling might be to write a novel about it', qualifying that 'Whether historically the novel expires or persists as a major art form seems immaterial to me; if enough writers and critics *feel* apocalyptical about it, their feeling becomes a considerable cultural fact'.[38] In *Kinds of Literature*, Alistair Fowler situates this feeling as part of a trans-historical cycle: 'Many kinds have been spoken of as "played out," exhausted, spent. And it may be that frequent imitation can use up formal possibilities, to the point that a kind no longer offers sufficient fresh variety to promise excellence'.[39] In terms of the novel, he suggests that 'reports of the genre's death […] may reflect a sense that the novel, and in particular the verisimilar novel, has reached a critical stage of development'.[40] While it is clear that the novel did not die with Barth's statement in 1967 (and has survived numerous other statements about its death), the form has experienced a reflexive phase which can be considered in terms of the literary cycles outlined above.

To summarise, the proliferation of represented worlds in a consumerist society, facilitated by the development of technology, expressed theoretically through notions of framing and performance, converging with a reflexive stage in the novel's formal development, all contributed to fiction that multiplies and interrogates 'levels of reality' as part of a trend that McHale calls the 'ontological dominant'.

Alongside critical studies of the factors driving these literary developments, there has been much work on identifying the mechanisms of reflexive techniques, resulting in an inventory of vocabularies. Lucien Dällenbach's *The Mirror in the Text* (1989) explores the effects of the *mise en abyme* [placed into abyss] on the French *nouveau roman*. In Dällenbach's definition, the term denotes 'any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it', and he explores variations on this technique including simple duplication (a text containing a similar text), infinite duplication (a text containing a similar text, which

[37] John Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 62–76 (p. 64).

[38] Ibid., p. 72.

[39] Alistair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 165.

[40] Ibid.

contains a similar text, and so on) and aporetic duplication (a text that paradoxically encloses the text that encloses it).[41] In the same year, Viveca Fürедy considered fictional levels in terms of 'boundaries' in 'A Structural Model of Phenomena with Embedding in Literature and Other Arts'.[42] She outlines how a boundary 'functions within a system without being part of it', turning 'difference' (more/less) into 'distinction' (either/or).[43] Along these lines, Füredy distinguishes between dividing a continuum into units on the same logical level (for instance, a thermometer) and on different logical levels (a painting within a painting).[44] This corresponds with the above discussion of hierarchical and ontological levels, with their respective up-down and inside-outside spatialities.

Waugh similarly acknowledges the plurality of definitions for what she calls 'self-conscious writing', listing 'the introverted novel', 'the anti-novel', 'irrealism', 'surfiction', 'the self-begetting novel' and 'fabulation'.[45] All of these, like 'metafiction', 'imply a fiction that self-consciously reflects upon its own structure as language; all offer different perspectives on the same process. But the terms shift the emphasis in different ways'.[46] She gives the example of the 'self-begetting novel', a classification developed by Steven G. Kellman; here, argues Waugh, the 'emphasis is on the development of the narrator, on the modernist concern of *consciousness* rather than the postmodernist one of *fictionality*'.[47]

Each critical approach thus centralises a different technique relating to reflexivity. Hutcheon draws upon the narcissus myth, Dällenbach the *mise en abyme*, McHale the 'Chinese Box', Waugh (following Goffman) the 'frame', and Füredy the 'boundary'. Each figure evokes distinct associations; the narcissus myth suggests a moralistic aspect to self-absorption, the 'frame' draws attention to scale, the 'boundary' points to the moment of transition, the *mise en abyme* conjures a dizzying, abyssal infinity and the 'Chinese Box' emphasises enclosure and containment. Accordingly, the 'level' evokes its own cluster of associations, including

[41] Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. by Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), pp. 8, 35.

[42] Viveca Füredy, 'A Structural Model of Phenomena with Embedding in Literature and Other Arts', *Poetics Today*, 10.4 (1989), 745–69.

[43] Ibid., p. 748.

[44] Ibid., p. 747.

[45] Waugh, p. 14.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.; Steven G. Kellman, *The Self-Begetting Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

measurement, positioning, progression and contemporary gaming. The term is actively used in abstract or metaphysical contexts (levels of reality; levels of meaning; levels of awareness) as well as hierarchical contexts (levels in a game; levels on a thermometer; levels in a shopping centre). Since no systematic study that conceptualises 'levels' has been carried out so far, my thesis draws upon the specific implications of this term in order to provide a new perspective on the relationship between hierarchy, ontology and play in postmodern and contemporary American fiction.

III. Level Postmodernism: Immanence and Equivalence

There is also another, hitherto unexamined definition of level; as mentioned above, the term derives from the Latin 'lībra' as balance, and 'level' accordingly indicates a condition of flatness. Incidentally, flatness is the first definition of 'level' in the OED: 'senses relating to a horizontal position of rest'. This aspect of the term also has a particular valence in the context of postmodernism, where an interest in levels of reality is concurrent with a sense that there is no substantial distinction between reality and fiction, no hierarchies of existence, no transcendent or 'objective' position of critical observation. In metafiction, attention is often draw to how proliferating or paradoxical structures involving narrative levels imply the equivalence of fiction and reality. As in Dällenbach's 'aporetic duplication', levels lose meaning when the container is simultaneously and contradictorily contained. This collapse in levels is another facet of the cultural tendencies outlined above: in a society permeated with information, advertisements and virtual realities, one can no longer meaningfully separate real from unreal. There are no more distinctions in *type*, as the painting within the painting has the same ontological status as the painting.

Such a levelling of levels is associated with certain theoretical developments – namely, a philosophy of immanence as expressed by Derridean deconstruction. Jameson writes a chapter on immanence in *Postmodernism*, casting the 'end of "theory"' in terms of the 'old tension between "immanence" and "transcendence"'.[48] Regarding literary criticism, he discusses the formalism of the New Critics as a kind of 'textual immanence':

[48] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 183.

> the forms of theoretical transcendence they sought to repel were extrinsic historical and biographical information, but also political opinions, sociological generalizations, and 'Freudian' concerns: the 'old' historicism plus Marx and Freud.[49]

Tracing these ideas through New Historicism, he asserts that 'Contemporary thought and culture are […] profoundly *nominalist*', prioritising local specificities over collective generalisations.[50] This corresponds with Jean-Francois Lyotard's famous definition of postmodernism as an 'incredulity towards metanarratives', emphasising instead the coexistence of 'many different language games' which 'give rise to institutions in patches – local determinism'.[51] In spatial terms, Jameson identifies one of the 'constitutive features' of the postmodern as 'a new *depthlessness*, which finds its prolongation both in contemporary "theory" and in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum' [italics mine], alluding to Baudrillard.[52] As elaborated in chapter one, Baudrillard's simulacrum exists in a condition of immanence: 'There is no longer any transcendence or depth, but only the immanent surface of operations unfolding, the smooth and functional surface of communication'.[53]

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari were key figures in formulating a philosophy of immanence. Deleuze, in *Pure Immanence*, identifies the paradoxes inherent in discussions of this concept:

> Immanence is not related to Some Thing as a unity superior to all things or to a Subject as an act that brings about a synthesis of things: it is only when immanence is no longer immanent to anything other than itself that we can speak of a plane of immanence.[54]

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, immanence is associated with the networked figure of the rhizome, as Deleuze and Guattari discuss the 'despotic formations of immanence and channelization specific to rhizomes, just as there are anarchic deformations in the transcendent system of trees,

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[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid., p. 185.

[51] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. xxiv.

[52] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 6.

[53] Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer, trans. by Bernard Schutze and Caroline Schutze (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988), p. 12.

[54] Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, trans. by Anne Boyman (New York: Urzone, 2001), p. 27.

aerial roots, and subterranean stems'.[55] These ideas will be probed further in chapter six, where I consider the combination of transcendent, arborescent structures (levels) with immanent, rhizomatic structures (networks).

As discussed above, postmodernist fiction plays with the multiplication of ontological levels, formally experimenting with techniques such as the *mise en abyme*. At the same time, this fiction participates in a discourse of 'immanence' or depthlessness, as exhibited by the frequently paradoxical relationship between narrative levels which ultimately collapses any hierarchical distinction. The paradox is encapsulated by the geometrical figure of the Möbius strip which constitutes Barth's 'Frame-Tale', the first short story in *Lost in the Funhouse*.

The peculiar relationship between hierarchy and flatness – between a condition of *levels*, and a condition that is *level* – can be reconciled through the work of Douglas Hofstadter, who outlines a pattern he calls a 'Strange Loop' or 'tangled hierarchy'. He describes how 'The "Strange Loop" phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started'.[56] This is visualised in the drawings of Escher, as 'each local region of Escher's *Ascending and Descending* is quite legitimate; it is only the way that they are globally put together that creates an impossibility'.[57] Another example is a structure called the Penrose steps (fig. 1).

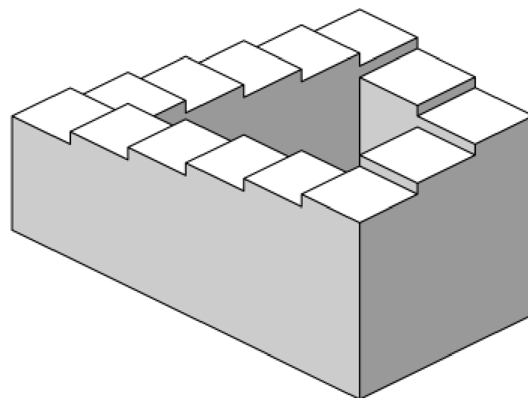

Figure 1. Penrose steps

[55] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1987), p. 20.

[56] Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid* (London: Penguin, 1980), p. 10.

[57] Ibid., p. 21.

Here, levels which appear hierarchical up close are indistinguishable from afar. This structure can be applied to literary texts; the equivalence of levels from a 'global' perspective does not necessarily negate their distinction on a 'local' perspective, where the moment of transition might perform some significant work.

Using the strange loop as a theoretical tool, I probe the opposition between immanence and depthlessness (associated with the figure of the network) on one hand, and transcendent hierarchies (associated with the figure of the level) on the other. This opposition is exemplified by a table constructed by Ihab Hassan in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (1971), which comprises two columns listing features of modernism and postmodernism. Hassan posits modernism's 'Purpose' against postmodernism's 'Play', modernism's 'Hierarchy' against postmodernism's 'Anarchy', modernism's 'Root/Depth' against postmodernism's 'Rhizome/Surface', and modernism's 'Transcendence' against postmodernism's 'Immanence'.[58] Hassan qualifies that

> the dichotomies this table represents remain insecure, equivocal. For differences shift, defer, even collapse; concepts in any one vertical column are not all equivalent; and inversions and exceptions, in both modernism and postmodernism, abound. Still, I would submit that rubrics in the right column point to the postmodern tendency, the tendency of indetermanence, and so may bring us closer to its historical and theoretical definition.[59]

What happens, then, if purpose is combined with play? What functions might structures comprising both roots and rhizomes perform? In other words, what are the effects of levels – which evoke both purpose (goals) and play (games), depth (spatial navigation) and surface (flatness) – in literary texts, and their literary contexts? Exploring the relationship between these principles is facilitated by the time span of this thesis, which moves through the later stages of postmodernism and into the twenty-first century. Here, the circularity of postmodern levels meets a renewed cultural emphasis on teleology. Combined with developments in digital media, this adds another dimension to the discussion of levels carried out so far.

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[58] Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus*, 2nd edn (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), pp. 267–68.

[59] Ibid., p. 269.

IV. Post-Postmodernism: A Teleological Dominant?

It is still unclear as to which movement, if any, characterises the contemporary; whether postmodernism has been superseded, whether there is a post-postmodernism, or whether any of the other various modernisms proposed will gain traction. Steven Connor opens his essay on 'Postmodernism grown old' (2005) by citing Beckett's *Endgame*: 'Finished, it's nearly finished, it must be nearly finished'.[60] The very term 'post-postmodernism' seems to be playing this endgame, implying extrapolation rather than transition – an asymptotic ending that is never quite achieved. Indeed, De Villo Sloan wrote 'The Decline of American Postmodernism' in 1987, a period which Connor retrospectively categorised as the second of postmodernism's four phases.[61] Josh Toth also suggests that postmodernism's 'deathwatch began [...] as early as the mid-1980s': 'since the end of the 1980s an increasing number of literary critics have announced, or simply assumed, the end of postmodernism'.[62] The end of postmodernism is, through a fitting irony, a constitutive aspect of postmodern discourse.

Nevertheless, the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has seen the emergence of new areas of discussion which have not yet settled into fixed forms; as Peter Boxall notes in *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, 'the time we are living through is very difficult to bring into focus, and often only becomes legible in retrospect'.[63] One such area sets issues of ethics, sincerity and teleology against postmodern circularity and equivalence. Connor remarks:

> Postmodernism had proved extremely resourceful in showing the constructed nature of systems of values: but writers in the late 1990s began to ask whether it might not be possible to imagine a postmodernism that would be not just constructionist, but itself 'constructive'.[64]

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[60] Samuel Beckett cited in Steven Connor, 'Postmodernism Grown Old', in *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century*, ed. by David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 31–48 (p. 33).

[61] De Villo Sloan, 'The Decline of American Postmodernism', *SubStance*, 16.3 (1987), 29–43; Steven Connor, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. by Steven Connor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 1–4.

[62] Josh Toth, *The Passing of Postmodernism: A Spectroanalysis of the Contemporary* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), pp. 2–3.

[63] Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 1.

[64] Connor, 'Postmodernism Grown Old', p. 46.

This 'turn […] to the ethical' is similarly posited by Robert McLaughlin, who asserts that post-postmodernism seeks to 'reenergize literature's social mission' by reminding readers that 'other realities are possible' as alternatives to the one in which they live.[65] Such principles were espoused by the movement of 'New Sincerity', which is particularly associated with David Foster Wallace. Wallace comments on the exhaustion of postmodern irony in an interview with Larry McCaffery and his essay 'E Unibus Pluram'; together, these two texts have been taken as manifestoes for an emphasis on 'single-entendre principles'.[66] As put by Adam Kelly: 'contemporary American fiction foregrounds a theory and practice of sincerity that is forward rather than backward looking, new rather than old'.[67] Like the irony to which it responds, this 'sincerity' has been conceived of in a number of different ways; for instance, Wolfgang Funk adopts the related concept of 'authenticity' in order to 'establish an aesthetics of reconstruction as the principal literary development in recent years'.[68]

The above discussions indicate a post-postmodern tendency towards restoring levels to level postmodernism by reimbuing fiction and criticism with a sense of outward purposiveness, soliciting movement towards a goal. In her introduction to a collection of works by early twenty-first century American writers, Zadie Smith remarks that the stories 'seem to be attempting to make something happen *off* the page, *outside* words, a curious thing for a piece of writing to want to do'.[69] This emphasis on outward agency is a recurring theme of fiction responding to postmodernism. As I discuss in chapters three and four, literature written at the end of the century continues to exhibit a repertoire postmodern techniques (reflexivity, irony,

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[65] Ibid.; Robert L. McLaughlin, 'Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World', *Symplokē*, 12.1/2 (2004), 53–68 (pp. 55, 67).

[66] Larry McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace', in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 21–52; David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction' in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 1998), pp. 21–82 (p. 81).

[67] Adam Kelly, 'The New Sincerity', in *Postmodern/Postwar and after: Rethinking American Literature*, ed. by Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), pp. 197–208 (p. 198).

[68] Wolfgang Funk, *The Literature of Reconstruction: Authentic Fiction in the New Millennium* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 3.

[69] Zadie Smith, 'Introduction', in *Zadie Smith Introduces The Burned Children of America* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2003), pp. xi–xxii (p. xx).

mise en abyme), but these techniques are repurposed towards some defined end rather than exposing the equivalence of all constructs.

Still, the 'New Sincerity' movement is just one post-postmodern inclination among many; the anthology *Supplanting the Postmodern* collects essays on Remodernism, Performatism, Hypermodernism, Automodernism, Renewalism, Altermodernism, Digimodernism and Metamodernism.[70] Surveying these possibilities, Funk remarks: 'If there is anything which unites these concepts, apart from their unwillingness to abandon modernism as their terminological basis, it is a focus on the media-related transformations of recent years'.[71] There does seem to be a critical consensus that, in Katherine Hayles's words, 'To think about contemporary literature is inevitably to encounter digital media'.[72] Hayles goes on to assert that 'So massive are these cumulative changes that they outweigh all the other influences on contemporary literature – combined'.[73]

In this vein, Zygmunt Baumann suggests that technological developments have crucially altered the perceived relationship between space and time in contemporary culture: 'once the distance passed in a unit of time came to be dependent on technology, […] all […] limits to the speed of movement could be in principle transgressed'.[74] We have, declares Baumann, entered the 'era of instantaneity'.[75] Elaborating on this, Boxall outlines the contrast between the 'kinetic speed of the motor vehicle' and 'the electronic speed of digital information exchange' – a transition evident in the media discussed in this thesis as the kinetic play of the funhouse (chapter two) gives way to the electronic play of the computer game (chapter five).[76] The shift from the kinetic to the electronic, suggests Boxall, is the driving force that has led several thinkers to posit a 'new phase of modernity' at the turn of the millennium.[77]

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[70] *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century*, ed. by David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

[71] Funk, p. 3.

[72] Katherine Hayles, 'Influences of the Digital', in *Postmodern/Postwar and after: Rethinking American Literature*, ed. by Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek and Daniel Worden (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016), pp. 197–208 (p. 209).

[73] Ibid.

[74] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 9.

[75] Ibid., p. 15.

[76] Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, p. 4.

[77] Ibid.

There are various ways in which digital developments can be seen to have influenced fiction, including, as explored in chapter four, a reaffirmation of the print medium. Jessica Pressman identifies an 'aesthetics of bookishness' in twenty-first century literature, contending that 'the threat posed to books by digital technologies becomes a source of artistic inspiration and formal experimentation'.[78] She describes how novels such as *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007) 'exploit the power of the print page in ways that draw attention to the book as a multimedia format, one informed by and connected to digital technologies'.[79] The flipside to this 'threat' is the possibility of new, hybrid forms, as identified by McHale: 'if wider access to computer technology and networked connectivity threatened the codex book, which had historically been the novel's main medium, it also provided opportunities for narrative fiction'.[80] McHale discusses Robert Coover's advocacy of 'fiction that was born digital, designed to exploit the capacity of computers to store, retrieve, and connect blocks of information: hypertext fiction'.[81] Hayles also mentions hypertext-like narratives, considering them in terms of 'network fiction'.[82] Yet alongside such formal experiments, there is also a reinvigoration of what Adam Kelly calls 'Formally Conventional Fiction'.[83] The effects of digitality are not always explored through the form of contemporary writing, but may be engaged with in content; Virginia Pignagnoli remarks that 'digital media is a *thematic* component shared by many post-postmodern fictions' [italics mine].[84]

One aspect of digital media that has been thematised involves levels, which have acquired new associations through the development of the digital market by entering the vocabulary of computer games. Most textbooks on game design feature 'level' in their title, and Ed Byrne defines 'level' as 'synonymous with "map", "mission" or "stage" in many games'.[85] He describes how the term likely originated in 'early arcade machines and home

[78] Jessica Pressman, 'The Aesthetics of Bookishness in Twenty-First-Century Literature', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 48.4 (2009), 465–82 (p. 465).

[79] Ibid.

[80] McHale, *Cambridge Introduction*, p. 129.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Hayles, 'Influences of the Digital', p. 211.

[83] Adam Kelly, 'Formally Conventional Fiction', in *American Literature in Transition, 2000–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 46–60 (p. 47).

[84] Virginia Pignagnoli, 'Narrative Theory and the Brief and Wondrous Life of Post-Postmodern Fiction', *Poetics Today*, 39.1 (2018), 183–99 (p. 186).

[85] Ed Byrne, *Game Level Design* (Hingham, MA: Charles River Media, 2005), p. 6.

game systems where the play experience was divided into increments of difficulty, called stages or levels'.[86] This terminology in turn derived from role-playing and tabletop games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, which

> divided game environments – most often dungeons and subterranean structures – into vertical floors, which not only determined how deep the players were, but also gave an indication of how powerful the creatures would be. Level Five creatures were obviously going to be a much bigger challenge than mere Level Ones, being further from the surface and the safety of retreat.[87]

Here, levels indicate both a space and a spectrum; stratification is expressed architecturally. Levels in games are hierarchical, acting as motivational tools that evoke particular feelings in their ascension: an alternation between suspense and satisfaction, anticipation and fulfilment. Yet these levels are also significantly teleological, designed to stimulate a sense of progression that is achieved through the potential fulfilment of a goal. I investigate these ideas further in chapter five, which explores twenty-first century literature that engages thematically with levels in digital games and other gamified corporate systems.

The gamic context of these formalised levels points to another strand that is central to this thesis: the relationship between levels, both ontological and hierarchical, and play. A quality of play is a key feature of discourse involving levels from postmodern ontological experimentation to digital formalisation, as I illustrate in the following section.

V. Architectures of Play

One of the first cultural theorists to conduct an extended study of play was Johan Huizinga, who published *Homo Ludens* in 1938. Huizinga suggests that play lies at the origins of human civilisation, summarising its formal characteristics as follows: a free activity undertaken voluntarily, in a sphere distinct from ordinary life, connected with no material interest, defined by its own rules and boundaries, associated with secret and specific social groupings.[88] A particularly important feature is play's spatial demarcation:

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[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), p. 13.

> The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function playgrounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.[89]

Huizinga implies that play takes place on a distinct, representational level of existence. In other words, play as activity holds the same ontological relation to the 'ordinary world' as a theatrical play – a relationship which I unpack in chapter three. While Huizinga gave multiple examples of playgrounds, from temples to screens, the terminology of the 'magic circle' has persisted and continues to be used in play theory today, having entered the vocabulary of game design.[90]

Roger Caillois expands on Huizinga's work in *Man, Play, and Games* (1961), where he reinforces the ontological distinctness of the play-world: 'play is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life, and generally is engaged with precise limits of time and place'; a 'restricted, closed, protected universe: a pure space'.[91] At the same time, Caillois articulates the limitations of Huizinga's analysis, suggesting that the concept of 'play' requires further refinement. He goes on to define four categories of game: *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation) and *ilinx* (vertigo).[92] Literature is *mimicry* insofar as it constitutes a verbal representation, and works of fiction themselves could be considered 'magic circles' in Huizinga's sense: self-contained worlds within which 'special rules obtain'. According to this logic, techniques such as the *mise en abyme* are games both with and within magic circles. At the same time, other categories of play appear both in literary depictions (texts which thematise games, including sports) and literary form (fiction structured as a puzzle might evoke *agon* as competition, while the mathematical constraints of the Oulipo movement suggest games of *alea* as chance).

Mark Bresnan suggests a distinction between the 'structuralist' framework of play, espoused by Huizinga and Caillois, and post-structuralist theories of play, which 'question the

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[89] Ibid., p. 10.

[90] See, for instance, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play – Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), p. 92.

[91] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. by Meyer Barash (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2001), pp. 6, 7.

[92] Ibid., p. 12.

stability of these rules and limits'.[93] This is exemplified by Jacques Derrida's 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (1967). For Derrida, play is a function of the violation rather than the implementation of structure; he suggests that 'play is the disruption of presence', where 'Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way round'.[94] In contrast to the 'magic circle', Derrida's conceives of a play *with* space rather than play *in* space; play is a condition of motion, a principle of deferral. Derrida is evoking another aspect of 'play' implicit both in the English term and the French *jeu*, which is 'movement', as in the first definition of play in the OED: 'Exercise, brisk or free movement or action'. This free movement without an end corresponds with a distinction made by James Carse between finite and infinite games: 'A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing to play'.[95] Carse's distinction becomes particularly pertinent in this thesis when considering ways in which levels of postmodern play (evoking infinite games) are re-worked in later fiction concerned with teleology (evoking finite games).

The role of play in fiction as opposed to theory has its own trajectory of development. In 1976, Robert Detweiler identified an increasing emphasis on games and play in American culture, spanning disciplines including theology, education, psychology and literature.[96] He acknowledges that one could 'call all fiction playful', as 'fiction is primarily an elaborate way of pretending, […] a fundamental element of play and of games'.[97] However, metafiction provides something more:

> when I speak of playful fiction, I […] mean an artistic self-consciousness whereby the writer, already intensely aware of the illusory nature and potential of the novel and story, manipulates the components of narrative to show the reader their artificiality.[98]

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[93] Mark Bresnan, 'The Work of Play in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 50.1 (2008), 51–68 (p. 52).

[94] Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 278–93 (p. 292).

[95] James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), p. 3.

[96] Robert Detweiler, 'Games and Play in Modern American Fiction', *Contemporary Literature*, 17.1 (1976), 44–62 (p. 47).

[97] Ibid., p. 51.

[98] Ibid.

A sense of playfulness is identified in most studies of metafiction; McHale calls the *mise en abyme* 'fiction at play', and Waugh comments that 'all metafiction "plays" with the form of the novel'.[99] Her study then contains a section on 'play, games, and metafiction', where she characterises literature as 'a form of play'.[100] Following Gregory Bateson, whose *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972) outlines the relationship between play and communicational levels, Waugh comments that 'all play and fiction require "meta" levels which explain the transition from one context to another and set up a hierarchy of contexts and meanings'.[101] She notes a positive correlation between play and fictional levels:

> The more 'playful' a literary work (the more, for example, it shifts from everyday to alternative-world contexts), the more […] metalanguages are needed if the relationship between the 'real' and the 'fictive' world is to be maintained and understood.[102]

Like Detweiler, Waugh identifies a quality of play in manipulating fictional levels of representation – an extrapolation of considering the world-making (or, 'magic circle') of fiction itself as a form of play.

Given the sense of playfulness that emerges in the foregrounding of fictional levels, perhaps it is no surprise that John Barth used the figure of the *fun*house for his seminal metafictional work. Yet the funhouse is also an architecture, drawing upon the inherent spatiality of levels discussed in the first section; even the abstract levels of metafiction involve a relationality that can be spatially mapped. Spatiality is central to postmodernism, as Jameson asserted: 'A certain spatial turn has often seemed to offer one of the more productive ways of distinguishing postmodernism from modernism proper'.[103] Accordingly, postmodernism has a particular relationship with architecture, and Jameson also remarks that it was 'from architectural debates that my own conception of postmodernism […] initially began to emerge'.[104] McHale similarly contends that architecture 'is in a sense the privileged model, to

[99] Brian McHale, 'Cognition En Abyme: Models, Manuals, Maps', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 4.2 (2006), 175–89 (p. 177); Waugh, p. 43.

[100] Waugh, p. 34.

[101] Ibid., p. 36.

[102] Ibid., p. 37.

[103] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 154.

[104] Ibid., p. 2.

which all other manifestations of postmodernism are referred'.[105] This relationship between postmodernism and architecture as a physical discipline coexists with the conceptual depthlessness, or immanence, discussed above.

Alongside a focus on physical architectures (which are largely outside the scope of this thesis, as I focus on architecture in fiction), postmodern discourse contains an abundance of architectural metaphors. Discussing the 'conditions of possibility' in spatial form, Jameson describes how 'the words of built space, or at least its substantives, would seem to be rooms, categories which are syntactically or syncategorematically related and articulated by the various special verbs and adverbs – corridors, doorways, and staircases, for example'.[106] This architectural language participates in the preoccupations identified by McHale: 'architecture as language or code, and building as text'.[107] Mark Wigley, in *The Architecture of Deconstruction* (1993), discusses the relationship between Derrida's writing and architecture, pointing out that before Derrida's purposive involvement in architectural design projects, his 'writing already depended on a certain thinking of architecture that even surfaces in the word "deconstruction"'.[108] This architectural thinking appears in the 'rhetoric of the house', which Wrigley traces throughout Derrida's writing: 'If to ground a structure is to build a house, to constrain unruly play of representations is to house them, to domesticate them'.[109]

Still, towards the turn of the century, architecture also finds itself subject to digital influence, as illustrated by a neat example from Connor's *The Madness of Knowledge* (2019):

> Things that resist keyword searches can be telling. Search for 'university architecture' and you will be provided with an extensive list of university departments of architecture. 'Harvard architecture' will deliver you to accounts of a particular form of computer structure, which is distinguished from von Neumann (or Princeton) architecture. The architecture of knowledge has become very largely an abstract or immaterial affair.[110]

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[105] Brian McHale, 'The Architectural Paradigm', in *The Cambridge History of Postmodern Literature*, ed. by Brian McHale and Len Platt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 185–98 (p. 186).

[106] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 105.

[107] McHale, 'Architectural Paradigm', p. 187.

[108] Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (London: MIT Press, 1993), p. xiii.

[109] Ibid., p. 106.

[110] Steven Connor, *The Madness of Knowledge: On Wisdom, Ignorance and Fantasies of Knowing* (London: Reaktion, 2019), p. 293.

Like Connor's 'architecture of knowledge', architectures of play have also become increasingly immaterial, and these changes are happening rapidly; the 'instantaneity' that Bauman attributed to the cellular telephone in 2000 has already come to seem ironic.[111] With the development of laptops, tablets and smartphones, vaster simulated worlds can be contained within smaller physical spaces, signalling a shift from concrete to digital architectures.

The formulation 'architectures of play' refers to the ways in which the playfulness of metafictional levels is expressed through architectural metaphors, as exemplified by Barth's funhouse. At the same time, I consider 'architecture' in a more abstract sense, exploring the material spatiality of texts, the abstract architecture of narrative levels, and the inside-outside dialectics of the magic circle. While architecture holds particular significance in postmodernist discourse, I continue to trace the theme through twenty-first century literature, exploring the impact of digital technology and virtuality in constructing increasingly immaterial architectures of play.

The spatiality of the 'level game' identified by this thesis is thus both conceptual and concrete. Conceptually, the magic circle evokes a distinct ontological level on which play occurs, while there is also a playfulness in navigating between the ontological levels created by a literary text. Concretely, play emerges in the architectural navigation of levels as spatial structures, whether kinetically in playgrounds or virtually in digital games. Throughout the thesis, I consider the correspondence between represented architectures and architectures of representation in order to identify the ludic work performed by levels.

VI. Chapter Summary

In a literary context which suggests an increasing attention to ethics and is influenced by the rapid development of digital technology, the role of 'levels' in literature might be said to transition from playful circularity to purposeful teleology. Accordingly, it is notable that another usage of the term 'level' is to denote a tool: a 'spirit level' is a device used to check whether a surface is flat. Exploring this idea of levels as tools, the focus of my thesis might be said to be phenomenological rather than ontological, investigating how levels constitute a subjective apparatus, or means of navigation.

[111] Bauman, p. 11.

My first chapter, 'Jean Baudrillard and the Game of Reality', works through Baudrillard's writings on simulacra and simulation. I interrogate Baudrillard's statement that 'reality has passed completely into the game of reality' by pointing out a paradox: he evokes a theoretical distinction between game and non-game in order to propose that there is no distinction between game and non-game.[112] More broadly, Baudrillard insists on the dissolution of a distinction between representation and reality while conjuring such a distinction in order to cancel it. I propose that scale needs to be factored into the analysis. Drawing upon Hofstadter's strange loop, I suggest that a *local* distinction between levels of reality coexists with their *global* equivalence in Baudrillard's work. This chapter sets out certain concepts which will recur throughout the thesis: that a game from one level of perception is reality from another; that fiction acts as a hypothetical space which allows for experiment and paradox; that locally distinct and apparently teleological levels can coexist with globally equivalent and non-teleological levels.

The second chapter, 'Slides, Staircases and Mirror Mazes: Navigating the Funhouse of Fiction', studies John Barth's short story 'Lost in the Funhouse'. I begin by contextualising funhouses and identifying their physical features, which I situate in terms of the development of playground equipment. Accounting for the origin of these structures in exercise, I locate the 'fun' of their engagement in the possibility of multi-directional spatial travel. I then map these ideas onto the conceptual funhouse of Barth's text, illustrating how its dizzyingly alternating diegetic levels correspond with the architectural levels of physical funhouses. Next I perform a brief comparison with Wallace's short story 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes Its Way', which responds to 'Lost in the Funhouse' by calling for the reintroduction of purpose to Barth's circular reflexivity. I propose that Wallace aims to achieve this purpose by continuing to use the 'tools' of postmodernism (ontological levels) while experimenting with new ways of manipulating them, as demonstrated in the following chapter.

The third chapter focuses on the *mise en abyme* in Wallace's *Infinite Jest*. I begin by applying Baudrillard's 'reality has passed completely into the game of reality' to the world of the novel, outlining how the political situation constitutes a game for those at higher levels of governmental organisation but is decidedly not a game for the civilians unable to control the infrastructural constraints that define them. I then dissect the idea of 'play' as both verb and noun, positing a parallel between *Infinite Jest* and *Hamlet* through their use of the 'play within

[112] Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Ian Hamilton Grant (London: SAGE, 1993), p. 74.

the play' device: just as *Hamlet* evokes the *mise en abyme* through the inset play 'The Murder of Gonzago', so does *Infinite Jest* contain the film 'Infinite Jest'. In both cases, the inset play has an agential effect on the world that contains it. The effectual mechanism appears to be self-similarity; the inset play only affects the outer play when there is a likeness between the two. I go on to outline the critical debate regarding whether Wallace has achieved his goal of reconfiguring the circularity he sees in metafiction and changing the conceptual direction from inward regress to outward stimulation. I argue that the spiral of popular responses to Wallace evinces such an outward movement, while observing that the text might have a greater agential effect if there is a similarity between the reader's life and the events of the novel.

Chapter four enters the new millennium and takes note of technological developments that have facilitated a renewed focus on the print medium. This chapter centralises material levels of typology and paper manipulation, analysing Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010). Here, I suggest that tonal distinctions emerge in the navigation of material levels. In *House of Leaves*, uncanny elements within the text (on the level of semantic content) are transformed into playful elements outside it (on the level of typographic form). I support this argument with reference to theories of the uncanny formulated by Jentsch and Freud, exploring the role of mediation in the theoretical relationship between uncanniness and playfulness. I frame the transition between these two conditions in terms of knowingness, a quality I go on to analyse in *Tree of Codes*. Foer's formally experimental text literally cuts out words and letters from Bruno Schulz's *Street of Crocodiles* (1934). Reading the two in tandem, I examine how a sense of 'knowingness' arises from parallels in form and content, contributing to a quality of playfulness.

Chapter five deals overtly with the theme of digitality, studying levels in the form in which they are most popularly known today: digital games. I compare how Richard Powers's *Plowing the Dark*, Dennis Cooper's *God Jr.* and Dave Eggers' *The Circle* thematise virtual reality, digital games and formalised levels. I consider these texts in terms of corporate strategies of 'gamification': the commercial employment of structures such as levels in order to drive user engagement, utilising an inherent attraction to a feeling of progression that levels can provide. Nevertheless, this attraction can prove addictive, entangling the player in a formal system where they become pawns in a game played by higher economic forces. I conclude this chapter by detailing how the above three texts are conspicuously *not* formally playful, particularly in relation to others studied in the thesis. I suggest that this formal conventionality

can provide a potentially manipulative sense of control on the level of reading, drawing a parallel between readers *of* the texts and players *in* the text.

Finally, chapter six explores the role of levels in networks. I begin by discussing how the figure of the network has, in recent decades, taken precedence over serial structures, where networks are associated with values such as equivalence and community as opposed to hierarchy and isolation. Countering these associations, I suggest that the seriality of levels does not make them antithetical to networks, but that the two structures can be fruitfully combined. I apply these ideas to Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), a paradigmatic 'network novel', and Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018).[113] The prepositions of these titles indicate that their thematic engagement with networks is concurrent with an awareness of hierarchical traversal: one must travel under and over, up and down, when navigating a networked world. Following on from this, I consider how levels in DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016) are used by characters as a means of orientation. Even if a formalised hierarchy of levels has no referent outside its self-contained system, it can be effective in providing feelings of security and location. Comparing the mystical endings of all three texts, I conceive of levels as tools that, upon the completion of a goal, are no longer necessary. Levels act as intellectual apparatus which can be discarded once an affective condition of revelation is achieved.

In exploring the ludic capacity of levels, my thesis asks: what do levels *do*? How do we play with levels – architecturally, digitally, and narratively? Moreover, how do these different media interact in postmodern and contemporary fiction? Through the following six case studies, I hope to illuminate the effects – and affects – attached to the figure of the level, elucidating a pervasive 'level game' in postmodern and contemporary literature and culture.

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[113] Jagoda, p. 46.

Chapter One

Jean Baudrillard and the Game of Reality

Reality has passed completely into the game of reality.[114]

Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976)

I. Introduction

My study begins with Jean Baudrillard because allusions to games are pervasive in his work, where a quality of play is actively associated with the condition of simulation. Dissecting the relationship between games and ontological levels in Baudrillard's writing identifies principles that apply to postmodern culture more broadly, and to the literary texts discussed in this thesis.

For Baudrillard, 'game' is both an object of discussion, and a qualifier for describing other objects. He identifies a gamic quality that characterises contemporary society, while also frequently using 'game' to suggest a distinct ontology: the 'game of reality' as opposed to a reality that is not a game. While Baudrillard's theory of simulacra famously abolishes levels of reality, arguing that it is no longer possible to make a meaningful distinction between the real and the represented, these distinctions are concurrently evoked in the process of cancellation. I argue that an engagement with ontological levels acts as the absolute value of Baudrillard's argument, performing an explanatory function. I elaborate this idea in relation to Baudrillard's conception of immanence. Despite his assertion that the contemporary condition is characterised by one-dimensionality (exposure, presence, an absence of secrecy), Baudrillard constantly uses geometrical imagery: a vocabulary of circles, circuits and bubbles. Such imagery retains the inside-outside dialectic that Baudrillard ostensibly negates. This principle is also evident in Baudrillard's discussion of physical architectures, particularly in America, which acts as his exemplification of hyperreality. Here, contemporary American architectures including Disneyland and the Bonaventure Hotel are conceived of as architectures of play. Yet if such structures participate in Baudrillard's blurring of game and reality, their physical features retain a distinction between inside and outside which conserves the 'reality principle'.

Accordingly, I propose that Baudrillard's writing reveals a distinction between ontological levels from a local perspective while asserting their global equivalence, where the

[114] Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Ian Hamilton Grant (London: SAGE, 1993), p. 74.

principle of Hofstadter's strange loop offers a way of reconciling paradoxes in Baudrillard's rhetoric. Following on from this, I propose that reading Baudrillard through a lens of 'fiction' rather than 'theory' is also a means of accounting for his contradictions, since theory and fiction solicit distinct rhetorical expectations. As fiction, his texts provides spaces for testing and hypothesising ideas, prioritising evocation over affirmation. They provide tools through which he can explore different ways of rearranging concepts. The compelling quality of Baudrillard's writing lies partly in the *idea* of levels of reality – whether affirmed, negated, or simply played with through experimental rearrangement.

II. What Does Baudrillard Mean by 'Game'?

Zygmunt Bauman observes that Baudrillard's words

> create a world in which they may dissolve, […] a universe of meaning in which their own, private meanings, having done their job, are no longer identifiable, merging into a universe of experience that cancels meanings it cannot, and wishes not, to absorb.[115]

Bauman suggests that Baudrillard's writing is not always consistent; his terms might perform different functions at each specific instant. This conceptual fluidity is exemplified by Baudrillard's use of 'game': his writing describes games of reality, games of simulation, games of seduction, and games with vestiges. He analyses the game of chess between Deep Blue and Garry Kasparov, games of football and games with gadgets. But the quality of 'game' that unites examples spanning theatre, politics, supermarkets and simulations is never quite defined, remaining by implication something malleable and abstract. Since no consistent definition is provided, the meaning of 'game' in Baudrillard's thought must be surmised from a close analysis of his rhetoric, and an examination of the various contexts in which he applies the term.

Recent decades have seen an increased interest in the relationship between Baudrillard's work and games. In 2007 there was a special issue in *Games and Culture* on Baudrillard and Game Studies, called 'What if Baudrillard was a Gamer?'. This collection comprises a range of approaches, including readings of Baudrillard's writing style as a game,

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[115] Zygmunt Bauman, 'The Sweet Scent of Decomposition', in *Forget Baudrillard*, ed. by Chris Rojek and Bryan S. Turner (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 22–46 (p. 22).

applications of Baudrillard's ideas to digital games, and considerations of what 'game' means in Baudrillard's writing. In the introduction to the special issue, Bart Simon describes Baudrillard's work as an 'ultimate sandbox game', inviting the issue's readers to 'play' with the lines of thought generated by these scholars.[116] This is developed by Seth Giddings, who focuses on Baudrillard's science of 'pataphysics' as a theoretical strategy, and Gerry Coulter contends that Baudrillard's 'game was writing', as opposed to Baudrillard being interested in 'gaming'.[117] Still, Baudrillard's work has been applied to digital games; Eva Kingsepp uses Baudrillard to analyse World War II digital games, exploring the 'energies […] concerned with resistance and defense against the disappearance of reality: nostalgia, fetishization, and so forth'.[118] Patrick Crogan similarly investigates the role that Baudrillard has played in video game theory, concluding that computer games are 'imaginary, ideological spaces that prove the deterrent functioning of simulation by their significant exception to the regime of the collapse of significance'.[119]

It is only Alexander Galloway, in 'Radical Illusion (A Game Against)', who considers Baudrillard's writing *about* games, as opposed to his writing *as* a game, or applying his writing *to* games. Galloway asserts that

> Games and play might be the single thing, statistically speaking, that he wrote most about, more so than any of his core passwords: seduction, the fatal strategy, catastrophe, ecstasy, the obscene, extermination, symbolic exchange, the perfect crime, evil, art, or even that term beaten senseless in the secondary literature, simulation.[120]

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[116] Bart Simon, 'What If Baudrillard Was a Gamer? Introduction to a Special Section on Baudrillard and Game Studies', *Games and Culture*, 2.4 (2007), 355–57 (p. 355).

[117] Seth Giddings, 'A Pataphysics Engine: Technology, Play, and Realities', *Games and Culture*, 2.4 (2007), 392–405; Gerry Coulter, 'Jean Baudrillard and the Definitive Ambivalence of Gaming', *Games and Culture*, 2.4 (2007), 358–65 (p. 359).

[118] Eva Kingsepp, 'Fighting Hyperreality with Hyperreality: History and Death in World War II Digital Games', *Games and Culture*, 2.4 (2007), 366–75 (p. 374).

[119] Patrick Crogan, 'Remembering (Forgetting) Baudrillard', *Games and Culture*, 2.4 (2007), 405–13 (p. 411).

[120] Alexander R. Galloway, 'Radical Illusion (A Game Against)', *Games and Culture*, 2.4 (2007), 376–91 (p. 376).

He goes on to analyse these various applications of game, suggesting that 'In Baudrillard, games are a way to understand large complex processes'.[121] Acknowledging Baudrillard's vague use of the term, Galloway summarises:

> By the end of his life, games and play had metastasized, infecting the entire corpus of his thought, so much so that game came to be a synonym for world, or for life, or in a very general sense for the ontological plane itself.[122]

Galloway's comments implicitly pick up on the distinction between 'game' as its own object of discussion, and the more abstract, 'metastasized' use of 'game' as a qualifier for other themes such as politics and simulation.

The former can be more easily pinned down; Baudrillard explicitly discusses Caillois's game-categories in *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1988), suggesting that culture is moving from 'a disappearance of the forms of expression and competition towards an extension of the forms of chance (*alea*) and giddiness'.[123] Baudrillard's dismissal of games of 'expression' (corresponding with Caillois's *mimicry*, or simulation) reflects his broader thesis that representational distinctions can no longer be meaningfully made – and yet, as I will later elaborate, this dismissal does not always hold. Another aspect of Baudrillard's overt discussion of games is his distinction between 'play' and the 'ludic', corresponding with Caillois's *paidia* and *ludus*: the former is spontaneous and energetic, the latter rule-bound and regulated.[124] The distinction is encapsulated by the contrast between the physical soccer match, and the soccer match that has been televised: 'one is a game, with its emotional charge, its bravado and choreography, the other is tactile, modulated (play-backs, close-ups, sweeps, slow motion shots, different angles of vision, etc.)'; 'The one involves play, the other the ludic'.[125] Play is now 'a sublimated form of the old, directive pedagogy that gives it a meaning, assigns it an

[121] Ibid., p. 378.

[122] Ibid., p. 376.

[123] Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer, trans. by Bernard Schutze and Caroline Schutze (New York: Semiotext(e), 1988), p. 25.

[124] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. by Meyer Barash (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2001), p. 13.

[125] Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, trans. by Brian Singer (Montréal: New World Perspectives, 1990), p. 160. The idea of the ludic is elaborated in 'The Gadget and the Ludic' section of *The Consumer Society*. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (London: SAGE, 1998), pp. 111–14.

end, and thereby purges it of its power of seduction'.[126] Baudrillard suggests that the contemporary form of play is non-teleological, without purpose or end. It is a circular process of alternation and selection, pared down to the principle of movement itself. Such an abstract conception of play is in keeping with Derrida's use of 'play' to denote a continuous process of substitution: 'This field is in effect that of play, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite', lacking 'a center which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions'.[127]

While the above extracts represent Baudrillard's direct discussions of play, he also frequently uses a vocabulary of play and game in a looser sense to describe other objects or themes. In *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, games are a consistent quality in the order of simulacra from the Renaissance 'counterfeit' to the modern 'simulation': there are Renaissance 'games of masks and appearances' ('du jeu des masques et des apparences'), twentieth-century referendums in the form of a 'question/answer game' ('jeu de question/réponse'), the political media's 'polling game' ('dans le jeu des media et des sondages'), the 'alternating equivalence of the political game' ('équivalence alternative du jeu politique') and, ultimately, 'reality has passed completely into the game of reality' (c'est la réalité entière passée au jeu de la réalité).[128] All of these institutions and processes are *like* games, where game is used more figuratively than literally. They possess a quality of game whose features must be derived from Baudrillard's rhetoric, since they are not explicitly explained.

In order to identify the nature of this quality, it is worth clarifying the terminology of Baudrillard's original French as expressed in the original quotations: *jeu*. Like the English 'play' (whose primary OED definition is, as mentioned in the introduction, 'Exercise, brisk or free movement or action'), *jeu* encompasses movement as well as play and game in its span of definitions. This is the sense foregrounded by Derrida when discussing the play of substitutions in 'Structure, Sign and Play', although the ludic sense is also simultaneously evoked. The key difference between English and French is that the French has no clear distinction between 'play' and 'game': *jeu* encompasses both, as well as referring to acting and a hand of cards. In

[126] *Seduction*, p. 158.

[127] Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), pp. 278–93 (p. 289).

[128] *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, pp. 55, 63, 65, 65, 74; Jean Baudrillard, *L'Échange Symbolique et la Mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), pp. 86, 99, 100, 101, 114.

addition, a further definition of *jeu* is ‘to stake’, where an irony emerges in Baudrillard’s frequent claims that play means that nothing is at stake.[129]

That nothing is at stake is one of the key features of *jeu* for Baudrillard, and is associated with a property of weightlessness. In *Seduction*, he remarks:

> Most of our exchanges are regulated by game strategies; but the latter, defined as a capacity to foresee all of one’s opponent’s moves and check them in advance, renders all stakes impossible. Game theory describes the ludic character of a world where, paradoxically, nothing is at stake.[130]

Further examples include Baudrillard’s discussion of war (‘The game was already won, nothing was objectively at stake but the verisimilitude of the final montage’) and advertising (a ‘game without stakes’).[131] In these cases, nothing is at stake because there is no unpredictability: everything is already known, without the possibility of spontaneity. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard describes the ‘game of power’: ‘purged of a political dimension […] only the fiction of a political universe remains’.[132] Here ‘purged’ (‘expurgé’) suggests a hollowness, a political universe comprised of form without content.[133] This substanceless outline is both ‘game’ and ‘fiction’, as the two terms are used interchangeably. The game of power is thus an empty structure which ‘*plays* at the real, *plays* at crisis, *plays* at remanufacturing artificial, social, economic, and political stakes’ [italics mine], where the French original is ‘joue’.[134] Similar language is evident in *The Transparency of Evil*; while AIDS is experienced as a ‘genuine catastrophe’, ‘the stock-market seems, by contrast, like a kind of *playing at catastrophe*’.[135] Play is used as an implicit synonym for simulation, which

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[129] *Pocket Oxford-Hachette French Dictionary: French–English*, ed. by Marie-Hélène Corrèard, 4th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 530.

[130] *Seduction*, pp. 157–58. The French is as follows: ‘C’est elle qui donne son caractère ludique à un monde paradoxalement sans enjeux’, illustrating the use of ‘jeux’ to mean ‘at stake’. See Jean Baudrillard, *De La Séduction* (Paris: Galilée, 1979), p. 214.

[131] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 37, 92.

[132] Ibid., pp. 23, 26.

[133] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981), p. 46.

[134] *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 21; *Simulacres et Simulation*, p. 40.

[135] Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. by James Benedict (London: Verso, 1993), p. 42.

features 'threats of a total weightlessness, an unbearable lightness of being' – the latter phrase taken from Milan Kundera's novel of the same name.[136] Baudrillard often casts his concepts in material terms, finding physical correlates for abstract ideas, as weightlessness and hollowness are supplemented by descriptions of a ludic condition identified as cool rather than hot, mediated rather than immediate.[137] Nevertheless, as I illustrate throughout this thesis, experiences of lightness and lack of stakes depend upon a subject's structural relation to the game: namely, whether they possess the ability to traverse the game's boundaries.

A second feature of Baudrillard's *jeu* is the capacity to invent – or, in Huizinga's terms, to create magic circles, which involves being able to step outside them. In *Screened Out* (2002), Baudrillard addresses the definition of game in relation to the chess match between Gary Kasparov and Deep Blue. He outlines the 'basic symbolic rule which states that no player can be bigger than the game itself. The player must not be unbeatable, or the game will die. The player is mortal; the rules are immortal'.[138] The reference to size ('bigger') evokes an inside-outside dialectic, where the player, while playing, remains *inside* the game. Baudrillard suggests that Deep Blue never fully participates in the game because it can never be an inventor. In order to access the essence of play, 'the machine would have had to have invented it, would have had to have been able to invent the very arbitrariness of the rules, which is unimaginable'.[139] Perhaps such technical invention is less unimaginable now than at the time that Baudrillard was writing, but what remains out of sight is the capacity of a machine to invent the sense of a distinct ontology; for Deep Blue, playing a game is qualitatively no different to a program running accounts. Play relies on the capacity to invent the idea of a separate reality and, at least imaginatively, enter 'inside'.

The capacity to invent links to Galloway's assertion that Baudrillard applies the term 'game' to 'the ontological plane itself'. This is made explicit in *Paroxysm*, where Baudrillard calls writing a 'game, in the sense that it's the *invention* of another, antagonistic world' [italics mine].[140] Recalling Bauman's comment that Baudrillard's terms take on different definitions depending on their context, 'game' here is equivalent to the invention of another world,

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[136] Ibid., p. 77.

[137] *Ecstasy*, p. 26.

[138] Jean Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 163–64.

[139] Ibid., p. 164.

[140] Jean Baudrillard, *Paroxysm: Interviews with Phillippe Petit*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1998), p. 32.

suggesting a distinct ontology. However, Galloway argues that Baudrillard cancels out the ontological distinctness of games suggested by Huizinga and Caillois. Instead, he contends that Baudrillard

> would never claim that there is a second reality that exists against normal life, precisely for the reason that 'normal life' is always already a 'second reality' from the get-go. […] The real is play. The 'virtual' is emphatically not the gamic for Baudrillard; it is this world that is the game. The magic circle is part of the here and now.[141]

If the world is already a game, already a second reality, then the distinction of the magic circle no longer holds. There is no longer a boundary to distinguish game from non-game.

I wish to read this argument against the grain, focusing on the fact that 'Reality has passed completely into the game of reality' conjures a distinction between game and non-game in the process of implying that this distinction has collapsed. The real game is, perhaps, the interaction between reality-as-game and reality-as-non-game: the plurality of envisioned ontologies that emerge in Baudrillard's hypothetical argumentative space. Levels of reality comprise the pivot around which Baudrillard's argument turns in a methodology where the evocation of a concept becomes more significant than its assertion or negation.

III. The Absolute Value of Levels

The opening of *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) illustrates Baudrillard's methodology. He begins by evoking the Borges fable where cartographers 'draw up a map so detailed that it ends up covering the territory exactly'.[142] However, in the second paragraph Baudrillard inverts Borges's parable, famously suggesting that the 'territory no longer precedes the map', but 'the map […] precedes the territory'.[143] He vividly describes how 'today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there'.[144]

[141] Galloway, 'Radical Illusion', pp. 377–78.

[142] *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 1.

[143] Ibid.

[144] Ibid.

Yet despite the declarative tone of the second paragraph, which inverts the first, Baudrillard's third paragraph performs a further inversion: 'In fact, even inverted, Borges's fable is unusable'.[145] Both paragraphs are then replaced by a third assertion:

> it is no longer a question of either maps or territories. Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and another, that constituted the charm of abstraction. […] No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept. […] The real […] is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelopes it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere.[146]

While the content of Baudrillard's writing abolishes the dialectic of positive-negative, as he argues that the real 'no longer measures itself against an ideal or negative instance', this is rhetorically expressed through a methodology of assertion followed by cancellation.[147] Indeed, the language of this paragraph is striking for its negativity, with the almost incantatory repetition of 'no longer' and 'no more'. The condition of simulation, which has theoretically surpassed the poles of 'is' and 'is not', is described in terms of what is not. If the distinction between levels of reality has been dissolved, these levels are still present in the expression of their abolition, acting as a methodological means of performing the evolution of a concept.

This reliance on negativity is acknowledged by Baudrillard. Describing simulation, he remarks:

> In fact, this whole process can only be understood in its negative form: nothing separates one pole from another anymore, the beginning from the end; there is a kind of contraction of one over the other, […] a collapse of the two traditional poles into each other: *implosion* – an absorption of […] positive and negative charge […]. *That is where simulation begins*.[148]

A 'negative form' is necessary in order to articulate the collapse of the distinction between positive and negative, as simulation is approached through a vocabulary of paradox and deferral. Baudrillard goes on to adopt a language of inexpressibility when describing how

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[145] *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 1.

[146] Ibid., p. 2.

[147] Ibid.

[148] Ibid., p. 31.

'simulation is of the third order, beyond true and false, beyond equivalences, beyond rational distinctions upon which the whole of the social and power depend'.[149] Reinforced by the rhythm of a rhetorical triad, the language of 'beyond' suggests that Baudrillard's articulation of simulation is a stepping stone towards something that defies the conditions of expression.

Still, Baudrillard is also aware of the persistence of the negated concept; if the era of simulation involves 'a liquidation of all referentials', this is accompanied by 'their artificial resurrection in the systems of signs'.[150] Referentials are simultaneously absent and present: artificially resurrected, they participate in the phantasm of ontological distinction. Similarly, in the preface to *Symbolic Exchange and Death* Baudrillard describes how 'each configuration of value is seized by the next in a higher order of simulacra. And each phase of value integrates the prior apparatus into its own as a phantom reference, a puppet reference, a simulated reference'.[151] If the reference does not exist, the *idea* of the reference exists in 'phantom', 'puppet' and 'simulated' states. When Baudrillard outlines the orders of simulacra from the Renaissance onwards, he describes the story of stucco, which transforms distinctions into 'a single new substance, a sort of general equivalent for all the others'.[152] While on one level (material) there is equivalence, on another (representational) there is distinction. The *idea* is retained, even if its actuality is insisted against: distinction is displaced to a more abstract plane, becoming geometrical rather than material. A further example of this increasingly abstract but persistent distinction is in *Forget Foucault*, where Baudrillard alludes to 'the institution of spatial perspective versus "real" space in the Renaissance', where the former 'is only a simulation of perspective'.[153] Again, the principle of perspective is retained, even if it ceases to exist in concrete form.

This principle can be considered the 'modulus' of Baudrillard's thought. In mathematics, the 'modulus' describes the absolute value of a term, ignoring whether it is positive or negative: for instance, the 'modulus' of negative twelve and twelve is twelve. Along these lines, Galloway remarks: 'Mathematically speaking, Baudrillard's is the "absolute value" of the dialectic'.[154] Baudrillard reinforces this idea in 'Radical Thought', where he remarks:

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[149] *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 21.

[150] Ibid., p. 2.

[151] *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, pp. 2–3.

[152] Ibid., p. 52.

[153] Jean Baudrillard, *Forget Foucault*, trans. by Nicole Dufresne (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007), p. 21.

[154] Galloway, 'Radical Illusion', p. 381.

> Ultimately, it is not even a disavowal of the concept of reality. It is an illusion, or in other words a game with reality, just as seduction is a game with desire (it brings it into play) and just as metaphor is a game with the truth.[155]

Rather than avowal and disavowal, Baudrillard's purpose is defined as bringing an idea into the argumentative field. Here 'game' and 'play' are used to describe the process of interacting with a concept or theme rather than affirming or negating it. Conceived in terms of play, theory becomes a tool rather than a truth. Baudrillard thus asserts that 'the value of thought lies not so much in its inevitable convergences with the truth as in its immeasurable divergences from the truth'.[156] The relationship is prioritised over the assertion, as the negative value of the thought is equivalent to its positive value.

Considering the modulus of Baudrillard's terms provides a means of addressing his contradictions, including contradictions regarding the concept of game. In *The Ecstasy of Communication*, he makes reference to 'the great game of simulacra, which makes things appear and disappear'.[157] However, at the end of the text he envisions the era of simulation as follows: 'What if the modern universe of communication, of hyper-communication, had plunged us, not into the senseless, but into a tremendous saturation of meaning entirely consumed by its success – without the game, the secret, or distance?'[158] In the same text, the 'game of simulacra' contradictorily coexists with the simulacral absence of game. Simulation constitutes a game because the condition is light, weightless and hollow, with nothing at stake. Yet simulation is not a game because it has no distance, no alternative ontology, participating in a condition of immanence where everything is simultaneously present and exposed. Different features of 'game' are drawn out in each context of its use, as play forms a floating principle with which simulation is always interacting.

Yet another way of accounting for Baudrillard's internal inconsistencies is through the figure of the strange loop. Baudrillard himself evokes such patterns when discussing how 'All the referentials combine their discourses in a circular, Möbian compulsion'; the Möbius strip also exhibits local distinction and general equivalence.[159] Similarly, in *Cool Memories II*

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[155] Jean Baudrillard, 'Radical Thought', trans. by David Macey, *Parallax*, 1.1 (1995), 53–62 (p. 54).

[156] Ibid., p. 53.

[157] *Ecstasy*, p. 71.

[158] Ibid., p. 103.

[159] *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 18.

Baudrillard describes how: ‘At Disneyland in Florida they are building a giant mock-up of Hollywood, with the boulevards, studios, etc. One more spiral in the simulacrum. One day they will rebuild Disneyland at Disneyworld’.[160] While a local juxtaposition between the mock-up Hollywood and ‘real’ Hollywood suggests that the former is a second-order representation of the latter, from afar the two become equivalent: in the order of simulation, there is no original, only a replication of models. Yet in Baudrillard’s own language, the mock-up Hollywood is a ‘spiral’ in the simulacrum, indicating a relative distinction. A spiral is a rich geometrical figure; extending the circle into a third dimension, it is comprised of levels which are locally distinct but, if the spiral continues infinitely, phenomenologically equivalent. From a top-down perspective, a spiral is indistinguishable from a circle, but when viewed from the side it extends into space. Such perspectival multiplicity encapsulates the flexibility of Baudrillard’s concepts, which change shape depending on the angle from which they are perceived. This sense is bolstered by his reference to spirals in *Revenge of the Crystal*, where he identifies theory as ‘game’: ‘as narrative, as *spiral*, as concatenation’ [italics mine].[161] There is something playful about the spiral because, like the strange loop, it performs a trick, changing shape depending on perspective.

Christopher Norris remarks that it is ‘impossible for Baudrillard to present his case without falling back into a language that betrays the opposite compulsion at work’.[162] In Baudrillard’s case, we are called upon to consider the opposite of the collapse of opposites. His language betrays a reliance on opposites in order to deconstruct them, participating in the paradoxical rhetoric of immanent criticism, aware of its linguistic limitations but unable to surpass them. Yet Baudrillard’s contradictions can be approached by taking the ‘absolute value’ of the objects he simultaneously affirms and negates, suggesting a conception of theory based on interaction rather than assertion. At the same time, his strategy of articulating ideas through the sequential process of evoking, affirming, and then negating suggests that scale must also be taken into account: the local perspective of his writing is distinct from the global perspective. As represented by strange loops, which are evoked through Baudrillard’s own

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[160] Jean Baudrillard, *Cool Memories II, 1987–1990*, trans. by Chris Turner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p. 42.

[161] Jean Baudrillard, *Revenge of the Crystal*, ed. and trans. by Paul Foss and Julian Pefanis (London: Pluto Press, 1990), p. 23.

[162] Christopher Norris, ‘Lost in the Funhouse: Baudrillard and the Politics of Postmodernism’, in *Jean Baudrillard*, ed. by Mike Gane, 4 vols (London: SAGE, 2000), I, pp. 363–89 (pp. 377–78).

vocabulary of spirals and Möbius strips, local distinction coexists with global equivalence. Taken in isolation, the second paragraph of *Simulacra and Simulation* would contradict his overall thesis. Understood within a wider frame of reference, it provides an illustration of a methodology that conceives of concepts as tools rather than truths: stepping stones towards a perspective which is enacted rather than affirmed.

IV. Dots and Bubbles: Baudrillard's Phantom Dimensionality

As suggested by the comment on Renaissance perspective, Baudrillard's world contains simulated architectures: one-dimensional spaces whose three-dimensionality is a *trompe l'oeil* illusion. This is linked to his identification of a condition of immanence. In *Revenge of the Crystal*, Baudrillard remarks that his work is in line with recent trends in the search for 'an immanence of things', aligning himself with Deleuze.[163] His most extensive discussion of immanence is in *Ecstasy*, where in the text's opening he comments that 'There is no longer any transcendence or depth, but only the immanent surface of operations unfolding, the smooth and functional surface of communication'.[164] Baudrillard goes on to elaborate that 'the distinction between an interior and an exterior […] has been blurred in a double obscenity'.[165] The cancellation of the distinction between interior and exterior recalls Galloway's thesis that Baudrillard's writing on games eradicates the magic circle. What Baudrillard calls the 'ecstasy of communication' is an 'over-proximity of all things', a vacuum without space or distance, with 'all functions abolished into one dimension'.[166]

Baudrillard's references to depth, surface, interiority, exteriority, proximity, space, distance and dimensions emphasises how his concepts are grounded in, and affected by, spatial dynamics. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, he suggests that the disappearance of the distinction between reality and simulation is precisely *because* of the disappearance of distance, indicating a correspondence between embodied experience and conceptual configurations: 'there is no imaginary except at a certain distance', where, as the order of simulacra progress, there is a

163 *Crystal*, p. 19.

164 *Ecstasy*, p. 12.

165 Ibid., p. 20.

166 Ibid., pp. 27, 23.

tendency 'toward the reabsorption of this distance, of this gap that leaves room for an ideal or critical projection'.[167] In an interview titled 'Games with Vestiges', he describes how there is

> no longer any transcendence of judgment. There is a kind of participation, coagulation, proliferation of messages and signs, etc. You are no longer in a state to judge, and no potential to reflect. You are taken into the screen, you are a gaze-simulacrum. This is fascination. It is a form of ecstasy.[168]

This inability to 'reflect' further elucidates Baudrillard's methodology: since theory cannot fulfil its etymological function of observation, it must instead function through participation. Nevertheless, Baudrillard's insistence on the vanishing of space is concurrent with a persistent rhetorical evocation of space. His language is infused with spatial, geometrical terminology: a vocabulary of dots, circles and bubbles, which respectively correspond with one-dimensionality, two-dimensionality and three-dimensionality. His conception of immanence relies on the evocation of theoretical distance in order to express its dissolution as spatiality continues to perform a phantom function.

The primary figure which maintains three-dimensional space in Baudrillard's rhetoric is the sphere. Despite *Ecstasy*'s insistence on the one-dimensional vacuum, the text is suffused with a language of bubbles. At the beginning, Baudrillard describes the subject's integration with their object of use through the example of the automobile: 'The vehicle […] becomes a bubble, the dashboard a console, and the landscape all around unfolds as a television screen'.[169] The key to this process is the term 'becomes' ('devient'), implying a temporal distinction: we *enter* a world in which there is only one dimension, its alternative inaccessible but theoretically and historically extant.[170] Later in *Ecstasy*, Baudrillard remarks:

> each individual sees himself promoted to the controls of a hypothetical machine, isolated in a position of perfect sovereignty, at an infinite distance from his original universe; […] in the same position as the astronaut in his bubble, existing in a state of

[167] Ibid., pp. 121, 121–22.

[168] Jean Baudrillard, 'Games with Vestiges', in *Baudrillard Live: Selected Interviews*, ed. by Mike Gane (London: Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2003), pp. 81–95 (p. 85). Ebook.

[169] *Ecstasy*, p. 13.

[170] Jean Baudrillard, *L'Autre par Lui-Même* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1987), p. 13.

> weightlessness which compels the individual to remain in perpetual orbital flight and to maintain sufficient speed in zero gravity.[171]

This description recalls the features of games discussed in the previous section; 'sovereignty' ('souveraineté') suggests control, entering the magic circle from an outside, while the 'bubble' ('bulle') and 'state of weightlessness' ('état d'apesanteur') imply the absence of stakes that characterise Baudrillard's game-world.[172] Baudrillard's metaphysics is constantly alluding to physics, as the astronaut comparison engages a material metaphor. An astronaut only experiences weightlessness with the equipment of the spacecraft and the atmosphere of space, and Baudrillard's terminology of bubbles similarly retains a hypothetical outside. The world in which everything is immanently connected in an 'uninterrupted interface' is not absolute, but grounded in a specific time and place.[173]

In 'Prophylaxis and Virulence', an essay in *Transparency*, Baudrillard discusses the 'Boy in the Bubble', referring to an American child born in the 1970s with severe immunodeficiency. The boy was kept alive in a sterilised, transparent, spherical chamber. In *Ecstasy*, Baudrillard suggests that such a 'vacuum-sealed existence' is representative of the current social condition:

> To each his own bubble; that is the law today. Just as we have reached the limits of geographic space and have explored all the confines of the planet, we can only implode into a space which is reduced daily as a result of our increasing mobility made possible by airplanes and the media, to the point where all trips have already taken place; where the vaguest desire for dispersion, evasion and movement are concentrated in a fixed point, in an immobility that has ceased to be one of non-movement and has become that of a potential ubiquity, of an absolute mobility, which voids its own space by crossing it ceaselessly and without effort.[174]

What is striking about this description is that it describes an implicit transition from bubble to vacuum, culminating in a state where 'each individual is contained in one hyperpotential

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[171] *Ecstasy*, p. 15.

[172] *Autre*, p. 15.

[173] *Ecstasy*, p. 14.

[174] Ibid., p. 39.

point'.[175] The bubble *contains* the vacuum: the abolition of inside and outside is itself enclosed inside a system. As in the above example of the automobile, this shift is indicated by the term 'become': 'Our very brain, our very bodies have *become* this bubble, this sanitized sphere, a transparent envelope in which we seek refuge' [italics mine].[176] The scheme of transcendence underpinning the Platonic cave is not absolutely dispensed with. Probing the intricacies of Baudrillard's spatial rhetoric, one might hypothesise that, if the subjects now inside the 'bubble' could be equipped with the correct apparatus – if their eyes or antibodies *could* cope with the external environment – they could 'transcend' to a reality outside the metaphorical cave. Dimensionality is theoretically conserved.

Several critics have challenged Baudrillard's conception of immanence. Katherine Hayles, in 'In Response to Jean Baudrillard', notes that 'Baudrillard would no doubt object that hyperrealism is not about transcendence but precisely its opposite – an immanent world that is only surface'.[177] However, Hayles argues against this. She critiques his reading of J. G. Ballard's *Crash* by arguing that the 'drive to transcend physical limitations' is evident in the signs of flight dominating the text, where 'desire' is not absent but reconfigured.[178] Commenting on the performative quality of Baudrillard's writing, she continues that 'The realm that Ballard sees beckoning to us from the margins, Baudrillard places at the center and inflates to consume the whole'.[179] Hayles thus sets Baudrillard's own reflections within a wider spatial framework, similarly suggesting that Baudrillard's depiction of a world without a distinction between inside and outside *itself* has an outside. David Porush, in 'The Architextuality of Transcendence', also reacts against Baudrillard's implication that imagination and transcendence will be 'sterilized' in hyperreality, arguing that transcendence can be both preserved and enhanced.[180] Porush defines transcendence as a process of revelation or explication, citing as an example the ancient architecture of the Temple of Solomon with its 'successive layers mediating between the populace and the holy scrolls, including curtains, doors, layers in the ark itself, veils, walls, tapestries, more walls, rooms, more doors,

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[175] Ibid., p. 41.

[176] Ibid., pp. 37, 39.

[177] N. Katherine Hayles, David Porush, Brooks Landon, Vivian Sobchack, and J. G. Ballard, 'In Response to Jean Baudrillard', in *Jean Baudrillard*, ed. by Mike Gane, 4 vols (London: SAGE, 2000), IV, pp. 3–11 (p. 4).

[178] Ibid., p. 5.

[179] Ibid.

[180] Ibid., p. 6.

courtyards, further systems of walls'.[181] Here, transcendence is embodied architecturally through concrete structures comprising levels and layers. Rather than alluding to a metaphysical transition, Porush's transcendence describes a process of spatial disclosure.

Yet Baudrillard implies that even such spatial disclosure is no longer possible, identifying the contemporary condition as one of 'visibility, the total disappearance of secrecy. […] There is no longer any ontologically secret substance'.[182] This applies equally to architecture: 'today our only architecture is just that: huge screens upon which moving atoms, particles, and molecules were refracted'.[183] The implication is that the architecture of the screen has no levels, no secrets, only a flat circulation of states. And yet, are there no 'secret' spaces in simulated architectures? Is there absolute visibility in the navigation of password-protected websites, and in the unlocking of new areas or abilities in video game levels? The development of digital technology corresponds with developments in the capacity to simulate space; video games, for instance, have progressed from two-dimensionality to increasingly complex three-dimensional representations. The principle of depth is carried over, constructed through virtual rather than physical materials.

Baudrillard's bubbles are, in some sense, architectures of play. They are game-worlds, where life inside them is light and weightless: there is nothing at stake. At the same time, his language of world-making maintains a theoretical distinction between inside and outside, and his vocabulary of 'becoming' describes a transition through scales of enclosure from bubbles to vacuums. These metaphors are significant in conveying additional information through vehicle as well as tenor, and Baudrillard's 'bubble' ('bulle') suggests a figure of transcendence, weightlessly flying and disappearing into a vanishing point of the sky. Baudrillard might assert that transcendence is not possible in a world where everything is exposed, but enclosing this exposed world within the temporally-defined boundaries of a specific context, figured as a bubble, retains the principle of transcendence in a relative sense – an idea that I explore further in the final chapter of this thesis.

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[181] Ibid.

[182] Jean Baudrillard, 'The Art of Disappearing', in *Jean Baudrillard: From Hyperreality to Disappearance*, ed. by Richard G. Smith and David B. Clarke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 185–88 (p. 187).

[183] *Ecstasy*, p. 20.

V. American Architectures of Play

In Baudrillard's writing America is frequently held as the embodiment of hyperreality. In *America* (1989), he describes America as 'neither dream nor reality' but 'a hyperreality because it is a Utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved'.[184] He continues to suggest that 'the truth of America can only be seen by a European, since he alone will discover here the perfect simulacrum – that of the immanence and material transcription of all values'.[185] Indeed, the 'truth of America' observed by a European will also be a different 'truth' to that perceived by an Asian or African – not to mention the vast variety of perspectives contained within these continental generalisations. Nevertheless, this description again encloses hyperreality inside the bubble of a specific system, temporally and geographically bound. Baudrillard implies that, through another cultural perspective, it is possible to step outside the system of simulation and observe it – at least, to the extent allowed by the limitations of one's own vantage point. America provides Baudrillard with a case study in simulation, and his frequent discussion of American architectures, from Disneyland to the Bonaventure Hotel, identifies them as architectures of play.

One of Baudrillard's most striking examples of simulation in *Simulacra and Simulation* is Disneyland: an explicit place of play. Disneyland, like America overall, provides the 'perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra'.[186] Baudrillard remarks:

> It is first of all a play of illusions and phantasms: the Pirates, the Frontier, the Future World, etc. This imaginary world is supposed to ensure the success of the operation. But what attracts the crowds the most is without a doubt the social microcosm, the *religious*, miniaturized pleasure of real America, of its constraints and joys.[187]

'Play' as applied to illusions and phantasms refers to movement: interactivity and rearrangement. Disneyland is a world composed of worlds, containing the subsections of Pirates, Frontier, Future World, and so on. At the same time, these worlds are equivalent, the distinction lying only in scale ('miniaturized'). Challenging Baudrillard's insistence on equivalence, Hayles comments that

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[184] Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 28.

[185] Ibid., pp. 28–29.

[186] *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 12.

[187] Ibid.

> Every existing simulation has boundaries that distinguish it from the surrounding environment. Disneyland sports a fence, dense hedges, and acres of parking lots. Only when these boundaries do not exist, or cease to signify that one has left the simulation and entered reality, does the dreamscape that Baudrillard evokes shimmer into existence.[188]

Baudrillard's argument is that these boundaries provide only local distinctions. He contends that, *despite* these demarcations, the quality of America's Disneyland is the same as the quality of America:

> Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation.[189]

The boundaries are serving a purpose, but that purpose is 'saving the reality *principle*' [italics mine].[190] They maintain the idea of distinction: the absolute value.

Yet, as will be elaborated in chapter three, this local distinction is precisely the locus of attraction; Baudrillard himself admits that the crowds are drawn to the 'miniaturised' and the 'microcosm'. They are attracted to the principle of moving between representational levels: more abstractly, to the specific *point* at which the Möbius strip twists, or to the shift provided by the individual Penrose step. This observation does not contradict Baudrillard's claims so much as identify a nuance in his insistence on equivalence. Baudrillard's own rhetoric reveals that the game lies not so much in Disneyland itself, but in the localised transition between levels of reality. If reality had 'passed completely into the game of reality', there would be no more game, but retaining the idea of a boundary correspondingly retains the idea of a game, here expressed through a geometry of embedded (miniaturised) worlds.

One of the most well-known American architectures discussed by Baudrillard is the Bonaventure Hotel, which he also interprets as an architecture of play. Brian Gogan, in *The Rhetoric of Symbolic Exchange*, notes the contrast between Baudrillard's description and that of Fredric Jameson:

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[188] 'In Response', p. 3.

[189] *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 12.

[190] Ibid., p. 13.

> Whereas Jameson's treatment commences at the hotel entrances […] and eventually ascends to the rotating cocktail lounges perched atop the hotel […], Baudrillard's treatment begins at the cocktail lounge […] and descends in an attempt to find the hotel's exit […]. Jameson, on the one hand, understands the hotel as a transformative and transcendent space – one that gives humans a new view […] and one that requires new perceptual capacities […]. Baudrillard, on the other hand, understands the hotel as an 'internal refraction' that lacks mystery […].[191]

Whether the hotel is understood through a scheme of immanence or transcendence depends on the way that each theorist chooses to descriptively navigate it. In Jameson's discussion, each element of the architecture is successively revealed through a progression inwards and upwards: entrances, gardens, glass skin, lobby, towers, cocktail lounge.[192] He emphasises the role of escalators and elevators in stimulating a radical 'spatial experience: that of rapidly shooting up through the ceiling and outside, along one of the four symmetrical towers', finally reaching the revolving cocktail lounge in which one is 'rotated about and offered a contemplative spectacle of the city itself'.[193] This movement, which involves surpassing a physical boundary of enclosure (the ceiling), stimulates an experience of transcendence. At the same time, Jameson notes a qualitative suppression of depth: 'a constant busyness gives the feeling that emptiness is here absolutely packed […] without any of that distance that formerly enabled the perception of perspective or volume', where 'the suppression of depth observable in postmodern painting and literature' is achieved in an architectural medium.[194] The implication of immanence is accompanied by an explicit expression of transcendence, as 'this latest mutation in space […] has finally succeeded in *transcending* the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself' [italics mine].[195] One transcends spatial systems in the movement through architectural levels, while this space is saturated with a sense of immanent presence, where this saturation in turn transcends a subject's cognitive sense of location. The two conditions interact through the interplay between the physical and the phenomenological.

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[191] Brian Gogan, *Jean Baudrillard: The Rhetoric of Symbolic Exchange* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2017), p. 23.

[192] Fredric Jameson, 'The Bonaventure Hotel', in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 11–16.

[193] Ibid., p. 15.

[194] Ibid., p. 14.

[195] Ibid., p. 16.

Contrastingly, Baudrillard begins his account with a short sentence: 'The top of the Bonaventure Hotel'.[196] The sentence's lack of subject exemplifies the immanent participation that Baudrillard emphasises as a feature of the hotel. By choosing to begin at the top, he negates the possibility of ascension, and his disorientation in failing to find an exit ('you cannot get out of the building itself') bolsters his insistence on immanence.[197] Yet Baudrillard has rhetorically performed the feat of being *already inside* the architecture by deliberately omitting description of the entrance. Since to be already inside the building is not physically possible, this is to instigate a rhetorical magic trick. Translated into a textual medium, architecture is manipulated to suit the framework of each concept. Jameson's and Baudrillard's accounts coexist without contradicting because they articulate different paths within the same space – different perspectives of the same object.

Baudrillard's immanence is accompanied by playfulness; the hotel suggests the features of a funhouse, stimulating the vertiginous experience of Caillois's *ilinx*. He describes the disorientating feeling of perceiving the metal structure at the top of the hotel revolving around the cocktail bar, before realising that it is the bar's platform that is moving while the rest of the building remains still.[198] Baudrillard identifies something suspiciously gamic in this structure, asking: 'Is this still architecture, this pure illusionism, this mere box of spatio-temporal tricks? Ludic and hallucinogenic, is this post-modern architecture?'[199] He goes on to address Jameson's observation that 'the Bonaventure aspires to be a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city' by remarking: 'Blocks like the Bonaventure building claim to be perfect, self-sufficient miniature cities. But they cut themselves off from the city more than they interact with it'.[200] Both Jameson and Baudrillard suggest that the hotel is self-contained; like the magic circle of a game, it is a complete and detached space. However, this implies that, if there is no inside-outside *within* the hotel, there is an outside *outside* the hotel. Baudrillard's immanence is relative to a certain systematic configuration because he cannot theoretically abolish the structure of physical space. It could be argued that physicality is irrelevant here, as Baudrillard is discussing something more subtle and perceptual. Yet in this chapter and throughout the thesis I have aimed to illustrate how the physical and metaphorical inform each other. As

[196] *America*, p. 62.

[197] Ibid., p. 63.

[198] Ibid., p. 62.

[199] Ibid.

[200] Jameson, 'Bonaventure', p. 12; Baudrillard, *America*, p. 62.

Jameson noted in his description of the elevator's upward motion, the physical vertical movement facilitated by the hotel's features, and selectively ignored in Baudrillard's description, enacts an experience of revelation and discovery. The architecture of the hotel is linguistically manipulated by each critic, lending itself to ludic rearrangement.

Not all of Baudrillard's notable engagements with architecture revolve around America. As well as the Bonaventure Hotel, another key architecture discussed by Baudrillard is the Centre Pompidou in Beaubourg, Paris, which also has a particular relationship with play. The Centre Pompidou is a mixed-use cultural centre, containing libraries, a modern art museum, an industrial design centre, public halls and various temporary exhibits. Visitors circulate through a transparent tube that runs along the side of the building which contains an escalator, providing views over Paris in the ascent. The architectural design was the result of an international competition set up by the president of France in 1971, won by architects Piano and Rogers.[201] Piano's interests were in 'rational, technological architecture and construction', and in his collaborations with Rogers, their teams initially built 'basic but elegant factories'.[202] Yet the factory was not the only inspiration for the Beaubourg design; in considering precedents for flexible internal structures, the designers also came across the 'Fun Palace', designed by architect Cedric Price for theatrical manager Joan Littlewood.[203] The fun palace was created as a 'laboratory of fun', including games, a music area, jukeboxes, a 'science-playground' to increase knowledge, and a 'therapy theatre'.[204]

In this spirit, Baudrillard opens his piece on Beaubourg by calling the building a 'Monument to the *games* of mass simulation' [italics mine].[205] This gamic atmosphere is reinforced by his comparison of it to a 'world's fair building, with its (calculated?) fragility deterring any traditional mentality or monumentality'.[206] The materials that comprise funhouses possess a similar flimsiness: a calculated temporariness which links to the lightness and weightlessness characterising the physics of the world inside the magic circle. Baudrillard goes on to suggest the absurdity of the asking what should be placed in Beaubourg, remarking: 'the topical distinction between interior and exterior should no longer be posed. There lies our

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[201] Nathan Silver, *The Making of Beaubourg* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), pp. viiii–x (p. viiii).

[202] Ibid., pp. 5–6.

[203] Ibid., p. 25.

[204] Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood, 'The Fun Palace', *The Drama Review*, 12.3 (1968), 127–34 (p. 130).

[205] *Simulacra and Simulation*, p. 61.

[206] Ibid., pp. 63–64.

truth, the truth of Möbius'.[207] Yet the Möbius, as expressed above, maintains a local distinction in levels. Moreover, despite this assertion of impossibility, Baudrillard goes on to speculate: 'Yet – yet […] if you had to have something in Beaubourg – it should have been a labyrinth, a combinatory, infinite library, an aleatory redistribution of destinies through games or lotteries – in short, the universe of Borges'.[208] In other words, the Beaubourg, a gamic architecture, should contain further games or gamic devices. If the Beaubourg is a game containing games, perhaps the negation of the inside-outside distinction is achieved after all, since the two become qualitatively identical. Still, as well as games, Baudrillard goes on to suggest that Beaubourg should house 'An experimentation with all the different processes of representation: defraction, implosion, slow motion, aleatory linkage and coupling'.[209] As elaborated in the next section, this sense of 'experimentation' also appears in Baudrillard's conception of theory-fiction, which is defined as a space of hypothesis and exploration rather than affirmation. It is a space of 'play' as movement, where objects can be unfixed, set in motion and tested out. Baudrillard's architectural descriptions thus correspond with his theoretical explications. Just as he expresses his concepts in material terms, grounding metaphysics in physics, he translates physical architectures into geometries and patterns that demonstrate abstract ideas.

Though Beaubourg is not an American architecture, it illustrates the principles that Baudrillard suggests America exemplifies: namely, the navigation of ludic worlds where the distinction between inside and outside is theoretically negated but materially present. This local distinction, I have argued, is a point of attraction and stimulates a sense of play. In *Paroxysm*, Baudrillard makes the following assertion about the relationship between America and Europe: 'with us, everything is always philosophical – even the glorification of appearances against depth […]. Over there, even theory becomes once again what it is: a fiction'.[210] This process is at once transformative and revelatory; Baudrillard's America, itself a fabrication, both fabricates and exposes fabrications. Along these lines, explicitly conceiving of theory as fiction has implications which will be unpacked in the following section.

[207] Ibid., p. 64.

[208] Ibid., pp. 64–65.

[209] Ibid., p. 65.

[210] *Paroxysm*, p. 82.

VI. Theory-Fiction

Baudrillard's style is frequently characterised as compelling but unclear, lacking solid argumentative infrastructure. Mark Poster suggests that his writings are open to several criticisms: 'he fails to define his major terms, such as the code'; 'His writing style is hyperbolic and declarative, often lacking sustained, systematic analysis when it is appropriate'; 'He totalises his insights, refusing to qualify or delimit his claims'.[211] Christopher Norris articulates a similar ambivalence:

> so long as we don't read too carefully he can thus carry off the performative trick of conjuring away with one hand those same criteria (truth, reality, history etc.) which he then summons up with the other for purposes of contrastive definition.[212]

He goes on to conclude that Baudrillard is 'thoroughly inconsequent and muddled when it comes to philosophising on the basis of his own observations'.[213]

Baudrillard's flaws as listed above can be summarised as imprecision, confusion and contradiction. As Norris points out, there is a sense of a *trick* in his rhetoric: something that cannot be grasped, performed behind the scenes, deliberately misleading and resisting clarification. Still, Baudrillard anticipates these charges. In *Paroxysm*, he remarks: 'I am aware of the paradoxical rhetoric in my writing, a rhetoric that exceeds its own probability. The terms are purposefully exaggerated'.[214] Perhaps one way of accounting for these paradoxes and contradictions on a rhetorical level is to treat Baudrillard's texts as fiction. There is precedence for this from both Baudrillard and his critics. Regarding the latter, Guy Bellavance, in an interview with Baudrillard, introduces *The Fatal Strategy* as a work of '*sociology fiction*'.[215] Similarly, Hayles comments that 'Baudrillard is as skilled a fiction writer as Ballard, Dick, or Lem', where his works do not only 'describe the implosion into simulation' but 'enact it by systematically eliding the borders that mark the differences between simulation and reality'.[216] She mentions the 'high' described by her students after reading Baudrillard, categorising his

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[211] Mark Poster, 'Critical Theory and Technoculture: Habermas and Baudrillard' in *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Douglas Kellner (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 68–89 (p. 83).

[212] Norris, p. 379.

[213] Ibid.

[214] *Paroxysm*, p. 186.

[215] *Crystal*, p. 15.

[216] 'In Response', p. 5.

writing with 'performative texts'.[217] This 'high' points to the compelling quality of Baudrillard's writing, which also corresponds with the attraction to the local transition between levels of representation discussed in previous sections.

Fiction functions according to different rhetorical expectations to theory. As suggested by Hayles, ideas are performed rather than described, enacted rather than elucidated. Along these lines, Brian Gogan identifies a 'performative dimension' to Baudrillard's aphoristic writing.[218] Conducting a detailed analysis of aphorisms, he outlines how 'the aphorism leaves open the possibility that the world maintains its suprasensibility – that is, a fundamental position above human sensibility'.[219] An aphorism 'maintains the mystery of the world' – a mystery which has, Baudrillard asserted, also disappeared.[220] Indeed, Gogan concludes that 'Baudrillard's use of the aphorism genre performs appearance and disappearance at the same time'.[221] The practice of holding contradictions simultaneously in play can be performed by fiction, which, as postmodernist fiction exemplifies, is under no obligation to provide logical resolution.

What fiction provides for Baudrillard is a space of hypothesis. In *Paroxysm* he explicitly comments that his exploration of what happens 'after the demise of different things and truths' can only be performed 'through the use of thought experiments'.[222] Fiction acts as an exploratory space that allows objects to be experimentally rearranged in different configurations. Accordingly, in the Bellavance interview Baudrillard acknowledges that

> the concepts I use are not exactly concepts. I wouldn't insist on their conceptual rigour: that would be far too constricting […]. You can play around with them. But that isn't frivolous or mundane; it is very serious in my opinion. It is the only possible way to account for the movement of things.[223]

The original sense of play as movement is reiterated, defined against the implied stasis of rigorously defined objects. Play describes a methodology as well as an activity, performed with

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[217] Ibid.

[218] Gogan, p. 13.

[219] Ibid., pp. 136–37.

[220] Ibid., p. 137.

[221] Ibid., p. 138.

[222] *Paroxysm*, p. 186.

[223] *Crystal*, p. 23.

a ‘serious’ intent which seeks illumination through interactivity. When Bellavance asks if Baudrillard is saying that ‘theory ultimately has the right not to be true’, he responds ‘Absolutely, the right to play or to be radical’.[224] If truth is something fixed and unchanging, play is, contrastingly, moving and evolving. Play does not affirm because affirmation is static; instead, play ‘brings more intense things into being’.[225] Again, the absolute value of an idea takes precedence over affirmation and negation, where bringing into being is prioritised over the question as to whether the object brought into being is ‘true’.

The sense of fiction as hypothesis is made explicit in *Cool Memories II*, when Baudrillard comments:

> Fiction? That’s what I do already. My characters are a number of crazy hypotheses which maltreat reality in various ways and which I kill off at the end when they have done their work. The only way to treat ideas: murder (they kill concepts, don’t they?) – but the crime has to be perfect. This is all imaginary, of course.[226]

Fiction allows for this theoretical violence because it takes place within a magic circle: a world without stakes. Here, characters can be dead and alive at the same time, since the significance lies is the modulus of their existence. At the same time, in *Revenge of the Crystal* Baudrillard qualifies that ‘the aim is not exactly fiction as such’, implying that his use of ‘fiction’ is simply an attempt at shifting the conversation – a means of suggesting that ‘We need to have many ways of expressing theory’.[227] In his own words, Baudrillard’s writing both *is* and *is not* fiction: fiction is affirmed and negated at the same time, drawing attention to the term’s absolute value.

Fiction forms a world in the way that a game forms a world, suggesting a second reality, another ontology, while at the same time this reality is attached like a Möbius strip to the reality from which it was created. Baudrillard explores this in *Paroxysm*, where he comments: ‘Let’s say that we manufacture a double of the world which substitutes itself for the world, we generate the confusion between the world and its double’.[228] These multiplied ‘worlds’ float around each other and interact, a strategy summarised by Baudrillard in ‘Games with Vestiges’: since one is ‘entirely within systems’, one ‘plays off and through the commutations of the

[224] Ibid., p. 24.

[225] Ibid.

[226] *Cool Memories*, pp. 21–22.

[227] *Crystal*, p. 24.

[228] *Paroxysm*, p. 43.

systems themselves'.[229] The purpose of inventing theoretical 'worlds' is to generate friction and energy through the interaction between them. This is through a mode of relation that is eccentric rather than concentric; in *Radical Thought*, Baudrillard describes radical thought as a game that is 'eccentric to the real, ex-centred from the real world'.[230] Similarly, in *Paroxysm*, he suggests a shift from dialectical thinking to 'what is ex-centred, eccentric'.[231] Whereas concentric circles are a series of circles that all have the same centre, eccentric circles are interlinked but have different centres. If Baudrillard's thought is eccentric to the real, then it is does not precisely align with the real but somehow overlaps with it. There is no shared point between subject and object, between theory and world, but a sideways relationship – something that allows *friction*, because the mapping is not precise.

In response to the 'game of reality', then, Baudrillard suggests a 'game *with* reality' [italics mine], putting forward a conception of theory which does not pretend to be above its object of description but is, instead, knowingly equivalent.[232] He remarks: 'it is not enough for theory to describe and analyse, it must itself be an event in the universe it describes'.[233] In a condition of immanence, theory cannot pretend to be outside the system it is attempting to define. Accordingly, its etymological definition of *theoria*, as observation, gives way to *fiction*, as fabrication. It is no longer a window but an object, something opaque rather than transparent. In Baudrillard's writing, reality seems to be composed of a series of equivalent worlds, where the world of fiction is no less real than the world of non-fiction, but another floating and equivalent plane which interacts with the other floating and equivalent planes – and, through this interaction, generates illumination.

VII. Conclusion

Reading an absolute value of levels in Baudrillard's disaffirmation of distinctions between representations and realities does not necessarily contradict Baudrillard's arguments; by writing in a way which eschews the dialectic, anticipating that theory has a 'right not to be true' but instead 'play', there is no contradiction, only interaction. In this chapter I hope to have

[229] 'Games with Vestiges', p. 94.

[230] 'Radical Thought', p. 54.

[231] *Paroxysm*, p. 43.

[232] 'Radical Thought', p. 54.

[233] *Ecstasy*, p. 99.

expressed the following points: that local distinctions in levels of reality coexist with global ontological equivalence in Baudrillard's writing, performing explanatory work and revealing an attraction to the moment of transition; that Baudrillard proposes that reality has a quality of game, and that this game is linked to the invention of worlds – or, the *idea* of inventing worlds, even if these worlds are ultimately equivalent; that one-dimensional immanence coexists with simulation of depth that maintains an abstract but functional distinction between levels; that Baudrillard identifies a ludic quality to the physical architectures he discusses, where architecture is also used as an embodied correlate of his concepts; that viewing Baudrillard's writing through a lens of fiction sets his paradoxes in a context of experimentation and hypothesis, where an idea's 'absolute value' again takes precedence over conclusive assertion. Baudrillard both affirms and disaffirms that reality is a game. He both affirms and disaffirms that simulacra are a game. In doing this, he is illustrating that there is a game to be played with theoretically manipulating levels of reality – a game that, as will be seen as this thesis unfolds, manifests itself in different forms through postmodern and post-postmodern fiction, beginning with John Barth's funhouse.

Chapter Two

Slides, Staircases and Mirror Mazes: Navigating the Funhouse of Fiction

Immediately you must pass through a rotating barrel […]*, then walk by a scary animation hiding in a small hallway and climb a steep circular stairway* […].

The staircase spirals upward to a series of flat, apparently stable planks. In reality, the planks shift and wave side-to-side each time you take a step; […] *just as you get to the end of this undulating threat, a sudden puff of air shoots up from an air hole hidden in the floor; dresses worn by young women flap in the air.*

Next you encounter a series of back-lit opaque glass panels; the light in here creates spooky shadows on a nearby screen and again, at the most unsuspecting moment, you experience another air hole, which is unavoidable if you hope to enter a maze of hallways with animations and illusions including a glass and projection trick where a human figure is transformed into a skeleton.

Then you enter […] *the Dizzy Room. This room relies on the tendency of your mind to misinterpret what it thinks it sees. The room* […] *appears* […] *conventionally constructed, but* […] *is actually built on a tilt, so walking is bewildering, and doubly so because a ball that seems to be rolling uphill* […] *is, in fact, rolling downhill.*

Still high above the Palace floor, you pass through an open archway onto another series of slip boards, another unexpected air hole, and finally work your way down to the final obstacle – the jail. In the first cell, you are enclosed by bars and must search for the one elusive rubber bar that would allow you to squeeze into the second and final cell. By now you're conditioned to look for a rubber bar, but you search in vain, for this time you have to find a trick gate. Just as the confusing search finally ends, you are hit once again with a blast from an air hole, the last indignity before you leave to experience the rest of the Palace.[234]

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[234] 'Middle Years: 1920s–1938', *Palace Museum Online*, 2005 <http://www.palaceamusements.com/1920.html> [accessed 26 September 2021].

I. What is a Funhouse?

The above description is derived from the recollections of Ralph Lopez Jr., who worked at the Pleasure Palace funhouse of Asbury Park, New Jersey, in the late 1940s. This is likely the funhouse in which John Barth became lost as a child, as he writes in his introduction to *Lost in the Funhouse*: 'I was in fact, at age thirteen or so, once briefly mislaid in a boardwalk funhouse, in Asbury Park, New Jersey; end of autobiographical reference'.[235] Barth was thirteen in 1943, which is precisely the time that Lopez's funhouse was active before being demolished in 1955. Nevertheless, a different funhouse appears in Barth's story: Ambrose and his family are on their way to Ocean City, a seaside resort in Maryland rather than New Jersey. 'Jester's Fun House' in Ocean City was built in the late 1920s by Thomas Conway of Atlantic City, and was most well-known for a large, automated rag doll called Laffing Sal, which stood in front of the funhouse laughing loudly.[236] Laffing Sal appears in 'Lost in the Funhouse' as 'Fat May', whose laughter 'chuckled, wheezed, wept; tried in vain to catch its breath; tittered, groaned, exploded raucous and anew' (79).

In addition to Laffing Sal, Brandon Seidl lists features of this funhouse as 'air bags, floor obstacles, a tilt room, dancing skeletons, a stunt entitled "*Bruno*" which was a bulldog that suddenly sprang out at unsuspected patrons, a large gorilla, and even an octopus'.[237] However, the funhouse in 'Lost in the Funhouse' resembles Asbury Park more than Ocean City. Like the revolving barrel entrance in Palace Amusements, it is accessed through a 'tumbling barrel […] just inside the Devil's mouth entrance to the funhouse', which is also near air jets that blow up ladies' skirts (89). Upon entering, Ambrose takes Magda's elbow to 'steady her against revolving discs set in the slanted floor to throw your feet out from under' (91), recalling the unstable planks described by Lopez.

Funhouses have their origins at the beginning of the twentieth century. The earliest versions were simply enclosed buildings containing various amusements, and a key progenitor was the Pavilion of Fun in Steeplechase Park, Coney Island. The Pavilion of Fun included 'the

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[235] John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), p. vii. All further references are taken from this edition and cited within the text. I use 'Lost in the Funhouse' to denote the titular story, while the collection as a whole is referred to as *Lost in the Funhouse*.

[236] Brandon Seidl, 'Ocean City Oddities: The Story of Laffing Sal', *Ocean City*, 2018 <https://www.oceancity.com/laffing-sal/?fbclid=IwAR399rvuXlGrf-UwgvLQWaBpbrm8fOyvx9MHJePvvuvLr_KVbYVJoQlLiAs> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[237] Ibid.

Pipe', a giant slide which led from the top of the building to the ground, and a 1914 guide lists further attractions as the Golden Stairs, the Bounding Billows, the Roof Garden, the Razzle Dazzle, the Human Roulette Wheel and the Barrel of Love.[238] The amusements were not accessed via a walk-through path as in funhouses today, but each was available on its own terms. Similar examples present at the time include Kennywood Park, and Rick Davis describes its Pavilion of Fun as a prequel to funhouses.[239] In 1903, this pavilion contained a slippery slide, electric shocks, air jets, surprise boxes and a 'crazy staircase' originally designed by George Tilyou for Coney Island.[240] Pavilions of Fun later developed into walk-through funhouses, which led from one area to another, and this is how funhouses are constructed today. A patent from 2000 describes the typical funhouse as a 'structure where participants work their way through a defined path of hallways or passageways containing various amusement effects', including 'dramatic graphics, collapsing stairs and […] a hall of mirrors'.[241] Several features appear consistently from the early pavilions of fun to modern funhouses, namely slides, crazy staircases, and mirror mazes.

The 'funhouse' is frequently used as a postmodern metaphor to evoke fun, inversion, play or disorientation, testifying to the enduring popularity of the figure. Writing on politics, Miles Orvell suggests that

> to live in the 1980s was to feel lost in the funhouse, looking in on a White House in which, toward the end of the Reagan era, the president's wife was whispering stage directions to a bewildered actor who could not quite get his lines.[242]

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[238] Adam Sandy, 'Inside Steeplechase: The Funny Place', *Amusement Park History*, 2002 <https://web.archive.org/web/20070810120406/http:/history.amusement-parks.com/insidesteeplechase.htm> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[239] Rick Davis, 'The Dark Side of Kennywood', *DAFE: Dark Attraction & Funhouse Enthusiasts* <http://dafe.org/articles/darkrides/darkSideOfKennywood.html> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[240] Ibid.

[241] Rick A. Briggs, 'Interactive Funhouse Play Structure' (Springfield, IL, 2000), patent number: 6132318, Section 1: Background of the Invention.

[242] Miles Orvell, *The Real Thing: Imitation and Authenticity in American Culture, 1880–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), p. xiii; Christopher Norris, 'Lost in the Funhouse: Baudrillard and the Politics of Postmodernism', in *Jean Baudrillard*, ed. by Mike Gane, 4 vols (London: SAGE, 2000), I, pp. 363–89.

Christopher Norris also applies the metaphor to Jean Baudrillard in the title of his essay ‘Lost in the Funhouse: Baudrillard and the Politics of Postmodernism’, though there is no mention of funhouses or Barth in the substance of his work.

Still, despite the widespread use of the figure, rarely is there reference to the funhouse’s material context. In the rest of this chapter I explore how the funhouse’s physical features, including the spatial levels traversed through slides, staircases and mirror mazes, correspond to narrative devices in John Barth’s ‘Lost in the Funhouse’ and David Foster Wallace’s response, ‘Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way’.

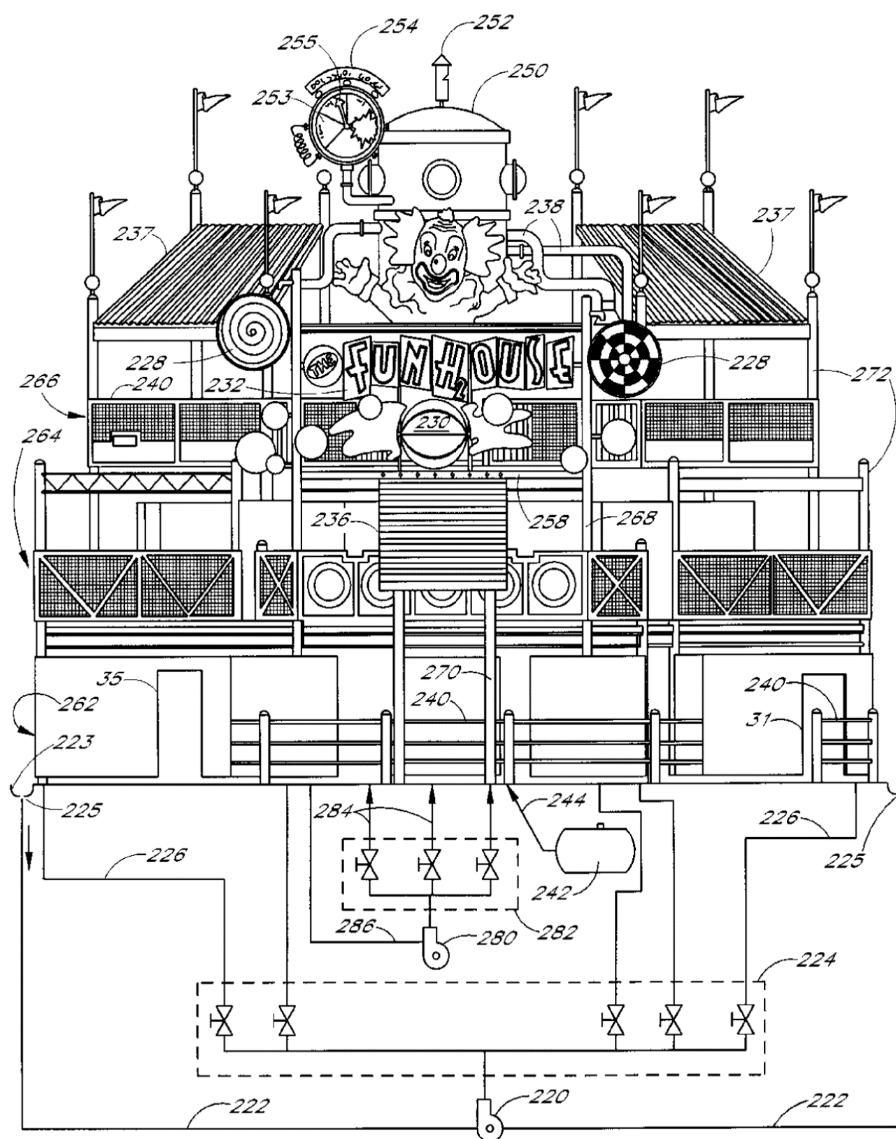

Figure 2. Diagram of a contemporary funhouse structure.
From Briggs, ‘Interactive Funhouse Play Structure’.

II. What is Fun?

At the beginning of *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga suggests that theories of play up to his time of writing are inadequate because they neglect the question: 'what actually is the *fun* of playing?'[243] It is, continues Huizinga, 'precisely this fun-element that characterises the essence of play'.[244] The etymological origins of 'fun' trace back to a verb rather than a noun, as to 'fun' somebody meant to 'cheat or cajole (a person) (*out* of something); to trick, deceive' (OED). From its early sense of trickery, 'fun' developed into its contemporary meaning of 'light-hearted pleasure, enjoyment, or amusement; boisterous joviality or merrymaking; entertainment' (OED). Nevertheless, a residue of tricks and jokes appears in contemporary usage, such as the phrase 'to make fun of' somebody. The funhouse brings all of these associations into play, with its air jets that 'make a fool' of women wearing skirts, optical illusions that aim to deceive, and its ultimate goal of fun as amusement.

Wallace articulates the economic dimensions of fun in 'A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again', an essay detailing his experience on a luxury cruise ship. The term 'supposedly' captures the spirit of the essay, suggesting an experience of fun that is a collective construct. Wallace remarks that 'all of the Megalines offer the same basic product', a product that is not a 'service' or even a 'good time', but rather a 'feeling': 'a blend of relaxation and stimulation, stressless indulgence and frantic tourism, that special mix of servility and condescension […] "to pamper"'.[245] The possibility of selling a feeling implies that feelings can, like material objects, be produced and transferred. This is emphasised by the poster for the ship, which is seductive because it is 'not an invitation to fantasise but rather a construction of the fantasy itself'.[246] Similarly, Wallace regards the cruise experience not as an invitation to feel fun, but a *construction* of feeling fun. Just as 'you are excused from doing the work of constructing the fantasy', you are excused from the work of feeling because feeling is provided materially, translated into objects and events.[247]

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[243] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), p. 2.

[244] Ibid., p. 3.

[245] David Foster Wallace, 'A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again' in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 1998), pp. 256–353 (p. 260).

[246] Ibid., p. 266.

[247] Ibid.

Ross Wilson identifies the potential for commodification in fun when discussing phrases that recur in advertising. He remarks:

> What do makers of inflatables and popcorn machines, retailers of party wares, children's entertainers, and owners of mariners for leisure-craft have in common? Amongst other things, they all use a revealing phrase to advertise what they do: 'We Manufacture Fun'.[248]

The devices listed here have another common feature: they all appeal to sensory experience, whether through food (popcorn machines), motion (inflatables) or laughter (entertainers). This embodied aspect is reinforced by the term 'manufacture', suggesting a process of engineering, and the fun of the funhouse similarly arises from interaction with manufactured mechanisms. At the same time, to 'manufacture' fun implies that fun can be broken down into identifiable elements: affective nuts and bolts. Barth's Ambrose sees the funhouse as '*a place of fear and confusion*' (72), but fear and confusion can be elements of fun; in Asbury Park, hidden animations shock participants, stimulating 'fear' in the service of fun, and the unstable planks that look deceivingly stable cause 'confusion'. There is potential for fun in the fear of a haunted house, but if fear increases too much then fun dissolves and the emotional spectrum enters terror. The architecture of the funhouse aims to create 'fun' through a combination of feelings manufactured at the correct proportions.

III. Why is a Funhouse Fun?

Recalling Roger Caillois's categories, the funhouse stimulates play in the mode of *ilinx*, producing disorientation through optical illusions and distorted perspectives. Along these lines, Ralph Lopez Jr. attributed the 'fun' of the funhouse to its geometry: 'the old fun house was the best!' because 'Everything was angled, you were always going on angles up and down. That's what was so neat!'[249] Caillois's categories also take place on a continuum between two modes, *paidia* and *ludus*, as mentioned briefly in the previous chapter.[250] *Paidia* comes from the Greek word for child, describing spontaneous play involving 'turbulence, free improvisation, and

[248] Ross Wilson, '"We Manufacture Fun": Capital and the Production of Affect', in *Affect and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 100–15 (p. 106).

[249] Ralph Lopez Jr. cited in 'Middle Years', *Palace Museum Online*.

[250] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. by Meyer Barash (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2001), p. 13.

carefree gaiety'.[251] However, *ludus* occurs when the free aspect of play is bound to 'arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions'.[252] The funhouse participates in *paidia*, facilitating spontaneous play delimited only by the physical boundaries of the equipment with which participants interact. However, the funhouse operating room, in which Ambrose finds himself, is a form of *ludus*: an abstracted play involving control panels and switchboards rather than energetic interaction.

The nature of *paidia* in the funhouse can be understood by considering other physical structures which share features with funhouses. One such structure is the playground, which also contains apparatus designed for kinetic play, such as slides, climbing frames and ladders. The history of playgrounds is rooted in gymnastics, as the playground movement stemmed from a need to improve physical welfare in the population.[253] The earliest manufactured playgrounds consisted of gymnastic apparatus, installed outside, and these playgrounds were called 'outdoor gymnasia'.[254] Typical equipment recommended by the Playground Association of America (PAA) included sliding boards, sand courts, rope swings and ladders.[255] The construction of playgrounds involved the manufacturing of artificial structures for the purpose of facilitating the spontaneous energy of *paidia*, providing a space for this impulse to be exercised (see fig. 3).

An exemplary feature of playground equipment is the jungle gym. The modern jungle gym, or climbing frame, was patented by Sebastian Hinton in the 1920s; Hinton submitted several variations to be patented, and in each he provided a rationale behind the design.[256] One of his aims was to design a structure where 'children can climb in any direction', including 'vertically', 'zig zag', in 'spiral fashion' and 'horizontal progress'.[257] Hinton works on the premise that climbing is an evolutionary means of travel, and the apparatus is also built to allow

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[251] Ibid.

[252] Ibid.

[253] Joe L. Frost, *A History of Children's Play and Play Environments: Towards a Contemporary Child-Saving Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 92.

[254] Ibid.

[255] Ibid., p. 178.

[256] Sebastian Hinton, 'Climbing Structure' (Illinois, 1923), patent number: 1471465; Hinton, 'Climbing Structure' (Illinois, 1924), patent number: 1488246; Hinton, 'Climbing Structure' (Illinois, 1924), patent number: 1488244.

[257] Hinton, 1471465, p. 1 (lines 85–86), p. 2 (lines 47–53).

Figure 3. Iron pole playground equipment at Trinity Play Park, Dallas, circa 1900. From Dallas Public Library Archives.

for the children's inclination to 'swing head downward by the knees, calling back and forth to each other, a trick which can be explained of course only by the monkey instinct'.[258] There is a parallel between the structure of playgrounds and monkey enclosures, which also contain climbing apparatus and suspended bridges. This analogy is reinforced by the terminology 'jungle gym' and 'monkey run way', now popularly known as 'monkey bars'. Climbing apparatus, in both monkey enclosures and playgrounds, is an artificial construct designed to facilitate a primal instinct towards physical exercise as play.

The slide is traditionally the antithesis to the climbing apparatus, as reflected by the board game 'Chutes and Ladders'. The history of the slide is a contested topic, but Peter Jensen Brown lists one of its more curious predecessors as the American cellar door.[259] Sliding down the cellar door, which was pitched at an elevated angle, was a nineteenth century pastime, and Brown suggests that the slide and cellar door together form 'a continuum of gravity-powered

[258] Hinton, 1488244, p. 1 (lines 66–69).

[259] Peter Jensen Brown, 'Cellars Doors and Trolleys – the History of Playground Slides', *Early Sports and Pop Culture History*, 2017 <https://esnpc.blogspot.com/2017/08/cellar-doors-and-trolleys-history-of.html> [accessed 26 September 2021].

sliding entertainments'.[260] He goes on to describe another contender for the first formal slide as the Helter Skelter in Coney Island's Luna Park in 1903. In a section called 'A Glorified Cellar-Door to Slide On', the magazine *Collier's* remarked:

> One of the things which the crowd likes best is a sort of winding inclined trough, made of bamboo and polished smooth as glass. You sit down in this at the top and slide to the bottom, precisely as a piece of ice slides down a chute into a cellar, except that you go about twice as fast and are likely to be upset at the turns. This slide costs nothing at all except the trouble of climbing to the top of it, and the charm of it is correspondingly insidious.[261]

The feelings associated with the slide here are 'relief', 'upset', 'trouble' and 'charm'. It is the pitch at which these experiences are combined that creates the 'fun' of the slide: the effort exerted in climbing up enhances relief and release in sliding down, which involves a voluntary loss of control, and the 'upset' at the turns provides a thrill of instability. Its popularity is evident in the installation of another slide the next year, which had the added feature of bumps.[262] The *New York Times* describes a man's reaction to experiencing this slide; he had ripped his clothes from the friction, but commented 'the fun's worth it' and went to climb again.[263] The article in *Collier's* similarly reports a woman who slides down so many times that 'once could fancy her dreaming of endless slides down vast abysses where you never find the bottom'.[264] The slide conjures imaginings of infinite play, as expressed in Carse's definition of games played 'for the purpose of continuing to play'.[265] The equipment of the funhouse and the playground is designed for infinite play in the form of *ilinx* and *paidia*: spontaneous, vertiginous, instinctual exercise. Once a person has slid down the slide, they climb back up to slide again.

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[260] Ibid.

[261] Arthur B. Ruhl, 'The New Glories of Coney Island', *Collier's*, 27 August 1904, p. 20, Hathi Trust Digital Library <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=pst.000068356071&view=1up&seq=492&skin=2021> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[262] Brown, 'Cellar Doors and Trolleys'.

[263] 'Bumping the Bumps', *New York Times*, 12 June 1904, p. 25.

[264] Ruhl, p. 20.

[265] James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), p. 3.

Yet the parallel between the slide and the cellar door indicates that the 'fun' of these structures is not inherent, but depends on usage. In this vein, Eduardo Paolozzi's 1972 front cover design of Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, which depicts a funhouse inside the outline of a human body (fig. 4), was in turn inspired by Fritz Kahn's 'Der Mensch als Industrieplast' (1926), which depicts a factory inside the outline of a human body (fig. 5). Michael Sappol discusses how Kahn was especially famous for his illustrations of the body as a factory, with 'workers tending switchboards and controls, working assembly lines, and doing manual labour'.[266] In 'Der Mensch als Industrieplast' ('Man as Industrial Palace') the functions inside the head, including mind, reason and will, control the mechanisms that function below them. Soppel summarises that

> managers in offices (the brain) monitor and direct production, a complex array of mixing vats, sprayers, pumps, chutes, storage areas, piping, pressure valves, furnaces, conveyor belts, pistons, pulleys, and workers. The poster is a kind of sequential art, an ordered progression of scenes in the body (which looks a bit like a pinball machine).[267]

As implied by Sappol's pinball machine analogy, elements of the industrial palace *already* resemble a funhouse. The central orange pipe, labelled 'speise-röhre' or 'food pipe', looks like a funhouse slide, and the early Pavilion of Fun in Steeplechase Park which contained a slide called 'The Pipe'. Food travels down the pipe through further tilted platforms which could also be some kind of slide, before dripping into the intestine. Here it is sprayed with protein, starch, and fat, in jets of water that resemble the air and water jets in funhouses. However, Paolozzi's version is much simpler than Kahn's. It contains typical features such as punch bags, slides, chutes, and panels that could be a mirror maze or obstacle course. On the left arm there is a small circuit – potentially a control panel – which corresponds with the managers inside the mental offices of Kahn's picture, and with the operating room in 'Lost in the Funhouse'.

There is nothing inherently fun in the structure of the funhouse, because similar features appeared in the structure of the factory; the platforms along which food slides from the pipe through the stomach are repeated in the funhouse apparatus, only in a different colour and simplified style. Sappol's comment that 'the presiding metaphor is the body as building or

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[266] Michael Sappol, *Body Modern: Fritz Kahn, Scientific Illustration, and the Homuncular Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. xiii.

[267] Ibid., p. 23.

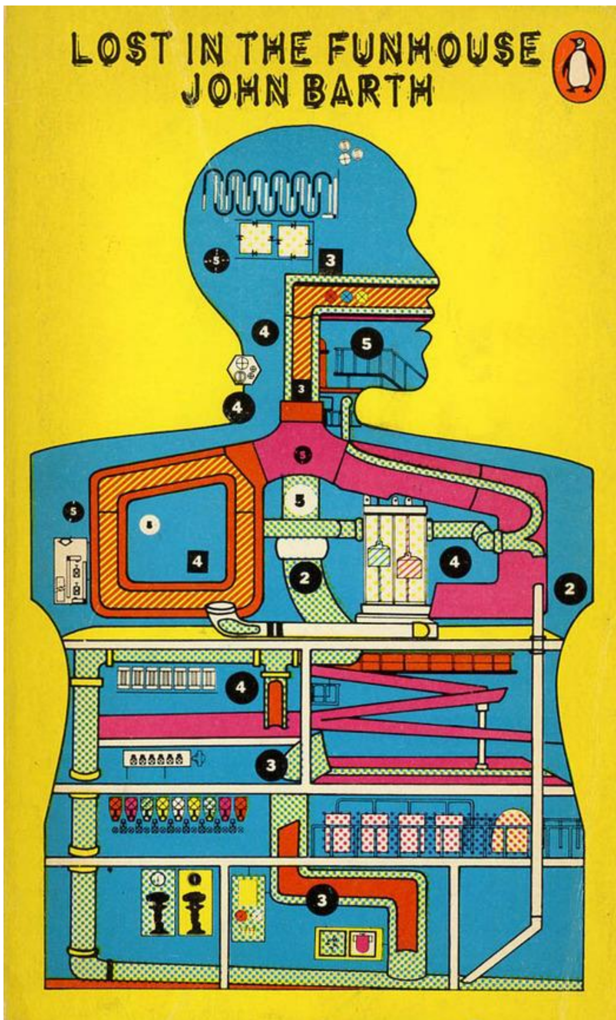

Figure 4. Front cover of the 1972 edition of *Lost in the Funhouse*, designed by Eduardo Paolozzi.

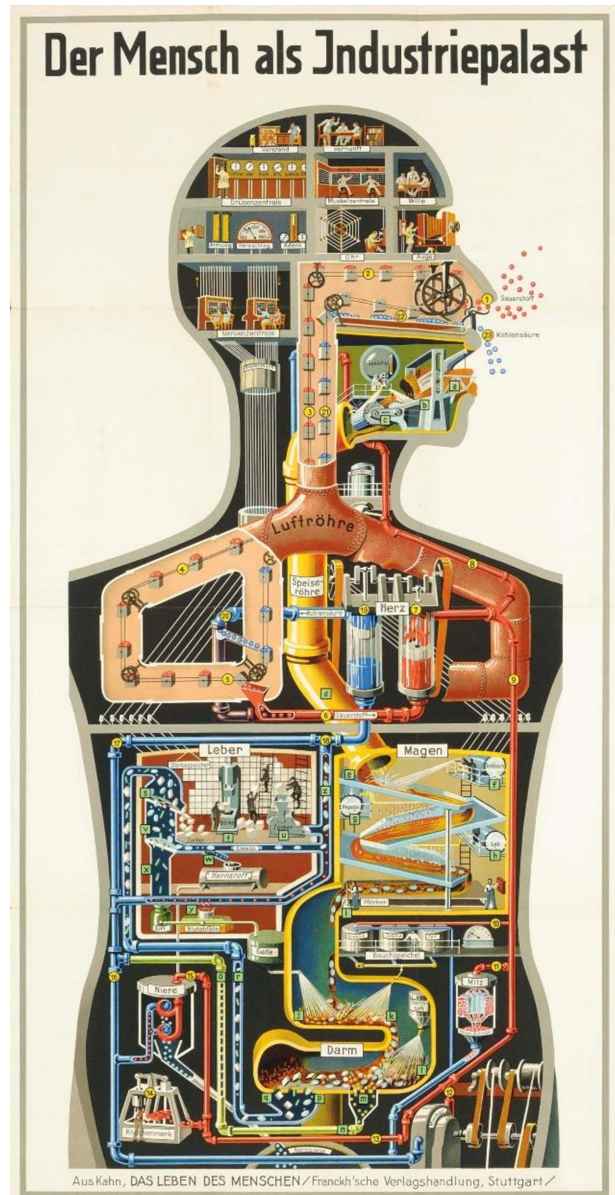

Figure 5. Der Mensch als Industriepalast [Man as Industrial Palace] Fritz Kahn, 1926.

container, with interior paths of conveyor belts, chutes, and pipes' could equally describe the picture of the factory and of the funhouse; they have the same apparatus, the same chutes and pipes.[268] Such abstract parallels are encapsulated by Jennifer Bloomer's comment that 'the fun house […] and the prison house bear a remarkable similarity'.[269] Both can contain rooms with bars, cells, locked doors, trapdoors, and corridors that lead nowhere. The cell was also present in Lopez's description of the Asbury Park funhouse with the barred prison at the end. Recalling the relationship between the slide and cellar door, fun arises from use: from a structure being put to play. The fun of the funhouse is rooted in embodied experience, emerging through kinetic interaction with structures that facilitate movement and invert expectations.

IV. Why is 'Lost in the Funhouse' Fun?

If the funhouse evokes *paidia* and *ilinx*, 'Lost in the Funhouse' participates in *ludus* and *mimicry*; the text is a game of representation as Barth plays with levels of narration. The distinction between *paidia* and *ludus* is also represented within the text through the contrast between the funhouse-proper and the funhouse operating room. In the operating room, 'toggle- and knife-switches hung beside the open fuse box […]; elsewhere in the little room were wooden levers and ropes belayed to boat cleats' (87). Ludic play is mediated, abstract, its apparatus buttons and controls rather than slides and ladders. Contrastingly, the fun of the physical funhouse is kinetic, based on movement between architectural levels (vertically, via staircases or slides) and within levels (horizontally, through doorways and corridors). Steven Connor, discussing space in the context of sport, asks: 'Can one say that when space is set aside for play, space itself must always then come into play? [270] Using the funhouse apparatus, participants do indeed play with space, and yet this works theoretically as well as kinetically: 'Lost in the Funhouse' plays with conceptual space. Victor J. Vitanza suggests that Barth's method resembles that of the 'mathematician' or 'topologist', 'concerned with the ways in which surfaces can be twisted, bent, pulled, stretched, or otherwise reformed from one shape

[268] Sappol, p. 84.

[269] Jennifer Bloomer, *Architecture and the Text: The (S)crypts of Joyce and Piranesi* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 36.

[270] Steven Connor, *A Philosophy of Sport* (London: Reaktion, 2011), p. 49.

into another'.[271] The series of stories in *Lost in the Funhouse* can be figured as a mirror maze: 'mirrors of the funhouse distort Ambrose into countless shapes, just as Barth, the novelist as topologist, twists, bends, pulls, stretches, or otherwise reforms one story into many different shapes'.[272]

Such spatial manipulation is present from the first story in Barth's collection, 'Frame-Tale' (pp. 1–2), which invites the reader to become a topologist; 'Frame-Tale' consists of an instruction to cut out and connect the ends of a strip at the edge of the page marked with the statement 'ONCE UPON A TIME THERE' on one side, and 'WAS A STORY THAT BEGAN' on the other. Following the instruction involves physically twisting the paper to create a loop, where the end of the statement links back to the beginning. The curve of the loop resembles the twist of a slide, creating the first play apparatus of the collection. Through such structures, both the funhouse and *Lost in the Funhouse* share a likeness with the 'gymnasium', which its etymological sense of exercise. Just as the physical funhouse resembles the playground, originally an 'outdoor gymnasium', 'Lost in the Funhouse' can be viewed as a mental gymnasium: a place to exercise the mind through play, using conceptual apparatus.

First there is *horizontal* movement, in the manner of the doorway and corridor rather than the staircase, as 'Lost in the Funhouse' contains conceptual forking paths where the narrative voice rewrites itself. Remarking on the slowness of narrative progression, the narrator states: 'At this rate our hero, at this rate our protagonist will remain in the funhouse forever' (78). 'Our hero' is rewritten as 'our protagonist'; the repetition of clauses with slight alterations suggests backtracking along a path in order to choose a different one. Barth's technique gives an illusion of spontaneity, with the text apparently being revised as it is written. Two parallel options are narratively available with slight differences between them, as clauses correspond with corridors. A similar example is: 'But at one seldom at one ill-frequented end of the boardwalk' (96). Either the first or the second clause could be attached to the third, and so parallel funhouse paths can lead to the same destination. Sometimes there are contradictions, as when Ambrose 'didn't have nerve enough to ask Magda to go through the funhouse with him', but 'with incredible nerve and to everyone's surprise he invited Magda, quietly and politely, to go through the funhouse with him' (90). These possibilities are on the same level

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[271] Victor J. Vitanza, 'The Novelist as Topologist: John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 19.1 (1977), 83–97 (p. 84).

[272] Ibid., p. 88.

of narration, like alternative paths which exist on the same plane or platform of the funhouse. The contradictions recur: 'This can't go on much longer; it can go on forever' (95). By allowing the reader-participant to travel down a different corridor and retrace their steps, the emphasis shifts from the destination to an unending movement of travel. The text becomes non-teleological: an infinite game.

Nevertheless, revealing these narrative rewritings places readers on a higher ontological level (corresponding to the funhouse balcony) which allows them to observe a cross-section of all possible paths simultaneously. In physical funhouses, this kind of vertical movement is enabled by slides and ladders (or, 'crazy staircases'). For instance, the funhouse patent from 2000 cited above has three levels, where the top level includes a 'number of elements that allow interaction with the other levels', as well as with 'participants on an adjacent play structure, in this case a water slide'.[273] The architectural levels of the funhouse allow a multiplicity of perspectives. From the top balcony, the participants can look down over the rest of the park and observe it from a birds-eye view. In an interactive play structure, as proposed by this patent, they can play tricks on those on the levels below. Of course, the levels of the funhouse are concrete and physical rather than ontological or metaphysical. However, the qualities that the physical levels facilitate are analogous with the effect of different levels in metafiction: the narrative at ground level, perceiving the events as they come, contrasts with observation from the balcony, perceiving events from 'above'. Barth uses architectural metaphors elsewhere in his *oeuvre*, as David Morrell describes how Barth's unfinished novel *The Seeker* is

> about a man so detached from life that he stayed in the top room of a high tower, spying down on human affairs through a giant *camera obscura* as well as every kind of telescope and microscope.[274]

Here, observation is physically made possible by height, emphasising how metaphors of vertical and horizontal levels are grounded in embodied experience.

Vertical movement in 'Lost in the Funhouse' is evident in the multiple diegetic levels in play from the beginning of the story. The narrator opens with 'For whom is the funhouse fun?', before remarking that 'A single straight underline is the manuscript mark for italic type,

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[273] Briggs, Section 11.

[274] David Morrell, *John Barth: An Introduction* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), p. 88.

which in turn is the printed equivalent to oral emphasis of words and phrases' (72). The commentary describes the narration, while the narration describes the story, and the text continues to alternate between narrating events and narrating the mechanics involved in narration. Later, Ambrose tells Magda that

> The important thing to remember, after all, is that it's meant to be a *fun*house; that is, a place of amusement. If people really got lost or injured or too badly frightened in it, the owner'd go out of business. There'd even be lawsuits. No character in a work of fiction can make a speech this long without interruption or acknowledgement from the other characters. Nothing was what it looked like. (90)

The quick switch from narrative to commentary on narrative ('no character in a work of fiction') emerges suddenly, surprisingly shifting readers from one level to another with no typographical warning. The voice that is commenting on the narrative is one level above, able to look down at the narration of the story and remark upon it. The narration on the level below, however, cannot 'look up' at the level above, as any attempt to do so will automatically put that voice on that level.

The Level Game in Barth's story is thus played through horizontal and vertical movement, with architectural analogies of corridors and staircases. Like Hinton's jungle gym, participants can move in any conceptual direction. Still, there are points where physical architecture aligns with ontological architecture, such as when Ambrose is walking under the boardwalk and hears laughter:

> If the joke had been beyond his understanding, he could have said: '*The laughter was over his head*.' And let the reader see the serious wordplay on second reading. (86)

With laughter that is both physically and metaphorically 'above', the pun captures Barth's correspondence between the architectural and ontological. In *Metaphors we Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson define a category of 'Orientational metaphors', listing examples including 'happy is up, sad is down', or 'conscious is up, unconscious is down'.[275] The joke that is over one's head is based on a paradigm such as 'knowledge/ understanding is up, ignorance is down'. This is not listed by Lakoff and Johnson, but it is in keeping with the spirit of their categories.

[275] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), p. 15.

Barth's narrator adds that the line will require a 'second reading'; the linear, sequential movement of narrative is constantly counteracted by instructions to retrace one's steps, to walk the same path again on a different level (concrete, metaphorical). The house provides a three-dimensional structure which corresponds with levels of abstraction. The literal meaning is below, the metaphorical meaning above; the funhouse is a funhouse below, and the funhouse is a symbol above.

Like a physical funhouse, Barth's text solicits play as movement. The fun of 'Lost in the Funhouse' parallels the fun of play apparatus, evoking a conceptually spatial structure with which a subject interacts, travelling in various horizontal and vertical directions.

V. Does a Funhouse Need to be More Than Fun?

In some ways, Ambrose does not get lost *in* the funhouse so much as get lost *from* the funhouse. His problem is that he can never actually enter the funhouse – he is a perpetual observer, always designing and never participating. Ambrose personifies metafiction, as in 'The Literature of Exhaustion' Barth describes a sense that there are no further avenues for literary innovation, where the only innovation left is to write *about* formal exhaustion.[276] However, this removal comes at an affective cost. For Ambrose, every feeling is mediated intellectually; during his sexual experience with Magda, 'strive as he might to be transported, he heard his mind take notes upon the scene: *This is what they call* passion*. I am experiencing it*' (84). Metafiction describes both the form of the story and the form of Ambrose's psychology within the story: self-consciousness, one level observing another, at increasing affective remove. He cannot love on this level, only write about love. Love is what happens inside the funhouse, not in the operating room. As levels of representation proliferate, the intensity of the feeling continues to diminish.

It is along these lines that Wallace launches his critique of 'Lost in the Funhouse' in 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way', contained in the collection *Girl With Curious Hair* (1989).[277] In the following comparison between 'Westward' and 'Lost in the Funhouse', I must qualify that I provide little discussion of the other stories in either collection, focusing

[276] John Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 62–76.

[277] David Foster Wallace, 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way' in *Girl with Curious Hair* (London: Abacus, 1989), pp. 231–373. All further references are taken from this edition and cited within the text.

instead on the specific work performed by the funhouse metaphor in these two texts. Similar ideas are engaged with in other stories (reflexivity in Barth; the literary market in Wallace), but this chapter examines how these concepts are encoded architecturally. Material metaphors were involved in the context of Wallace's writing; Kasia Boddy reads 'Westward' as a product of the creative writing workshops in which Wallace participated, noting that while the term 'workshop' suggests 'individualised pieces of artisanal handwork' the reality more closely resembled mass manufacturing.[278] I also probe the implications of such terminology, exploring how the materials of Barth's story are reconfigured by Wallace.

Wallace's attitude to Barth is ambivalent. In his famous interview with Larry McCaffery, Wallace calls Barth a 'patriarch for my patricide', alluding to Harold Bloom's theory of misprision where new authors must strongly misread their predecessors in order to progress beyond their work.[279] The flaws that Wallace identifies in Barth, whether through reading or misreading, are laid out in 'Westward'. 'Westward' describes a re-imagined version of Barth's Ambrose, who also represents Barth himself, as a creative writing teacher. Wallace's Ambrose has partnered with a businessman called J.D. Steelritter to create a franchise of three-dimensional funhouses based on his famous story, but the young writing student Mark Nechtr believes that they are attempting to 'build a Funhouse for lovers out of a story that does not love' (331). This is Wallace's critique of 'Lost in the Funhouse' and metafiction in general: that it does not love, failing to engage its reader's emotions.

Yet emotionless metafiction was exactly what Barth was attempting to avoid. In an address at the Library of Congress in 1967, he remarks that his writing aims beyond 'cold technique' and 'intellectual fun-and-games'.[280] Instead, he posits a synthesis of 'heartless skill' and 'heartfelt ineptitude' in 'passionate virtuosity': 'if these pieces aren't also moving, then the experiment is unsuccessful'.[281] Wallace responds to this speech through the character of D.L., a self-styled 'postmodernist' (234) portrayed as sterile, infertile, and unable to love or be loved.

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[278] Kasia Boddy, 'A Fiction of Response: *Girl with Curious Hair* in Context', in *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 23–41 (pp. 29–30).

[279] Larry McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace', in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 21–52 (p. 48); See also Charles B. Harris, 'The Anxiety of Influence: The John Barth/David Foster Wallace Connection', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 55.2 (2014), 103–26 (p. 104).

[280] John Barth's Speech to Audience at Library of Congress, 1 May 1967, cited in Morrell, p. 96.

[281] Ibid.

The exception is that 'she loves the word *virtue*' (237); by isolating virtuosity from passion, Wallace implies that Barth failed to achieve the first half of his goal of 'passionate virtuosity'. However, 'Westward' also seems to respond to a wider school of thought rather than to a failed individual achievement, and in a conversation with David Lipsky Wallace describes the text as 'about a whole orientation to fictional theory'.[282] A question arises: 'Lost in the Funhouse' might be *about* affective abstraction, as in Ambrose's '*this is what they call* passion', but does that mean it is affectively abstract itself?

As outlined above, I argue that the primary experience evoked by 'Lost in the Funhouse' is fun. Barth had commented that he did not want his writing to be 'intellectual fun-and-games', relegating 'fun' to a more trivial position than 'love'. However, fun can be intense, even passionate; children running around a playground, play area, or funhouse, shrieking and shouting, are far from emotionless. As a mediated text, 'Lost in the Funhouse' is a level of representation removed from this kind of fun, but I have attempted to illustrate how the text's conceptual spatiality provides an experience analogous to a funhouse. The allegorical density of the writing creates a sense of depth; each line has multiple referents, applicable microcosmically and macrocosmically, to funhouse as person, as building, as fiction. One reads not only linearly, from one sentence to the next, but can pause at a section or phrase and unfold it, discovering the possibilities simultaneously at play. Wallace might have remarked that 'art's reflection on itself is terminal', but the topology of the Funhouse narrative resembles a spiral more than the circle; there is a conceptual three-dimensionality, each observation creating another level, recursion rather than repetition.[283] 'Lost in the Funhouse' might be *about* affective abstraction, but the 'about' contributes to a conceptually spatial structure that is actively engaged with. Intellectual 'gymnastics', viewed in the context of energetic playground movement, are less affectively abstract than Barth's own comment implies.

Wallace ignores the subtler affective elements in Barth's metafiction by selectively reading 'virtuosity' without 'passion'. Indeed, Wallace's attitude to Barth is not entirely critical, but ambivalent; to Lipsky, Wallace described 'Westward' as 'simultaneously absolutely homicidal and a fawning homage'.[284] Further evidence for this 'homage' has been identified by Charles B. Harris, who notes that on the inside front cover of his copy of *Lost in*

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[282] David Lipsky, *Although of Course You End Up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010), p. 226.

[283] McCaffery, 'Expanded Interview', p. 30.

[284] Lipsky, p. 226.

the Funhouse, Wallace wrote: ‘This is art – concerned less with explanation than transfiguration, less with escape than the modality of perspective. […] What is more rare: This book deserves the care and patience it demands’.[285] Taking this praise into account, Harris suggests that Wallace deliberately misreads *Lost in the Funhouse*, interpreting Barth’s fictional world as emotionally sterile when it is actually ‘inflected by emotion’ and ‘existential pain’.[286] Whether there is really a passion of ‘existential pain’, or kinetic play, or something else, Wallace’s reading of passionless virtuosity provides him with an absolute against which he can react and swerve in a different direction. His critique, then, is mixed with respect: ‘Lost in the Funhouse’ was fun enough to be worth misreading, as misreading is itself a homage. It was fun enough to deserve an extension, and to sustain a renovation. The significance of the funhouse as an architecture of play is evident in its legacy, namely, the attention the text has received, the subsequent allusions to its title and the further writing stimulated by its premise. The existence of ‘Westward’ proves that Barth’s Funhouse *is* fertile; ‘Westward’ is, in literary genealogy, one of its offspring.

Accordingly, Wallace’s novella is also a textual funhouse, and its structure also evokes play apparatus; ‘Westward’ is divided into titled sections which exist on a level ‘above’ the narrative content, and the text solicits frequent movement between these levels. The title ‘WHY THE KIDS ARE LATE’ is followed by ‘MORE QUICKLY WHY THEY’RE LATE’ (248) on the same page, where the semantic redundancy of the latter emphases its structural fact. There is often pointed interaction between title and content, as the section titled ‘HOW THE COMPLIMENTARY FLIGHT TO CHICAGO WAS’ (249) begins ‘Not complimentary for Mark, who’s just along. And in general not great at all’ (249). Although the title is formally discrete in relation to the content, like an architectural step, the semantic interaction between title and content forms a link between them, like a slide connecting distinct spatial platforms. One level of narration is pointing to the other, stimulating a sense of ‘consciousness’ or ‘knowingness’ which I investigate further in chapter four. This self-awareness is evident in other titles such as ‘A REALLY BLATANT AND INTRUSIVE INTERRUPTION’ (264), followed by ‘FINAL INTERRUPTION’ (331) and then ‘ACTUALLY PROBABLY NOT THE LAST INTRUSIVE INTERRUPTION’ (346). Wallace’s conversational style suggests a crafted carelessness, a studied spontaneity. His titles contribute to the playful effect of his prose

[285] Harris, ‘Anxiety of Influence’, p. 104.

[286] Ibid., p. 107.

by inviting movement between narrative levels that are simultaneously all one level – like the figure of the Möbius strip or Hofstadter's strange loop.

At the same time, the offspring absorbs and grows beyond the parent. While 'Lost in the Funhouse' alternated between narrating events, and narrating narrative mechanisms, 'Westward' contains the entirety of 'Lost in the Funhouse' as an embedded text. In 'Westward', Barth's multi-level structure is simply 'all one tale': a flat wall inside the three-dimensional building of Wallace's new edifice.[287] The construction of physical funhouses within the plot of 'Westward' signals an attempt build something real out of metaphor, to create something concrete out of abstraction: a funhouse inspired by metafiction just as metafiction was inspired by the funhouse. Where 'Lost in the Funhouse' translates the architectural to the ontological, 'Westward' aims to transform the ontological into the architectural, modelling a transition from intellectual to sensory experience.

This challenge is undertaken by Mark, Ambrose's inheritor in 'Westward'. Mark will deliberately lock himself inside the funhouse in order to find his way out again through different means, mapping onto Wallace's use of metafiction as a tool for moving beyond metafiction. In this way, Mark will 'shut the Funhouse franchise doors against the revelled babble, sit his ass down, and actually write a story' (355) whose 'claim to be a lie will itself be a lie' (356). This is the crux of Wallace's negotiation of meta-meta-fiction: he performs the *undoing* of metafiction, where a lie is a lie as tautology meets contradiction. A similar sentiment is expressed by the following title:

> I LIED: THREE REASONS WHY THE ABOVE WAS NOT REALLY AN INTERRUPTION, BECAUSE THIS ISN'T THE SORT OF FICTION THAT CAN BE INTERRUPTED, BECAUSE IT'S NOT FICTION, BUT REAL AND TRUE AND *RIGHT NOW*. (334)

Wallace flips so frequently between levels of narration that readers loses track and become disorientated. The dimensionality of diegetic levels flattens into a single, twisting voice. Wallace has jumped out of the system to the extent that jumping out of the system has become meaningless, with lies about lies about lies. 'Westward' is a much more self-conscious piece than 'Lost in the Funhouse', as while Barth writes fiction about fiction, Wallace writes fiction about metafiction. In Wallace, locally distinct narrative levels are exploded – through

[287] Barth, 'Menelaiad', in *Lost in the Funhouse*, pp. 130–67 (p. 139).

multiplication – into equivalence, extrapolating Barth's self-consciousness to the extent that the levels lose meaning. Wallace plays Barth at his own game, constructing a funhouse with so many levels that distinction disappears, and to all intents and purposes the text becomes level.

Nevertheless, the very fact that Wallace's 'Westward' asks 'Does a funhouse need to be more than fun?' (242) testifies to the fun of the funhouse; Wallace chooses to air his ambivalence through the medium of Barth's metaphor, which he engages and plays with. This invites further consideration as to why this metaphor is so appealing. As I have already analysed the idea of 'fun', the next aspect to investigate is the idea of the 'house'.

VI. Why is the Funhouse a House?

There is a tradition of using architectural metaphors to encode theory about fiction. Ellen Frank investigates this topic in *Literary Architecture: Essays Towards a Tradition* (1983), outlining a historical 'convention' involving 'the comparison between architecture and literature extending from Plato to Samuel Beckett'.[288] She focuses on nineteenth and early twentieth century authors, including literary-theoretical constructions such as Henry James's 'House of Fiction' which provides a brief point of contrast. James's House of Fiction contains a million possible windows, each of which can be pierced to reveal a section of human life. Nevertheless, each window offers a different perspective. All of the observers are 'watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine'.[289]

In James's metaphor, the house is a boundary separating the world of observation and the world of lived human life, connected via windows. His metaphor accentuates the multiplicity of perspectives possible of the same scene, as each scene is conditioned by the window through which it is perceived. Barth's alternative Funhouse of Metafiction similarly suggests a relativity of perception, but its windows do not open outside onto the 'human scene'; instead, they reveal other windows, walls, or unexpected staircases.[290] While James was writing in a tradition of realism, the funhouse of metafiction is a world of infinite artifice. Barth

[288] Ellen Eve Frank, *Literary Architecture: Essays Towards a Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 3.

[289] Henry James, 'Preface to The Portrait of a Lady', in *The Critical Muse: Selected Literary Criticism*, ed. by Roger Gard (London: Penguin, 1987), p. 485.

[290] Ibid.

suggests that there is no reality on which to open a window, as the windows are arranged in a Möbius strip which cannot separate subject from object.

The architectural nature of the funhouse metaphor is interrogated in 'Westward'. D. L., frustrated with Ambrose for not approving her work, writes a 'petty critical limerick' (236) on the blackboard:

> For lovers, the Funhouse is fun.
> For phonies, the Funhouse is love.
> But *for whom*, the proles grouse,
> Is the Funhouse a house?
> Who lives there, when push comes to shove? (239)

The poem draws attention to the fact that the 'fun' prefix does not only enhance the house, but negate part of its original function: a house is built for shelter, protection, acting as an incubator for human development. The funhouse inverts these characteristics. Rather than safety, it provides shock; rather than familiarity, it stimulates novelty and surprise; rather than functionality, its aim is amusement. These features are what make it an appropriate vehicle for the tricky, creative and unpredictable tenors of adolescence, fiction, and fun.[291] Probing the components of Barth's vehicle, 'Westward' outlines a goal of retrieving the house from the funhouse, prioritising the qualities of shelter and incubation over those of entertainment and fun.

Barth's metaphors constitute Wallace's literary inheritance, and this is dramatised within the text through the relationship between Ambrose (Barth, the literary 'patriarch') and Mark (the new generation, such as Wallace himself). Mark will explicitly '*inherit* clever academic fiction's orb and gown' (335), '*inherit* Ambrose's bald crown and ballpoint scepter' (348) [all italics mine]. In an interview with David Lipsky, Wallace commented that his creative writing professors advised the students not to use pop references, but Wallace replied that his generation used these references 'the way the romantic poets use lakes and *trees*. I mean, they're just part of the mental furniture. That you carry around'.[292] In a similar sense, levels of awareness and architectures of play constitute the 'mental furniture' that Wallace

[291] Here, 'tenor' is the term used by I.A. Richards to denote the content of a metaphor, as opposed to 'vehicle' which refers to the means of expression. See I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 97.
[292] Lipsky, p. 75.

inherits from his literary precursors. Since these are the elements at his disposal, he rearranges and experiments with them. As identified above, Wallace does not abandon the proliferating diegetic levels of metafiction but extends them to an extreme that renders them senseless. Correspondingly, he does not renounce the figure of the funhouse but responds to Barth on the level of vehicle as well as tenor.

Consequently, perhaps the funhouse is a house because the house possesses physical features which make it a particularly useful 'vehicle' for certain concepts, linking to the etymology of metaphor as *metafora* [Greek: μεταφορά]: to carry over. Accordingly, 'Westward', like 'Lost in the Funhouse', is preoccupied with themes of travel and transportation:

> Again, the preceding generation of cripplingly self-conscious writers, obsessed with their own interpretation, would mention at this point, just as we're possibly getting somewhere, that the story isn't getting anywhere, isn't progressing in the seamless Freitagian upsweep we should have scaled by this, mss. p. 35, time. They'd trust, though, à la their hierophant C—— Ambrose, that this explicit internal *acknowledgment* of their failure to start the show would release them somehow from the obligation to start the show. (269)

Wallace criticises metafiction for a lack of progression, and for using self-conscious awareness as a substitute for progression, while also *performing* this lack of progression in his own text. On the level of plot, this emerges in the inhibitions faced by the characters in their journey to the McDonalds reunion: 'But so they're in motion, at least, notice, though the going is slow. It's undeniable that they don't even yet have transportation *to* the Funhouse, and that it's awfully slow going, here' (263). The arrival does not happen in the primary plotline, only in the hypothetical future (372), corresponding with the way that Barth's Ambrose is lost 'from' the funhouse just as he is lost 'in' it. In both cases, entering the funhouse is deferred. Yet by existing theoretically rather than concretely, the *idea* of the funhouse acts as a flexible container which can hold multiple hypotheses and potential outcomes, contributing to the nature of these works as 'theory-fiction'. Like James, Wallace and Barth use the house as a vehicle to simultaneously contain and carry over ideas about fiction. The spatial features of the funhouse facilitate abstract conceptualisation, making the architecture of play a theoretical tool. The funhouse is a house partly because a house is a fun vehicle for communication.

Taking Barth's metaphor at face value, Wallace probes the architectural properties of the funhouse, particularly its capacity of enclosure. When Ambrose wants to pull out of J. D. Steelritter's funhouse franchise after D. L.'s poem, Steelritter meditates on the situation: 'Does a Funhouse need to be more than Fun? More than New and *Improved* Fun? Are actual house-considerations at work in this campaign, unseen? For whom is the Funhouse an *enclosure*, maybe?' (242). As discussed in 'A Supposedly Fun Thing', the advertising rhetoric of Steelritter's 'New and *Improved* Fun' emphasises 'fun' as a commercial construct, a manufactured quality. Wallace has transplanted Barth's funhouse into his own economic context, where fun has become a currency. The question 'Does a Funhouse need to be more than Fun?' functions allegorically, expressing Wallace's central concern: does fiction need to do more than entertain? Does fiction have a duty of ethics as well as aesthetics? Steelritter continues:

> Does he, J.D., live in anything like a Funhouse? J.D. lives at the J.D. Steelritter Advertising Complex in Collision […] J.D. is of Central Illinois. Central Illinois is, by no imaginer's stretch, a Funhouse. But neither is it enclosed. Enclosed? It's the most disclosed, open place you could ever fear to see. (242)

The above extract exemplifies Baudrillard's 'reality has passed […] into the game of reality': to *live* in an advertising complex is to live in simulation, as reinforced by 'J.D. lives deep inside J.D., marrying images and jingles' (242). These are enclosures within enclosures: the character is his own house, expressing the involution of American fiction with its socio-economic correlate of advertising and consumerism. Here Wallace is extrapolating an idea implicit in Barth, since the funhouse derives from the culture of amusement parks which are the early progenitors of the Disneyland that Baudrillard regards as the apotheosis of simulation.

Trying to make sense of this disorientating conceptual spatiality, Steelritter continues: 'that Ocean City Park was enclosed, though. The park was enclosed, and not by mirrors or ticket windows or dj booths' (243). Steelritter's statement recalls the debate in the previous chapter between Hayles' assertion that a physical demarcation between inside-outside the amusement parks remains, and Baudrillard's argument that this physical demarcation is superficial, deflecting from qualitative equivalence. The possibility that lurks at Steelritter's peripheral vision is that Steelritter is inside a funhouse which is simply too vast for him perceive – contained without knowing that he is contained – and this sense that the funhouse metaphor operates on multiple scales is also suggested by Harris's enthusiastic remark that 'the funhouse

stands for the universe'.[293] While J.D. thinks that Illinois is not a funhouse, nor enclosed, the 'disclosed, open space' is abstractly enclosed within corporate systems driven by the commercialisation of 'fun'.

Steelritter goes on to muse about the fate of Barth's funhouse, which burnt down. Fire was a common fate for amusement parks in the early twentieth century; Gary Kyrazi points out that 'Because they are such an insecure investment, amusement parks up through the 1920s were made as cheaply as possible out of lath and staff', which were highly flammable, leading to the destruction of several famous parks such as Luna Park and Steeplechase.[294] Steelritter similarly comments:

> The Park had burnt down, he'd traveled to personally research and found it down. […] you're standing by the gutted skeleton of a former Funhouse, with the door's grinning face a ruin, the plastic Fat Lady melted […], the House itself gutted, open, a bunch of black beams crossed and curved and supporting nothing, no roof. (243)

James's House of Fiction transformed into Barth's Funhouse of Metafiction – but now, in a Bloomian fashion, Wallace must burn down Barth's funhouse in order to build another. The funhouse of metafiction has become useless ('supporting nothing, no roof'). He continues: 'No wonder the poor bastard tried to write the roof back on, put the whole thing erect' (243), reinforcing the correspondence between writing and architecture. By burning down Barth's funhouse and building another, Wallace *performs* his critique through Barth's metaphorical vehicle, utilising the communicative capacity of embodied expression.

Nevertheless, Wallace wishes to bring out aspects of this vehicle that he deems to have been neglected by Barth; his own question as raised in D.L.'s poem is specifically 'For whom is the funhouse a *house*?' [italics mine]. He attempts to answer as follows:

> For whom is the Funhouse a house? Maybe for liars, creative types, campaigners, tree surgeons having at the great Saxonic tree. For Tom Sternberg, the Funhouse is less a place of fear and confusion than (grimace) an *idea*, an ever-distant telos his arrival at

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[293] Charles B. Harris, *Passionate Virtuosity: The Fiction of John Barth* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), p. 107.

[294] Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks: A Pictorial History* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1976), pp. 80–81.

> which will represent the revelated transformation of a present we stomach by looking beyond. A present comprised by fear *of* confusion. (259)

Here, Wallace plays Barth's game by rearranging his materials: the phrase 'fear *of* confusion' (i.e., fear of postmodern disorientation) is produced by taking the principles identified by Barth ('fear and confusion' (72)) and experimentally putting them in a different relation with one another. The envisioned destruction of the funhouse is a reshaping of materials, where Wallace plays with Barth's architecture of play. He plays the funhouse at its own game; instead of being subject to its tricks and illusions, he subjects it to tricks and illusion, playing *with* it rather than playing *in* it. Distorting distortion, Wallace applies the funhouse to the funhouse in order to restore the properties of the house.

These properties are expressed through Wallace's insistence on the theme of shelter, a word which repeats like a refrain throughout the text. Discussing D. L.'s use of tarot cards, Magda comments: 'She invests them with a power to change what they can only reveal. She wants shelter, a structure. A house of cards, with tiny furniture' (353). Later, there is the 'utterly enclosed, sheltering, rained-upon car' (345), as well as the 'sheltering tight-roofed Funhouse club' (344). Moreover, there is the fact that Mark Nechtr's 'ambivalent artistic attitude toward his teacher Dr. Ambrose' derives from distrust of the 'fictional classifications that Ambrose seems to love and has entered, curling, looking for shelter from the very same cold critical winds that, in the fullness of time, had carved Ambrose's classified niche in the first place' (346). Reflexivity is effectively identified as a 'shelter' *from* reflexivity; Ambrose's 'shelter' is a self-defeating principle, and yet Wallace highlights a recurrent impulse towards it.

Through this emphasis on shelter, Wallace insists on the need for demarcation between inside and outside. Moreover, he seeks to restore the concreteness of this demarcation by appealing to the materiality of the physical world: the basic opposition of the elemental versus the domestic, evoking shelter in a primitive and concrete sense. This is something we also see in the following chapter on *Infinite Jest*, and potentially acts as a counter to Baudrillard's equivalence. Baudrillard's discussion of one-dimensional vacuums, abolishing the distinction between inside and outside, is confined to *meta*physics: qualities and phenomenologies. However, physics remains unaltered: space still exists, dimensions still exist, their abolition perceptual rather than physical.

Wallace thus uses the same metaphorical materials as Barth in an attempt to discover a solution within this same rhetoric. He rearranges the elements of this metaphor's vehicle in

order to retrieve the house from the funhouse, and ethics from aesthetics. This is symbolically enacted by D. L., who 'will see to it personally that Dr. C—— Ambrose's one flat gutted Maryland Funhouse comes truly to offer a whole new dimension in alone fun, become the discotheque where America can be themselves' (354). Flatness will be resurrected as three-dimensionality – a dimensionality applied to feeling ('dimension in alone *fun'*) as well as physicality ('Fun*house*'). At the end of 'Westward', the narrator describes:

> So to the reunion of All Who've Appeared, to the Egress, to the Funhouse, Ambrose's erect Funhouse, designed to universal standards to be – past all the hype that will support it – just that. A *house*. That, though Dr. Ambrose would rather be among those for whom it's designed, he'll eat with sad cheer the fact that he, as builder, is *not* among: not a face in the crowd of those for whom it's really there: the richly deprived, the phobically unenclosed, the in-need-of-shelter. Children. (372)

The repetition of 'to' in 'to the reunion […], to the Egress, to the Funhouse' implies that they are all equivalent: the different faces fall down to reveal the same referent, which is the funhouse. The funhouse expands and contracts, the term applying to the text as a whole, to the funhouse event of the reunion, and physically to an actual building. It is for 'children', just as toys and play areas are for children, but Wallace means 'children' in a wider sense. This is the child inside the adult, the infantile need for shelter and enclosure that finds greater elaboration in *Infinite Jest*.

Engaged on the level of both vehicle and tenor, the funhouse is a house in 'Westward' because of the house's original properties of protection and shelter. In terms of literary theory, Wallace aims to overcome the 'dead end' of metafiction and return a developmental power which he believes fiction to have lost. His character Mark desires to 'write about something that stabs you in the heart', something that stimulates feeling as opposed to supposedly affectless metafiction which is unable to 'betray' emotionally, only 'reveal' mechanically (332). For Barth, the funhouse is a house because the architectural structure corresponds with a pseudo-kinetic, conceptual space for metafictional play. For Wallace, the funhouse is a house because it provides protection, shelter, and incubation for growth. Barth's techniques are aesthetic, while Wallace's aim to be ethical, reconceiving the same structure towards different ends.

VII. Conclusion

Both Barth and Wallace conclude their texts with an evocation of the *mise en abyme*, describing stories written by their protagonists which bear some similarity to the story that contains them. In Barth's text Ambrose, lost in the funhouse, murmurs a story about being lost in the funhouse. In Wallace's text Mark Nechtr, in his creative writing class, writes a story about a man called Dave (who is a competitive archer, like Mark, but 'not nearly so healthy as Mark' (356)), and his lover L ('who is a great deal more attractive and sympathetic than D.L.' (356)). While the primary couple in 'Westward' is Mark and D.L., the protagonists of Mark's story are 'D' and 'L', as if splitting D.L.'s acronym. This gives the impression that the story has zoomed into the character who, functioning as allegory as well as character, breaks down into her component parts, which are themselves allegory-characters. Like 'Lost in the Funhouse', narration slides between diegetic levels; long passages describing Mark's story are abruptly interrupted by the narratorial voice, with comments such as 'So far it's a good graduate-workshop story' (358). These moments remind the reader that the story is being paraphrased by the narrator, while simultaneously indicating that Mark's fictional characters are just as fictional as Mark himself. Everything flattens into a single level ('all one tale') where depth returns to optical illusion: Baudrillard's *trompe l'oeil.*

Is Wallace's meta-metafiction ultimately any different to Barth's metafiction? The tools at Wallace's disposal – his inherited literary 'furniture' – are Möbius strip levels, and architectures of play. Does he enact the construction of a house from the funhouse, or simply describe it? Along these lines, Marshall Boswell suggests that 'Westward' is more a manifesto than an example. He comments that the 'work seems to chart, if not to arrive at, a new direction for narrative art'; for all Wallace's insistence on writing something that 'stabs you in the heart' (332), 'Westward' is '*not* that piece of fiction, a fact both Wallace and his narrator surrogate are at pains to declare up front; *Infinite Jest*, by way of contrast, emphatically *is*'.[295] Wallace participates in the affective abstraction he critiques: it is difficult to communicate 'love' when constantly transforming each sentence into a fiction, emphasising the fabricated nature of the experience. The abstraction common to both Wallace and Barth makes both pieces, as Baudrillard put it, 'theory-fiction'. They can be seen as manifestoes in conversation, theories in conversation, in keeping with the etymological root of 'theory' as 'observation'. To observe,

[295] Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: South Carolina Press, 2003), p. 102.

once must be standing on the funhouse balcony, with a cross-section perspective of the levels below.

At the same time, this movement is the source of *fun* in both texts. The proliferation of diegetic levels – sometimes related discretely in the manner of ladders, sometimes continuously in the manner of slides – provides a sense of kinetic navigation: a mental 'gymnasium' where readers traverse a conceptually three-dimensional structure. Levelness and levels paradoxically coexist as readers can enter *inside* the illusion, accepting the invitation to forget the flatness of the *trompe l'oeil* until they are abruptly reminded by the intruding narrator. This is the game of the strange loop: local distinction, global equivalence.

Rather than dispensing with play and levels in his work, Wallace elaborates and rearranges these features, probing whether he can extract different properties from the same materials. 'Westward' might be considered a literary workshop where Wallace interrogates and experiments, inspecting and dissecting his inherited materials before fashioning something more decisive in *Infinite Jest*. I will examine *Infinite Jest* in the following chapter, exploring how Wallace manipulates the geometrical structure of the *mise en abyme* in order to create something finite from the infinite, something teleological from the cyclical, and a line from a loop – while still employing the playful levels that characterise postmodern literary architectures.

Chapter Three

From Magic Circle to *Mise en Abyme*: *Infinite Jest* and the Play Within the Play

I. Introduction

Baudrillard's 'reality has passed completely into the game of reality' fittingly describes the world of *Infinite Jest*, which extrapolates the ludic elements of American culture. The proliferating acronyms from E.T.A. to A.F.R. to O.N.A.N. to A.T.H.S.C.M.E. satirise the complex formalisations of contemporary infrastructure, while 'subsidized time' takes consumerism to its parodic extreme, culminating in the Statue of Liberty 'wearing some type of enormous adult-design diaper'.[296] This society is designed as an enormous game, functioning according to a currency of fun. At the same time, the world of *Infinite Jest* is replete with self-contained games: play as sport through tennis; the spectation of Entertainment; the highs of drugs and alcohol. Like the satirical infrastructures within which they take place, these sources of pleasure are also taken to their extreme – an extreme that brings play into question, revealing its quality to be dependent on quantity. Making an oxymoron of its title, *Infinite Jest* questions whether a jest that extends to infinity can still be a jest.

The games within games in *Infinite Jest* complement Wallace's use of the 'play within the play' device: a point of connection between *Infinite Jest* and *Hamlet*. The relationship between the two texts is, in Wallace studies, often explored through comparisons between Hamlet and Hal, or the *Hamlet* graveyard scene from which the novel takes its name.[297] However, another unexplored parallel with Shakespeare's play is Wallace's use of the *mise en abyme*. Just as *Hamlet* contains the play within the play, so does *Infinite Jest* contain 'Infinite

[296] David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (London: Abacus, 1997), p. 33. All further references are taken from this edition and cited within the text.

[297] Stefan Hirt identifies resemblances between Hal and Hamlet in *The Iron Bars of Freedom: David Foster Wallace and the Postmodern Self* (Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2008), p. 56; Mary Holland discusses the graveyard scene in '"The Art's Heart's Purpose": Braving the Narcissistic Loop of David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest'*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 47.3 (2010), 218–42 (p. 237); Stephen Burn compares how *Hamlet* and *Infinite Jest* explore self-consciousness in *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide*, 2nd edn (London: Continuum, 2012), pp. 45, 75; Greg Carlisle details many *Hamlet* allusions, including the graveyard scene, in *Elegant Complexity: A Study of David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest* (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group, 2007). See, for instance, p. 424.

Jest': the eternally addictive film which thematically parallels the plot of the book. Wallace's work is deliberately informed by such structures; Michael Silverblatt observes in an interview that the structure of *Infinite Jest* presents a concept in 'small form', which returns in a 'second form containing the other subjects'.[298] He notes the resemblance to fractals, and Wallace confirms that *Infinite Jest* was 'actually structured like something called a Sierpinski Gasket': a pattern of triangles within triangles that continues to infinite regress.[299]

Lucien Dällenbach remarks that *Hamlet* is the most famous of all internal duplications in literature, with critics frequently 'claiming that it represents the *mise en abyme* in its purest form'.[300] However, he continues that *Hamlet* is not really a precise example of this technique, as the inset play does not strictly parallel the plot of the play, but a plot that happened before the events of the play began.[301] Similarly, the plot of *Infinite Jest* is not strictly repeated in 'Infinite Jest', whose content is only sporadically revealed in fragments. Still, Marshall Boswell suggests that 'even these scant particulars comprise a concise outline of the novel's major themes'.[302] The *mise en abyme* can be used with precision to mean exact self-similarity, or more loosely where the point of similarity is thematic or associative. In any case, it participates in the repertoire of reflexive techniques adopted by postmodern texts and manipulated by Wallace in his attempt to transcend the 'rebellious irony' he believes to be exhausted.[303]

As noted in the introduction, metafiction is often discussed as inherently ludic, making the *mise en abyme* a figurative series of concentric magic circles. Accordingly, to consider *Infinite Jest* in terms of Shakespeare's 'play within the play' is to draw out an implicit association between 'play' as verb and 'play' as noun – and, correspondingly, between 'play' as activity and 'play' as literary form. Tom Bishop, in 'The Art of Playing', links the use of 'play' in a theatrical sense to changes in vocabulary around 1600, pointing out that actors in

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[298] Michael Silverblatt, 'Interview with David Foster Wallace', radio interview recording, KCRW, 11 April 1996 <https://www.kcrw.com/culture/shows/bookworm/david-foster-wallace-infinite-jest> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[299] Ibid.

[300] Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. by Jeremy Whiteley and Emma Hughes (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 8.

[301] Ibid., p. 13.

[302] Marshall Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (Columbia: South Carolina Press, 2003), p. 127.

[303] David Foster Wallace, 'E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction', in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (London: Abacus, 1998), pp. 21–82 (p. 65).

Shakespeare's time were always called players rather than performers.[304] In earlier contexts, the use of 'play' to mean theatrical event was fused with the use of 'play' to mean activity. Glending Olson describes how, in medieval thought, there is no sign that

> performance is in any respect different from thinking about other forms of public verbal or physical play – jests, jokes, storytelling, banter, raillery. There appears to be no presumption of separate aesthetic criteria even for what would be consciously crafted works of entertainment.[305]

Play categorically encompassed jest, story, game, and performance through the uniting principle of entertainment. The term 'jest' spans similar implications; its etymological roots in the Latin 'gesta', meaning great deeds, are carried over in its definition as 'a narrative of exploits; a story, tale, or romance, originally in verse' (OED). At the same time, 'in jest' means 'not seriously, without serious intention, in joke, in fun' (OED). Jest suggests both a form and a quality: a narrative structure, and a ludic property. These two senses, like the two senses of play, are interrelated throughout *Infinite Jest*.

In the following sections I examine Wallace's 'game of reality', beginning by investigating ways in which play is determined by a subject's level of perspective. This is most clearly evident in political games, where the O.N.A.N. government makes pawns of its population by re-drawing the boundaries of the U.S.A. in the manner of a magic circle. These political games are described in the same narrative episode as the game of Eschaton played by the students of E.T.A., questioning the role of games within a reality that is already a game. I consider how games function as a distraction or deferral, an idea developed through parallels with *Hamlet* and interpreting the phrase 'poison in jest' as poison concealed *inside* jest.[306] In both cases the 'play within the play' is something superficially comic (playful, a jest) but substantially dangerous, acting as a catalyst for cataclysmic events in the world that contains it. The mechanism of this catalysis is self-similarity: the mirror in the text does not only reflect, but effect, disrupting the infinite regress of the *mise en abyme* and further foiling its technical

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[304] Tom Bishop, 'The Art of Playing', in *Medieval Shakespeare: Pasts and Presents*, ed. by Ruth Morse, Peter Holland, and Helen Cooper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 159–76 (p. 160).

[305] Glending Olson, 'Plays as Play: A Medieval Ethical Theory of Performance and the Intellectual Context of the Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge', *Viator*, 26 (1995), 195–222 (p. 200).

[306] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, 2nd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), III. 2. 228. All further references are taken from this edition and cited within the text.

precision. I ask whether Wallace, by using the technique in this agential sense, achieves his goal of getting 'out of the abyss' of postmodern reflexivity. I propose that drawing attention to the material finitude of the text in contrast to the hypothetical infinity of theoretical abstraction provides a means of doing so, stimulating a form of readerly play.

II. The Game of Reality

Two significant events happen on Interdependence Day, 8th of November, Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment: the students at E.T.A. play a game called Eschaton which simulates nuclear warfare, and they watch a film which uses puppets to illustrate the inception of their current political system. Both events play with levels of representation, drawing upon a common vocabulary of maps and territories. While Eschaton is explicitly a game, the tricks and manipulations involved in the formation of the O.N.A.N. government implies that politics is, formally, as much of a game as Eschaton. Eschaton eventually descends into confused anarchy, as the game's rules disintegrate and simulated violence gives way to physical violence; conversely, the apparently serious context of O.N.A.N. politics becomes increasingly game-like as the politicians step outside the magic circle of national boundaries in order to manipulate them to their own advantage. The juxtaposition of these two events on the same narrative day invites the question as to whether, in a world where everything is ludic, there is any distinction between games and games within games – and to what effect such a distinction might be made.

The politics of *Infinite Jest* are revealed through several mediated levels: a narration of a film of a puppet show created by Mario as a 'kids' adaptation of James Incandenza's four-hour version, watched in the context of national holiday festivities. As a consequence, the political structure that gives rise to the festivities is, in Dällenbach's terms, 'aporetically' contained by the festivities as a film, giving politics the same ontological status as a play (the literary form) and the same qualitative status as play (the activity). Within these ludic levels of mediation, the politicians play a game of representation. The President Johnny Gentle seeks to find a solution for the polluted, toxic territory of North America, and the Chief of Unspecified Services Rodney Tine concludes that the only possible option is to 'give […] away' (402) the polluted territories as an 'unprecedented intercontinental gift' (403) to Canada. The next point of debate in the cabinet is whether the rearrangement of territory will cause refugees through the mass relocation of people who inhabit the 'gifted' territories. The solution to this, like the

solution to the pollution, is to rearrange form rather than content: the Press Secretary cites a formal definition of refugee, and points out how to avoid the definition.

Recalling Huizinga's terminology, the politicians draw a magic circle around the map of the American continent and play with its boundaries to their advantage. By 'solving' the problem of toxic waste through re-drawing the map, they act on a separate representational level, trivialising the situation and making a game of it. The Canadians could respond with the same expression used by Gloucester in Shakespeare's *King Lear*: 'As flies to wanton boys are we to th'gods; | They kill us for their sport'.[307] What is sport for the gods is life or death for the humans. Similarly, for the Canadian E.T.A. boys the festive occasion does not feel like 'sport', but something much darker. They 'remember only hard facts, and the glass-walled Great Convexity whose southern array of ATHSCME Effectuators blow the tidy U.S.'s northern oxides north, towards home' (385). They have no say in the design of the game; instead, they are the puppets being designed, as those who cannot step outside the magic circle are not really in a magic circle at all. Baudrillard, in the context of humans inventing machines, remarks that what cannot invent, cannot play, remaining 'forever out of the game'.[308] This is also suggested by Huizinga, who comments that 'all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play'.[309] James Carse concurs: 'whoever *must* play, cannot *play*'.[310] The Canadian political victims trapped in somebody else's game of reality are not themselves participating in a game. For them, the festivities are distasteful, and they 'feel with special poignancy on 11/8 the implications of their being down here, south of the border, training, in the land of their enemy-ally' (385). Play depends on the subject's position in relation to the game's structure: whether they are inside or outside the playground's boundaries and, most importantly, whether they possess the ability to traverse these boundaries.

In light of the above, is there a meaningful distinction between the implicit game of politics and the explicit game of Eschaton? If the world is a game, can there still be games within the world? Jon Beasley-Murray suggests that Eschaton is 'nothing more than a distraction', citing its 'complete disassociation from the realities of the present' (*Infinite Jest*

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[307] William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of King Lear*, ed. by Jay L. Halio, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), IV. 1. 36–7. Further references will be cited within the text.

[308] Jean Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2002), p. 164.

[309] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), p. 17.

[310] James P. Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), p. 4.

322).[311] This recalls Baudrillard's Disneyland: 'Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real'; 'this world wants to be childish in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the "real" world, and to conceal the fact that true childishness is everywhere'. [312] For the students of E.T.A., who spend their lives negotiating a world of play from tennis to politics to drugs, the game of Eschaton ironically serves to – in Baudrillard's words – '[save] the reality principle'.[313] Deliberately defined as a game, it constructs the sense that there is something outside: a hypothetical non-game. Playing Eschaton evokes a deferred reality. It is a game of politics that distracts from the game of politics that constitutes their world's condition.

Eschaton descends into chaos when J. J. Penn remarks that it is snowing outside the game, which may affect their capacity to play. Michael Pemulis responds with anger, seeing the remark as 'theatre-boundary-puncturing threats to the map's integrity' (333). Any reference to what is happening outside the game threatens the game's sense of 'animating realism', which depends on believing that the tennis court represents the whole 'rectangular projection of the planet earth' (333). Pemulis shouts: 'It's snowing on the goddamn *map*, not the *territory*, you *dick*!' (333) What follows is a rapid breakdown of the game as the players start attacking each other outside it. This is often read as a postmodern blurring of the boundaries between game and reality; Gerry Canavan sees Pemulis's anger as 'the reaction of traditional Enlightenment rationality to its challenge from an increasingly hegemonic postmodernity that is characterized by […] indeterminacy, irrationality, and labyrinthine self-referentiality'.[314] Timothy Jacobs similarly interprets Eschaton as an allegory for postmodern literature: 'Eschaton is a metaphor for art's "Armageddon" (134), the inevitable terminality of continually involutedly self-conscious art'.[315]

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[311] Jon Beasley-Murray, 'The Map and the Territory', *Posthegemony*, 2014 <https://posthegemony.wordpress.com/2014/06/11/the-map-and-the-territory/> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[312] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 12, 13.

[313] Ibid., p. 13.

[314] Gerry Canavan, 'Infinite Summer #5: Maps and Territories', *Gerry Canavan*, 2009 <https://gerrycanavan.wordpress.com/2009/07/26/infinite-summer-5-maps-and-territories/> [accessed 26 September 2020]

[315] Timothy Jacobs, 'American Touchstone: The Idea of Order in Gerard Manley Hopkins and David Foster Wallace', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 38.3 (2001), 215–31 (p. 222).

However, the episode can alternatively be read as a confirmation of these boundaries. While Mark Bresnan discusses how the 'construction of Eschaton as a closed system, an entirely discrete alternate reality' is broken here, the very breaking of this boundary emphasises that the boundary was present in the first place.[316] Like the individual Penrose steps, or Escher's stairs, Eschaton provides a local moment of definition – even if this moment is flattened into equivalence on a wider scale. The *moment* when the game breaks down reveals a distinction between game and non-game which briefly illuminates the presence of *play*, since play depends on the ability to break the boundary – an ability lost for the victims of the political games discussed above, who cannot escape the magic circle because its borders are beyond their control.

That play is made manifest in the moment of transition between game and non-game is expressed by Hal. High on the sidelines, Hal 'finds himself more intrigued by Penn's map/territory faux pas than upset by it, or even amused' (334). Later, he thinks it is 'extremely abstract' but much more interesting than Eschaton itself (335). Hal's attraction is to the moment of transition that momentarily brings play to the foreground; what is compelling is play's possibility, the local distinction in level between simulation and reality – even if, from afar, this distinction ceases to hold. While Hal is intrigued by the two distinct levels of map and territory, these levels soon begin to multiply and the vantage point from which he makes his observations threatens to dissolve into infinite regress; he experiences 'marijuana thinking', 'lost in a paralytic thought-helix' (335), 'almost incapacitated with absorption' (340). Moments after his interest in the map-territory conflation, he 'can't sort through the almost infinite-seeming implications of what Troeltsch is saying fast enough' (341). Hal effectively becomes lost in a *mise en abyme* of thought. Infinite levels, which are phenomenologically equivalent to there being no levels at all, dissolve both meaning and play.

These implicit and explicit games of politics – O.N.A.N. and Eschaton – are identical from one perspective but distinct from another. From afar, they constitute equivalent elements of the simulacral game of reality that is the world of *Infinite Jest*. From up close, however, each contains local frames of transition. As exemplified by Hal, the characters cannot hold onto this frame – this *local* step, or heuristic definition – before it multiplies it into an abyss of levels that simultaneously suggests infinite depth and a flat collapse. This corresponds with the text's

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[316] Mark Bresnan, 'The Work of Play in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 50.1 (2008), 51–68 (p. 62).

wider theme: a search for meaningful distinction between game and reality, or, more broadly, the search for boundaries altogether.

III. Poison in Jest

The games within the game of reality are not only local demarcations, but distractions. If Eschaton briefly re-imposes a distinction between game and reality through a magic circle that the students can control, it also detracts attention from the various 'games' which they cannot; Beasley-Murray points out that 'Meanwhile, off-stage and barely noticed by anyone, is a mint-green Ford sedan idling by the dumpsters'.[317] Eschaton distracts from Hugh Steeply sitting in his car in the guise of Helen the journalist. This diversion works upon readers as well as characters, since the small, metonymic detail of the car is lost among the drama of the game. Games function as distractions from other games: a deferral and displacement. This distraction works through the combination of a game's apparent triviality and the possibility of immersion; games lull subjects into a sense of security while also inducing intense absorption to the extent that the world outside becomes forgotten, although when the player does reach such a state the game arguably ceases to be a game.[318] Beasley-Murray asks: 'is the game a metaphor for broader realities, perhaps even the vehicle through which what really counts looms larger, more intensely than it does elsewhere?'[319] This idea of games as vehicles, recalling the etymology of metaphor as 'carrying over', is the function of the play within the play in *Hamlet* and *Infinite Jest*. In both texts, there is 'poison in jest'; 'jest' acts as a Trojan horse for poison.

Because his words did not need to be taken seriously, the Shakespearean jester had a particular social license to make controversial statements about authority figures for which anybody else would be castigated. In *King Lear*, Goneril refers to Lear's 'all-licensed fool' (I. 4. 160), and writing on *Hamlet*, Manfred Draudt remarks: 'This assumed madness gives him the license of a court jester who is not held accountable for his jibes at the mighty, and who can utter the truth about the King, the Queen, and the courtiers to their faces'.[320] Part of the

[317] Beasley-Murray, 'The Map and the Territory'.

[318] Roger Caillois comments that 'the corruption of *mimicry* […] is produced when simulation is no longer accepted as such, when the one who is disguised believes that his role, travesty, or mask is real'. See Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. by Meyer Barash (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2001), p. 49.

[319] Beasley-Murray, 'The Map and the Territory'.

[320] Manfred Draudt, 'The Comedy of *Hamlet*', *Atlantis*, 24.1 (2002), 71–83 (p. 79).

reason that the play within the play functions as a plot device in *Hamlet* is because it is *play*. In context, the young prince Hamlet has been told by his dead father's ghost that his father died by being poisoned by his brother, Hamlet's uncle Claudius, who is now King and has married Hamlet's mother. Hamlet devises a circuitous method to confirm the guilt of the new King, which involves presenting him with a play that acts out the circumstances of his father's murder. Hamlet hopes that watching the events that he performed depicted before him will disturb King Claudius to the extent that his guilt will become apparent.

Hamlet uses 'jest' to describe the play performed to the King, even though, given that it is called *The Murder of Gonzago*, the play does not appear to be particularly comic. In fact, the Prologue explicitly calls it a tragedy: '*For us and for our tragedy, | Here stooping to your clemency, | We beg your hearing patiently*' (III. 2. 142–4). Yet when the King asks 'Have you heard the argument? Is there no offence in't?' (III. 2. 226–7) Hamlet replies 'No, no, they do but jest. Poison in jest. No offence i'th'world' (III. 2. 228–9). On one hand, Hamlet's 'poison in jest' refers to the play being a play as opposed to a real event. The player-king poisons his brother 'in jest': only in pretence, artificially, unlike King Claudius who did so in reality. At the same time, the phrase simultaneously suggests that the play is a 'jest' containing 'poison', the latter being its hidden purpose to reveal the King's guilt. This insistence on viewing the *Murder of Gonzago* as a 'jest' is reinforced by Hamlet's manic exclamations when the King abandons the play: 'For if the King like not the comedy | Why then belike he likes it not, perdie. | Come, some music!' (III. 2. 285–7). Though the play is apparently tragic, Hamlet calls it a 'comedy', emphasising its represented nature as both play and a play. To function as a Trojan horse, the play must appear in the form of entertainment: only in the guise of comedy can it be a catalyst for tragedy.

Perhaps the equivalent of the Shakespearean jester in Wallace's late twentieth century America is postmodern irony as manifested through television. In 'E Unibus Pluram', Wallace remarks:

> One big claim of this essay is going to be that the most dangerous thing about television for U.S. fiction writers is that we don't take it seriously enough as both a disseminator and a definer of the cultural atmosphere we breathe and process.[321]

[321] 'E Unibus Pluram', p. 27.

R. S. Bakker similarly notes: 'The most *serious* thing in *Infinite Jest*, after all, is the most silly thing: Entertainment'.[322] Television is Wallace's Trojan horse, its danger accentuated by its apparent innocuousness, or surface fun.

In this spirit, the 'Infinite Jest' film comes wrapped as a jest, stamped with the sign of a yellow smiley face. A superficial sign of consumerism and cheerfulness, the face first appears on the padded mailer received by the near Eastern medical attaché, which has 'a small drawn crude face, smiling, in ballpoint ink, instead of a return address or incorporated logo' (36).[323] Inside the mailer is the cartridge, which is described as standard black with only 'another of these vapid U.S.A.-type circular smiling heads embossed upon it where the registration- and duration-codes are supposed to be embossed' (36). Information, location, registration and duration are all replaced by the simple smiling face. It becomes its own system, its own code, emphasised by its being a 'U.S.A.-type' face: a 'type' is a formal category, and the face has a formal function as a social mask associated with the functional (rather than meaningful) phrase 'Have a nice day'.[324] The face on the cartridge is a mirror of how, when the attaché watches the film, he will also become smilingly 'vapid', precisely according to its OED definition: 'devoid of animation, zest, or interest; dull, flat, lifeless, insipid'. Like the screen and the image, he becomes psychologically two dimensional, 'ecstatic' (78) in the etymological sense of dis-placed (Greek: ek-stasis). In losing perception of the world outside he loses the ability to play; as suggested by Caillois, the game of make-believe can only continue insofar as the distinction between simulation and reality is maintained.[325] When this distinction collapses the game disappears. The film is marked as a 'jest' on the outside, but once the viewer is perceptually inside it ceases to be a jest. The yellow smiley face is the embodiment of the catatonic state, but it is also the Trojan horse of happiness, the surface of jest which conceals something darker: rather than played out poisoning, there is poison in play.

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[322] R. Scott Bakker, 'Alas, Poor Wallace: A Review of Infinite Jest', *Three Pound Brain*, 2011 <https://rsbakker.wordpress.com/2011/10/14/alas-poor-wallace-a-review-of-infinite-jest/> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[323] I outline the plethora of associations that this sign has gathered since its inception, and how these associations resonate throughout *Infinite Jest*, in 'The Semiotics of Emoji: *Infinite Jest* and the Yellow Smiley Face', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 61.2 (2019), 193–205.

[324] I discuss the facilitatory function of this phrase and the yellow smiley face sign in 'The Semiotics of Emoji', p. 4.

[325] Caillois, p. 49.

IV. Self-Similarity and Sympathetic Magic

In both *Hamlet* and *Infinite Jest*, the inset play and inset film are not isolated narratives but perform a catalytic function on the narratives in which they are contained. Mary Holland describes how

> The classic version of the infinite 'gest' is *The Arabian Nights* […], in which Shahrazad tells one story after another to postpone her death; in this sense, her story is also a 'jest' or joke that she perpetrates against her captor. The joke of this novel, then, lies in the fact that, from the moment we meet Hal, we know that he is doomed to the solipsistic death of his pathological society, yet the novel defers for as long as possible our understanding of this culture and this moment, parsing out seemingly infinitely repeating examples of its recursive loop over more than a thousand and one pages of Hal's 'story,' a story told, in essence, to postpone his own certain death.[326]

Yet Shahrazad's postponement is effective; though there are different versions of *The Arabian Nights*, a common feature of their endings is that Shahrazad succeeds in using her 'jest' to avoid death. Her stories ultimately do not only postpone death, but overcome it, eventually breaking the recursive pattern of infinite regress which they had set into motion.

This example points to the agential function of the *mise en abyme*, which also applies to *Hamlet*; here, the inset play initiates dramatic action as King Claudius storms away, stimulating the tragedy's causal chain of events which culminate in violence and murder. Conversely, the viewers of 'Infinite Jest' are subsumed into what they watch, as the cartridge 'catalyses' catatonia. However, this disabling effect is a powerful weapon with significant political consequences; the catastasis of spectators disrupts social functioning and causes governmental panic. When Don Gately prophetically dreams of digging up James Incandenza's head in a graveyard with Hal, trying to find the master copy of the 'Infinite Jest' film before the Canadian terrorists, he thinks 'it's really important, like Continental-Emergency important' (934). Although those who participate in the 'jest' are caught in an internal reflexive spiral, from the outside their stasis is a crucial political weapon with extensive effects on a 'Continental-Emergency' scale.

The means through which the inner plays of *Hamlet* and *Infinite Jest* act on the worlds that contain them involve self-similarity. In *Hamlet*, it is the similarity between the inset play

[326] Holland, p. 234.

and the King's situation that creates a reaction. Identification can only happen with the King, and perhaps slightly the Queen, but not with any of the other characters as the poisoning plot does not represent their actions. Consequently, whether the play within the play is a 'jest' or 'poison' – playful or serious – depends on likeness between its events and the spectator's own experience. Hamlet makes this clear when he comments: 'Your majesty and we that have free souls – it touches us not. Let the galled jade wince, our withers are unwrung' (III. 2. 235–6). Hamlet's 'touches' evokes a spatial metaphor; those who have nothing in common with *The Murder of Gonzago* cannot touch it. It is distanced from them, like the games of Gloucester's gods, and can therefore be seen as 'jest' or 'comedy'. However, the sinning 'galled jade' will 'wince'; for the one who identifies, the play will move closer and touch them. At this proximity, the play shifts from comedy to tragedy, and from game to reality.

While the film in *Infinite Jest* is never depicted in its entirety, its effects are discernible in the viewers' responses: the film, stamped with a yellow smiley face, transforms viewers into yellow smiley faces. When the medical attaché's wife returns from her tennis session and cannot elicit a response from him, she notes that 'the expression on his rictus of a face nevertheless appeared very positive, ecstatic, even, you could say' (78). According to the OED, 'rictus' is used in zoology to mean 'the opening or gape of a mouth', and in reference to people it is 'a fixed grimace or grin'. 'Fixed' implies the static two-dimensionality of the yellow smiley face, and the attaché also looks 'positive', an abstract word now also associated with yellow smiley faces. Rodney Tine, the Chief of the Office of Unspecified Services, later thinks about the effect of the cartridge on those who have viewed it. He recalls them as 'docile and continent but blank, as if on some deep reptile-level pithed' (548). Tine's description of the viewers' faces evokes the face on the cartridge, which was conspicuously 'blank' when found by the medical attaché, and 'pithed' means 'to pierce, sever, or destroy the upper spinal cord or brainstem of (an animal), so as to cause death or insensibility' (OED). The 'Infinite Jest' film makes its viewers resemble the cartridge itself: blank, unconscious, and wearing a 'rictal' smile.

Yet the film achieves this by drawing out a yellow smiley face that was already latent in the viewer; like *Hamlet*, the spectators of the film are affected because they are already similar, and therefore susceptible, to what they are spectating. Kiki Benzon summarises:

> Ensnared in identification with the physical and psychological recursion of 'Infinite Jest', the viewer, utterly consumed by what he or she sees, loses all compulsion to do anything but watch the film and consequently dies in his or her own excrement.[327]

Here, 'identification' is the factor that causes the 'absorption of subjects into the film's narrative loop'.[328] The Entertainment in *Infinite Jest* provides a mirror for its spectators; it does not depict, nor stimulate, anything radically different from what the O.N.A.N. citizens of Wallace's U.S.A. already knew, but extrapolates what is already there.

This is illustrated by the extreme passive state that the medical attaché enters every evening before encountering the cartridge. He comes home, and his wife tends to him carefully so that he can 'enjoy his hot dinner without having to remove his eyes from whatever entertainment is up and playing' (34). He has a 'special electronic recliner' which, when he falls asleep, automatically reclines to 'full horizontal' (34). This allows him to slip from 'unwound spectation' into a relaxed night's sleep, with a 'recursive loop of low-volume surf and light rain' (34) in the background. Even before watching 'Infinite Jest', the medical attaché approaches a catatonic state each night. The cartridge simply takes this state to its logical extreme, reflecting and reverberating the passivity. One of the nicknames for 'Infinite Jest' is 'the Entertainment' with a capital E: like the largest triangle in the Sierpinski gasket, the Entertainment contains and surpasses the smaller, lower-case entertainments. It does not introduce anything that is of a different *kind* to what the viewers already know, but a different *degree*, making the difference one of quantity rather than quality – a quantity that becomes quality.

Along these lines Marathe, with his theories on free will, suggests that the cartridge is not innately compelling, but compelling specifically to a 'U.S.A.-type' society. In one of his conversations with Steeply, Marathe tells him to look at the facts:

> This is a U.S.A. production, this Entertainment cartridge. Made by an American man in the U.S.A. The appetite for the appeal of it: this also is U.S.A. The U.S.A. drive for spectation, which your culture teaches. This I was saying: this is why choosing is everything. (318)

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[327] Kiki Benzon, '"Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Certain Borders": Chaos and Realism in *Infinite Jest*', in *Consider David Foster Wallace*, ed. by David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group, 2010), pp. 101–12 (p. 106).

[328] Ibid.

The principle is geared towards identity: made by U.S.A., for U.S.A., a mirror for itself. Steeply attempts to paraphrase Marathe's point: 'You're saying that the administration wouldn't even be concerned about the Entertainment if we didn't know we were fatally weak. As in as a nation, you're saying the fact that we're worried speaks volumes about the nation itself' (318). The cartridge 'Infinite Jest', made by a U.S.A. man for a U.S.A. audience, works by holding a mirror up to nature. Moreover, this mirror is structured as an infinite feedback loop: a hall of mirrors that dissolves the distinction between object and image.

If O.N.A.N. put the Canadian citizens inside a magic circle from which they could not escape by rearranging the country's borders, the Canadian terrorists in turn put the American citizens inside a magic circle of television, where they become so deeply immersed that they can no longer see the boundaries of the screen. Hayles remarks that

> the terrorist sect that Marathe sees as freeing him from isolation merely displays another form of O.N.A.N.-ism, pursuing their objectives without regard for the pain and suffering they inflict on others. The A.F.R. is not so much an alternative to Gentle's administration as a mirror to it.[329]

Yet this is exactly the power of their weapon: the Canadian terrorists fight back against the O.N.A.N. government by giving them a mirror. Since they cannot step outside O.N.A.N.'s system, they take it down from the inside through a symmetrical inversion. The Canadians cannot get out of the Americans' magic circle, but the Americans choose to enter the Canadians' magic circle, falling so deeply inside that the effect is the same. Deciding to enter a magic circle, they find themselves lost in a *mise en abyme*.

V. Inverting the *Abyme*

Just as the inset play affects the outer play, so does the outer play affect the audience. What, then, is the effect of *Infinite Jest* in relation to 'Infinite Jest'? Wallace's aim was for *Infinite Jest* to stimulate the opposite effect of 'Infinite Jest', counteracting the 'dead end' of

[329] N. Katherine Hayles, 'The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*', *New Literary History*, 30.3 (1999), 675–97 (p. 695).

postmodern reflexivity and inverting the *mise en abyme* of self-referentiality and addiction.[330] He articulates his view of fiction's purpose as follows:

> If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still *are* human beings, now. Or can be.[331]

This dramatisation involves an element of difficulty; Wallace suggests that art is 'apt to make you uncomfortable, or to force you to work hard to access its pleasures, the same way that in real life true pleasure is usually a by-product of hard work and discomfort'.[332] But despite these intentions, Wallace's biographer D. T. Max suggests he was 'too self-aware not to see the paradox that his attempt to condemn seduction had proven so seductive'.[333] Max asks: 'Had *Infinite Jest* become another entertainment cruise ship, bright lights on an empty sea?'[334]

The debate as to whether *Infinite Jest* succeeds in inverting the *abyme* is at the crux of Wallace criticism. On one hand, there are those who – without necessarily suggesting that Wallace fails in his aims – identify a parallel between the addictiveness of the film 'Infinite Jest' and the book *Infinite Jest*. Hayles asks whether *Infinite Jest* creates an imaginative world so compelling that 'the reader wants only to consume this text, a desire made all the more insatiable by the text's excessive bulk', contending that 'reading *Infinite Jest* itself becomes addictive'.[335] At the same time, she concludes that this addictiveness is undermined by the novel's ending, where Wallace withholds from his readers the 'usual satisfactions of finishing a very long book. There is no climax, resolution, and denouement in any conventional sense'.[336]

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[330] This feeling is discussed by Wallace in 'E Unibus Pluram' and his interview with Larry McCaffery, where Wallace remarks: 'Art's reflection on itself is terminal'. See Larry McCaffery, 'An Expanded Interview with David Foster Wallace', in *Conversations with David Foster Wallace*, ed. by Stephen J. Burn (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), pp. 21–52 (p. 30).

[331] 'Expanded Interview', p. 26.

[332] Ibid., p. 22.

[333] D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (London: Granta, 2012), p. 225.

[334] Ibid.

[335] Hayles, 'Illusion of Autonomy', p. 695.

[336] Ibid.

Instead readers, like addicts hitting Bottom, are impelled into change through understanding the illusory nature of autonomous selfhood.[337]

Frank Cioffi exhibits a similar ambivalence. He details a 'pathological quality' that emerges when interacting with Wallace's novel, suggesting that 'To read *Infinite Jest* is, almost, to watch the fatal videotape'.[338] Yet he acknowledges that the text's addictiveness also coexists with high demands: 'reading the book cannot be a passive or static activity', as it requires the 'reader's active involvement'.[339] Greg Carlisle agrees that 'the reader of Infinite Jest is rewarded not by passive acceptance of easy answers or tidy resolutions, but by an active engagement with ongoing narratives'.[340] Jacobs cites Wallace's 'participatory aesthetic', remarking that 'Wallace expects the reader to become engaged with his work – as opposed to the "passive spectation" that television prescribes'. Benzon also suggests that Wallace's techniques 'disrupt the passivity of a "spectator" qua reader by problematizing the real'.[341] Marshall Boswell summarises the contradiction: 'The book itself is an "infinite jest" – a seemingly endless source of readerly pleasure – yet it is also, paradoxically, both a diagnosis and a critique of the culture's addiction to pleasure'.[342]

Extrapolating this sense that the text demands work, another line of critical argumentation explicitly considers *Infinite Jest* as an antidote to 'Infinite Jest'. After summarising the film, Tom LeClair continues: '*Infinite Jest* is no such entertainment. […] its ideas, digressions, rapid scene shifts, coiling sentences, footnotes, and mass make it a work that requires work, a novel that many readers found they could pull away from'.[343] Philip Sayers asserts that the book reverses the effects of the entertainment, achieving Wallace's goal of rendering readers 'more "conscious"'.[344] Daniel Grausam identifies *Infinite Jest* as a 'therapeutic' as opposed to 'diagnostic' novel, and, discussing Marathe, Stephen Burn suggests

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[337] Ibid.

[338] Frank Louis Cioffi, '"An Anguish Become Thing": Narrative as Performance in David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*', *Narrative*, 8.2 (2000), 161–81 (p. 171).

[339] Ibid., pp. 162, 168.

[340] Carlisle, *Elegant Complexity*, p. 15.

[341] Benzon, p. 112.

[342] Boswell, p. 119.

[343] Tom LeClair, 'How to Exploit a Dead Writer', *Full Stop*, 2015 <https://www.full-stop.net/2015/08/12/blog/tomleclair/how-to-exploit-a-dead-writer/> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[344] Philip Sayers, 'Representing Entertainment(s) in *Infinite Jest*', *Studies in the Novel*, 44.3 (2012), 346–63 (p. 351).

that 'his doctrine of exemplary self-control and denial' may be 'intended as a sort of antidote to the entertainment'.[345]

Others simply believe that Wallace has failed in his aims. R. S. Bakker acknowledges that

> The book *Infinite Jest* (Literature? or ingroup entertainment?) is set up as the antithesis of *Infinite Jest* the art film (Entertainment? or death?), but in the end they are ultimately the same, just as the 'addicts' at the top of the hill mirror the addicts below.[346]

Similarly, Mary Holland argues that *Infinite Jest*

> fails to deliver on the agenda that Wallace set for it, not only because it fails to eschew empty irony for the earnestness that Wallace imagines but also, and more importantly, because it fails to recognize and address the cultural drive toward narcissism that fuels and is fuelled by that irony.[347]

Here, Wallace's novel 'reflects an already self-consciously self-reflecting world'.[348]

Mirrors are multivalent figures because they both duplicate and invert; they can be used metaphorically to express both likeness and contrast. Much *Infinite Jest* criticism appears to recognise both a mirror in the text, and the text as mirror. However, some critics consider *Infinite Jest* to be an addictive parallel to 'Infinite Jest', while others emphasise the book as an antidote to the film. Most accept the coexistence of addictiveness with activity, helplessness with hard work. Some interpret Wallace's irony as an indication that he is ensnared in the traps he tries to escape, while others posit this irony as a technique which he manages to manipulate to different ends.[349]

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[345] Daniel Grausam, '"It Is Only a Statement of the Power of What Comes after": Atomic Nostalgia and the Ends of Postmodernism', *American Literary History*, 24.2 (2012), 308–36 (p. 329); Burn, p. 62.

[346] Bakker, 'Alas Poor Wallace'.

[347] Holland, p. 218.

[348] Ibid., p. 228.

[349] Discussing Wallace's early reviewer A. O. Scott, Boswell comments that Wallace's strategy is: 'meta-ironic. That is […] to turn irony back on itself, to make his fiction relentlessly conscious of its own self-consciousness, and thus to produce work that will be at once unassailably sophisticated and doggedly down to earth'. See Boswell, p. 15.

Another way of addressing the debate as to whether Wallace continues or inverts the *mise en abyme* of reflexivity is to focus not on techniques within the text, but on responses to the text. Having discussed the effect of the inset play on the outer play, I will now move onto the effect of the outer play on its audience. One way to assess such effects is to consider popular as well as critical responses to *Infinite Jest*, including the vast internet infrastructure that has sprung around the novel. Such an approach is along the lines posited by Rita Felski, who suggests that responses by lay audiences are dismissed too readily by critics and calls for greater attention to the affective aspects of literary engagement.[350] In *The Limits of Critique*, she examines literary works in terms of Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, contending that 'Art works can only survive and thrive by making friends, creating allies, attracting disciples, inciting attachments'.[351] In this manner, texts create 'networks of alliances, relations, and translations' whose 'number and length […] prove far more salient to a text's survival than matters of ideological agreement'.[352] The extent to whether Wallace has achieved his aims in *Infinite Jest* can be studied from this angle, according to the external networks in which the text participates.

A defining characteristic of the 'Infinite Jest' film is that it draws people into themselves, inhibiting communication; the viewer's consciousness becomes so deeply immersed in the film that it is impossible for them to retrieve external perception. However, responses to *Infinite Jest*, in the very fact of their existence, indicate an outward directionality: a communication. That *Infinite Jest* aims for this outward directionality has been suggested by Hering, who remarks that 'Wallace attempts to stage a dialogic process of refraction, enacted here as a moment of transfiguration and "seeing-through" of the reflective surface and engaging with the reader outside the text'.[353] Zadie Smith similarly writes that if Wallace insists on awareness, 'awareness must move always in an *outward* direction, away from the self' [italics mine].[354] Evidence of the text's communicative outwardness includes the 2009 blog 'Infinite Summer', which was set up as a platform where readers of *Infinite Jest* all over the world could participate in a communal reading of the novel from 21 June to 22 September, dividing the text

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[350] Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 4.

[351] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 165–66

[352] Ibid., p. 166.

[353] David Hering, *David Foster Wallace: Fiction and Form* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 6.

[354] Zadie Smith, 'Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace', in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), pp. 257–300 (p. 268).

into seventy five pages a week.[355] Four writers co-ordinating the program posted weekly in order to 'promote and facilitate discussion'.[356] The organisation of the website acts as a navigational tool for Wallace's text, including a schedule, tips, references to readers' guides (Carlisle and Burn) and links to other online tools such as a glossary, the *Infinite Jest* wiki, and a website called the Howling Fantods, each of which contains further links and tools for the text. Moreover, the 'Infinite Summer' blog gave rise to an 'Infinite Winter' blog in 2016, which sought to revive the communal reading experience.[357] The proliferation of such forums illustrates an outward movement that has gained a generative life of its own: communication about *Infinite Jest* that leads to further communication about *Infinite Jest*.

The sociability of reading *Infinite Jest* is also expressed by personal accounts of individuals' encounters with the text, described in internet blog posts. Despite its fame, many readers describe how they came to the book through personal recommendations from friends or family members. Matthew Hammett Knott comments that his attempt to read *Infinite Jest* 'stemmed from three or four friends' who were 'passionate advocates of either the novel or the author', Peter Anderson encountered it through his father, Scott Stein was initially given a copy by a friend as a student, and Greg Carlisle, who went on to write *Elegant Complexity*, was introduced to Wallace through a friend giving him a copy of *A Supposedly Fun Thing*.[358] Bakker criticises the length and difficulty of *Infinite Jest* as implying exclusivity, commenting: 'As with any other "elite" subgroup, literary practitioners are prone to self-identify according to perceived competencies, especially when those competencies dramatically exceed those of the *hoi polloi*'.[359] Yet the non-academic context of the responses listed above, and their

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[355] *Infinite Summer*, 2010 <https://infinitesummer.org/> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[356] 'About', *Infinite Summer*, 2010 <https://infinitesummer.org/about> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[357] 'Infinite Winter', 2016 <http://infinitewinter.org/> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[358] Matthew Hammett Knott, 'I Jest You Not: How David Foster Wallace Changed My Life', *IndieWire*, 2012 <https://www.indiewire.com/2012/01/i-jest-you-not-how-david-foster-wallace-changed-my-life-173573/> [accessed 26 September 2021]; Peter Anderson, 'You Are In Here: How *Infinite Jest* Pretty Much Changed My Life', *Mr. Anderson Reads & Writes*, 2016 <https://mrandersonwrites.wordpress.com/2016/02/21/you-are-in-here-how-infinite-jest-pretty-much-changed-my-life/> [accessed 26 September 2021]; Scott Stein, '2018: The Year *Infinite Jest* Took Over My Life', *CNET*, 2018 <https://www.cnet.com/news/2018-the-year-infinite-jest-took-over-my-life/> [accessed 26 September 2021]; Greg Carlisle, 'Greg Carlisle: Reading *Infinite Jest* Changed My Life (And Now It Will Change Yours)', *Infinite Summer*, 2009 <http://infinitesummer.org/archives/1874> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[359] Bakker, 'Alas Poor Wallace'.

encounter with the text through personal recommendations, suggests communication rather than exclusivity; those inside the *Infinite Jest* 'subgroup' seem to actively solicit new recruits.

A common feature of these personal accounts is a statement that *Infinite Jest* changed the reader's life. Greg Carlisle and Chris Ayers both comment that 'Reading *Infinite Jest* changed my life'; Jason Segel, who plays Wallace in the documentary film *The End of the Tour*, lists the novel as one of 'Three Books That Changed My Life'; the title of Knott's post is 'How David Foster Wallace Changed my Life'; Anderson's title is similarly 'How *Infinite Jest* Pretty Much Changed my Life'.[360] Such comments must be taken in their rhetorical context, where exaggeration and striking titles take precedence over critical argument. It is also a selectively biased sample, since those for whom *Infinite Jest* did not change their life would be less likely to comment on it. Moreover, the fact of 'change' is not necessarily constructive; the 'Infinite Jest' film also changed the lives of its audience, but in an inward direction which inhibited any ability to state or comment on the change. Nevertheless, even accounting for these various qualifications, the above statements suggest that *Infinite Jest* has staged some intervention in the lives of particular readers. As discussed in Section IV, 'Self-Similarity and Sympathetic Magic', this intervention can be considered in terms of mirroring. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the majority of the above writers for whom *Infinite Jest* changed their life are American men of a similar demographic to Wallace himself; Ayers explicitly notes that he read the text aged 33, 'near the same age as David Foster Wallace when he wrote it'.[361] This is not to say that these are the only people whose lives may be 'changed' by the novel, but these examples reinforce the logic of sympathetic magic through self-similarity, particularly as several testimonies also mention experiences of addiction or mental health disorders. Ayers comments that *Infinite Jest* 'was asking the same questions that I was' when he read it, as he was 'navigating through a mild depression that I was only starting to realize or admit to myself that it actually was a depression'.[362] As a mirror, the text reveals to readers aspects of their own appearance of which they were previously unaware. Indeed, Mark Steffen, citing the

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[360] Carlisle, 'Reading *Infinite Jest* Changed My Life'; Chris Ayers, 'Chris Ayers: How To Be Human', *Infinite Winter*, 2016 <http://infinitewinter.org/chris-ayers-how-to-be-human/> [accessed 26 September 2021]; Jason Segel, 'Three Books That Changed My Life', *Art Works Blog*, 2015 <https://www.arts.gov/art-works/2015/three-books-changed-my-life-0> [accessed 26 September 2021]; Knott, 'I Jest You Not: How David Foster Wallace Changed My Life'; Anderson, 'How *Infinite Jest* Pretty Much Changed My Life'.

[361] Ayers, 'How To Be Human'.

[362] Ibid.

description of analysis-paralysis, directly asserts that 'This passage was like reading into a mirror'.[363]

For Peter Anderson, struggling with an alcohol addiction while he read the text, *Infinite Jest* provided a methodology: 'It's the book I needed to read at that time of my life. I was a full-blown alcoholic […]. *Infinite Jest*, and by extension David Foster Wallace, showed me a way out'.[364] Giving 'voice to the infantile hurt that propelled [him] into addiction', the text not only acted as a mirror of his condition, but provided a blueprint of what to do next. If *Infinite Jest* reflected Anderson's addiction, Anderson in turn reflected its methodologies for overcoming addiction. He cites as particularly influential the section where Don Gately, lying in hospital, thinks about the division of time:

> Taking it a second at a time. […] the thought of feeling like he'd be feeling this second for 60 more of these seconds – he couldn't deal. He could not fucking deal. He had to build a wall around each second just to take it. […] He could do the dextral pain the same way: Abiding. No one single instant of it was unendurable. Here was a second right here: he endured it. What was undealable-with was the thought of all the instants all lined up and stretching ahead, glittering. (859–60)

Commenting on this passage, Anderson remarks that 'This notion that I could endure anything if I broke it down into individual seconds helped me quit alcohol for good'.[365] This is the most explicit testament to *Infinite Jest* inverting the *abyme* – or abyss – of addiction, which Wallace posits as the behavioural correlate to narrative reflexivity.

To 'build a wall around each second' suggests a re-implementation of borders, recovering the magic circle from the *mise en abyme*. Recalling Hal in Eschaton, the possibility of play emerges in the local moment of distinction between simulation and reality – in the individual Penrose step, or shift in level – but disappears in the 'paralytic thought-helix' (335) of infinite jest. By recovering the ability to apply cognitive boundaries, Gately recovers the infrastructure of play. Bresnan similarly suggests that 'liberating play' in *Infinite Jest* is located in the methodologies of Alcoholics Anonymous.[366] He discusses how, 'Throughout his struggle

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[363] Mark Steffen, *marksteffen.net* <https://marksteffen.net/post/4927782058/that-most-substance-addicted-people-are-also> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[364] Anderson, 'You Are In Here'.

[365] Ibid.

[366] Bresnan, p. 53.

for sobriety, Gately recognizes that he is both working and playing', suggesting that *Infinite Jest* 'contrasts strategic, provisional, and ultimately liberating play with the naive idealization of play as a haven for autonomy, free from the regulatory structures of everyday life'.[367] Dispensing with the concept of the magic circle as too binary in implying a separation of play from everyday life, he posits a form of play that is integrated with work. Nevertheless, the magic circle was not characterised as 'free from […] regulatory structures' in the first place; Huizinga explicitly remarked that play 'creates order, *is* order'.[368] It is the inability to access finite boundaries which dissolves play, as evinced by the Canadians' political entrapment as well as the *mise en abymes* of the 'Infinite Jest' film cartridge, drug addiction and Hal's paralytic thought-helix.

The above evidence does not further the critical debate as to whether *Infinite Jest* itself surpasses or succumbs to irony but, in treating the text as a kind of 'black box', focuses on its effects. If 'Infinite Jest' made its viewers into vapid, uncommunicative yellow smiley faces, *Infinite Jest* has stimulated both popular and critical response, where even those who articulate its failures are communicating in doing so.[369] Wallace shifts the movement of the *mise en abyme* towards an outward and intersubjective direction, as exemplified by the internet apparatus that has sprung around reading the text collectively, in the way that many readers encounter the text through personal recommendations, and in the testaments of those for whom it helped recognise their condition or find a way out of it. While the mirror *in* the text ('Infinite Jest') creates an internal abyss, the mirror *of* the text (*Infinite Jest*) catalyses external effects.

VI. From *Mise en Abyme* to Magic Circle: Playing *Infinite Jest*

If the film 'Infinite Jest' evokes 'play' as noun, the book *Infinite Jest* evokes 'play' as verb: a transition from spectacle to interactivity. To 'play' *Infinite Jest* might initially seem antithetical to Wallace's purpose; as discussed above, a ludic quality is often attributed to the kind of metafiction that Wallace was attempting to swerve away from. Larry McCaffery suggests that Wallace's *Westward* depicts metafiction as a 'game that only reveals itself, or that can't share

[367] Ibid., p. 66.

[368] Huizinga, p. 10.

[369] Another example of this is Amy Hungerford's 'On Not Reading DFW', in *Making Literature Now* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 141–68. The fact that the text has prompted critical essays without having being read may ironically serve as a reason to read it.

its valence with anything outside itself', and Benzon asserts that Wallace's 'chaotic fiction' is 'not a gamey metafictional exercise'.[370] Such comments equate play with purposelessness and circularity. Still, Stein compares the page by page guides to *Infinite Jest* with 'video-game walkthroughs', suggesting an alternative kind of play: something more goal-driven than the infinite games of funhouse fiction and playground apparatus.[371] In keeping with Carse's distinction, Wallace attempts to retrieve finite from infinite games, and an integral aspect of this finite play is his emphasis on the physicality of the text. Despite the impression of vastness, *Infinite Jest* is materially finite; paper, unlike theoretical hypotheses, has physical boundaries. Wallace's 'paralytic thought-helix' (335), and '*Analysis-Paralysis*' (203) exist only in a world of abstraction, lacking concrete counterparts.

The text continuously reminds readers of its physicality through its size, and Emma-Lee Moss describes advice she received on setting out to read the novel as 'sawing it into thirds': 'Walking into the living room one morning to see me hacking at the book with a kitchen knife, my boyfriend told me that I looked "completely crazy"'.[372] Counteracting the overwhelming feeling of endlessness provoked by the book's size, this tactic suggests a physicalised 'analysis' in the etymological sense of 'resolving (something) into its elements' (OED). It also recalls Don Gately's technique for recovering from addiction, dividing the abyss of time by constructing a 'wall' around each minute: dividing the book into thirds effectively builds a 'wall' around each section. Though the book's actual volume remains unchanged, imposing a formal structure of organisation upon it stimulates a sense of control, and a means of recovering the infrastructure of play.

An engagement with the text's physicality is solicited by Wallace's copious endnotes. The need for readers to constantly flick back and forth emphasises the book's condition as a physical object to be traversed. Andrew Varnon comments that flipping between one's 'two bookmarks' is often compared with being 'a spectator at a tennis match', but he finds it 'like playing in a tennis match, with Wallace on the other side of the net'.[373] This distinction between

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[370] McCaffery, 'Expanded Interview', p. 40; Benzon, p. 111.

[371] Stein, 'The Year *Infinite Jest* Took Over My Life'.

[372] Emma-Lee Moss, '*Infinite Jest* at 20: Still a Challenge, Still Brilliant', *Guardian*, 15 February 2016 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/feb/15/infinite-jest-at-20-still-a-challenge-still-brilliant-emma-lee-moss> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[373] Andrew Varnon, 'The Other Side of the Net', *The Smart Set*, 2018 <https://www.thesmartset.com/the-other-side-of-the-net/> [accessed 26 September 2021].

spectating and playing evokes the distinction between the play within the play ('Infinite Jest') and the play (*Infinite Jest*). Nevertheless, *Infinite Jest* is a tennis game where the size of the court (the number of pages between primary narrative and endnote) shrinks as the game progresses, making it theoretically faster to hit the ball of the reader's attention across. This shrinking serves as a marker of progress and creates acceleration, stimulating a sensation of motion.

Like its size, *Infinite Jest*'s endnotes create an impression of infinity which is nevertheless offset by the fact of finitude. For instance, endnote twenty four describes James Incandenza's filmography, where many of the films listed are, as Burn notes, 'temptingly similar to episodes recounted in the book'.[374] This exemplifies Wallace's fractal structure and Sierpinski gasket analogy, where the duplication of macrocosm in a microcosm signifies the beginning of a *mise en abyme*. However, in practice there are usually no more than two levels of endnotes before readers return to the primary narrative. In Barth's 'Lost in the Funhouse' the shift in diegetic level was often imperceptible: a slide rather than a step, with, aside from occasional use of italics, no formal elements to signal the transition. However, the endnotes in *Infinite Jest*, demanding readers to physically move from one end of a large book to the other, keep the levels sharply demarcated. Even when the endnotes expand into passages that rival the main text in terms of depth and narrative centrality, the process of moving backwards and forwards ensures that the boundary remains in view.

David Letzler suggests that there is a combination of useful and redundant information in the endnotes of *Infinite Jest*. Borrowing the term 'cruft' from computer coding as a designation of superfluity, redundancy, or something overly complex, he remarks: 'there […] *is* quite a lot of important material in Wallace's endnotes, yet to discover it, one has to wade through lots of cruft'.[375] He also discusses endnote twenty four, which contains several 'conceptually unfilmable' examples of '*Found Drama*' (989–90) amongst other films simply described as '*Untitled*. Unfinished. UNRELEASED.' (990, 992). Letzler contends that these entries are

> pure cruft: their inclusion cannot further or enrich the novel's plot, because Wallace tells us nothing about them, nor are they necessary for factual completeness as in a real

[374] Burn, p. 60.

[375] David Letzler, 'Encyclopedic Novels and the Cruft of Fiction: *Infinite Jest*'s Endnotes', *Studies in the Novel*, 44.3 (2012), 304–24 (p. 310).

> filmography, because these unfinished films only exist inasmuch as they are invented by Wallace in the note. Such entries do not represent pointlessness – they *are* pointlessness.[376]

Nevertheless, Letzler goes on to suggest that 'cruft' acts as exercise equipment, arguing that encyclopedic novels provide a training ground for sorting through information and modulating the attention of readers.[377] In this light, cruft can be said to have an architectural purpose. The titles with lower informational content lend themselves to a formal rather than semantic apprehension, experienced as material rather than meaningful. Their purpose becomes their textual matter, with found dramas and untitled works constituting structural placeholders. Three of the '*Untitled*. Unfinished. UNRELEASED' are placed after a series of highly dense film descriptions (992), and are followed by three further dense descriptions which are then broken up again by another three 'Unfinished. UNRELEASED' titles (993). This alternation of density and 'cruft' is repeated several times, where the 'cruft' typographically breaks up the concentration of complex sections, potentially increasing a reader's ability to focus attention upon them and mine for the significant information by creating a spatial spotlight. Wallace treats the text as a material construction which requires bolsters and support mechanisms: architectural infrastructure as well as semantic substance. Cruft manages pace by balancing density with redundancy.

Frank Cioffi calls the navigation of *Infinite Jest*'s endnotes a 'near-aerobic activity', and Letzler suggests that the encyclopedic novel serves as an 'all-purpose gymnasium for mental filtering skills'.[378] The vocabulary of 'aerobic' and 'gymnasium', as well as Benzon's earlier 'gamey metafictional *exercise*' [italics mine], recalls the kinetic play discussed in the previous chapter, positing Wallace's book as a kind of apparatus. Even the endnotes that give negligible information require readers to move backwards and forwards across the book, centralising the motion itself.[379] Wallace lays out the blueprints of a physical choreography that he wishes readers to perform: to hit the ball back, even if it does not meet its target, like the repetition of AA slogans even if one doesn't believe them, or the utterance of prayer even if

[376] Ibid., p. 314.

[377] Letzler, p. 310.

[378] Cioffi, p. 168; Letzler, p. 313.

[379] A case in point is, as Letzler points out, the endnote two hundred and sixteen attached to 'Coatlicue Complex' which reads only 'No clue' (1036). See Letzler, p. 305.

one does not have faith. He implements a ritual of formal motion whose performance is itself the coping mechanism. The sign becomes the referent.

Cioffi suggests that *Infinite Jest*'s '"paratextual mode" involves a physical "performance" by the reader, who must consult footnotes or reference works on a continual basis throughout'.[380] Perhaps this 'performance' – whose audience is only, in the process, oneself – is also a mode of play. To play *Infinite Jest* is to navigate its materiality as a physical exercise. This is both to follow Wallace's choreography, but also to develop one's own strategies for doing so – whether that involves sawing the book into thirds, following the 'video-game walkthroughs' of guidebooks or adhering to a communal internet schedule. Using the apparatus provided, readers play the book by physically traversing it, but unlike the funhouse there is an emphasis on teleology, manifested visually in the shrinking number of pages between the two bookmarks. Letzler's 'cruft' creates elements of architecture, an interaction with structure rather than semantics, like the vacuous AA statements or formalistic prayers that must be repeated in the hope that an illuminative grace will, at some undisclosed point, descend. This exercise is already implicit in the history of playgrounds as gymnasia, soliciting a kinesis that is also training or preparation. Its end is the recovery of the magic circle from the *mise en abyme*, the walled minute from the immensity of hours – and the infrastructure of play from the infinite jest.

VII. Conclusion

If the 'game of reality' is an infinite game which has ceased to be a game, Wallace seeks a mode of play with progression and purpose. This sense of teleology is ironically achieved through the text's physicality, where the shrinking distance between the two bookmarks renders readers alert to their own progress. There is movement, exercise, an activity that prevents total absorption because the book demands physical navigation. The aerobic endnotes and 'cruft' invite participation in a somatic choreography, a physical traversal of the text's material form alongside the intellectual navigation of its complex plot. Through these techniques, Wallace re-instates the magic circle. One cannot get lost in a *mise en abyme* when constantly reminded of the step, the local shift in level, necessitated by moving backwards and forwards between

[380] Cioffi, p. 162.

the pages. Emphasising how levels of demarcation can function as tools, Wallace illustrates the necessity of heuristic walls and organisational architectures as an antidote to abstraction.

Since the play within the play changes the play that contains it, the sum total of *Infinite Jest* is distinct from 'Infinite Jest' – just as *The Murder of Gonzago* is distinct from *Hamlet*. In both cases, the theoretical impression of *mise en abyme* is offset by imprecision in practice. Yet this imprecision is a source of dynamism: the texts emphasise the agential capacity of self-similarity through a form of sympathetic magic. The mirror in the text acts on the text, and the text, which contains and transcends its internal mirror, acts on its audience. Asking whether the *mise en abyme* performs any cognitive work, Brian McHale posits that the inset text elucidates the wider text that contains it.[381] In the case of *Infinite Jest*, I suggest that this 'cognitive work' is not elucidation so much as inversion. If 'Infinite Jest' transformed its viewers into yellow smiley faces, *Infinite Jest* aims to transform them back into 'real human being[s]' – human beings which, in a world saturated with infinite jests, have recovered their architectures of play.[382]

The interaction between the physical levels of a text's material architecture and the abstract levels of its narrative structure, here solicited through apparatus such as endnotes, will be further developed in the following chapter. I go on to examine how a quality of playfulness is conditioned by spatial dynamics of proximity and distance in two highly formally experimental works: Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes*.

[381] Brian McHale, 'Cognition En Abyme: Models, Manuals, Maps', *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 4.2 (2006), 175–89 (p. 180).

[382] McCaffery, 'Expanded Interview', p. 26.

Chapter Four

Playing Between the Lines:
Architectures of Paper in *House of Leaves* and *Tree of Codes*

I. Introduction

As already evident in *Infinite Jest*, and as this thesis progresses chronologically, 'postmodernism' in the sense applied to Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse* undergoes certain mutations with time. These mutations take various directions, but the second half of my thesis focuses on literary responses to technological developments from the millennium onwards. I explore material levels in chapter four, digital levels in chapter five and the relationship between levels and networks in chapter six.

The present chapter studies Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000) and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Codes* (2010). That these two texts emphasise the materiality of the printed page is immediately indicated by their titles, which coincidentally connect: the former's last word 'leaves' leads naturally onto the latter's 'tree'. The theme is corroborated by etymology; 'codes' is derived from the Latin 'caudex' (OED), meaning the trunk of a tree, reinforcing the links with both 'tree' and 'leaves'. Here, architectures of play are created through architectures of paper; the typographical innovations in *House of Leaves* parallel the bizarre architecture that forms its subject matter, while *Tree of Codes* constructs a new narrative by literally cutting words out of an existing story collection: Bruno Schulz's *Street of Crocodiles* (1934). Danielewski represents architecture on paper, while Foer creates architecture from paper. Both draw attention to diegetic and material levels of mediation. The interplay between these levels gives rise to a sense of 'knowingness' that contributes to a quality of 'playfulness'.

Critics have commented on both continuity and transition in the relationship between *House of Leaves* and postmodernism. Katherine Hayles suggests that Danielewski's text reflects 'the crisis characteristic of postmodernism, in which representation is short-circuited by the realization that there is no reality independent of mediation'.[383] However, Will Slocombe and Mark Hansen explicitly negate postmodern play; Slocombe calls the house 'a figure of

[383] N. Katherine Hayles, 'Saving the Subject: Remediation in *House of Leaves*', *American Literature*, 74.4 (2002), 779–806 (p. 779).

impossibility, not deconstructive deferral or postmodern play, but a nihilistic void', while Hansen posits a 'transfer of focus from postmodern epistemological play to orthographic critique'.[384] In contrast, Josh Toth reinforces this play while proposing a different divergence:

> for all of its ostentatious postmodern play, […] *House of Leaves* is far less invested in the postmodern repudiation of teleological truth claims than it is in the recovery of, or return to, the possibility of such claims.[385]

Unlike the work of John Barth, continues Toth, *House of Leaves* 'allows for moments of closure, of absolute repetition – moments, that is, when the spiral collapses into and thus disintegrates as a perfect and closed circle'.[386] As discussed in chapter two, a spiral from one angle forms a circle from another, and Toth's reading might coexist with that of Hayles if scale is accounted for; there is no way of conclusively asserting a hierarchy in the diegetic levels of *House of Leaves*, but one can identify local moments of definition. Like Wallace, Danielewski continues to use the equipment of postmodernism (McHale's 'ontological dominant'; a multiplicity of diegetic levels), while experimenting with the narrative architectures formed by this equipment.

Accordingly, Danielewski's formal experimentation participates in another trend specific to its technological moment. Jessica Pressman calls this trend an 'aesthetics of bookishness', suggesting that the 'threat posed to books by digital technologies becomes a source of artistic inspiration and formal experimentation in the pages of twenty-first-century literature'.[387] This aesthetics of bookishness is an 'emergent literary strategy that speaks to our cultural moment', and Pressman cites *House of Leaves* as an example among other works such as Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts*.[388] Her article was published one year before *Tree of Codes*, but Hayles later situates Foer's text in a similar aesthetic context. She considers it part

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[384] Will Slocombe, '"This Is Not For You": Nihilism and the House That Jacques Built', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 51.1 (2005), 88–109 (p. 100); Mark B. N. Hansen, 'The Digital Topography of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*', *Contemporary Literature*, 45.4 (2004), 597–636 (p. 606, footnote 7).

[385] Josh Toth, 'Healing Postmodern America: Plasticity and Renewal in Danielewski's *House of Leaves*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 54.2 (2013), 181–97 (p. 182).

[386] Ibid., p. 187.

[387] Jessica Pressman, 'The Aesthetics of Bookishness in Twenty-First-Century Literature', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 48.4 (2009), 465–82 (p. 465).

[388] Ibid.

of a ‘group of contemporary novels’ which ‘engage in strategies that entice readers to become intimate with the novels’ bodies through physical manipulation of their printed forms’.[389] A contemporary work created in a similar vein is Tom Phillips’s *A Humument*, which had been a work in progress since 1966 and was completed in 2016.[390] Phillips artistically modified a Victorian novel called *A Human Document* by painting and drawing over its pages, concealing particular sections and words while creating new collages of images. Such techniques also have key precedent in the work of William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin who articulate a ‘cut up’ method of literary composition in *The Third Mind*, exploring chance combinations of extracts from newspapers or other texts.[391]

As evident from the above summary, *House of Leaves* and *Tree of Codes* instantiate a wider textual movement focusing on typography and material manipulation, which has acquired particular resonance with the rise of digitality. While these two texts have been categorised together, they are not often analysed together; *Tree of Codes* has been compared to *A Humument*, which also focuses on the manipulation of paper, while Danielewski’s innovations are typographical.[392] Nevertheless, each provides a valuable perspective on the role of materiality in literary architectures of play. Examining the techniques of typography and paper excision, I delineate the effects of navigating material and diegetic levels in each text, investigating how mediation transforms the tone and type of play. I will first discuss Danielewski’s haunted house and the relationship between uncanniness and play, before moving onto the relationship between knowingness and play in the paper levels of *Tree of Codes*.

II. Self-Similarity and Levels of Response

Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* is notable for its levels of mediation. The innermost level is a potentially fictional documentary called *The Navidson Record*; filmed by a photographer called Will Navidson, the documentary details the life of a family who moves into a new house that

[389] N. Katherine Hayles, ‘Combining Close and Distant Reading: Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Tree of Codes* and the Aesthetic of Bookishness’, *PMLA*, 128.1 (2013), 226–31 (p. 227).

[390] Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016).

[391] William S. Burroughs and Brion Gysin, *The Third Mind* (New York: The Viking Press, 1978).

[392] Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, ‘Old and New Medialities in Foer’s *Tree of Codes*’, *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 13.3 (2011).

contains a mutating and paradoxical black space in its centre. However, this documentary film is received by readers only through the written descriptions of a blind old man called Zampanò. Zampanò's writings are in turn compiled and edited by a young man called Johnny Truant, whose work has additionally passed through another round of anonymous fictional editors. Consequently, the text is full of representations of responses. Zampanò responds (or depicts himself responding) to *The Navidson Record*, Johnny responds to Zampanò's response, and readers respond to Truant's response to Zampanò. Since there are parallels between the responses of Zampanò and Johnny, the implication is that readers will also respond in this way – which is with fear, confusion, and a sense of the uncanny.

The beginning of the novel indicates that the text actively solicits such a response from its readers. *House of Leaves* opens with Johnny describing his 'fear', contending that the 'horror' he discovered in Zampanò's text is now 'before you, waiting for you a little like it waited for me that night'.[393] Here Johnny makes an explicit parallel between readers and himself: just as he responds to Zampanò, readers respond to Johnny. The parallels are reinforced as the introduction progresses, where Johnny comes to increasingly resemble Zampanò. Just as Zampanò's house was found with 'all the windows […] nailed shut and sealed with caulking' (xvi), so does Johnny describe how 'I nailed my windows shut' (xviii), buying locks and chains which he fixes to the floor and walls (xviii). Just as Zampanò 'left plenty of clues and warnings' (xix) about his text, so is the introduction a warning to readers – and just as Johnny 'disregard[ed]' the warnings (xx), so does he assume that 'there's a good chance you won't' (xxii) regard his own. When Johnny feels that Zampanò's text is capable of 'slashing out, tearing up the floor, murdering Zampanò, murdering us, maybe even murdering you' (xvi), the switch to second person emphasises the extension of the series of responses through the text and beyond it: from 'Zampanò' to 'us' to 'you'. Along these lines, the introduction ends with a sequence of second-person imperatives: 'you'll care only about the darkness', 'you'll […] dismantle every assurance' and, finally, 'the nightmares will begin' (xxiii).

However, Johnny's imperatives serve to construct rather than explain a response. In 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny', Ernst Jentsch identifies varying degrees of susceptibility to the uncanny, suggesting that it is present 'more substantially, the weaker the critical sense

[393] Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, 2nd edn (London: Doubleday, 2000), pp. xi, xvii. All further references are taken from this edition and cited within the text.

[…] and the more the prevailing psychical background is affectively tinged'.[394] Danielewski attempts to construct this susceptibility in the introduction by 'affectively ting[ing]' the reader's psyche with a sense of premonition. Readers receive in detail the *effect* of the text before encountering any of the supposedly terrifying content, creating a framework for reading that actually contributes to making this content terrifying. From the outset, the emphasis is on the response rather than the object. As Johnny notes, 'it makes no difference that the documentary at the heart of this book is fiction. Zampanò knew from the get go that what's real or isn't real doesn't matter here. The consequences are the same' (xx). Similarly, when Johnny describes the house he 'can no longer remember the smell only my reaction to it' (xvi); reaction takes precedence. Later in the novel, he finds himself 'absolutely terrified, if not of something in particular – there were no particulars as far as I could see – then of the reaction itself' (107). Here, Johnny is describing a meta-response, as defined by Susan Feagin: 'A direct response is a response to the qualities and content of the work. A meta-response is a response to the direct response'.[395] This is elaborated in Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*, where she discusses meta-responses regarding feelings about feelings.[396] Danielewski is attempting to generate a horror-story response of fear and confusion precisely by *describing* a response of fear and confusion. Readers' initial reactions are to a textual anticipation of their own reaction.

Critics often follow Danielewski's directive in extrapolating this parallel chain of responses within the text to responses by readers. Hansen remarks that 'Truant's transformation figures the response of every reader', and Slocombe comments that 'Our desire to enter the House is the same as Navidson's'. [397] While Truant and Navidson exist on different narrative levels within the text, there is a prevailing sense that readerly reactions are modelled on those of the characters. Pressman similarly suggests that the novel produces a 'convergence of house and book that puts the novel's reader in the position of a reader within the text', where 'Truant is the novel's representative reader'.[398] Citing Hutcheon's *Narcissistic Narrative*, Nick Lord

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[394] Ernst Jentsch, 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny (1906)', trans. by Roy Sellars, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 2.1 (1997), 7–16 (p. 13).

[395] Susan L. Feagin, 'The Pleasures of Tragedy', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 20.1 (1983), 95–104 (p. 97).

[396] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 10.

[397] Hansen, p. 634; Slocombe, p. 97.

[398] Jessica Pressman, '*House of Leaves*: Reading the Networked Novel', *Studies in American Fiction*, 34.1 (2006), 107–28 (pp. 111, 117).

links this strategy to metafiction more broadly: ‘to present a plot whereby the act of reading parallels what is depicted in the text’.[399] Consequently, the critical consensus is that *House of Leaves* succeeds in stimulating a feeling of uncanniness; Hansen describes the house’s ‘uncanny transformation’, and Rune Graulund comments on the ‘palpable sense of the uncanny evoked by Danielewski’.[400] Most explicitly, Nele Bemong argues that ‘the novel can be regarded as a narrative repetition of Freud’s theorization as put forward in his essay “The Uncanny”’.[401] Discussing how the uncanny is already anticipated in the footnotes of the text, Bemong considers the role of spatiality in the experience, noting the significance of knowledge and disorientation in Jentsch’s original formulation.

As in *Infinite Jest*, the mechanism for generating this uncanny effect is self-similarity. Danielewski describes the ‘invitational aspect’ of his book, remarking that ‘I’ve received a lot of feedback from readers who have responded by telling me about their anxieties and why the book evoked these for them’.[402] He continues: ‘you’re on the threshold of a whole series of stories that the book has allowed you to access but that are, at the same time, particular to you’.[403] Just as Johnny accesses his own deep fears and anxieties through Zampanò’s *The Navidson Record*, so does Danielewski suggest that *House of Leaves* performs the same function for readers. *House of Leaves* has the capacity to draw out fears and anxieties when it describes something which resonates: when it creates an analogy, however abstract, with a feeling already latent in readers. Similarly, in *Infinite Jest* representation has greatest effect when there is a similarity between the representation and its receiver; only the guilty are affected by Hamlet’s *Murder of Gonzago* just as, Marathe implies, those habituated to an addictive lifestyle are affected by the ‘Infinite Jest’ film.

Following on from the idea of ‘inverting the abyme’ in *Infinite Jest*, I wish to consider an alternative way of reading *House of Leaves*. Rather than an extrapolation of parallel

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[399] Nick Lord, ‘The Labyrinth and the Lacuna: Metafiction, the Symbolic, and the Real in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 55.4 (2014), 465–76 (p. 467).

[400] Hansen, p. 387; Rune Graulund, ‘Text and Paratext in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*’, *Word & Image*, 22.4 (2006), 379–89 (p. 387).

[401] Nele Bemong, ‘Exploration # 6: The Uncanny in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*’, *Image & Narrative*, 3.1 (2003) <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/uncanny/nelebemong.htm> [accessed 30 September 2021].

[402] Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, ‘Haunted House – An Interview with Mark Z. Danielewski’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 44.2 (2003), 99–135 (p. 120).

[403] Ibid.

responses, I posit a categorical *difference* between the reader's response and responses depicted within the text, proposing that the additional level of mediation separating readers from the novel's own multiple levels enacts a tonal transition from uncanniness to playfulness. Despite the ambivalence regarding postmodern playfulness, another kind of playfulness has frequently been asserted by critics of *House of Leaves*; Hansen and Lord note its 'typographic play', Pressman its 'typographical play', Brian Chanen its 'play with typography' and Toth calls the text 'typographically playful'.[404] What these comments have in common is locating the playfulness of the text in form rather than plot; *House of Leaves* is playful from the *outside*, in formal arrangement rather than semantic articulation. This distinction provides the possibility of a disruption to the parallelism of responses: what is uncanny within the text becomes playful outside it. Despite Johnny's ominous introduction and Danielewski's remark about readers' anxieties, the response to *House of Leaves* is not necessarily one of horror and uncanniness because readers experience an additional level of mediation inaccessible to the characters. This further mediation contributes to something structurally playful in *House of Leaves* which is available to readers of the text – but not, perhaps, to characters within.

I now trace the role of mediation in the theoretical relationship between uncanniness and playfulness with reference to Jentsch and Freud, before moving onto a close reading of the text.

III. Uncanniness and Playfulness

The most well-known exposition of the uncanny is Freud's 1919 essay, though Freud also acknowledges Ernst Jentsch's 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny' (1906), which he cites and reconfigures. Both Freud and Jentsch use spatial language in their discussions, and Anthony Vidler summarises how, 'As a concept, […] the uncanny has […] found its metaphorical home in architecture'.[405] Jentsch begins by elucidating the relationship between uncanniness and foreignness, remarking that 'the word suggests that a *lack of orientation* is bound up with the

[404] Hansen, p. 598; Lord, p. 466; Pressman, 'Networked Novel', p. 107; Brian W. Chanen, 'Surfing the Text', *European Journal of English Studies*, 11.2 (2007), 163–76 (p. 164); Toth, 'Plasticity and Renewal', p. 183.

[405] Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (London: MIT Press, 1992), p. 11.

impression of the uncanniness of a thing or an incident'.[406] This '*lack of orientation*' is then mapped onto a 'feeling of uncertainty'.[407] Here, uncertainty is structurally figured as disorientation through the analogy between being unable to navigate a space and being unable to navigate an idea or impression. Architectural disorientation has an abstract correlate in intellectual disorientation: the inability to verify and confirm ideas within the architecture of one's mind. Indeed, to be 'lost in the funhouse' subscribes precisely to Jentsch's definition of the uncanny; the inability to orient oneself in this 'architecture of play' (and, correspondingly, within the levels of the self-conscious mind) stimulates an experience of uncanniness as fun slides into fear and confusion.

Freud develops Jentsch's intellectual uncertainty into something 'once familiar and then repressed'.[408] While Jentsch suggested that the uncanny stems from something unknown, Freud refines this to something that was known but then forgotten, made strange in the process of re-emergence. Freud's conception of the uncanny focuses less on disorientation, but a spatial vocabulary of homes and buildings is still central to his exploration of the etymology of *unheimlich*: the original German term for 'uncanny'. He traces the 'shades of meaning' of *heimlich* (literally, 'homely') until it comes to mean its antonym *unheimlich*.[409] This is due, describes Freud, to the 'two sets of ideas' contained in the word *heimlich*, where the one is the 'familiar and comfortable' and the other 'what is concealed and kept hidden'.[410] The latter meaning of *heimlich* is not far from *unheimlich*, as hiddenness and secrecy lead towards the alien and unfamiliar.[411]

There is something spatial in this transition. *Heimlich* begins as familiar because it implies an inside space: a home is an architecture demarcated as distinct from the outside world, and therefore private. This idea of private and personal space, sealed from the outside, then begets a quality of secrecy. While initially the subject is inside the same space as the secret – indeed, the subject *is* the secret, if secrecy is figured as something spatially contained – this quality of secrecy then takes on a life of its own, existing within the house. This secrecy can be represented as an additional space *within* the home. The further inner space then becomes

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[406] Jentsch, p. 8.

[407] Ibid.

[408] Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 154.

[409] Ibid., p. 132.

[410] Ibid.

[411] Ibid.

alien to the subject outside it, as while they are inside the house, they are outside the quality of secrecy that lurks at the centre of the house. Thus, the subject is alienated.

So far I have discussed the spatial dialectics of the uncanny, and in earlier chapters (on the magic circle and the *mise en abyme*) I have discussed the spatial dialectics of play. Now, these two qualities enter into relation with one other. Writing on the relationship between uncanniness and play, Scott G. Eberle draws upon spatial vocabulary in noting how 'play' is difficult to 'demarcate', its 'territory' tricky to define.[412] Eberle continues to describe how he is searching for the 'outer edge of play', concluding that 'we can observe the end of play here at the edge of the uncanny valley'.[413] Play and the uncanny are configured as spatially adjacent; by implication, there is a borderline between the two, and it is this line that is traversed when navigating the diegetic levels of *House of Leaves*. Eberle similarly identifies the possibility that mediation can transform uncanniness into play. He describes the inverse to finding uncanniness at the edge of play, which is finding play at the edge of uncanniness: 'with exposure, even the uncanny can be incorporated into play. But at that point, of course, as players nimbly vault the chasm, it has ceased to be felt as uncanny'.[414] Eberle's 'chasm' can be considered in terms of the diegetic gap between text and reader: what is uncanny on one level is playful on another, just as in *Infinite Jest* the inhabitants of the territories (locked inside the magic circle) live in fear, while the governments controlling the maps (and the magic circle boundaries) possess the ability to play.

Both Jentsch and Freud articulate a distinction between uncanniness stimulated by something real, and uncanniness stimulated by something fictional, giving illustrative examples of the latter through the stories of E.T.A. Hoffman. In his discussion of emotional responses to real and fictional stimuli, Jentsch remarks:

> In life we do not like to expose ourselves to severe emotional blows, but in the theatre or while reading we gladly let ourselves be influenced in this way: we hereby experience certain powerful excitements which awake in us strong feelings for life, without having to accept the consequences of the causes of the unpleasant moods if

[412] Scott G. Eberle, 'Exploring the Uncanny Valley to Find the Edge of Play', *American Journal of Play*, 2.2 (2009), 167–94 (pp. 167, 168).

[413] Ibid., p. 189.

[414] Ibid., p. 190.

> they were to have the opportunity to appear in corresponding form on their own account, so to speak.[415]

Emotions are experienced differently when responding to fiction compared with responding to real life because the fictional event has no 'consequences'. This bears upon current debates about emotional realism; in a chapter called 'Making Sorrow Sweet', Alison Denham discusses psychological and philosophical theories about emotional responses to art, including Kendall Walton's Pretence Theory.[416] Walton suggests that what we really feel towards fictional entities are 'quasi-emotions': make-believe feelings experienced in response to make-believe situations.[417] Denham counters this argument by noting that psychological evidence, including neurological studies, 'overwhelmingly indicates that emotions had in response to fictions are psychologically and physiologically manifested in the same way as everyday ones'.[418] In the above context, Jentsch is not questioning whether the 'powerful excitements' are real, but emphasising that they arise in response to a mediated rather than directly experienced event, which tempers or contains (but does not necessarily negate) the subject's reaction because there is no impulse to action.

Regarding the uncanny, Freud also notes that mediation alters its effect, as '*many things that would be uncanny if they occurred in real life are not uncanny in literature*'.[419] The constraints and expectations of fiction are such that there can be a higher threshold for strangeness and coincidence than there is in real life: 'primitive beliefs' that are false in reality may not necessarily be false in a fictional world. Moreover, even if a situation is constructed as uncanny *within* the fictional world of a text, it is conceivable that readers, existing at an additional level of removal, will *perceive* uncanniness without actually feeling it, accessing the experience in a muted or vicarious way. The uncanny here becomes intellectual rather than affective: something observed, but not felt. Eberle similarly identifies mediation as a factor determining experiences of play and the uncanny, commenting that 'play teeters at the edge of the uncanny valley as we tease ourselves with mock horror, controlled risk, and temporary

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[415] Jentsch, p. 12.

[416] Alison Denham, 'Making Sorrow Sweet: Emotion and Empathy in the Experience of Fiction', in *Affect and Literature*, ed. by Alex Houen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 190–209.

[417] Kendall L. Walton, 'Fearing Fictions', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 75.1 (1978), 5–27 (p. 6).

[418] Denham, p. 197.

[419] Freud, pp. 155–56.

discomfort'.[420] Again, the additional layer of mediation provided by fictionality ('mock', 'controlled', 'temporary') can convert uncanniness into play.

If the uncanny can be transformed by mediation, it can also be transmuted by its linguistic opposites as antidotes: homeliness (*heimlich*) and knowingness ('canniness'). While the German *unheimlich* evokes the architecture of the house and the homely, the English 'canny', derived from Scots, means 'knowing; wise; judicious, prudent; wary, cautious' (OED). Linguistically, the un-canny is the un-known, un-wise, un-wary – terms with slightly threatening implications. Yet just as Freud's *unheimlich* is not simple unfamiliarity, but the familiar made strange, so is the uncanny is not 'not knowing', but the resurfacing of something that was once known. In other words, uncanniness involves a play *with* knowing; a *movement* between known and unknown. Uncanniness is thus dispelled when this movement stops: when one enters a state of 'canniness', or awareness. In his example of epilepsy provoking uncanny reactions, Jentsch points out that an expert will no longer react in that way because he knows the causes of the condition: 'If clarity regarding the relevant conditions is established, then the special character of the peculiar emotional state disappears'.[421] The disappearance of secrecy stops the experience of the uncanny, and the significance of 'knowing' in this experience is made linguistically explicit in the English translation of the word. Recalling the spatial paradigm of 'knowledge/ understanding is up, ignorance is down' suggested in chapter two, uncanniness could be figured as a movement between these levels, where remaining on the higher level of 'knowing' ends the effect. Moreover, the fact that the not-homely and not-known are translations of each other suggests an analogy between the home and the mind, reinforcing the parallels drawn throughout this thesis between the architectural and the conceptual. The spatial play of the *unheimlich*, moving inside and outside secret spaces, maps onto the transition between levels of 'knowing'.

To summarise, levels of mediation can transform an experience that is uncanny into an experience that is playful – and, in addition, uncanniness can be dispelled if one remains on a higher level of 'knowing'. The following sections examine in greater depth how levels of mediation and hierarchies of awareness are engaged in the relationship between uncanniness and playfulness in *House of Leaves*.

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[420] Eberle, p. 189.

[421] Jentsch, p. 15.

IV. Playful Uncanniness

The figure of the labyrinth in *House of Leaves* acts as a pertinent study for the relationship between play and the uncanny. Labyrinths are multivalent structures; like funhouses and haunted houses, they are also a staple feature of amusement parks. The structure has the capacity to stimulate a combination of fear, fun and confusion, where the proportion of each element in relation to the others determines the overriding effect.

Within the text, labyrinths are associated with uncanniness and horror. Hamilton writes on the structure as 'theme, symbol, and form' in *House of Leaves*; as symbol, she comments that 'Both Karen and Navidson must navigate their inner mazes to reach one another at the center of the labyrinth', where 'Each has a personal minotaur to face'. [422] Moving from the diegetic level of *The Navidson Record* to that of Johnny Truant, the 'entire novel can be interpreted as Truant's personal voyage through the labyrinth of the self'.[423] These psychological labyrinths are challenging and dangerous to traverse, complete with metaphorical minotaurs, and such associations also emerge in the text's thematic exploration of the figure. Zampanò writes extended sections on the labyrinth which are ominously struck out but still included by Johnny as editor. In the struck-through footnote one hundred and twenty three, Zampanò describes a theory that 'King Minos did not build the labyrinth to imprison a monster but to conceal a deformed child', arguing that 'I am convinced Minos' maze really serves as a trope for repression' (110). According to Zampanò, his theory inspires a play by 'Taggert Chiclitz' called *The Minotaur*, which centres on the King's eventual guilt and regret for the death of the son that he had entrapped (110–11). Here, the text's elaborations on the concept tend towards horror, as the labyrinth is a space of 'repression' (110) and 'agony' (111).

But how does the labyrinth *of* the text compare with the labyrinth *in* the text? Hamilton suggests a parallelism between text and reader:

> The terror experienced by the characters at all levels of the novel is made more immediate for the reader because of the bizarre and unfamiliar typography of the book, which […] makes the act of reading the novel an unfamiliar experience.[424]

[422] Natalie Hamilton, 'The A-Mazing House: The Labyrinth as Theme and Form in Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 50.1 (2008), 3–16 (pp. 4, 6).

[423] Ibid., p. 8.

[424] Ibid., p. 14.

Here, 'terror' and 'unfamiliar[ity]' are respectively associated with experiences of horror and uncanniness. However, Hemmingson, using the term 'labyrinth' metaphorically, remarks that 'Danielewski's footnotes invite the reader into a labyrinth of critifictional playfulness' where the reader chooses whether to 'experience aggravation or enjoy it all and go along with Danielewski's critifictional game'.[425] These two aspects are combined in Wendy Faris's general remark that the labyrinth suggests both 'play and terror; it expresses both our control over our environment and our bewilderment within it; it represents orderly disorder, the systematic creation of a mystery more powerful than the creator, who may subsequently become lost in it'.[426]

I suggest that, unlike the characters, readers do not become lost in the labyrinthine typography of *House of Leaves*; as Hamilton herself recognises, the different fonts clearly identify the distinct diegetic levels, making their navigation relatively uncomplicated.[427] Perhaps, then, the form of *House of Leaves* evokes the *idea* of confusion more than confusion in practice. Twisting the text around to access different angles does, as in *Infinite Jest*, involve an interactive physical exertion – but, as is also the case in *Infinite Jest*, it is a fairly straightforward enterprise. Though unconventional, Danielewski's typographical manipulations are not *difficult*, and the primary source of confusion in the text frequently lies in deciding whether to follow each link to extra-diegetic material such as appendices or whether to read the text sequentially.

Sequentiality is a crucial determining factor in one's experience of a labyrinth; the 'maze-treader' may be lost, scared and confused, uncertain as to whether they can discover the exit, while the 'maze-viewer' safely perceives the complex pattern of the whole.[428] On one hand, Hamilton suggests that 'Readers become trapped in the corridors of this house, diachronically experiencing the maze of the text, which is fragmented and provides limited

[425] Michael Hemmingson, 'What's Beneath the Floorboards: Three Competing Metavoices in the Footnotes of Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 52.3 (2011), 272–87 (pp. 276, 281).

[426] Wendy B. Faris cited in Hamilton, pp. 14–15.

[427] See Hamilton, p. 12. Comparing notoriously impenetrable texts like *Gravity's Rainbow*, Rune Graulund similarly remarks that shifts in narrative voice in *House of Leaves* are 'clearly signposted through the use of font type'. See Graulund, p. 383.

[428] These terms are taken from Penelope Reed Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (London: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 1.

vision of what is to come'.[429] However, while we experience the labyrinth *of* the text diachronically because we cannot see what will come next, we experience the labyrinth containing the characters synchronically: we remain *outside* it, observing the spatial net that entraps them. In other words, the typography creates a mapping or notation of a labyrinth rather than an actual labyrinth, and although readers must navigate instance by instance, each instance is perceived from above. Unfamiliarity is tempered by mediation, and this security allows for the emergence of playfulness.

Moreover, this playfulness is corroborated by the reader's awareness of a resonance between the diegetic levels: a sense that form is mirroring content as labyrinths are simultaneously enacted and described. In terms of Caillois's categories of play, *mimicry* provides a way of conceptualising the text's playful typography more broadly. One of the most striking examples of this *mimicry* is in the final scene of Navidson's exploration of the house, where he enters the space alone. Here, the ceiling drops down until it grazes his head, before rising higher and higher until it disappears altogether. This is reflected in the text by the words dropping to the bottom of the page, before moving diagonally upwards from bottom left to top right (427–30). Eventually Navidson finds himself in a 'small circular chamber without doorways or passages. Just a series of black rungs jutting out of the wall, leading up into an even narrower vertical shaft' (439). On the next page, Navidson and readers begin to climb these rungs as the words turn sideways and ascend through pages 440 and 441 (see fig. 6). Within the text, this architecture is experienced as uncanny and terrifying. Yet while climbing a mysterious ladder inside a dark and inexplicable space within one's own home is conceivably uncanny, climbing a ladder made of words is less so. The text's *content* might be uncanny, and acknowledged as such on the semantic level of reading, but its form and typography is playful.

Navidson's ladder also recalls the crazy staircase of funhouses, and in a similar playground spirit this ladder is followed by a tunnel: Navidson creeps through a small corridor formed by a rectangle of words on page 443, and then both corridor and rectangle shrink in the following pages into a tunnel until he emerges into a large room on page 458. This is not the first tunnel in the text; in the highly experimental Chapter IX there is a footnote inside a square which lists everything that is not in the house, running from page 119 to 144 (see fig. 7). Hansen describes how 'in its appearance on the left-hand pages, it presents the text in reverse, as if the

[429] Hamilton, p. 14.

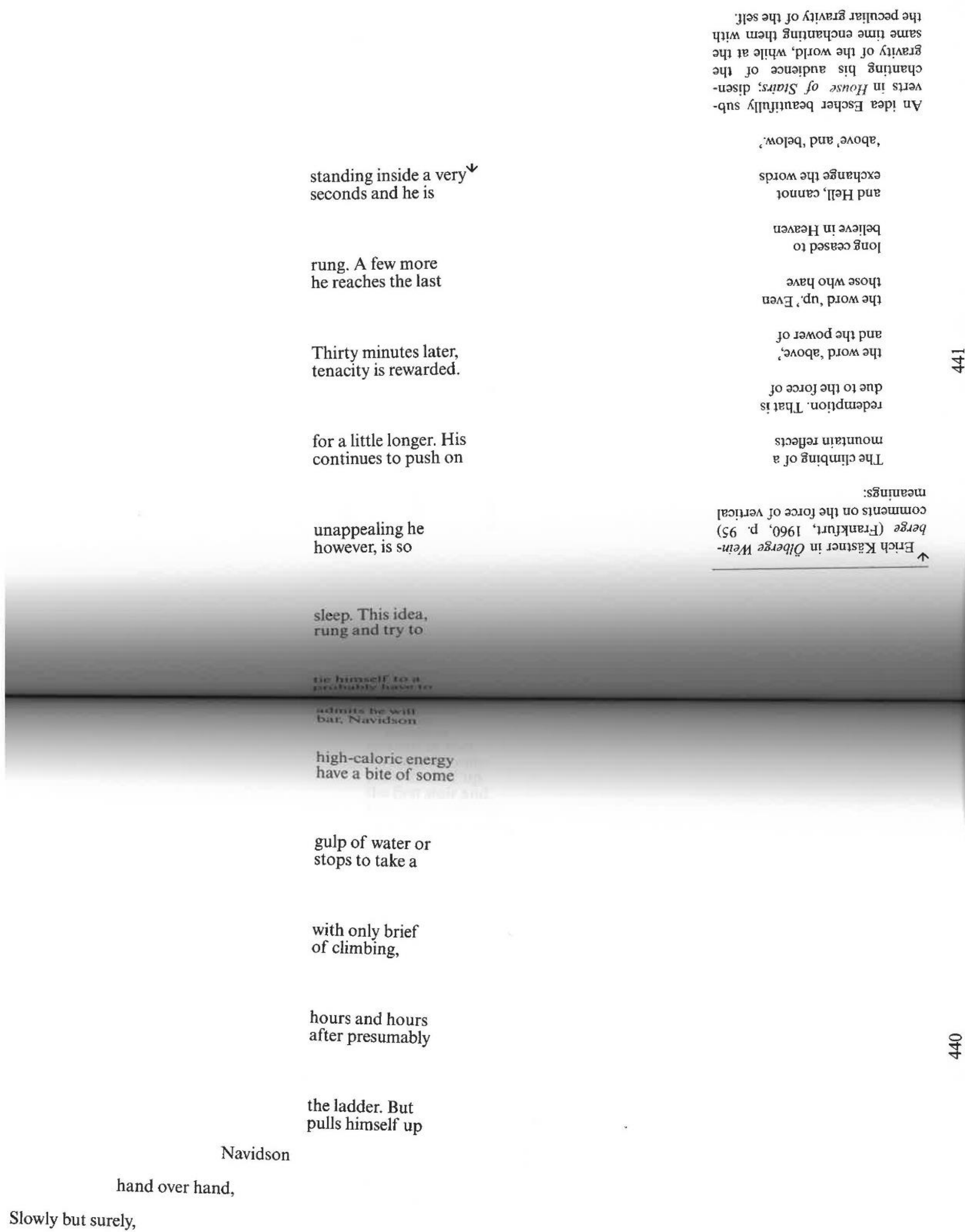

Figure 6. The ladder of words in *House of Leaves*, pp. 440–41.

redefinition of route, even the absurd way the first hallway leads away from the living room only to return, through a series of lefts, back to where the living room should be but clearly is not; describes a layout in no way reminiscent of any modern floorplans let alone historical experiments in design.[146]

Sebastiano Pérouse de Montclos, however, has written a sizable examination on the changes within the house, positing that they in fact follow Andrea Palladio's structural derivations.

By way of a quick summary, Palladian grammar seeks to organize space through a series of strict rules. As Palladio proved, it was possible to use his system to generate a number of layouts such as Villa Badoer, Villa Emo, Villa Ragona, Villa Poiana, and of course Villa Zeno. In essence there are only eight steps:

1. Grid definition
2. Exterior-wall definition
3. Room layout
4. Interior-wall realignment
5. Principal entrances—porticos and exterior wall inflections
6. Exterior ornamentation—columns
7. Windows and Doors
8. Termination[149]

Pérouse de Montclos relies on these steps to delineate how Navidson's house was (1.0) first established (2.0) limited (3.0) sub-divided and (4.0) so on. He attempts to convince the reader that the constant refiguration of doorways and walls represents a kind of geological loop in the process of working out all possible forms, most likely *ad infinitum*, but never settling because, as he states in his conclusion, "unoccupied space will never cease to change simply because nothing forbids it to do so. The continuous internal alterations only prove that such a house is necessarily uninhabited."[150]

[146]For example, there is nothing about the house that even remotely resembles 20th century works whether in the style of Post-Modern, Late-Modern, Brutalism, Neo-Expressionism, Wrightian, The New Formalism, Miesian, the International Style, Streamline Moderne, Art Deco, the Pueblo Style, the Spanish Colonial, to name but a few, with examples such as the Western Savings and Loan Association in Superstition, Arizona, Animal Crackers in Highland Park, Illinois, Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles, or Mineries Condominium in Venice, Wurster Hall in Berkeley, Katselas House in Pittsburgh, Dulles International Airport, Greene House in Norman Oklahoma, Chicago Harold Washington Library, the Watts Towers in South Central, Barcelona National Theatre, New Town of Seaside Florida, Tugendhat House, Rue de Laeken in Brussels, Richmond Riverside in Richmond Surrey, the staircase hall in the Athens, Georgia News Building, the Tsukuba Center Building in Ibaraki, the Digital House, Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art, the interior of the Judge Institute of Management Studies in Cambridge, Maison à Bordeaux, TGV Railway Station in Lyon-Satolas, the post-modernism of the Wexner Center for Visual Arts in Columbus, Ohio, Palazzo Hotel in Fukuoka, National Geographic Society in Washington, D.C., the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery, Pyramid at the Louvre, New Building at Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, Palace of Abraxas at Marne-la-Vallée, Piazza d'Italie in New Orleans, AT&T Building in New York, the modernism of Carré d'Art, Lloyds Building in London, the Boston John F. Kennedy Library complex, Nave of Vuokseeniska Church in Finland, head office of the Enso-Gutzeit Company, Administrative Center of Säynätsalo, the Eames House, the Baker dormitory at MIT, inside the TWA terminal at Kennedy Airport, The National Theatre in London, Hull House Association Uptown Center in Chicago, Hektoen Laboratory also in Chicago, Fitzpatrick House in the Hollywood Hills, Graduate Center at Harvard University, Pan-Pacific Auditorium in Los Angeles, General Motors Testing Laboratory in Phoenix Arizona, Bullock's Wilshire Department Store in Los Angeles, Casino Building in New York, Hotel Franciscan in Albuquerque New Mexico, La Fonda Hotel in Santa Fe, or Santa Barbara County Courthouse, the Neff or Sherwood House in California, Exterior of the Secondary Modern School, Maisons Jaoul, Notre-Dame-du-Haut near Belfort, The Unité d'Habitation in Marseilles, The Farnsworth House in Plano, Illinois, The Alumni Memorial Hall at Illinois Institute of Technology, Guggenheim Museum in New York, or nothing of the traditionalism of Lawn Road Flats in Hampstead, the Zimbabwe House and Battersea Power Station in London, Choir of the Angelican cathedral in Liverpool or Memorial to the Missing of the Somme near Aras, Viceroy's house in New Delhi, Gledstone Hall in Yorkshire, Finsbury Circus facade, Castle Drogo near Drewsteignton Devon, Casa del Fascio in Como, Villa

[144]Not only are there no hot-air registers, return air vents, or radiators, cast iron or other, or cooling systems—condenser, reheat coils, heating convector, damper, concentrator, dilute solution, heat exchanger, absorber, evaporator, solution pump, evaporator recirculating pump—or any type of ducts, whether spiral lock-seam/standing rib design, double-wall duct, and Loloss™ Tee, flat oval, or round duct with perforated inner liner, insulation and outer shell; no HVAC system at all, even a crude air distribution system—there are no windows—no water supplies,

[149]For an exemplary look at Palladian grammar in action, see William J. Mitchell's *The Logic of Architecture: Design, Computation, and Cognition* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1994), p. 152-181. As well as Andrea Palladio's *The Four Books of Architecture* (1570) trans. Isaac Ware (New York: Dover, 1965).

[150]Sebastiano Pérouse de Montclos' *Palladian Grammar and Metaphysical Appropriations: Navidson's Villa Malcontenta* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1996), p. 2,865. Also see Aristides Quine's *Concatenating Corbusier*

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[148]See Exhibit One.

Thus, as well as prompting formal inquiries into the ever elusive internal shape of the house and the rules governing those shifts, Sebastiano Pérouse de Montclos also broaches a much more commonly discussed matter: the question of occupation. Though few will ever agree on the meaning of the configurations or the absence of style in that place, no one has yet to disagree that the labyrinth is still a house.[151] Therefore the question soon arises whether or not it is someone's house. Though if so whose? Whose was it or even whose *is* it? Thus giving voice to another suspicion: could the owner still be there? Questions which echo the snippet of gospel Navidson alludes to in his letter to Karen[152]—St. John, chapter 14—where Jesus says:

> In my Father's house are many rooms: if it *were* not *so*, I would have told you.
> I go to prepare a place for you . . .

Something to be taken literally as well as ironically.[153]

drains, bathtubs, urinals, sinks, drinking fountains, water heaters, or coolers, expansion tanks, pressure relief valves, flow control, branch vent, downspout, soil stacks, or waste stacks, or fire protection equipment: smoke detectors, sprinklers, flow detectors, dry pipe valve, O.S. & Y. Gate valve, water motor alarm, visual annunciation devices, hose rack and hose reel whether a 2 1/2" or 1 1/2" valve, foam systems, gaseous suppression systems; nor any sign of daisy-chain wiring or star wiring or electrical metallic tubing (EMT), rigid conduit, wireways, bus ducts, underfloor ducts,

Philibert de l'Orme, Pierre Lescot, Gilles le Breton, Pirro Ligorio, Andrea Palladio, Martini Bassi, Galeazzo Alessi, Domenico Fontana, Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola, Jacopo Tatti Sansovino, Michele Sanmicheli, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Giulio Romano, Baldassare Peruzzi, Raffaello Sanzio, Antonio da Sangallo the Younger, Antonio da Sangallo the Elder, Donato Bramante, Filarete, Leonardo da Vinci, Leon Battista Alberti, Filippo Brunelleschi, Simon of Cologne, Juan Guas, Juan Gil de Hontañón, Arnolfo di Cambio, Lorenzo Maitani, Benedikt Ried, Konrad Heinzelmann, Nicolaus Eseler, Jörg Ganghofer, Ulrich von Ensingen, Wenzel Roriczer, Heinrich von Brunsberg, Hans von Burghausen, Peter Parler, Diogo Arruda, Diogo Boytac, William Wynford, Robert Janyns, Henry Yevele, Henry de Reynes, William the Englishman, William of Sens, Jean de Loubinière, Bishop Bernard de Castanet (P), Jean d'Orbais, Abbot Suger (P), Nicola Pisano, Pedro Petriz, Gunzo, Apollodorus of Damascus, Severus, Celer, Daedalus—though here the names of the authors of buildings have begun to fade into the names of Patrons (P), whether Bishops, Kings, Emperors, Dynasties, eventually myth, and finally time.—148

(New York: American Elsevier, 1996) in which Quine applies Corbusier's Five Points to the Navidson house, thereby proving, in his mind, the limitations and hence irrelevance of Palladian grammar. While these conclusions are somewhat questionable, they are not without merit. In particular, Quine's treatment of the Villa Savoye and the Domino House deserves special attention. Finally consider Gisele Urbanati Rowan Lell's far more controversial piece "Polypod Or Polylith?: The Navidson Creation As Mechanistic/Linguistic Model" in *Abaku Banner Catalogue*, v. 198, January 1996, p. 515-597, in which she treats the "house-shifts" as evidence of polylithic dynamics and hence structure. For a point of reference see Greenfield and Schneider's "Building a Tree Structure. The Development of Hierarchical Complexity and Interrupted Strategies in Children's Construction Activity" in *Developmental Psychology*, 13, 1977, p. 299-313.

[151]Which also happens to maintain a curious set of constants. Consider —

Temperature: 32°F ± 8.
Light: absent.
Silence: complete*
Air Movement (i.e. breezes, drafts etc.): none
True North: DNE

*With the exception of the 'growl'.

[152]See Chapter XVII.

[153]Also not to be forgotten is the terror Jacob feels when he encounters the territories of the divine: "How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." (Genesis 28:17)

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Figure 7. Textbox as tunnel/mirror/window in *House of Leaves*, pp. 120–21.

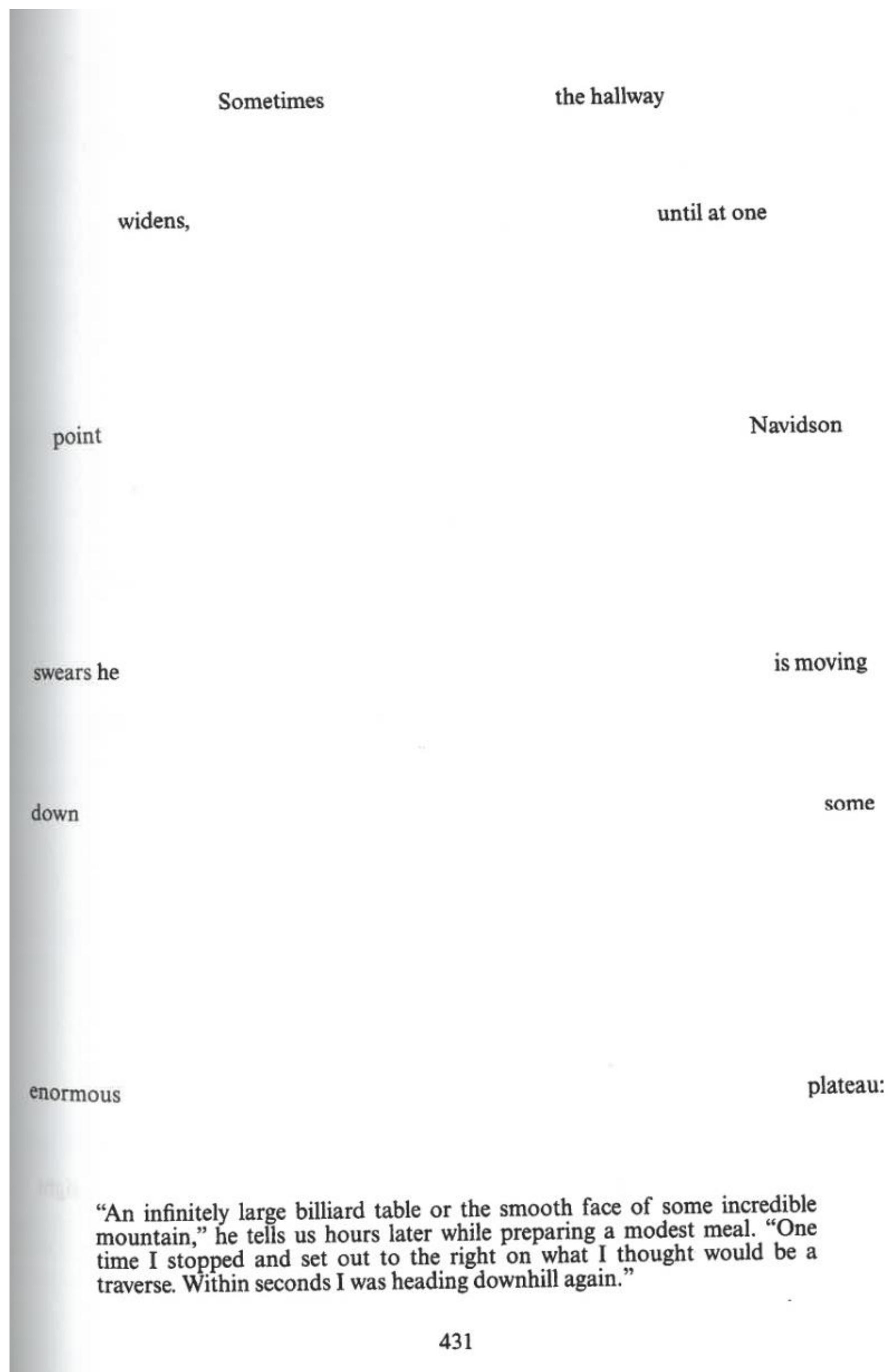

Figure 8. Form imitating content through the shape of a hallway in *House of Leaves*, p. 431.

And then the walls reappear, along with the ceiling and numerous doorways; the shifts always accompanied by that inimitable, and by now very familiar, growl.

As the days pass, Navidson becomes more and more aware that he is running precariously low on water and food. Even worse, the sense of inevitable doom this causes him is compounded by the sense of immediate doom he feels whenever he begins riding his bike: "I can't help thinking I'm going to reach an edge to this thing. I'll be going too fast to stop and just fly off into darkness."

Which is almost what happens.

On the twelfth or thirteenth day (it is very difficult to tell which), after sleeping for what Navidson estimates must have been well over 18 hours, he again sets off down the hallway.

Soon the walls and doorways recede and

v a n i s h,

then sight

of

the

out

ceiling

completely

is

out

lifts

too

completely

it is of

too

until

sigh

432

Figure 9. Playful typography in *House of Leaves*, p. 432.

normally opaque text were suddenly rendered transparent, or at the very least punctured by a see-through or reflective portal'.[430] The opaque text effectively becomes a window, reinforcing the text's resemblance to architecture.

Hansen continues to suggest that this 'playfully alludes to the capacity of text to mimic the effects of technical recording media'.[431] A link is identified here between 'playfully' and the 'capacity […] to mimic': the text is playing by mimicking its subject matter. A sense of knowingness is stimulated by similarity between the levels of form (a window shape) and content (architecture). At the same time, the words on that square can only be read using a mirror, and Chanen suggests that by running through several pages this square 'seems to function as a tunnel'.[432] Simultaneously a window, mirror and tunnel, the square enacts the transmuting architecture of the house – and the tunnel, like the ladder, corresponds with playground apparatus. Ladders and tunnels are features of both the funhouse and the haunted house, where they appear as established architectures of play.

In the typography of *House of Leaves*, form is copying content – or, form is playing a game of simulation (*mimicry*) with content (see fig. 8). Of course, such a reading rests on the illusion that the text is describing a subject matter which pre-exists it, while in reality the text is *creating* the house. Moreover, even within the text there is an ambiguity of creation, making it impossible to definitively determine the described object and describing subject. As Josh Toth summarises, the text allows for the possibility that there is really only a single author creating all of the rest – but this author could be Johnny, Zampanò, or even Johnny's mother Pelafina.[433] Hayles identifies the effect of this reversibility as one of vertigo, describing the simultaneous possibilities that Johnny is created by Zampanò and vice versa as 'vertiginous inversions'.[434]

The effect of vertigo stimulated by the text is in keeping with Caillois's *ilinx*. Combining the two categories, the narrative levels of representation – constituting a game of *mimicry* or simulation – provoke *ilinx* through their twisting and confusing relationships. Again, there is a distinction here between vertigo *within* the text and vertigo *of* the text. The former is expressed by Johnny in his introduction where his deterioration entails growing 'more

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[430] Hansen, p. 610.

[431] Ibid.

[432] Chanen, p. 167.

[433] Toth, 'Plasticity and Renewal', pp. 185–86.

[434] Hayles, 'Remediation', p. 801.

and more disorientated' (xviii); disorientation here is not playful but a source of terror. Johnny's experience is, on another level, paralleled by Navidson inside the house, as Navidson is also

> slowly becoming more and more disorientated. He suffers from surges of nausea, 'like I've got a bad case of the spins.' Questions plague him. Is he floating, falling, or rising? Is he right side up, upside down or on his side? (465)

The architecture *within* the text is a source of fear and confusion, stimulating vertigo. Hamilton extends this parallelism by noting that 'The reader of such a text soon becomes disorientated' – but what if the reader's disorientation is different to that of the character? For readers, the disorientation of Navidson's 'nausea' is mitigated by mediation and *mimicry*, tending to the disorientation of *ilinx*. Real vertigo within the text becomes play-vertigo in the typographical experience of the text.

The dependence of a subject's response on their level of perception is also modelled within the text, as evident in a moment noted by Larry McCaffery in his interview with Danielewski. McCaffery comments that his favourite page is two hundred and five, in the scene where Jed is killed by Holloway:

> When I first read this passage, my first reaction was of surprise and then laughter. The juxtaposition in tone and emotional content between what's being presented in the 'main text' and the footnote is so startling that it struck me as being funny.[435]

The main text on this page reads 'To begin with', while footnote two hundred and fifteen on the same page reads 'Typo. "T" should read "t" with a period following "with."' (205). This instance disrupts any horror experienced by readers by transporting them to a level where the text's territory becomes a map and the semantic becomes formal. A terrible event flattens into an arrangement of letters; reality becomes the game of reality. As McCaffery implies, the footnote would not stimulate humour as a stand-alone comment. Rather, humour arises in the local (and hierarchical) shift between diegetic levels – in the *movement* ('play' in its early etymological sense) between them. This is the titular level game of this thesis, arising in the act of moving between levels which transforms the tenor of one's experience.

[435] McCaffery and Gregory, p. 124.

My analysis emphasises how readers of *House of Leaves* experience an additional level of fictionality compared to the characters, disrupting the parallelism of response suggested by many critics. This allows for the transformation of uncanniness (experienced *within* the text, by characters) into a playful response to the interrelation of diegetic and typographic levels (experienced *outside* the text, by readers). Through the mechanism of mediation discussed by Freud and Jentsch, what is horror inside the *House of Leaves* becomes playful outside it – just as the fear and confusion of a haunted house theme park attraction dissolve into a game upon exit. Play is not so much modelled by the text as created by its totality, arising from the sum of mediated narrative parts. Levels, both in representational (diegetic) and concrete (architectural) forms, create a vertigo that can constitute either Caillois's playful *ilinx* or the disorientation of uncanny confusion and physiological horror. Nevertheless, this transformation operates in both directions: while an additional level of mediation can transmute the uncanny into play, the removal of such a level can also transmute play into the uncanny.

V. Uncanny Play

The transition from uncanniness to play appears through the frames of expectation set up within the text, and is exemplified by the case of Tom, Navidson's brother, who is swallowed up by the house. When the house's mutating unpredictability and threatening potential has reached an extreme and the characters are in panic, Tom passes Navidson's daughter Daisy to him through the window, but then Zampanò describes how Tom 'has found his limit' (346). This sentence provides the odd possibility that what happens next is a reflection of Tom's internal condition, reinforcing the potential interpretation (anticipated by criticism already contained in *House of Leaves*) that the house is the manifestation of a psychological state. Out of breath, Tom drops to his knees, and then 'The floor carries him backwards ten or fifteen feet more and then for no apparent stops. Only the walls and ceiling continue their drunken dance around him, stretching, bending, even tilting' (346). This description of the architecture evokes a funhouse with its plethora of optical illusions that bend, stretch and tilt the participant's perception of rooms and reflections, lending an incongruously game-like tone to the moment. The effect is one of vertigo, yet this vertigo hovers uncertainly between playful disorientation and uncanny disorientation; the 'drunken dance' of the house's architecture suggests something superficially playful, but the events that follow rapidly negate this effect.

When Navidson sees Tom, he cannot believe that he is standing still rather than trying to escape. However, 'as Tom demonstrates, whenever he takes one step forward, the floor drags him two steps back' (346). Here, *mimicry* transforms from playful to dangerous. By dragging him back whenever he attempts to move, the house mocks Tom with a kind of embodied irony, making him perform the opposite action to the one he intends. It is unclear as to whether the house has some kind of consciousness, or whether it operates automatically: as always in *House of Leaves*, directionality is reversible, meaning that the house could be affecting Tom or that the house could be affected *by* Tom as an externalisation of a mental state that has reached its limit. Eventually, as Navidson begins to crawl through the window in an attempt to reach his brother, the 'oscillations' of the walls and ceiling cease and the walls suddenly snap together, breaking Tom's fingers. Then the 'linoleum floor dissolves, turning the kitchen into a vertical shaft' (346) and Tom falls into the darkness. Like the drunken walls and tilting perspectives, this moment of horror simultaneously suggests a funhouse trap door – another apparatus of play.

However, the situation here is much darker; the quality of playfulness that runs through this scene actually intensifies the horror. If funhouse and haunted house structures aim to thrill and scare by playing with participants' perceptions, defamiliarising their expectations of architecture by making walls and floors behave in unexpected ways, *House of Leaves* is already aware of these tropes. Funhouses and haunted houses, like generic horror stories, have been around for a long time, and their features have become expectations. Consequently, the horror of this moment comes from the awareness that such paradoxical architecture is usually a trick; tilting walls and trap doors are associated with a frame of expectation of game, but here it turns out to be the opposite. Play is made uncanny because the boundaries of the magic circle suddenly disappear. There is no longer a safe, containing, external reality as was initially assumed. Freud notes that 'an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary'.[436] When what was thought to be fictional turns out to be real, something that was not uncanny turns out to be uncanny, and this is what happens when the house swallows Tom. Through a slight shift in levels of reality, architectures of play become architectures of fear and confusion – made all the more potent by the force of the contrast.

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[436] Freud, p. 150.

In *House of Leaves*, mediation is a means of transmuting uncanniness into play, but this works in both directions: when the boundaries of the magic circle suddenly melt away, an effect of uncanniness is created out of play. The text possesses the capacity to simultaneously provoke reactions of readerly anxiety, physiological horror, uncanniness and playfulness. The qualities inflect and act as composites of one another; there is something playful in the thrill of the uncanny haunted house, providing it is safely contained within the boundaries of a magic circle, and there is something uncanny in the realisation that play is not really play. The sinister can be subsumed into a game of levels just as the level game can conceal something sinister, depending on the structure and proportions of its affective architecture.

VI. Cutting Poetry from Prose in *Tree of Codes*

While the uncanny is much less dominant in *Tree of Codes*, material levels of mediation are still significant in conditioning the emergence of play. A distinctive feature of *House of Leaves* is its complex levels of diegesis; in *Tree of Codes*, these diegetic levels are physicalised through the cutting out of words and phrases, making each page a frame for the next and creating a constant awareness of omission. Generative absence is a key point of connection between the two texts as playfulness is rooted in an alternation between figure and ground.

Foer's *Tree of Codes* constructs a new narrative by removing words from Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles*. Consequently, *Tree of Codes* is one level above *The Street of Crocodiles* in the architectural hierarchy of knowing: Foer knows about Schulz but Schulz does not know about Foer. This could be illustrated physically, as superimposing the former text on the latter would form one complete and continuous text with the words simply existing at different spatial depths. Reading Schulz's original collection in tandem with Foer's version emphasises the latter's critical decisions of exhumation; Foer's exclusions and decisions create implicit ironies and moments of self-reference, stimulating a playfulness that arises not out of any semantic additions, but through the interaction between omission and original. This is an architecture of play determined by an architecture of paper.

Schulz was born at the end of the nineteenth century in what is now Poland, and he was killed during the Holocaust. As a result, many of his works were lost, and the collection of short stories called *The Street of Crocodiles* is one of the few remaining. In the afterword to *Tree of Codes*, Jonathan Safran Foer describes how he 'wanted to create a die-cut book by erasure' (138) but found it difficult to find the right book to use; having considered the

dictionary, encyclopaedia, and even some of his own books, none were quite right.[437] In these cases, he writes, the process would be more of an 'exercise', whereas he wanted a book whose 'erasure would somehow be a continuation of its creation' (138). Deciding on *The Street of Crocodiles*, Foer describes a sensation that Schulz's text was already 'the product of a similar act of exhumation'; the prose is 'radically odd' and 'The sentences feel too unlikely to have been created on purpose', giving the impression that there was 'some yet larger book from which *The Street of Crocodiles* was taken' (139). Foer envisions himself participating in the continuation of a process that gradually shifts towards smaller textual scales with greater abstraction and selectivity: a book created from a book created from a book.

If Schulz's prose is already 'radically odd', oddness is also a quality facilitated by Foer's technique; unlike other forms of imaginative composition, the words and letters are pregiven, and Foer's task is to manipulate the relations between them. Unusual combinations arise from these constraints, such as the 'chemist's / large jar / of pain' (10).[438] This is cut out from Schulz's 'we passed […] the chemist's shop. A large jar of raspberry juice […] symbolized […] balms which can relieve all kinds of pain'.[439] Foer's cut out phrase does make sense, but it is also striking in its imagery, combining the physicality of jar with the abstract visualisation of pain as a liquid that can be contained. The effect of this is a greater oddness than the prose from which it is cut.

Hayles points out that there are certain thematic patterns in Foer's strategy of composition. She notes that he removes all of the minor characters in Schulz's work, and alters the relationship between the mother and the father by increasing their communication, removing intermediary sections.[440] The 'questionable sexualities' of *The Street of Crocodiles* are 'entirely erased' from Foer's text, as are Schulz's suggestions of animality, exemplified by the 'Cockroaches' story.[441] Hayles remarks that

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[437] Jonathan Safran Foer, 'Afterword' to *Tree of Codes* (Belgium: Visual Editions, 2010), p. 138. All further references to *Tree of Codes* are taken from this edition and cited within the text.

[438] I use '/' to denote spaces when quoting from *Tree of Codes*.

[439] Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles and Other Stories*, trans. by Celina Wieniewska (New York: Penguin, 2008), p. 5. All further references are taken from this edition and cited within the text.

[440] 'Close and Distant Reading', p. 227.

[441] Ibid., p. 228.

> given these systematic erasures, one might accuse Foer of Disneyfying Schulz's text, stripping it of sexuality, animality, and sleaze and substituting in their place a bourgeois marriage in which mother and father are devoted to each other.[442]

Yet with several manufactured arguments and surreal interactions, the mother and father in *Tree of Codes* are not exactly a consistently devoted couple. Hayles goes on to remark that 'Foer's narrative is on the whole less striking and blander than Schulz's original'.[443] However, *Tree of Codes* is not a 'narrative' in the same way as *The Street of Crocodiles*. The formal configurations created by cutting out words produce self-contained fragments of imagery as opposed to continuous prose. The two texts are qualitatively different; the rich description in Schulz is transformed into abstraction and concision in Foer, illuminating Schulz's key motifs by pulling them out of their specific narrative context and inviting a metaphysical than literal mode of interpretation.

By cutting *Tree of Codes* from *The Street of Crocodiles* (as phrase, and as text), Foer cuts abstraction out of specificity, poetry out of prose, and subjectivity out of objectivity. He assembles another level of reading which is tonally different to the level below. Again, the relationship between a circle and a spiral is relevant here; if the text of *Tree of Codes* was superimposed on *Street of Crocodiles* it would align exactly, forming an identity. However, just as a three-dimensional perspective reveals the features of a spiral that are not present in the circle, so does the (literally) three-dimensional perspective of *Tree of Codes* reveal its material (and corresponding conceptual) distinctions from *The Street of Crocodiles*. The cut out words in Foer's text illustrate the generative potential of negation by facilitating different connections between words which create a new dynamic. The dominating factors are syntax, order and placement: Foer's paper game is played according to ludic characteristics of selection and rearrangement, as evoked also in the interactive decisions which must be made by readers in the process of navigating the text.

I first consider the tonal effect of moving between these levels generally, before examining the specific role of play in the final section of this chapter. An illustrative example of abstraction cut out of specificity is in Foer's phrase 'submerged in the / green / and / blind with age, we rediscovered / life / , the quality of / blood, / the secret of / private time' (15). In *The Street of Crocodiles*, the context is a visit to Aunt Agatha's house:

[442] Ibid., p. 229.

[443] Ibid.

> In the gloom of the hall, with its old lithographs, rotten with mildew and blind with age, we rediscovered a well-known smell. In that old familiar smell was contained a marvellously simple synthesis if the life of those people, the distillation of their race, the quality of their blood, and the secret of their fate, imperceptibly mixed day by day with the passage of their own, private time. (8)

In *Crocodiles* the rediscovered object is a familiar 'well-known smell'; in *Codes* it is 'life'. In *Crocodiles* there are references to '*those* people' and '*their* race', but these pronouns are absent from *Codes*: 'quality of *their* blood' becomes the 'quality of / blood'; 'the secret of *their* fate' becomes the 'secret of / private time' [all italics mine]. Specific references, appropriate to the form of the short story as a continuous prose narrative, are cut out into abstractions: blood as blood, time as time, concepts detached from their contexts.

The dynamics here are also altered by typography. In *Tree of Codes* a long space precedes 'private time', and this space can, upon reading, be voiced as a silence. The gaps in *Tree of Codes* exert a force by shaping the space around them. They form a negative presence, conspicuous due to their varying lengths; the expansion and contraction of the gaps between words and phrases gives them a life of their own as they seem to move and transmute, altering the weight of the words around them by shifting emphasis. Here, 'private time' is emphasised by the gap that precedes it, lending the phrase a sense of secrecy and ominousness which accentuates the implications of privacy.

Cutting abstraction from specificity is also linked to cutting poetry from prose, as evident in the above example of the 'chemist's / large jar / of pain' (10). A similar example is 'Hours pass / in / coughs' (13), taken from 'Hours pass, filled with heat and boredom; Touya chatters in a monotone, dozes, mumbles softly, and coughs' (6–7). Not only is (as Hayles observed) the specific character of Touya cut out, but a descriptive narrative sentence is transformed into a synesthetic synthesis of temporal and bodily imagery. Moreover, the resonance between hours passing in coughs and the chemist's jar of pain illustrates how Foer's cut-out language begins to create its own thematic connections across the text.

While the physical structure of *Tree of Codes* is manipulated to create emphasis, it can also, inversely, create parenthesis. As Hayles points out: 'different complexities are created by the words that show through the die-cut holes from one, two, or even three pages beyond'.[444]

[444] 'Close and Distant Reading', p. 229.

Readers are faced with a decision between 'scanning the pages separately' and 'scanning with the hole words showing' – a decision which forms part of the text's interactivity and the defamiliarisation of the reading process.[445] The hole words are literally on a different level to the page words, functioning as an embodied parenthesis. An instance of this is a section cut from Schulz's 'Cockroaches' story, discussing the madness of the father:

> I once saw him
> on the floor naked, / his ribs
> visible through the skin [[[[[[unconnected]]]]]]
> [[the window]]
> .
> [the black mirrors]
> we gave father up
> [[trembling with]]
> –
> we got used to it. [and pressed forward] (101) [446]

Though unclear whether deliberate or coincidental, this last parenthesis in particular flows perfectly from the sense of the words on the primary page. Habituation ('we got used to it') is foregrounded over progression ('and pressed forward'), but the two clauses combine into a continuous sentence. The other parentheses also interact with the words on the primary page as surreal inflections of imagery; the deeply parenthetical 'unconnected' can be applied to the visible ribs described just before it, creating an image of a disconnected body with its disconnected skeleton. Then 'the window' connects conceptually to visibility in the line above it, with the implication that the father's skin has become a window. The full stop between the parenthetical 'window' and 'black mirrors' acts as caesura, indicating a transition from transparent visibility (window) to opaque reflectivity (mirror). This change in reflective direction is borne out by the shift between the narrator observing his father before the full stop, and giving him up after. The narrator primarily '[gets] used to it', parenthetically 'presse[s] forward', but all the while he is – in even deeper parenthesis – 'trembling'.

[445] Ibid., p. 230.

[446] Following Hayles, the number of brackets I have used here indicate the number of pages between the embedded words and the primary page.

A final transformation that Foer enacts through this cutting method is from objectivity to subjectivity. Again, Hayles anticipates this when she discusses how ‘Foer’s manipulation goes beyond erasing words: he extends it to morphemes and phonemes’, ‘focusing attention on the molecular dimension of language’.[447] A significant such erasure is evident in Foer’s ‘i’, which, towards the end of *Tree of Codes*, becomes increasingly lower case, indicating that it has been cut out from another word. In Schulz’s short story ‘Nimrod’, which is about the narrator playing with his eponymous small dog, he describes how ‘Nimrod began to understand’ more about the world around him, and the ‘backdrop of his young life’, the smells of the kitchen and the ‘noisy bustle’ of Adela, ‘ceased to frighten him’ (43). In *Tree of Codes*, this becomes:

> i / began to understand
> The backdrop of / life,
> the
> noisy bustle, (66)

As the small ‘i’ is cut from the name ‘Nimrod’, first person is cut out of third person, altering the subject of the text by cutting one subject out of another. The specific story of the small dog transforms into the abstract experience of a lyric ‘I’, musing about ‘life’ more broadly, with an unspecified ‘noisy bustle’. Another example is in ‘Cinnamon Shops’, when ‘It sometimes happened that, during a meal, my father would […] rise from the table with a feline motion […] and peer through the keyhole with the utmost caution’ (53–4). In *Tree of Codes*, this is reconfigured as:

> It sometimes happened that, during a meal,
> i
> would rise from the table / and peer
> through the keyhole / . (76)

Again, the third person ‘father’ is transformed into a lyric ‘i’ that has been cut out of the original text.

Tree of Codes invites a highly different form of reading compared to *Street of Crocodiles*. Its cut out gaps determine pacing and the spatial configuration affects how each

[447] ‘Close and Distant Reading’, pp. 229–30.

word or phrase is weighted. The text plays typographically with emphasis and parenthesis, expressed physically through the depth of the pages. By disrupting continuous narrative, *Tree of Codes* solicits greater attention to the interconnection of themes and the synthesis of imagery, creating something poetic. To cut poetry out of prose is not to suggest that Schulz's prose is not poetic, but rather that Foer's version makes use of certain formal features which are more typically found in poetry, including pauses, significantly-placed caesura, and a lyric subject. Hayles identifies this generativity when she comments that Foer's 'erasures create new phrases potent in their suggestiveness'; absence exerts a force which alters the dynamics of the whole.[448] Central to this structure are its levels, as *Tree of Codes* exists on a level 'above' *The Street of Crocodiles*; physically we could see the latter through the holes of the former, and conceptually the latter is abstract while the former is specific. The next subject to address concerns the qualities that emerge from these levels – specifically, 'knowingness' and 'playfulness'.

VII. Knowingness and Playfulness

Because Foer's text is self-consciously derived from Schulz's, a quality of knowingness arises from implicit moments of referentiality, and this in turn contributes to a quality of playfulness. In contrast to the cut-up technique of Burroughs, which solicited an element of randomness in the synthesis of extracts, Foer's decisions are deliberate within the constraints of the words available. A sense of knowingness arises from the text's ironies, whether intentional or coincidental, which can only be perceived when readers are aware that *Tree of Codes* is cut out of *Street of Crocodiles*. An example is Schulz's 'Tailors' Dummies' story, which has a description of the father giving a speech. In Foer, the father exclaims:

> what relief it would be for
> the world to lose some of its contents. (48)

This exact same line appears in *The Street of Crocodiles*, and, in terms of textual worlds, Schulz's has indeed lost some of its contents – *Tree of Codes* is enacting the very comment it chooses to retain. Yet Foer erases the preceding line from this section which is, in Schulz, the father's exclamation: 'Less matter, more form!' (30). Given the form of *Tree of Codes*, the

[448] 'Close and Distant Reading', p. 229.

omission is conspicuous, creating an implicit joke that the exclamation ‘Less matter, more form’ is part of the matter that has been cut out by Foer’s form.

At the same time, *Tree of Codes* as a whole follows the father’s injunction to remove matter from the world – as exemplified by the title itself, which is cut out from Schulz’s titular ‘Street of Crocodiles’. Foer’s ‘our city is / reduced / to / the / tree / of / cod / es.’ (94) suggests both how Schulz’s city, with its Street of Crocodiles, has been ‘reduced’ in Foer’s version, and how all cities become trees of codes (pieces of paper printed with signs) when translated into narratives. Foer is extrapolating an idea already present in Schulz’s text. In Schulz’s story ‘Cinnamon Shops’ the city is reduced to a map, and Foer’s story reduces it again to a ‘tree of codes’; its levels of representation are further removed as it becomes a paper artifact of ‘coded’ terms that stand for an expanded version. Several lines later, there is the remark that ‘The / tree / of / cod / es was / better than a paper imitation’ (*Codes* 96), and in ‘Cinnamon Shops’, Schulz’s depraved ‘Street of Crocodiles’ is described as a ‘paper imitation’ of ‘modernity and metropolitan corruption’ (*Crocodiles* 72). This is the sense in which Foer’s work is, as he suggested in the afterword, a ‘continuation’ rather than an ‘exercise’ (*Codes* 138). If Schulz’s Street of Crocodiles as a physical location is a paper imitation of modern corruption, and if Schulz’s *Street of Crocodiles* text is a paper imitation of the reality he describes, then Foer’s *Tree of Codes* is on yet another level a paper imitation of Schulz’s ‘Street of Crocodiles’.

Other similarly self-referential lines include ‘the pages of days’ (*Codes* 122) and ‘Reality is as thin as paper’ (*Codes* 92). Foer literalises Schulz’s metaphors; ‘pages’ and ‘paper’ acquire a different resonance when reading a text with die-cut pages. A similar effect emerges in the description of ‘moving a / finger across maps of the sky, from / star to star.’ (131). The metaphor was already present in the text, but Foer’s formal structure actualises it; it is not unlikely that readers of *Tree of Codes* are moving their fingers across the hole-riddled pages in order to ensure that they are staying on the same line. This section continues to describe the ‘great book of / catastrophes / , copied a thousand times’ (131), which recalls how Schulz’s own book of catastrophes has been ‘copied’ (and adapted) by Foer. In such instances, the parallels between the content of Schulz’s work, and the form of Foer’s, give the impression of a knowing consciousness at work. This knowingness arises from self-similarity between the levels of form and content. It is playful through dramatic irony; readers are admitted into a higher-level awareness which reveals patterns invisible from the level below.

Of course, this ‘knowingness’ arises only if the two works are read together. *Tree of Codes* does also function as a stand-alone text, which does not negate its material play. When

read in this way, 'play' is present in the sense of movement and navigation; skipping over gaps, probing the spatial depths of parentheses and interpreting absences involves interactivity and exercise. The specific effect of reading Foer's text alongside Schulz's is the addition of another level: another dimension of play equipment through which readers can move and explore. The seemingly conscious resonances between these two levels model the emergence of meaning from pattern, quality from quantity, as self-referentiality has been created typographically rather than semantically; in other words, referentiality stems from a particular organisation of isomorphisms.

Though it is made of the exact same material as *The Street of Crocodiles*, without any addition of substance, *Tree of Codes* uses strategic omissions and inclusions in tandem with its formal features in order to create a quality of knowingness, and from knowingness playfulness. If a playful *ilinx* is potentially stimulated through the navigation of the cut-out pages, particularly if taking the parenthetical 'hole words' into account, there is also a *mimicry* that, through selective replication, makes Foer's text qualitatively different from Schulz's – tonally as well as structurally.

VIII. Conclusion

As the titles of *House of Leaves* and *Tree of Codes* indicate, these two texts create architectures from paper, which stems from leaves and trees. Both works engage with features of typographic play specific to the print medium and facilitated by the form of the book. In *House of Leaves* this includes the scholarly network of footnotes and appendices, whereas in *Tree of Codes* attention is focused on paper and its opacity – a feature usually taken for granted when reading. While Danielewski constructs hallways through shapes that emerge from the absence of words, Foer cuts windows out of paper which create embodied punctuation through their parenthetical framing of the words below. In both cases there is a generative absence; the empty spaces in architectures of play are shown to be active participants in the game, exerting a dynamic force on the structures surrounding them.

Nevertheless, paper funhouses might, *House of Leaves* suggests, transform into haunted houses on another level of narration or readerly reception. With typographic play, the level game is carried out with shapes as well as concepts – and, additionally, through the synchronisation between shapes and concepts, where typography plays *mimicry* with the content it expresses. Through such alignments spring qualities of knowingness, playfulness,

and uncanniness. These qualities not only arise from conceptual and textual architectures, but create their own relational network: an affective architecture whose elements can be combined, manipulated and interlinked to various effects. Standing on the balcony of knowingness, one can survey the levels of perception below, and play with them – just as long as there is no trap door, and the ceiling does not turn out to be a floor.

The following chapter will consider the flipside to Pressman's 'aesthetics of bookishness': the aesthetics of digitality. Shifting focus from the material architectures of print to the immaterial architectures of digital games, I will explore how contemporary fiction has engaged with the theme of virtual reality – including the hierarchical levels in the vocabulary of digital gaming. Rather than the back and forth transition between levels of awareness, with attendant tonal features of uncanniness and playfulness, I now consider the teleological drive in a hierarchy of levels as a seductive force that exists in tension with the power to play God over a simulated space.

Chapter Five

Power Dynamics of Digital Play in *Plowing the Dark, God Jr.* and *The Circle*

I. Introduction

A defining feature of the early twenty first century is the expansion of simulated space; with the considerable advancements of the internet and gaming industry, architectures of play have become digital. The children's asphalt playground is replaced by its virtual counterpart, manifested through screens and smartphones. Accordingly, various proposed successors to postmodernism focus on digital technology as a contemporary cultural 'dominant', including Robert Samuels' 'automodernity' and Roger Kirby's 'digimodernism'.[449] With its chapters ordered from most to least pervasive cultural form, Kirby's *Digimodernism* identifies video games and literature at, respectively, opposite ends of the spectrum. However, these forms are combined in literature *about* digital games, which the present chapter will consider, extrapolating the common point that both media involve the construction of virtual worlds.[450] The following sections examine the power dynamics that arise when two levels of reality interact as instantiated through contemporary digital media. I draw upon allusions to Plato's cave allegory, Jameson's cognitive mapping and corporate techniques of gamification to investigate these power dynamics in Richard Powers's *Plowing the Dark*, Dennis Cooper's *God Jr.* and Dave Eggers' *The Circle*. While players exercise mastery over virtual worlds, paralleling the Platonic governance of shadow by light, these worlds in turn exert a seductive force on players. Providing individuals with a feeling of empowerment is, on another level, a means of controlling them.

Although there is a burgeoning critical field of video game studies, this chapter is not about digital gaming, but about fiction about digital gaming; in other words, digital games as mediated by literary form. Through their thematisation of virtual reality, these novels offer a mixed media *mise en abyme*: a digital world inside a literary world. What distinguishes the

[449] Robert Samuels, 'Auto-Modernity after Postmodernism: Autonomy and Automation in Culture, Technology, and Education', in *Digital Youth, Innovation, and the Unexpected*, ed. by Tara McPherson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 219–40; Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2009).

[450] I use the term 'digital games' rather than 'video games' in order to encompass digital structures which might be conceived of as gamic even if they are not formally games.

digital game within the novel from the play within the play (*Hamlet*), the film within a novel (*Infinite Jest*), and the text within the text (*House of Leaves*) is an explicit interactivity. A film, play or a written text can be experienced without modification from its audience. However, the world of a simulated environment is constituted *by* interactivity, achieving realisation only through the active intervention of a participating subject. It is this interactivity which shifts the 'God' analogy onto the participant rather than the artist, giving rise to a certain set of power dynamics. I first examine the power play of the worlds within each text, before zooming out to compare how these dynamics are at work in literary form.

I have chosen these three texts because together they address the multiple ways in which digitality is integrated into contemporary American life. In *Plowing the Dark*, Powers delineates a virtual reality space called 'The Cavern', whose utility and artistic potential exerts a fascination on the technology company's employees while implicitly putting their work to political purpose. Cooper's *God Jr.* describes a father's cognitive symbiosis with his dead son's computer game, juxtaposing the sense of navigation provided by the world of the game with an increasing loss of control in the world outside. Finally, Eggers's *The Circle* satirically interrogates emergent corporate strategies of gamification and their potential for manipulation, as well as the ethical risk of allowing the (magic) circle of a self-contained world – here, a corporation – to swallow the reality within which it is contained.

Yet unlike the materially experimental exploration of paper technologies in *House of Leaves* and *Tree of Codes*, the three novels discussed in this chapter are not particularly formally playful. Published after the heyday of postmodern ontological playfulness, their use of narrative convention acquires a conspicuousness which performs a particular kind of work in relation to their playful subject matter. Game mechanics are mediated by literary mechanics whose own dynamics of mastery are in dialogue with those they depict.

II. Plato's Cave and Powers's Cavern

The title of Powers's *Plowing the Dark* evokes a mechanical tool, and the novel's emphasis is not on the observation of a virtual world, but its manipulation: not what games *are*, but what games *do*. This is in keeping with Kirby's suggestion that the relationship between

postmodernism and digimodernism involves a transition from spectacle to interactivity.[451] The passive spectacle of the television, explored and extrapolated in *Infinite Jest*, gives way to interaction with virtual worlds that can be actively modified.

Powers's novel is centred around two rooms. The first is the Cavern, a virtual reality simulator developed by a technology company called TeraSys, while the second is a cell in Lebanon in which an American called Taimur Martin is held hostage. The two architectures correspond with two narratives, both dealing with constrained physical spaces which induce an expansion of virtual space, whether in the simulation of the Cavern or, in Taimur's case, the mind's imaginative capacities. The protagonist of the Cavern narrative is Adie Klarpol, a former artist who applies her skills to the virtual environments constructed by the developers. Surrounded by scientists, her work constantly recalls and interrogates Auden's 'poetry makes nothing happen', which acts as the refrain of Powers's novel.

The name and nature of the Cavern deliberately evokes Plato's cave, arguably one of the most culturally pervasive illustrations of the interaction between levels of reality. To summarise, the inhabitants of this allegorical cave are unable to move their heads and can see only shadows of objects on the wall. The real objects – and the fire that creates the shadows – are outside the vision of the cave's inhabitants. Readers are invited to imagine that one of the inhabitants ascends out of the cave towards the sun, observing the objects which cast the shadows. Initially blinded by the light, the inhabitant gradually comes to understand that he now perceives a greater reality than the shadows in the cave. Socrates, the narrator, then generalises the allegory to the position of philosophers, arguing that the enlightened should not remain in the safe world of light but have a duty to return to the shadows where they must attempt to share and apply their knowledge towards the ultimate goal of 'bind[ing] the city together' through an educated government.[452] Here, pedagogy is inextricably linked to power; the implication is that those in the light should govern those in the shadows, as power is afforded to subjects who can access a higher level of awareness.

These dynamics are at work in *Plowing the Dark*, where the attraction exerted by the Cavern on the characters is linked to the capacity to control and create. For the computer game

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[451] Alan Kirby, 'The Death of Postmodernism and Beyond', in *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century*, ed. by David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), pp. 49–60 (p. 53).

[452] Plato, *The Republic*, ed. by G. R. F. Ferrari, trans. by Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 514–521 (520a).

enthusiast Jackdaw, the Cavern is a place of 'pure potential'; for Adie, it is 'the greatest Etch-a-Sketch a girl had ever been given', 'an unlimited fantasy sandbox', and a 'supreme paintbox'.[453] The paintbox and the sandbox are all alternative forms of the toolbox: the technology provides individuals with a means of construction, placing them in a position of control over the assemblage of virtual materials. The Cavern as toolbox is most explicitly identified by the economist O'Reilly, for whom the Cavern has an instrumental function; it is 'the tool that only TeraSys could offer him' (80), an advanced means of simulating economic variables and predicting their trajectories. In all three cases, the Cavern allows its users to play God: to be omnipotent (world-creator) and omniscient (visualising data).

One of the ways in which the Cavern functions as a tool is by externalising cognitive processes, in keeping with the extended mind thesis in the philosophy of mind. Andy Clark and David Chalmers propose that when cognitive processes interact with environmental apparatus, these externalised operations also count as cognition: 'The human organism is linked with an external entity in a two-way interaction, creating a *coupled system* that can be seen as a cognitive system in its own right'.[454] They cite examples such as the use of pen and paper to perform mathematical sums, and the physical rearrangements of letter tiles to stimulate word recall in Scrabble.[455] Powers's Cavern similarly offers O'Reilly the opportunity to 'stand among the lights and sounds, inside the skeins of regenerating prediction too complex to take in any way but viscerally' (80). The visualization afforded by the Cavern stimulates an affective understanding; there are things he can understand 'viscerally' which he could not, it is implied, understand if presented in a more abstract form. The Cavern extends the mind by providing a means of thinking aloud, performing a mental work too complex to take place without being externally and spatially mapped out. Similarly, the biochemist Dale Bergen creates a simulation called the 'Large Molecule Docking Room' (166) where the user stands 'among galaxies of enfolded polymers, zooming in on docking sites now large enough to walk inside and poke around' (166). Bergen's next idea is for a 'simulated evolution' (167), an ecology of plants which plays out the results of their competing needs. He imagines the simulation developing 'more convoluted conversations' (167) – conversations not possible to imagine without the visualisation facilitated by Cavern technology, emphasising its epistemological potential.

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[453] Richard Powers, *Plowing the Dark* (London: Vintage, 2002), pp. 112, 228, 25, 398. All further references are taken from this edition and cited within the text.

[454] Andy Clark and David Chalmers, 'The Extended Mind', *Analysis*, 58.1 (1998), 7–19 (p. 8).

[455] Ibid.

As well as scientific tools, the rooms simulated by the Cavern can, like Plato's cave, be conceived of as philosophical tools. This is exemplified by 'Imagination's room', which appears not to be a Cavern simulation but a metaphorical extrapolation of its concept. Imagination's room exists beyond space ('this room can't brook any depth or width' (145)) and beyond time ('the room to which dying people retire', 'the room from which infants are taken to be born' (145)). It is a room of theory, hypothesis, and visualisation; a place of wish-fulfilment and resolution, where 'all things work out' and 'every accident has its repair' (144). However, it is also 'the room of no consequence in the least. Of making no difference in the whole known world' (145), recalling 'poetry makes nothing happen'. Still, as in Plato's parable, these theoretical exercises can be precursors to action. Discussing *Plowing the Dark*, Daniel Grausam remarks that 'storytelling may have no direct agency on the world, yet a world without storytelling has given up on the possibility of an alternative history or organization of social reality'.[456] Accordingly, imagination's room allows the construction of an 'alternative history' as a model to be followed; it is a tool with which to construct and test an alternative organisation of reality.

By itself, imagination's room does make nothing happen, just as Plato's philosopher makes nothing happen if they stay in the world of light. However, if the room is used as a tool, tapping into the root linguistic unity between art and tools as 'techne' (Greek: *τέχνη*), imagination's room can be transcribed to practical reality. In the text's narrative structure, the room's description precedes a section of Taimur's narrative, which demonstrates its application in line with Grausam's comment that 'Powers's entire career has reflected on narrative as a technology of sanity'.[457] By allowing Taimur to envision an alternative organisation of his reality, imagination's room providing a means of escaping the cell within which he is trapped. His section begins: '*Yeki bood. Yeki nabood*. That is how the world's best storytellers always start: It was so. And it was not so' (146). Storytelling, which always takes place in imagination's room, can accept the coexistence of contradictions, allowing Taimur to 'make sense of the senseless' (146). Imagination's room is a tool for Taimur because it allows for a logic that he can apply to his own situation. It is a way for him to combine the material fact of his experience ('Like so: you find yourself in a small room' (146)) with a means of escape

[456] Daniel Grausam, '"It Is Only a Statement of the Power of What Comes after": Atomic Nostalgia and the Ends of Postmodernism', *American Literary History*, 24.2 (2012), 308–36 (p. 324).

[457] Ibid.

(‘And not like so: you are not here. Hope refuses even these temporary lodgings’ (146)). Beset with desperation, it provides a hypothetical state in which he can live – an architectural sanctuary. It might make ‘nothing happen’ directly in the material world, but it makes something happen inside the mind by allowing Taimur to maintain sanity during his imprisonment. The mind searches for tools to keep itself together; the ability to survive in the valley of its saying is, in this case, an active rather than passive achievement.

As scientific and philosophical tools, the Cavern and its imaginative correlates provide a means of control; the inventor and manipulator of a virtual world possesses the god-like capacity to stand outside the system and survey it. This exemplifies what Samuels calls ‘automodernity’: a cultural epoch characterised by a ‘combination of technological automation and human autonomy’.[458] Samuels outlines how technological developments can give individuals a higher sense of control by overcoming constraints of time and space, allowing access to information from any place and at any time.[459] Nevertheless, the volatility of this autonomy is exemplified by Jackdaw. Enamoured of digital games since childhood, he ‘spent his teens alone, sealed in his bedroom, voyaging’ (110). While in the real world Jackdaw’s isolation stunts his social growth, in digital space ‘adolescent Jack governed his own surging metropolises’ (110), taking on the status of a god. He becomes a God Junior, like the protagonist of Cooper’s novel, who is a god in his son’s computer game while his real life falls apart: power on one level is powerlessness on another.

Autonomy in relation to technology is dependent on maintaining a certain structural position outside the system, recalling the magic circle which exists only insofar as the player possesses the capacity to step outside it. The darker side to simulation is identified by Adie in a psychological game she played as a child, which involved rocking the frames of her bedroom’s paintings with her imagination, mentally animating the painted objects. However, Adie becomes too good at the game: the room begins moving by itself, the chairs sliding and the bed creaking without her control (177). Slipping too far inside the frame, she loses her capacity as inventor, tending psychologically towards madness. To cure herself, Adie must paint over all of the paintings in her room; only by reimposing the layer of fictionality that she has mentally stripped away can she recreate the magic circle boundaries, putting the game back in its box and maintain the distinctions between inside and outside. In Platonic terms, once the

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[458] Samuels, p. 219.

[459] Ibid., p. 230.

Cave inhabitant re-enters the dark and their eyes become re-accustomed to the shadows, they may forget the light; a return to a less real ontological level only allows a sense of control if one retains an awareness of their relative position. Once the individual forgets that the shadow is a shadow, it slips from tool to illusion, and from illusion to delusion.

A variation on this theme is a player discovering that although they control the virtual world of their game, they have been unknowingly controlled by a higher, invisible level of social organisation. While at the beginning of the novel, the Cavern is a game – '*the greatest paint-by-numbers kit in the universe*' (41) – by the end it becomes clear that its technology is being used for military purposes. Adie is ignorant of the political instrumentality underlying the enterprise until she discovers that

> Her work here was just a rough draft for technology's wider plan. The world machine had used her, used them all to bring itself into existence. And its tool of choice – its lever and place to stand, the tech that would spring it at last into three dimensions – was that supreme, useless, self-indulgent escapism. The thing that made nothing happen. The mirror of nature. Art. (398)

The Cavern is a tool, but the fallacy lies in who wields it: Adie and the Cavern employees are revealed to be puppets for a wider system just as the prisoners' supposed objects are revealed to be shadows. They find themselves in a different dichotomy to what they thought: light and shadow are not knowledge and ignorance, but power and puppetry, where the wielder of the tool is not a person but 'the world machine'. A machine is a tool made up of tools, and the implication is that from these tools some kind of emergent property has spun its force, an intentionality arising from a collective system. Adie discovers that she *is* the tool; 'the world machine had used *her*' [italics mine], just as she had used the technology of the Cavern. Like any tool, the effect of the Cavern's technology depends on who wields it – and, in the chain of Forms, on who wields the wielder.

In the revelation of its conclusion, *Plowing the Dark* suggests an industrial link between play and politics. At first the Cavern appears to be an elaborate computer game which allows artistic creation, playful exploration and scientific speculation. It acts as an extension of cognition, providing an apparatus with which to visualise and hypothesise. It is a means of playing God, allowing both omnipotence and omniscience: world-creation and knowledge development. However, the ends to which these capacities are used are far from innocuous; outside the magic circle of its self-contained world the technology is entangled with complex

ethical effects, suggesting that the belief that 'poetry makes nothing happen' is itself a weapon. Adie's conviction that she is simply playing rendered her ignorant to the possibility that they are not only plowing shadows, but that they are the shadows being plowed.

My reading of *Plowing the Dark* explores the instrumentality of virtual realities, where play and purpose are not in opposition but complex interrelation. The experimentation facilitated by a virtual space can lead to purposive discovery, as in Baudrillard's proposition of play as an epistemological methodology (chapter one). At the same time, game worlds can act as a 'Trojan horse' of distraction or deferral, recalling Baudrillard's Disneyland and Wallace's yellow smiley face in *Infinite Jest* (chapter three). In *Plowing the Dark*, play on one level is subsumed into purpose on another, drawing a parallel between the virtual worlds of digital technology and the infrastructural worlds of political organisation.

III. 'Let's Go Into the Computer Game': *God Jr.*[460]

While *Plowing the Dark* deals with institutional and political power dynamics, *God Jr.* focuses on a psychological sense of control. The Cavern employees were driven by pursuits of scientific knowledge and aesthetic fulfilment, but Jim's motivation for entering a virtual world is grief; he seeks access to his dead son Tommy through playing Tommy's old computer game, following the avatar's footsteps with the erratic belief that they somehow encode their previous player.

What the game provides for Jim is a variation on Fredric Jameson's 'cognitive mapping'. At the end of his discussion of the Bonaventure Hotel, as mentioned in chapter one, Jameson describes the difficulties of navigating 'postmodern hyperspace', which has 'succeeded in transcending the capacities of the individual human body to locate itself, to organize its immediate surroundings perceptually, and cognitively to map its position in a mappable external world'.[461] In the 1988 essay where he first proposes the idea, Jameson

[460] In his interview with Cooper, Danny Kennedy remarks that *God Jr.* is 'not like the story of the death of a person told through a narrative form that originated in a computer game, it's much more like – "let's go into the computer game"…' See Danny Kennedy, '"It's the shift that creates": An Interview with Dennis Cooper, 12 July 2007' in *Dennis Cooper: Writing at the Edge*, ed. by Paul Hegarty and Danny Kennedy (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2012), pp. 191–209 (p. 198).

[461] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), p. 44.

identifies two means of mapping which he nevertheless acknowledges as flawed: conspiracy as the 'poor person's means of cognitive mapping' and the 'autoreferentiality' of much postmodernist art. The latter 'takes the form of a play with reproductive technology – film, tapes, video, computers, and the like – which is, to my mind, a degraded figure of the great multinational space that remains to be cognitively mapped'.[462] However, the various examples of 'reproductive technology' which Jameson has grouped together are themselves distinct in form. In the thirty years since Jameson wrote this essay, 'tapes' and 'video' have become redundant, while 'film' and 'computers' have undergone many developments with the expansion of the internet. The difficulties of cognitive mapping could be updated from postmodern hyperspace to post-postmodern cyberspace; the dense barrage of information surrounding the contemporary subject is mostly channelled through the internet and the digital technologies which allow access to it. In this context, the finite and formalised nature of video games might indeed be a 'degraded figure' of external space, but this miniaturisation and simplification provides a sense of navigability: a *feeling* of cognitive mapping, even if the player is static and no less disorientated outside the screen.

Jonathan Flatley has suggested a variation on cognitive mapping called affective mapping, discussing how literary texts can facilitate an affective defamiliarisation which orientates individual readers in a collective context of moods, affects, and 'structures of feeling'.[463] Perhaps another way of thinking about this is the affect *of* mapping: there is a sense of control produced by the ability to navigate, and games provide a space that facilitates this experience in contemporary culture. In a world of overwhelming information, digital games display graspable structure; their mechanics are designed to create a sense of mastery and their landscapes are custom-made for navigability, pitched at a precise level of difficulty that stimulates a sense of achievement at their completion.

In *God Jr.*, Jim's difficulty is not so much an inability to cognitively map himself within the 'external world' Jameson describes, but within the internal world of his own mind and emotions, including coming to terms with his son's death and a personal sense of culpability. It is this internal disorientation which prompts him to seek relief in the game: a world which is navigable, finite and mappable. His use of the game has no real teleological goal, because the

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[462] Fredric Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 347–60 (p. 356).

[463] Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

sense of teleology is itself the goal; the computer game provides comfort for Jim because of its structure's capacity to generate a sense of autonomy. While he feels increasingly helpless in the world outside, the game provides the omnipotence of being in the position of a god, and while his life is regressing, the game's levels provide a feeling of progression – a purpose and a quest. As Jim ascends the levels of the game he progresses deeper into fiction, since what is sought from the shadows is not knowledge but solace. The purpose here is not the possibility of light, but simply the act of plowing, even with the awareness that the soil is unable to generate fruit.

Alexander Galloway comments that simulation games where the operator 'hovers above the game, one step removed from its diegesis, tweaking knobs and adjusting menus' are known as '"God games"'.[464] In a similar vein, Danny Kennedy calls *God Jr.* a 'theology of gaming'.[465] Jim's game avatar is a simulated bear, and a rumour spreads throughout the world of the game that this bear avatar is God. Playing God provides the protagonist with a sense of autonomy; he is in control of the other characters because he comes from outside the system, occupying the top position in the hierarchy of power. When a snake in Level 4 doesn't believe his god status, Jim decides to call his bluff:

> I explained how I'd made the world out of this stuff called computer code and could so easily delete him. […] He was to give us our new honeycomb this second, or I would have him re-rendered as a non-golden rock or something even worse.[466]

What Jim describes as bluffing is theoretically true: if a god is defined as an executive function, then Jim fulfils this definition, and it is technically possible for him to modify the code of the game. He comes from the sunlit region outside Plato's cave, while the game and its characters exist as shadows. With the consciousness that he possesses from this higher level of reality, Jim can perceive a meaning in the 'shadows' – or pixels – that the simulated bear cannot. What to the bear is pattern, to Jim is sentience: a ferret in the game speaks 'after a pause that strikes me as thoughtful. To the bear, it was more like watching a strand of hair be combed' (83). The world of the video game is a world of pattern that might generate meaning for the level beyond

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[464] Alexander R. Galloway, *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 19.

[465] Kennedy, p. 209.

[466] Dennis Cooper, *God Jr.* (New York: Black Cat, 2005), p. 113. All further references are taken from this edition and cited within the text.

it, but this meaning is unobservable within the level itself. Through applying the higher consciousness drawn from the world of light, Jim perceives aspects of the shadow-world which the 'beings' on that level do not.

As well as autonomy, the second purpose of the game for Jim is progression, as it provides him with the sense that he is accessing his son's mind. *God Jr.* opens with Jim governing the construction of a monument for Tommy, based on an image that his son supposedly drew. It later transpires that the drawing was by Tommy's girlfriend Mia, based on a building in the video game. Jim's ostensible purpose in playing the game is to unlock the monument because his son had also tried to unlock it, and Mia comments: 'Tommy thought that if he couldn't unlock it, it had to be important. But it was only a glitch in the game' (34). Yet the locked monument holds more significance than if it were open, because if it cannot be unlocked, it cannot be solved, and if it cannot be solved it cannot disappear as a goal. Gaston Bachelard identifies this logic in *The Poetics of Space*, when he remarks that 'there will always be more things in a closed, than in an open, box. To verify images kills them, and it is always more enriching to imagine than to experience'.[467] Opening the monument would similarly kill it. It remains unclear as to whether the monument is really a glitch, but its insolvability keeps Jim on a perpetual quest. It keeps him travelling through the game's levels; without the levels, he has nothing to hold onto. In the real world, there are no levels: everything is unsolvable and unformalised. Conversely, the game world provides the abstract sense of movement and progression. For Jim, the game is a means of cognitive mapping whereby he can locate himself and travel teleologically at the expense of reality.

At the same time, he is only mapping himself within the system of the game; this is to say, his *feeling* of location and navigation has no external referent. The experiences that Jim derives from the game world – namely, power and progression – carry no valence outside the game; autonomy inside the game exerts an equal and regressive force outside it, where Jim becomes increasingly helpless and withdrawn. As his wife Bette comments when she finds him playing: 'if you want to know the truth, you look crazy' (90). Sometimes an awareness of this futility seeps into his experience of the game itself; slipping between levels of perception, Jim is caught in the incongruity of expecting features only available in the world of light (sympathy, compassion, conversation) from shadows. A talking plant articulates that 'I sense you want to spill your guts, but don't [...]. I wouldn't respond if I could' (99). The plant is two dimensional;

[467] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1964), p. 89.

like Tommy's monument, it has 'no insides' (22), unable to respond beyond its programming. Jim encounters the same affective flatness in a well, which 'rather bluntly explained that it had no idea what I was whining about' (128). The well's logic 'shouldn't have surprised me. It was just a fake hole in fake ground, for heaven's sake [...]. Still, at the time, I hoped its walls might spring a leak or two in some surreal takeoff on sympathy' (128). The affective flatness of the hole corresponds with the superficiality of Jim's god-like position, which is revealed in these moments to be as two-dimensional as the video game screen: a simulated empowerment which, from a higher level of perception, is a growing dependency.

The levels of Jim's game carry him towards the text's conclusion, which turns out to be a state of representation whose original object is simply absent: 'Let's say the extremely smooth grass in cemeteries is fake grass, and there is no one and nothing underneath it' (163). If pattern in the world of the game creates meaning for creatures from the world outside it, this can also work in reverse; by the end of *God Jr.*, Jim interprets the meaning of his own world according to the two-dimensional pattern of the game. This leaves surface without depth: the representation of death, without death. In the vocabulary of Plato's parable, there is the shadow without its object. Jim finds solace in two-dimensionality with the qualification that this solace is as two-dimensional as the structure that generates it.

God Jr. asks whether progression in a simulated world amounts to anything in real life or shrinks into triviality. This is the mysticism of *God Jr.*: sacrificing the material world in favour of contemplation, progressing and regressing at the same time. Cooper takes the game mechanics that are being formalised and commercialised in gamification, and applies them to the human mind, illustrating the delicate play of emotions that both infuse and are generated by these structures. These include the sense of power linked to playing the 'God' of a virtual world, and the sense of progression that comes with travelling through levels, both of which allow Jim a means of cognitive mapping within a finite space. The text's ending indicates that Jim chooses the world of the game: he chooses to become a shadow, relinquishing the knowledge of three-dimensionality given by the light and accepting a perception of a world without 'insides'. Although outside the screen this is a surrender of control, the game is a more pragmatic tool than Plato's illuminated knowledge. It is a tool that allows Jim to, like Taimur, 'make sense of the senseless' at a time when the senseless is the only reality available.

In the subjective interaction between players and digital games, Jameson's 'degraded' representations provide a means of mapping oneself in a context of post-postmodern cyberspace. Though it may mean little outside the screen, the navigability of these games

stimulates a sense of individual mastery which is enhanced by game mechanics including levels. The opportunity to play God (or, at least, play God games) is a driving force behind the expansion of the gaming industry that underpins Kirby's digimodernism. Here, the appeal of individual omnipotence is utilised by the higher omnipotence of market forces, and these dynamics are explored in the following section.

IV. The (Magic) Circle

In Dave Eggers's *The Circle*, power dynamics are again set in a context of institutional exploitation rather than individual psychology. The emphasis is not on a particular digital game, but on the game mechanics employed by a technology company with expanding influence – a dystopian satire that extrapolates the social media monopolies of Google and Facebook. Resembling Google's 'office playgrounds', features of the campus architecture such as the 'Electric Slide' (31), 'manmade waterfall' (32) and 'secret chamber' behind the wall of Eamon Bailey's office (27) would not be out of place in Ambrose's amusement park.[468] In this novel the theme of gaming is enacted in a corporate context, where the Circle is a company designed as a self-contained world geared towards emotionally controlling its employees through strategies of gamification.

Gamification involves the application of game techniques – formalised as game mechanics – to commercial environments in order to increase user engagement and productivity. This idea is not new but, as Robson et al. point out, the rise of digital technologies and social media has had a particular role in firms 'turning traditional processes into deeper, more engaging game-like experiences for many of their customers and for their employees'.[469] Zichermann and Linder suggest that gamification is partly a response to the dominating presence of digital games in twenty-first century culture; since the game industry thrives on distraction and 'cannibalizing other forms of entertainment', its features can be utilised and put towards other purposes.[470] Gamification strategies include 'points, badges, levels, challenges,

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[468] Dave Eggers, *The Circle* (London: Penguin, 2013), pp. 31, 32, 27. All further references are taken from this edition and cited within the text.

[469] Karen Robson, Kirk Plangger, Jan H. Kietzmann, Ian McCarthy, and Leyland Pitt, 'Is It All a Game? Understanding the Principles of Gamification', *Business Horizons*, 58.4 (2015), 411–20 (p. 411).

[470] Gabe Zichermann and Joselin Linder, *The Gamification Revolution: How Leaders Leverage Game Mechanics to Crush the Competition* (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2013), pp. xv–xvi.

and leaderboards'.[471] Zichermann and Cunningham give the example of American Express credit cards, with the colours of Green, Gold, Platinum, and Black indicating different levels of progression.[472] These mechanics manipulate consumers' affective responses; Zichermann and Linder remark that 'Great gamified experiences, like great games, invest heavily in cultivating a sense of mastery – and progression toward it at all times'.[473] Mastery is distinct from winning: while winning is about 'achieving a goal', mastery is about 'demonstrating control' through a 'continuous improvement process'.[474] Engagement is sustained through movement, where travelling towards the reward is more important than reaching it.

The role of levels in this process is illustrated through a *Guardian* article by Liv Siddall (2019), who describes her video game addiction.[475] Siddall begins by outlining the boredom of working in a local café as a teenager, before rushing home after every shift to play 'Diner Dash': a video game where one played a waitress in a busy restaurant. The game involved exactly the same work that she was performing in real life, but the appeal of the simulation was greater, partly due to its game mechanics. Siddall remarks: 'I was enthralled by the thrill that came with pleasing customers and advancing levels. How many levels were available was never made clear. The game seemed infinite. I'd play it for hours'.[476] The game's infinite levels play a trick; they provide an unending sense of progression, which is really a contradiction in terms, since levels lose definition without the reference point of an ending. Keeping the game's structure unclear leaves open the possibility of a conclusion – a finitude which holds out the promise of meaning – without ever reaching it, maintaining the thrill of advancement so that the player continues to play. Here levels are tools that tease with the suspense that comes from teleology, without actually providing it.

The most effective mechanism of gamification in *The Circle* is the company's continuous ranking and scoring. The Circle is founded on compulsive measurement which

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[471] Christopher Cunningham and Gabe Zichermann, *Gamification by Design: Implementing Game Mechanics in Web and Mobile Apps* (Sebastopol, CA: O' Reilly Media, 2011), p. ix.

[472] Ibid., p. 48.

[473] Zichermann and Linder, p. 15.

[474] Ibid., p. 16.

[475] Liv Siddall, 'My Land of Make Believe: Life After The Sims', *Guardian*, 6 October 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2019/oct/06/my-land-of-make-believe-life-after-the-sims-video-games-computers> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[476] Ibid.

gains meaning only through comparison, stimulating constant competition – Caillois's category of *agon*, as contest. The protagonist Mae, who initially works in Customer Experience, must answer queries from customers who rate her performance out of one hundred. Yet this scoring is involved in play as well as work; later Mae is given a 'Participation Rank', also known as 'Popularity Rank', which is calculated from social media activity. A personal engagement with these rankings is reinforced by the sense of exclusivity created by sub-groups: the top 2000 ranked employees are 'nicknamed T2K' and are a 'group of Circlers almost maniacal in their social activity and elite in their corresponding followers' (192). These statistics possess a powerful ability to evoke emotion, particularly as Mae's mind increasingly internalises the Circle's system. When her friend Annie sends a message praising her around the 10041 employees, which is forwarded 322 times leading to 187 follow-up comments, 'the validation felt good' (54). Conversely when her participation rank falls to the bottom 10000, she is 'hating herself' (183); unable to sleep, she stays awake until the early hours, attempting to 'break 3000' (191). Her reward for her efforts is '7716' virtual 'smiles' (192) which stimulate a 'new feeling of competence and confidence' (192). Recalling Siddall's 'Diner Dash', visceral reactions of hate, competence and confidence are all aroused by quantitative statistics.

The company's gamification strategies thus utilise the capacity of numbers to provide a form of security and navigation. Despite its abstraction, Mae's location within a ranking of thousands of people becomes increasingly vital, suggesting another form of Jameson's cognitive mapping as expressed in *God Jr.*: if an individual cannot cognitively map themselves in the vast world system surrounding them, they find an alternative (and 'degraded') virtual system which they *can* navigate – within which they *can* be located – even if this system has no meaning in the wider world. Like Jim's game, Mae's statistics soon become a form of medication; when she returns from a trip to see her parents, 'wired' with her nerves 'constantly alert', she seeks 'relaxation, and distraction' (371) in the quantifiable scoring which constituted her work in Customer Experience, 'knowing there she could be useful and that there, her efforts would be appreciated, immediately and demonstrably' (371). These responses are stimulated by patterns without referents; the point is not *what* she is completing, but the detached fact and feeling of completion; the point is not whether her work is actually useful, but that the company's system creates an aura of utility through the formalised reward process.

As she becomes increasingly cognitively integrated with the Circle's system, Mae traces every unpleasant feeling to a lack of knowledge: 'what had always caused her anxiety,

or stress, or worry, was not any one force, nothing independent and external – […] it was subjective: it was *not knowing*' (194). Accordingly, the emotional solution is knowing: 'If she knew […], there would be calm' (194). The Circle's constant reference to 'transparency' – the idea of everything being visible, everything known – suggests the Platonic dichotomy between light and shadow as knowledge and ignorance. The language of light and shadow is explicitly employed when politicians, using the Circle's technology, decide to 'go transparent', which involves constantly wearing a camera. The pressure join this scheme is captured by the apparently common-sense question: 'If you weren't operating in the light of day, what were you doing in the shadows?' (240). With transparency, 'there would be no more back rooms, no more murky deal-making. There would be only clarity, only light' (240–41).

However, if Plato's parable portrays an ascension into knowledge, the Circle's rhetoric of light and shadow suggests an ascension into information. Steven Connor discusses the distinction between information and knowledge; evaluating UNESCO's *Towards Knowledge Societies* report, he describes how knowledge is 'understood as information made meaningful by human interpretation'.[477] The limitation, however, is that 'knowledge in the UNESCO sense requires detachment and delay, while the very means of growing knowledge societies closes every possibility of delay, deferral or distance'.[478] As in Zygmunt Baumann's characterisation of liquid modernity as the 'era of instantaneity', *The Circle* extrapolates this tendency towards immediacy through the theme of transparency.[479] The shrinking of distance facilitated by technology in the text suggests the inhibition of knowledge, since information is not filtered or cognitively interpreted. Consequently, the Circle's enlightenment is the enlightenment of pure information: a glut of data which ceases to be meaningful. There is no selectivity and organisation, no interpretation, and therefore no real knowledge. The Circle constructs a world of increasing abstraction, mediated by gamified surveys and scorings which are progressively less attached to any external referent.

As well as light and shadow, a second dichotomy presented by the text is that between inside and outside, recalling the boundaries of Huizinga's magic circle. As soon as she enters the company, Mae thinks that her 'hometown, and the rest of California, the rest of America, seemed like some chaotic mess in the developing world. Outside the walls of the Circle, all

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[477] Steven Connor, *The Madness of Knowledge: On Wisdom, Ignorance and Fantasies of Knowing* (London: Reaktion, 2019), pp. 326.

[478] Ibid., p. 327.

[479] Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 15.

was noise and struggle, failure and filth. But here, all had been perfected' (30). The Circle is an apparent utopia carved into a dystopia, and yet the latter contains the former: its perfection is artificial, virtual, a small pocket of order. Mae's perception subscribes precisely to Huizinga's definition that play 'creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection'.[480] This nested 'order' has attendant emotional effects, as expressed when, during the first party, Mae meets Francis: 'because she trusted everyone within these Circle walls – she had at that moment so much love for everyone within those walls, where everything was new and everything allowed – she followed him back to the party' (33). The sentence enacts Mae's process of immersion, as she feels first 'trust' within the walls and then 'love': the circumscription of parenthesis performs the channelling of the emotion, demarcating depth. This inside-outside dialectic, manifested on the level of syntax, reveals her immersion in the magic circle of this formalised world.

As the novel continues, the Circle expands – both in the mind of the protagonist and in the company's influence on the world of the text. Bailey, commenting on the 'C' of the company's logo, remarks that the open space of the letter has always 'bothered' him (287): 'it's become symbolic of what's left to do here, which is to close it' (287). Demonstrating this closure on a screen, he remarks that 'a circle is the strongest shape in the universe. Nothing can beat it, nothing can improve upon it, nothing can be more perfect' (287). Incidentally, the appeal of the circle's geometry might also be why the 'magic circle' has become the popular term for Huizinga's playground. Bailey's concept of 'completion' involves dissolving the distinction between inside and outside, transforming the inside into the totality. On an individual level, Mae finds it 'increasingly […] difficult to be off-campus' (370). Outside there are 'homeless people', 'assaulting smells', 'the chaos of an orderless world' (370); inside, all is 'familiar' and without 'friction' (370). Just as the Circle as a corporation seeks to swallow the world outside it, so is the same inclination enacted in Mae's cognition.

However, the dissolution of the magic circle is also the dissolution of the game; without the definition of a playground, play ceases to be play. The Circle's expansion is equivalent to forgetting about the more real world that contains it: equivalent to the dissolution of the world of light upon return to Plato's shadows. The inability to leave the Circle means taking its formalistic structures for the entire reality, which is to take information for knowledge,

[480] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), p. 10.

measurement for matter and shadow for light. Eggers hypothesises this in the novel's ending; the final section of the book opens with ‘to have gotten so close to apocalypse – it rattled her still’ (489). This is the final irony; despite the Circle’s professed transparency, the etymology of apocalypse is disclosure or revelation [Greek: *αποκάλυψη*]. Mae had been so close to *disclosure* – to a truth not found in information but in its interpretation, which would expose the corporation’s covert totalitarianism – and yet she averted it. Like Jim in *God Jr.*, Mae chooses the shadows; a semblance of control which, outside the circle, is a surrender of control. She chooses to forget the outside of the magic circle and take the shadows for the entirety, since the shadows are disguised by a rhetoric of light.

V. Unplayful Narrative

Despite their subject matter, *Plowing the Dark*, *God Jr.* and *The Circle* are the least formally playful works considered in this thesis so far. In contrast with the metafictional tricks of *Lost in the Funhouse*, the stylistic extravagance of *Infinite Jest*, the typographical experimentations of *House of Leaves* and the material innovations of *Tree of Codes*, these novels employ conventional narrative techniques. Indeed, they may be said to participate in a trend that Adam Kelly identifies as ‘formally conventional fiction’: the premise that twenty-first century fiction has turned to a re-affirmation of conventional forms, evident in both contemporary literature and authorial commentaries by Jeffrey Eugenides, David Foster Wallace, Junot Diaz and Jonathan Franzen.[481] Kelly proceeds to account for this ‘widespread praise of formal convention in contemporary American fiction’ by arguing that it is a response to a neoliberal, anti-institutional impulse associated with the formal experimentation of postmodernism.[482]

In the case of the above authors, I am limiting my observations of formal convention to the three works discussed rather than their *oeuvre* in general; Dennis Cooper in particular has experimented with multi-media forms, including his recent project investigating the narrative potential of the blog.[483] Still, it is significant that, in critical discourse, these authors are frequently situated at the tail-end of postmodernism. Jeremy Green reads Powers in terms of

[481] Adam Kelly, ‘Formally Conventional Fiction’, in *American Literature in Transition, 2000–2010* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 46–60 (pp. 46, 46–7).

[482] Ibid., pp. 47–8.

[483] See Dennis Cooper, *DC’S: The Blog of Author Dennis Cooper* <https://denniscooperblog.com/> [accessed 26 September 2020].

‘Late Postmodernism’, suggesting that he emphasises temporal continuity and ‘tradition’ in his work; Leora Lev writes that Cooper draws upon European avant-garde literature as well as ‘urban, pop-cultural, fin de siècle postmodernism’; Virginia Pignagnoli groups Eggers, along with Danielewski and others, under ‘post-postmodern fiction’.[484] Formal conventionality is conspicuous because it comes after postmodern ontological experimentation – a conspicuousness accentuated when the topic in question is play.

The Circle is the most generic of the three texts. Eggers’ novel adopts the conventions of dystopia, a genre which might be said to have an educative purpose: by extrapolating current circumstances into hypothetical apocalypse, dystopia acts as a warning, and a warning implies the possibility of change. Gordin, Tilley and Prakash remark: ‘utopias and dystopias by definition seek to alter the social order on a fundamental, systemic level. They address root causes and offer revolutionary solutions’.[485] Envisioning the consequences of a cultural tendency can change its trajectory; in Roger Travis’s reading of Plato’s allegory, depicting the failure to climb out of the shadows can enact a pedagogical function outside the system.[486] Narrative conventionality is a means of achieving this educative purpose by constructing an implicit compact with readers through devices including hyperbole and irony. The effect of both devices relies on a shared understanding between reader and author; by exaggerating and inverting social tendencies, they expose absurdities rendered invisible by familiarity.

Much of *The Circle* is written in what Dorrit Cohn calls narrated monologue, or free indirect speech, where the narratorial voice imperceptibly merges with the voice of the protagonist. Cohn explains: ‘Imitating the language a character uses when he talks to himself, [the narrated monologue] casts that language into the grammar a narrator uses in talking about

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[484] Jeremy Green, ‘Late Postmodernism and Cultural Memory’, in *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 117–62; Leora Lev, ‘Introduction’, in *Enter at Your Own Risk: The Dangerous Art of Dennis Cooper*, ed. by Leora Lev (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), pp. 15–39 (p. 15); Virginia Pignagnoli, ‘Narrative Theory and the Brief and Wondrous Life of Post-Postmodern Fiction’, *Poetics Today*, 39.1 (2018), 183–99 (p. 187).

[485] Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash, ‘Introduction. Utopia and Dystopia beyond Space and Time’, in *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*, ed. by Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 1–18.

[486] Roger Travis, ‘Bioshock in the Cave: Ethical Education in Plato and in Video Games’, in *Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values through Play*, ed. by Karen Schrier and David Gibson (Hershey, PA: Information Science Reference, 2010), pp. 86–101.

him, thus superimposing two voices that are kept distinct in the other two forms'.[487] Cohn identifies irony and sympathy as effects achieved through this technique. If sympathy is considered in terms of its etymological sense of likeness or affinity, these two effects respectively suggest distance and proximity.

Discussing Eggers' use of free indirect discourse in *The Circle*, Carmen Bueno posits that the technique manipulates distance throughout the novel. While initially inviting readers to 'identify' with Mae and 'recognize the possibilities offered by the Circle's transhumanist approach', Bueno suggests that Eggers later attempts to 'undermine readers' empathy towards the protagonist, creating instead emotional distance from her and, consequently, from the values she promotes'.[488] Yet I would argue that the ending of *The Circle* is not necessary an undermining of empathy, but a means of construing complicity – enacting Cohn's 'sympathy' not in an emotional sense of pity, but in a technical sense of affinity. The novel ends with Mae, fully indoctrinated, wondering what her comatose friend Annie is thinking:

> What was going on in that head of hers? It was exasperating, really, Mae thought, not knowing. It was an affront, a deprivation, to herself and to the world. She would bring this up with Stenton and Bailey […]. They needed to talk about Annie, the thoughts she was thinking. Why shouldn't they know them? The world deserved nothing less and would not wait. (491)

The narrative slips between third person narration and the free indirect discourse with which it concludes: it is Mae, not the narrator, who asserts that the world deserves to know. The structurally imperceptible slip from one voice to another resembles the gradual identification of Mae's own voice with the ideology of the corporation. While ironic, the rhetorical question simultaneously invites identification as readers articulate it themselves in the process of reading, briefly merging their own internal voices with Mae's and inhabiting the Circle's perspective.

The effect of this is that readers are both complicit by speaking in Mae's voice, and above their own complicity through the awareness facilitated by irony: 'Why shouldn't they know them?' is a rhetorical question on the level of Mae's mind, but non-rhetorical on the level

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[487] Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 105.

[488] Carmen Laguarta Bueno, 'Transhumanism in Dave Eggers' *The Circle*: Utopia vs. Dystopia, Dream vs. Nightmare', *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*, 22 (2018), 165–88 (pp. 167–68, p. 177).

of readers. Writing on Austen and free indirect style, D. A. Miller conceives of the technique as a 'kind of turnstile that helps organize the boundary, and recycle the binary, of an antithesis'.[489] Perhaps the antithesis in this context is tonal; narrated monologue is a means of 'recycling' the dynamics of distance and proximity, irony and sympathy, mastery and being mastered. The control dynamics enacted through gamification techniques within the text are paralleled by the literary techniques used *by* the text, with the distinction that readers – unlike characters – are afforded an awareness of these dynamics.

Ultimately, *The Circle* flatters readers, placing them on a higher plane of logic because they observe absurdities that characters cannot. Pignagnoli suggests that 'Mae and the other employees are puppet-like characters who express no interest in deep thought'; Eggers 'employs archetypal characters hinting to the genre of science fiction where ciphers or types are quite common' [sic].[490] Drawing on archetypes and conventions to make characters explicitly shadows emphasises readers' own positions in the world of light, stimulating a dramatic irony which Bueno suggests situates readers in a 'critical position towards these technologies'.[491] Pignagnoli similarly concludes that *The Circle* offers 'quite explicit ethical warning'.[492] It is the combination of irony and complicity which performs this warning through reverse psychology. In a *Guardian* article, Edward Docx points out that an essay by Franzen made similar points to Eggers's novel, but suffered an online backlash. Docx continues that 'although Eggers is saying all the same things as Franzen (and so much more), he makes his case not through the often tetchy medium of the essay, but in the glorious, ever resilient and ever engaging form of the novel'.[493] By inviting readers to derive their own conclusions, Eggers avoids didacticism and confers autonomy – the latter heightened by the fact that, in contrast to texts in previous chapters, *The Circle* actively does *not* play tricks on readers by engaging in postmodern diegetic games. Instead, irony and hyperbole allow for easy reading between the lines, establishing an implicit trust. Rather than fear and confusion, readers experience control,

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[489] D. A. Miller, *Jane Austen, or The Secret of Style* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 59.

[490] Virginia Pignagnoli, 'Surveillance in Post-Postmodern American Fiction', in *Spaces of Surveillance: States and Selves*, ed. by Susan Flynn and Antonia Mackay (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 151–67 (p. 156).

[491] Bueno, p. 168.

[492] 'Surveillance', p. 163.

[493] Edward Docx, '*The Circle* by Dave Eggers – review', *Guardian*, 9 October 2013 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/oct/09/circle-dave-eggers-review#maincontent> [accessed 26 September 2021].

placed on a higher level of enlightenment than the brainwashed protagonist as narrative conventions allow them to gain mastery over the novel's subject matter.

At the same time, this subject matter suggests that giving somebody a sense of mastery over a virtual world is a means of manipulating them. Consequently, there is another level of complexity implicit in the power dynamics of a commercially successful dystopia. Does the novel actually enlighten, in the Platonic sense, or does it simply construct a *sense* of enlightenment? *The Circle* is popular partly because its straightforward style makes it accessibly easy to read – an ease recalling 'Infinite Jest', which Wallace attempts to counteract through the difficulty of *Infinite Jest*. Aptly, a *Daily Mail* review of *The Circle* remarked: 'Prepare to be addicted'.[494] The commercial success of *The Circle* has led to its being made a film; mediated by the increasingly monopolistic corporations that it apparently satirises, the nature of its critique alters. Ease of narrative achieved through formal conventionality is a means through which the commercial market can master consumers, where readers' feelings of mastery over the novel and the novel's ideas are utilised for economic profit. The power dynamics depicted within the text, further mediated by the power dynamics of narrative techniques, are mediated again by the power dynamics of its economic context.

If *Plowing the Dark* is less commercially successful than *The Circle*, it is also less easily navigated: while the former is a continuous narrative straightforwardly divided into three sections, Powers's text employs two distinct narratives with interspersions that appear to belong to either, neither or both. This demands additional work. The fact that Powers's two narratives are largely separate invites readers to identify the links between them themselves, encouraging a strategy of reading alert to analogies which contribute to a larger thematic coherence; readers must 'plow the dark' of two distinct plotlines to identify the overarching unity. These strategies can in turn be applied to identifying analogies outside the text. Powers uses literary form to teach a methodology, based on the premise that American gaming and American politics are insidiously connected.

By only revealing the overarching military purposes of the Cavern at the end of the novel, Powers enacts the experience of realising one's reality is a shadow, shocking readers out of complacency. This parallels the way that the funhouse of metafiction shifts diegetic level

[494] Stephanie Cross, 'The Circle', *Mail Online*, 3 October 2013 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-2442020/Dave-Eggers-THE-CIRCLE.html> [accessed 26 September 2020].

without warning, but here the emphasis is on the ontology of digital technology rather than the ontology of fiction. Accordingly, the stable ontology of fiction is an invitation to take games seriously, warning readers that a feeling of one's own empowerment can be the means of somebody or something else's empowerment. Formal conventionality returns narrative devices to tools rather than play apparatus; the slide transforms back into the cellar door, the ladder to a piece of equipment. Rather than constituting an architecture of play, literary structure offers a commentary on digital architectures of play, highlighting the potential of inverted power dynamics in subjective interaction with virtual worlds. The capacity of narrative as a tool here is exemplified by the text's resolution, which is performed through literary form: the two narratives of Adie and Taimur miraculously overlap when the protagonists meet in the Cavern simulation of Hagia Sophia. As put by Katherine Szadziewicz, this encounter is an impossibility 'rendered possible through the contrivance of Powers's narrative art'.[495] Paralleling the digital tools of the Cavern, the tools of narrative allow for the speculation of hypothetical, transcendent solutions which function on a poetic rather than literal plane.

That formal conventions emphasise fiction as a tool rather than fiction as a game is also suggested by *God Jr.*, although here the purpose is less didactic than aesthetic. Kennedy comments that Cooper's books following the George Miles cycle

> deal much more overtly with presenting to the reader different strains of narration in a much more self-contained and explicit form – so for example in *My Loose Thread* you have the documentary, in *The Sluts* it's the message-boards, and in *God Jr.* you have the videogame.[496]

In all these examples, Cooper is using narrative form to probe digital form. In the case of *God Jr.*'s, each of the text's three titled parts are divided into small sections: the first by asterisms, the second by spacing where the text begins halfway down the page, the third by asterisms that additionally separate dialogue within the computer game. Structuring the narrative in self-contained blocks constitutes a kind of pixilation, mimicking the game's discrete divisibility. At the same time, the first person present tense creates a lyrical, confessional tone. Cooper's language is concise; most of the sections begin with clear, declarative statements such as the

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[495] Katherine Szadziewicz, 'Novel Realities and Simulated Structures: The Posthuman Fusion of Forms and Simulacra in Richard Powers's *Plowing the Dark*', *Aspeers*, 7 (2014), 89–113 (p. 109).

[496] Kennedy, p. 197.

consecutive ‘Al tries to grab the phone away from Marianne’ (10) and ‘Joe walks into the office’ (11). Though Jim’s mental condition becomes increasingly confused, the tight control of narrative form keeps the text in high definition: a lucidity that accentuates the character’s absorption. As in the case of Mae in *The Circle*, readers remain one level above the characters, retaining a sense of control that the latter emphatically lack.

The structure of *God Jr.* is illuminated by a contrast with *The Sluts* (2004), which was published around the same time.[497] The texts are starkly distinct in both form and content; while *God Jr.* tracks a grieving father, *The Sluts* is set on a website for gay escorts involving extreme sexual violence and physical abuse. *The Sluts* explores sexual play as opposed to formalised games, as well as the play of identities, nicknames and personas facilitated by internet anonymity. Characters are never revealed beyond the mediation of the information they post, making narrative reliability indeterminable for readers as well as other characters: throughout the novel it is impossible to distinguish fictional ‘truth’ from fictional fiction, as message board accounts rewrite and contradict each other. However, *God Jr.* is enacted at a further level of removal: rather than being implicated in an unstable magic circle, readers observe a character grappling with an unstable magic circle.

Cooper calls *The Sluts* a ‘kind of game about what was real and not real’, while Kennedy describes it as a ‘*playground* of the themes you had before’ [italics mine].[498] *The Sluts*, which is not about formal games, is formally playful; *God Jr.*, which is about formal games, is formally intricate but not playful as such. Perhaps this is partly due to the distinctness of the two forms Cooper explores. Though online, message boards are still verbal, and *The Sluts* suggests a variation on epistolary fiction translated into a contemporary context. However, video games are primarily a visual, non-verbal medium, which does not allow for the same kind of correspondence between form and content unless electronic elements are incorporated into the textual.[499] What Cooper achieves in *God Jr.* is a superimposition of conventions: a confessional lyric literary mode is the lens through which to perceive the structure of games. *God Jr.* illustrates the interrelation of media by keeping the narrative hovering between the two, encapsulated by the line: ‘the sky is so low and flat that I can pick up every brushstroke’ (91–2). We are neither allowed to enter the game as a complete, self-

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[497] Dennis Cooper, *The Sluts* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2004).

[498] Kennedy, p. 195.

[499] By this I refer to video games at the time of the novella (2005), since early 1980s games were text-based.

contained world (since we are constantly reminded that it is two-dimensional; affectively empty; algorithmic), but nor do we evade identification with its imaginative reality. Suspended between the two, readers are aware of – rather than implicated in – the suspension. Retaining this distance facilitates a kind of phenomenology of digital games: allowing readers to retain mastery over their perception of the narrative retains the spotlight on the character's confusion, creating both a careful character study and aesthetic investigation of what happens when the conventions of one medium interact with those of another.

In all three texts, formal conventionality is a means of taking play seriously. Positioning readers at a level of remove, observing the conflation of levels of reality rather than being implicated in their confusion, reinforces an ethical warning and constructs an observational and aesthetic vantage point. It is also a means of shifting from the 'ontological dominant' of postmodernism to a 'technological dominant' implicit in whatever comes next, examining levels of reality and architectures of play through the forms of digital technology. The principle of metafiction has migrated; levels of reality find expression through different media, translating Plato's power dynamics into a contemporary context.

VI. Conclusion

Returning to Kirby's digimodernist ranking in light of the above analysis, perhaps the following questions can be formulated: building upon 'what does fiction *do*?', we can ask 'what does *fiction* do?' In other words, what is particular about literature as both medium and practice in expressing the levels that underlie instances as diverse as Plato's cave and digital games? Compared to a history or philosophy of levels, literature as practice engages voice to construe complicity. It enacts rather than describes the power dynamics of levels, drawing upon the inherent interactivity of reading to perform the tension between mastering a virtual world and being mastered by it. At the same time, as instantiated by the generic conventions of dystopia, literature possesses a critical capacity accentuated in the above cases by *unplayful* narrative. The use of formal conventions constructs a sense of readerly mastery in a manner resisted by postmodern ontological confusion – which is, in turn, put to investigative, pedagogical and potentially manipulative purpose.

Plowing the Dark, *God Jr.* and *The Circle* illustrate how the self-contained virtual worlds constructed through digital architectures of play evoke feelings of control in the player, who is placed in the relational position of a 'god' over this world. However, these games

simultaneously exert their own force as players come to desire the feeling of progression and completion stimulated through formalised levels and other game mechanics. In an ironic inversion, the player or participant's sense of control is a means through which they can be controlled by a higher level of social organisation – or, in the case of *God Jr.*, by their own addiction. Texts so deeply concerned with the forms of digital technology correspondingly invite consideration of their own literary form. As made conspicuous by their temporal proximity to the formal experimentations of postmodernism, these novels are not particularly playful, exhibiting a narrative conventionality which has specific effects: keeping the magic circle of narrative diegesis intact allows readers to gain a sense of mastery over the world of the texts. Nevertheless textual conventions, like game mechanics, are powerful tools, possessing a capacity for manipulation distinct from metafictional disorientation. Ultimately we are left with a warning that applies equally to the virtual world of narrative and the virtual world of digitality: that the seduction of mastery is a means of being mastered.

The final chapter of this thesis will explore another feature of digital development which has a particular relationship with levels: the figure of the network. Delineating the relationship between 'network thinking' and 'level thinking', I elaborate on this idea of levels as tools – providing a means of cognitive mapping through Jameson's 'degraded' representational systems, and constituting an inherent feature of navigating both material and immaterial spaces.

Chapter Six

The Level and the Network: Apocalyptic Endgames in *Underworld*, *The Overstory* and *Zero K*

I. Introduction

The network is the most prominent figure in recent critical discourse; in *Network Aesthetics* (2016), Patrick Jagoda delineates a 'network imaginary', suggesting that the network is the 'principle architecture and most resonant metaphor of the globalizing world'.[500] Tracing the development of network theories in economic, political and technological domains from the mid twentieth century, he posits that the various strands of network thinking formed a coherent research program in the 1990s, which also saw the popularisation of the internet as an exemplification of the network form.[501] Sabine Sielke places the timeline slightly later, commenting that network theories gained 'currency and popularity at the turn of the millennium'.[502] Writing on networks has certainly been active in the last two decades, and a special issue of American Studies collecting essays on network thinking was published in 2016. In one of these essays Hanjo Berressem points out that while most contemporary references to network theory centre around Bruno Latour, these ideas can be traced to earlier instantiations of networked figurations in Michel Serres and Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980).[503] He comments that Latour had considered calling his Actor Network Theory 'rhizomatic', inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's central figure, which is particularly resonant for American culture: 'its both conceptual and concrete disinterest in stability, origins, ontology and metaphysics makes America eminently rhizomatic and thus eminently Latourian'.[504]

Since network thinking appears across various disciplines and philosophical theories, networks are tricky to define. Recurring features include a lack of hierarchy; Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome is described as an 'acentred, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without

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[500] Patrick Jagoda, *Network Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 3.

[501] Ibid., p. 11.

[502] Sabine Sielke, 'Network and Seriality: Conceptualizing (Their) Connection', *American Studies*, 60.1 (2015), 81–95 (p. 81).

[503] Hanjo Berressem, 'Déjà Vu: Serres after Latour, Deleuze after Harman, "Nature Writing" after "Network Theory"', *American Studies*, 60.1 (2015), 59–79 (p. 59).

[504] Ibid., p. 68.

a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states'.[505] Jagoda defines the network as a 'complex and interconnected structure made up of groups of "nodes" that are connected by "links"', comprising features including 'openness, flexibility, extensibility, complexity, internal asymmetry, and an interdependence of individual parts'.[506] Nevertheless, he also notes that networks are 'ontologically slippery, approached simultaneously as objective things in the world – natural structures or infrastructural technologies – and as metaphors or concepts to capture emergent qualities of interconnection in our time'.[507] A network, as Richardt, Schaefer and Schober reinforce, can be an abstract model, a technology, or a physical structure of nature as evident in neural pathways and spider webs.[508]

Acentric and non-hierarchical, networks are frequently considered antithetical to levels; David Ciccoricco remarks that a 'hierarchical structure sits in opposition to a networked one' as the latter has 'no dominant axis of orientation'.[509] The question arises as to whether hierarchical paradigms are still relevant in an age of global connectivity and the internet. Investigating why the network is so popular in contrast to the 'comparatively undertheorized' series, Sielke distinguishes the 'indifference' of the series from the 'ethics' of the network.[510] She suggests that the latter 'cherishes proximity' while the former 'retains distance in approximation': 'The indifference of seriality resonates with an attitude of disinterestedness and detachment, a kind of unconcern and (legal) impartiality not to be confused with a (psychological) aloofness and apathy'.[511] Yet indifference, disinterestedness and detachment are no more inherent features of serial structures than they are of networks. Less abstractly, the examples Sielke gives of seriality range from Aristotle's 'hierarchical taxonomy of essentially distinct species' to serialised novels and television episodes.[512] The serial structure of television episodes and novels is far from indifferent, playing with dynamics of anticipation and suspense,

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[505] Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1987), p. 21.

[506] Jagoda, p. 8.

[507] Ibid., p. 4.

[508] Ulfried Reichardt, Heike Schaefer, and Regina Schober, 'Introduction: Network Theory and American Studies', *American Studies*, 60.1 (2015), 11–15 (p. 11).

[509] David Ciccoricco, *Reading Network Fiction* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), p. 5.

[510] Sielke, p. 81.

[511] Ibid., pp. 89, 90.

[512] Ibid., p. 84.

expectation and fulfilment, created through the manipulation of tension and temporal gaps in a linear sequence.

Another reason given for the current prominence of networks is their diagrammatic utility. Sielke suggests that serial structures are difficult to conceptualise and do not lend themselves to visualisation in the same way as networks.[513] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun similarly posits that the network's popularity derives from its utility as a 'theoretical tool', 'making visible the invisible' by mapping and visualising hidden relations between things.[514] She associates this with a 'logic of empowerment', a term which appears frequently in network rhetoric; Ciccoricco notes that the 'antihierarchical' nature of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome is said to have 'liberating and empowering implications for those who use it'.[515] He goes on to describe how this discourse of liberation was taken up by early hypertext theorists, who argued for the capacity of hypertext to 'liberate its users from a systematic oppression of hierarchies, in both artistic and pedagogical practice'.[516]

While networks are indeed used across disciplines as tools of visualisation, the claim that they provide 'liberation' from oppressive hierarchies is not straightforward. Firstly, hierarchical structures are not necessarily repressive; ladders, for instance, can be both symbols and instruments of liberation. Secondly, networked structures possess their own potentially discomforting features. Alan Liu comments: 'If the network is our contemporary intuition of infinity, then its boundlessness is matched by an equally infinite, equally unreal hunger for security'.[517] The network provides a useful way of mapping contemporary information, but may be less suited to a more subjective form of cognitive mapping as networks 'privilege connection over location'.[518] As discussed in the introduction and throughout this thesis, levels suggest a specific kind of serial structure, emphasising an object's *positioning* in a hierarchy; the 'security' of 'location' mentioned by Liu can be provided by hierarchies that are organised as levels. As will be explored later in this chapter, particularly in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*, levels can be a cognitive crutch. Even if they have no navigational referent in the real world (such as

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[513] Sielke, pp. 85–86.

[514] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, 'Networks NOW: Belated Too Early', *American Studies*, 60 (2015), 37–58 (p. 41).

[515] Chun, p. 41; Ciccoricco, p. 5.

[516] Ciccoricco, p. 8.

[517] Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 42.

[518] Ciccoricco, p. 14.

the levels of a computer game), they provide a way for the mind to orientate itself within a self-contained system, as expressed by *God Jr*. If networks provide a liberation of nonhierarchical equivalence, levels offer the security of hierarchical location.

II. Levels, Networks and Play

The above analysis suggests that the popularity of networks is associated with features of proximity, empowerment and utility, even if a comparison with sequential structures reveals the nuances and limitations involved. Such dynamics are also stimulated in play, where networks can be used to create a feeling of community. This is identified by Jagoda; analysing the computer game *Journey*, he comments that it 'evokes an atmosphere of intense alone-togetherness – a feeling of being with another person over an unknown distance'.[519] He cites a player commenting on the game who describes 'How masterfully it plays with the feeling of *connectedness*', which is treated, continues Jagoda, as a 'common affective state'.[520] Still, there is a sequentiality inherent in a journey, manifested in this particular game through its organisation in levels. A journey involves movement, progression, and *Journey* is an example of how the network and the level intersect; if the former figure provides community, the latter creates continuity. The level and the network fuse as a feeling of connectedness is combined with a feeling of teleological movement.

One of the key aspects of the level game discussed so far is the physical kinesis of traversing such structures, as in the architecture of the funhouse. Deleuze and Guattari remark that rhizomatic theories suggest another way of travelling and moving: 'proceeding from the middle, through the middle, coming and going rather than starting and finishing'.[521] The middle, they say, is 'where things pick up speed'.[522] This language of movement can be mapped onto the physical equipment of the playground. Though all apparatus is physically finite, there is, as discussed in chapter three, a logic of intransitive travel at work – an emphasis on unending movement rather than conclusive navigation from one point to another. One slides down the slide not to travel from A to B but to climb back up and slide again. When Deleuze and Guattari

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[519] Jagoda, p. 2.

[520] Ibid.

[521] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Athlone Press, 1987), p. 25.

[522] Ibid.

remark that ‘Where are you going? Where are you coming from?’ are ‘totally useless questions’, they are articulating the attitude of the playground.[523] To travel for the sake of movement rather than destination, picking up speed in the middle, is the premise of *ilinx* in the form of the funhouse’s vertiginous, kinetic play.

In terms of the basic geometry of playground equipment, the fusion of levels and networks is exemplified by the rope pyramid: a web of rope that tapers up to a point which children climb up to reach. Physically, this is a combination of a network structure (web) and level structure (ladder). While teleological in one sense, with the implicit goal of climbing to the top, the rope pyramid is, like all playground equipment, designed to be traversed again and again, and in a number of ways. Children can design their own games around it, travelling around its edges or through the middle rather than necessarily progressing from bottom to top and back. In games of *ilinx* (rollercoasters, slides, spinning around) play does indeed pick up speed in the middle. At the same time, the beginning and end are necessarily there in order to give valence to the middle – to create a structure which *can* pick up speed.

In play and other cultural domains, networks and levels offer distinct and often interlocking affective possibilities that stem from their structural attributes. As Sielke remarks, while the dominant rhetoric suggests that the network is ‘more viable and visible than the series’, serial processes are actually just as ‘pervasive as networked alliances’. [524] She concludes that the ‘the successive dominance of series and network is the effect of the seriality of (dominant) technologies’, where ‘new technologies will evolve new tropes and new models’.[525] In this scheme, the network’s dominance arises out of our specific globalised, information-dominated society; when cultural conditions change, another figure will arise that better approximates the new structure.

Such a heuristic perspective is also expressed by Deleuze and Guattari, who qualify that the root-tree and canal-rhizome are ‘not two opposed models’: the first is a ‘transcendent model and tracing, even if it engenders its own escapes’ while the latter is an ‘immanent process that overturns the model and outlines a map, even if it constitutes its own hierarchies, even if it gives rise to a despotic channel’.[526] The rhizome has a methodological purpose, where ‘we invoke one dualism only in order to challenge another’, employing a ‘dualism of models only

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[523] Ibid.

[524] Sielke, p. 85.

[525] Ibid., p. 93.

[526] *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 20.

in order to arrive at a process that challenges all models'.[527] The series and the hierarchy are an 'entirely necessary enemy, the furniture we are forever rearranging'.[528] Recalling Baudrillard's eccentric circles, the implication is that significance lies not so much in the figure itself but in the friction generated by the interaction of figures developed throughout various cultural contexts. Here, the network and the level might be neither antithetical nor coexisting alternatives, but work in a productive interrelation. As heuristic tools, the two figures offset each other, illuminating each other's limitations and articulating their boundaries.

This interaction can be also be conceived in terms of two properties associated with the network and the level respectively: immanence and transcendence. Both terms are etymologically rooted in theology; immanence is defined as 'presence or dwelling in or within a person or thing' while transcendence is 'The attribute of being above' (OED). Daniel W. Smith summarises that 'an immanent or pure ontology would be an ontology in which there is nothing "beyond" or "higher than" or "superior to" Being'.[529] Deleuze explicitly characterises himself as a philosopher of immanence, suggesting that immanence is a condition of philosophy itself: 'Whenever there is transcendence, vertical Being, imperial State in the sky or on earth, there is religion; and there is Philosophy whenever there is immanence'.[530] For Deleuze, 'Transcendence is always a product of immanence'.[531] Immanence implies absolute proximity, which necessitates an absence of mystery and revelation. Accordingly, Thomas Carlson describes how a culture where all is 'made manifest – and thus available, calculable, and manipulable', affords 'no recess of darkness or mystery, no distance or transcendence, and in this sense it could rightly be termed an "apocalyptic" culture of "total presence"'.[532]

In exploring the relationship between the level and the network, I am additionally exploring the relationship between transcendence and immanence with their corresponding prepositions of 'above' and 'within'. Theodor Adorno outlines the flaws of both as

[527] Ibid.

[528] Ibid., p. 21.

[529] Daniel W. Smith, 'Deleuze and Derrida, Immanence and Transcendence: Two Directions in Recent French Thought', in *Between Deleuze and Derrida*, ed. by Paul Patton and John Protevi (London: Continuum, 2003), pp. 46–66 (p. 48).

[530] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 43.

[531] Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, trans. by Anne Boyman (New York: Urzone, 2001), p. 31.

[532] Thomas A. Carlson, 'Locating the Mystical Subject', in *Mystics: Presence and Aporia*, ed. by Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 207–38 (p. 210).

methodologies of criticism, arguing that it is a fallacy for the cultural critic to assume that they transcend culture and society. The critic is 'necessarily of the same essence as that to which he fancies himself superior': 'The choice of a standpoint outside the sway of existing society is as fictitious as only the construction of abstract utopias can be'.[533] Immanent criticism, on the other hand, 'holds in evidence the fact that the mind has always been under a spell' but 'on its own it is unable to resolve the contradictions under which it labours'.[534] Adorno continues that the very 'opposition between knowledge which penetrates from without and that which bores from within becomes suspect to the dialectical method', concluding that 'The dialectical critic of culture must both participate in culture and not participate'.[535]

If it is not possible to stand 'above' culture, perhaps transcendence can be considered in a relative sense. An individual can 'transcend' their own conceptualisation of culture by progressing towards a wider frame of reference without necessarily presenting this perspective as final or objective. This is to conceive of culture as, in the spirit of DeLillo's *Underworld*, a world divided into subjective worlds which operate on different scales: a network composed of perceptual subsets. Observing the totality of this network is not possible since a subject is necessarily part of it, yet standing above one's own previous perspective (conceived of as a kind of 'world') might itself be a form of transcendence. Here a subject is simultaneously immanent (always 'within' the network) and transcending (climbing up the rope pyramid, altering their relation to the structure which contains them). This is reinforced by the grammatical forms of the terms' derivations. While 'transcendence' is a verbal noun containing 'scandere', meaning to 'climb' (OED), immanence is a state or condition. While transcendence has a verb form ('transcending'), immanence does not. Transcendence grammatically encompasses movement and immanence stasis, mapping onto a distinction between the progression towards knowledge, and the achievement of that knowledge. Regarding the latter, the novels discussed below intimate that the fullest knowledge of the world-as-network is achieved not through perception but through participation: a cancellation of perception achieved at the limits of subjectivity. This alternative form of knowing involves entering a state of immanence without the relationality of awareness.

[533] Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), pp. 19, 31.

[534] Ibid., p. 32.

[535] Ibid.

Concluding their juxtaposition of arborescent and rhizomatic structures, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the tree imposes the verb 'to be' while the rhizome is the conjunction 'and'.[536] This chapter asks: what if we combine 'and' with 'to be'? The ladder and the web can be fused into a rope pyramid, and in digital games such as *Journey* a networked feeling of togetherness coexists with linear progression through levels. Yet this fusion is not necessarily seamless; there is also a friction between subjectively navigating levels of perception and an immanent realisation of the world-as-network, with the former indicated and the latter intimated. In the rest of this chapter I will consider these dynamics in three contemporary works of fiction: Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), Richard Powers's *The Overstory* (2018) and DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016).

III. Vertical Navigation: *Underworld* and *The Overstory*

Underworld and *The Overstory* are both concerned with endings and ecologies, as the former's 'underhistory of waste' tracks the effects of consumption while the latter's 'overhistory' of trees considers the depletion of natural resources through human production.[537] The comparison between them begins with the prepositions of their titles, both of which draw attention to the underlying and overarching systems that surround, both spatially and abstractly, the 'ground' level of everyday perception. Written twenty years apart, in 1997 and 2018, the texts possess structural and thematic similarities. Structurally, both are wide-ranging narratives composed of interconnected characters and plots, which lends them to network analysis. Thematically, both are driven by a sense of apocalypse and cataclysmic events that arise from the specific contexts of their writing. While the plot of *Underworld* ranges through the history of late twentieth century America spanning fifty years, investigating the threats and effects of nuclear warfare, *The Overstory* is concerned with the crisis of climate change – and its publication in April 2018 coincides with the founding of Extinction Rebellion in May 2018. Its plot follows a diverse group of characters connected through environmental activism involving the protection of trees, a point they all reach through highly varied individual trajectories. Both texts suggest the presence of a networked world, and yet this world is subjectively accessed

[536] *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 25.

[537] Patrick O'Donnell, '*Underworld*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Don DeLillo*, ed. by John N. Duvall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 108–21 (p. 114). 'Overhistory' is not a quotation from a text but my own coinage.

through vertical navigation: only by travelling under and over, cognitively as well as physically, can characters discover the connections underlying their condition.

DeLillo's novel repeatedly insists that 'everything is connected', and Jagoda regards *Underworld* as the exemplary 'network novel': it 'performs and encodes its sense of connectivity, at a formal level, in ways that are specific to an era saturated by networks'.[538] Nevertheless, a less frequently discussed aspect of the text is the subjective interaction with these connections, as many references to networks in *Underworld* are qualified with limitations in perceiving these networks. Moreover, such subjective limitations are described in terms of levels, as expressed by the quotation with which Jagoda open his chapter: 'And how can you tell the difference between orange juice and agent orange if the same massive system connects them at levels outside your comprehension?'[539] Networked connections exist on 'levels outside your comprehension': the world's network is so vast that it is unknowable. While one can understand that the capitalistic industries behind the sale of orange juice are related to the industries behind the chemical warfare that produces agent orange, the details are outside the framework of perception, which only apprehends the fact of connection. The implication is that the network exists objectively, but cannot be comprehended subjectively.

The sense of connections outside the boundaries of comprehension is expressed through the Pocket, a facility for the development of nuclear weapons. The Pocket is described as 'one of those nice tight societies that replaces the world', 'self-enclosed and self-referring', a 'place and a language […] inaccessible to others' (412). Like E.T.H. in *Infinite Jest* or the Convergence in *Zero K*, it suggests an architecturally demarcated magic circle, functioning according to its own internal rules. It is also one of the text's multiple underworlds, 'inaccessible' to mainstream society. The nuclear work undertaken in the Pocket is a fundamental node in the network of the world system: its employees know that 'Everything connected at some undisclosed point down the systems line' (408), though the means by which this happens remain 'a splendid mystery' and 'source of wonder' (408). DeLillo suggests that there is a theoretical, retrospective, or omniscient space where everything connects – but this space is, again, 'outside […] comprehension', which tapers off into clouds of 'mystery' and

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[538] Jagoda, p. 46.

[539] Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1998), p. 465. All further references are taken from this edition and cited within the text.

‘wonder’. If the contemporary world is objectively structured as a network, this network is mediated by the limitations of subjectivity.[540]

The vertical architecture of underworlds and overworlds is simultaneously a psychological dichotomy of the hidden and exposed, the secret and the known: qualities conditioned by one’s perceptual vantage point. These dynamics are evoked in the novel’s depiction of waste, which the Soviet businessman Viktor calls ‘the *secret* history, the underhistory, the way archaeologists dig out the history of early cultures’ (791) [italics mine]. The ‘waste theorist’ (285) Jesse Detweiler proposes to ‘Bring garbage into the open. Let people see it and respect it. Don’t hide your waste facilities. Make an architecture of waste’ (286). Detweiler’s radical idea is to bring the ‘underworld’ of waste into the overworld of visibility, which links to his history as a ‘garbage guerrilla’ in the sixties who ‘stole and analyzed the household trash of a number of famous people’, printing his findings in the ‘underground press’ (286). The exposure of waste has affective implications; bringing secrets to light and revealing perversities, it is a source of guilt and shame for the individual to whom that waste belongs. J. Edgar Hoover, one of Detwiler’s victims, muses: ‘How odd it seemed that such a taken-for-granted thing, putting out the garbage, could suddenly be a source of the gravest anxiety’ (558). Waste is information, and the horror of this moment lies in the prospect of this information’s transition from underworld to overworld. Secrecy and guilt deal not with objective facts but with the subjectivity of how these facts are known, and such conditions are produced by relational distance and obfuscation rather than proximity and equivalence. The theme is epistemological: not about how things are connected, but who knows about the connections. The process of knowing, materially manifested through waste, is expressed in prepositional language, evoking the spatial levels of under and over, above and below.

The implication here is that what is ‘under’ corresponds to what is real: waste is the bare psyche, a nakedness and vulnerability, and throughout *Underworld* there is a correlation between depth and reality. Again, this link is phenomenological; a sense of reality is always located ‘under’ in the characters’ cognitive organisation of their experience, as exemplified through the protagonist Nick. When Nick leaves his underworlds behind at the end of the text, he longs to return to ‘the days when I was alive on this earth […] dumb-muscled and angry and

[540] The flipside to this argument is to perceive connections where connections do not exist, constructing a subjective network of paranoia. See Peter Knight, ‘Everything Is Connected: *Underworld’s* Secret History of Paranoia’, *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 45.3 (1999), 811–36. Still, my chapter centralises DeLillo’s depiction of ways in which connections are discovered and negotiated rather than paranoically invented.

real' (810). Reality is figured as under for the same reason that Baudrillard remarked that 'reality has become the game of reality': as Nick's own world and the world's industrial systems grow vertically upward, both in material skyscrapers and immaterial economies, they also become increasingly experienced as 'unreal'. They become abstractly formalised rather than forceful and frictional, losing the primal spontaneity of anger and play, recalling Baudrillard's thesis that in a society of simulation *paidia* becomes abstracted into *ludus*. Reality is figured spatially in secrets and tunnels, expressing the primitive etymological origins of language: 'follow the word through the tunnelled underworld of its ancestral roots' (826). The realities are the children's games and the hopscotched streets before they are swallowed by the architectures built above them, or embedded in the crypts of museum preservation.[541] The reality, DeLillo suggests, is waste; waste is the world's truth, the 'underhistory' that Jesse Detwiler sought to expose. Waste is reality because it both encodes each individual's information and endures, unsolved and undigested, as the remainder of consumption. An exemplary underworld, waste is the developed world's foundation – both its end and its apocalypse, as revelation.

The underworld is connected to the overworld, but the epistemological nuances of secrecy and hiddenness express this connection as a hierarchy of known and unknown. While these various worlds could retrospectively be plotted as equivalent nodes on a graph, subjectively they are encountered through the mediation of perception. Nevertheless, the prepositional relation of worlds in DeLillo's novel is not only the inherent condition of being located as a subject within a space, but a cognitive *tool* with which one can locate oneself. Nick consistently uses the idea of an 'underworld' to process the absence of his father, who disappeared in his childhood without explanation. Inspired by his father's Italian roots, Nick conjures Mafia-esque plots to explain the disappearance, and this gangster motif pervades his psychology from making 'gangster threats' in his office at work (104) to his accidental shooting of George Manza.

At the end of the novel, Nick finally comes to some kind of resolution regarding his father, achieved through directly confronting the notion of the underworld and accepting the unknowability of which it consists. He concludes:

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[541] Bronzini 'imagined a fragment of chalked pavement cut clean and lifted out and elaborately packed – shipped to some museum in California where it would share the hushed sunlight with marble carvings from antiquity. Street drawing, hopscotch, calk on paved asphalt, Bronx 1951' (662).

> The earth opened up and he stepped inside. I think it felt that way not only to us but to Jimmy himself. I think he went under. I don’t think he wanted a fresh start or a new life or even an escape. I think he wanted to go under. […] I think he just went under. (808–9)

The location of Nick’s father is identified as on another level of the network as Nick confronts and accepts the fact that he does not have an explanation – or, that the disappearance is its own explanation. Nick’s father, already participating in the underworld of Italians in America – itself a subset of the underworld of immigrants – entered a deeper underworld which Nick cannot fathom. Conceiving of this world as ‘under’ is the only conclusion Nick can reach, allowing him to locate his father, albeit intransitively. Even if ‘everything is connected in the end’ (826), Nick does not have access to the hypothetical omniscience of the end. Since he does not possess complete information, he must organise what he knows using the prepositional tools available to him. To locate his father intransitively ‘under’ is itself a form of closure.

It is the end, with its power of retrospect, which provides the most holistic view of how everything is connected. *Underworld*’s underworlds converge in the last paragraph of the novel: here we glimpse ‘small kids playing a made-up game in a neighbor’s yard’ (827), solidifying the motif of children’s play within the neat boundary of a clause, and other underworlds accumulate through the religious ‘monk’s candle reflected in the slope of the phone’ and the cinematic ‘apple core going sepia in the lunch tray’ (827). Though hidden connections are made manifest in the end, throughout the course of the novel DeLillo depicts the means by which these connections are encountered, including excavating the earth for archaeologies of waste and a corresponding archaeology of cognition. He delineates the processes of exposure and illumination involved in identifying realities buried underground. If the contemporary world lends itself to being conceptualised as a network of connections, the methods through which these connections are accessed involve a dialectics of under and over, near and far: the prepositional repertoire of subjectivity. Everything is connected somewhere, but that somewhere is underground, outside, always displaced and on another level of perception. Objective connectedness is set against a reliance on subjective navigation – on climbing under and over, across and between, in a kinetic sequence of revelations.

While discovery in *Underworld* takes the form of excavation, enlightenment in *The Overstory* is found in the opposite direction. An ‘overstory’ is ‘The highest layer of vegetation in a forest or woodland, usually the canopy-forming trees; also called overwood’ (OED). This

provides an analogy for Powers's narrative structure as the theme of ecology and trees acts as the 'overstory' connecting together eight otherwise disparate narratives, each of which is developed distinctly and separately before being intertwined with the others. This intertwining happens cumulatively: the narrative of Mimi meets the narrative of Douglas as the narrative of Olivia meets the narrative of Nick. Once these four branches become two pairs, they then meet each other and all four intertwine – before, towards the end of the novel, gradually detangling again. Like *Underworld*, *Overstory* also suggests that everything is connected, though the emphasis in this case is ecology rather than social and technological infrastructure. The novel is based on the premise that the contemporary world functions as a network, and yet the central issue faced by the characters is how to communicate this connectivity. Vertical hierarchies are again means of articulating the processes involved in perceiving and knowing, figured through the spatial perspectives facilitated by the organic architecture of trees, expressed through a vocabulary of place prepositions. Characters transcend their previous world-views, attaining increasingly holistic perspectives of ecological networks until finally achieving an immanent awareness of the whole in their concluding enlightenment.

Each of the characters in Powers's novel experiences an ecological epiphany in a distinct way, though all involve trees. Cracking the base of his spine after falling out of an oak, the child Neelay has a transformative vision of the tree's structure: 'looking upward', he sees the vastness of the ecological system, including the 'networks of conjoined cells pulsing with energy and liquid sun'.[542] Neelay is left severely disabled by the incident but he is inspired to create a simulation game which becomes enormously successful until it encounters what he calls a 'Midas problem': 'There's no endgame, just a stagnant pyramiding scheme. Endless, pointless prosperity' (410). The game has become infinite, non-teleological, expanding without a goal. Although this is not the way in which Neelay uses the term, his game *is* an endgame in the Beckettian sense: progression without conclusion. There is no way to win or lose as the game collapses into its own stagnant neutrality and levels lose meaning as markers of progression.

Though the computer game continues to make economic profit, Neelay cannot solve his dissatisfaction except by abandoning the system of the game altogether. The plot of the game enacts in miniature the expansion and limitation of an (albeit virtual) ecological system,

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[542] Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (London: William Heinemann, 2018), pp. 102, 103. All further references are taken from this edition and cited within the text.

which reaches a point where the only solution is to change system: to enact a transition from one plot to another, from simulation to reality and then to an even higher perspective of reality. Neelay eventually finds himself at a talk given by the dendrologist Patricia Westerford, who leads another of the text's storylines, and here his narrative congeals with the narratives of several other characters. As he does not actually interact with the characters, these connections are visible only at the level of the overstory: the top-down narrative perspective. Neelay's initial epiphany when he falls out of the tree, followed by his later transition from the simulated ecological system of games to a greater awareness of the physical ecological system of real life, suggest stages of enlightenment. He transcends his previous world view, attaining a higher perspective of ecology and his own position within it.

The connections between the narratives suggest a network but their common overstory invites definition in terms of levels – and it is this prepositional level which holds everything together. As Mimi thinks regarding her relationship with Douglas: 'they're different species. This cause they've given themselves to – this defense of the immobile and blameless, the fight for something better than endless suicidal appetite – is all they have in common' (297). Mimi's thought suggests that their relationship is not horizontal or nonhierarchical but triangular, as the characters are only connected through the mediating factor of a cause that is higher than themselves both concretely (the forest's overstory) and abstractly (an immaterial idea). However much they might identify the ecological network that connects trees to baskets, boxes and beds (135) – the apparatus of human life – they are themselves part of this network, preventing a fully objective perspective. As perceiving subjects they cannot master it, because they are enmeshed in its links and conditioned by its hierarchies.

The world of *Overstory* insists on an awareness of the ecological network that ties the apex of human development back to its raw environmental materials. At the same time, perception of this network is accessed through complex epistemological levels, expressed through the figure of the 'overstory'. The overstory illustrates how a common hierarchical point – something abstract and overarching – can connect multiple items which would not otherwise be connected, such as the eight narratives of the text and relationships between individual characters including Mimi and Douglas. Moreover, prepositions of place indicate the spectrum of perspectives achieved by the characters: it is from the height of the trees that the ecological network is viewed best. A higher level is necessary to facilitate a more holistic perspective of the network, while also articulating the limitations of this view. One cannot perceive the

network when one is part of it; rather, one uses prepositions of over and under as physical and cognitive tools to access whatever knowledge one can.

IV. Pretending to Own the End of the World: Endgames in *Zero K*

Like *Underworld* and *The Overstory*, DeLillo's *Zero K* (2016) explores how levels act as cognitive tools through which networks can be navigated, but also engages with the idea of 'endgame' and the consequences of the corporate gamification discussed in chapters one and five. The plot of *Zero K* follows Jeffrey Lockhart and his father Ross, who has invested in a cryogenic facility called the 'Convergence'. This facility freezes human bodies in order to suspend death in the hope of future re-animation. The motif of an 'underworld' continues to resonate as the facility is located in a remote, enclosed compound with its own system of governance, resembling the nuclear facility of the Pocket. Like *Underworld*, *Zero K* is also frequently analysed in a vocabulary of networks – yet its title evokes scales of measurement, tapping into an underlying logic of levels which pervades the text.[543] The compound's architecture is internally structured in 'numbered levels', and its external isolation suggests the magic circle of world-making.[544] This questions whether the technology developed can really lead to immortality or whether the characters are playing an end*game*: an endless series of deferrals that serve only to sustain an illusion.

Zero K opens with a provocative statement: '*Everybody wants to own the end of the world*' (3). The words are mediated through Jeffrey as narrator, who continues: 'This is what my father said, standing by the contoured windows in his New York office – private wealth management, dynasty, emerging markets' (3). Like Beckett's *Endgame*, *Zero K* begins with a thematisation of the end, intimating the contradictory situation of a continuous ending. Nevertheless, in this case the ending can be 'owned', signalling the capacity of capital to make

[543] For a discussion of *Zero K* in relation to networks see Erik Cofer, 'Owning the End of the World: *Zero K* and DeLillo's Post-Postmodern Mutation', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 59.4 (2018), 459–70. Cofer suggests that DeLillo's text illustrates 'networked, embodied existence functioning as a productive counterweight to the transhumanist ethos exemplified by the Convergence', p. 460. I later argue that the Convergence's supposed goal of escaping the network of embodied existence is a fallacy, as the facility actually extends the logic of the networked world it pretends to escape.

[544] Don DeLillo, *Zero K* (London: Picador, 2016), p. 33. All further references are taken from this edition and cited within the text.

the world into a playground. To own the 'end of the world', Ross Lockhart must create a world whose end he can own. Since 'end' is temporal, and time cannot be owned in any concrete sense, he translates time into space by creating an architecture that encodes and embodies the end. Capital facilitates this possibility as Ross invests large amounts of money in the Convergence which is often described as an artificial world; Jeffrey, referring to his father, calls it 'the world he'd made' (97) and Ross himself comments that 'They're making the future' (30). The language of 'made' and 'making' emphasises that this world is a construct – *a* world, rather than *the* world. By owning the former, Ross can pretend to own the latter.

Like a magic circle, the walls of the Convergence demarcate a complete world within which the wealthy can play their endgame – and though the Convergence is not built as an architecture of play, its features recall aspects of the funhouse and haunted house. An example of this ludic quality is what Ross calls 'structural redundancy' (30). When Jeffrey walks the halls, he identifies a series of doors 'painted in gradations of muted blue' (23). He waits for somebody to open them, but then it 'hit' him that

> There was nothing behind the doors. I walked and thought. I speculated. There were areas on certain floors that contained offices. Elsewhere the halls were pure design, the doors simply one element in the overarching scheme […]. I wondered whether this was visionary art […]. I liked the idea. It fit the circumstances. (23)

The Convergence participates in the optical illusions of the funhouse; its doors that appear to lead nowhere are created artistically rather than functionally in a deliberate defamiliarisation of navigation. Architecture in the Convergence creates its own logic, initially incomprehensible to the visitor, which heightens its isolation as a self-contained world distinct from the world outside. Jeffrey considers that 'All I had to do was knock on a door. Pick a color, pick a door and knock. If no one opens the door, knock on the next door and the next' (24). The architecture provides a base for him to create a game of chance – *alea* – which he defines algorithmically, fashioning his own 'if' condition. When he eventually plays the game, six doors provoke no response but the seventh opens to reveal a figure who sternly implies that these doors are not for him to access. The logic of the funhouse slips into the logic of the haunted house: play becomes concealment, prohibition and confusion.

Nathan Ashman, discussing the architecture of the Convergence as a 'transrational space', suggests that the building possesses a 'design logic that is in complete synergy with its

philosophical and scientific determinations'.[545] He describes how the corridors are 'punctuated only by numerous doors, air locks, and access tubes, many of which conceal nothing behind their veneers'.[546] However, Ashman fails to acknowledge the mediation of this architecture through Jeffrey's perception; the text does not actually reveal whether these doors are false, only that Jeffrey perceives them as false. The fact that nobody answers six of his knocks does not necessarily mean that the doors are only surfaces. The actual architecture of the Convergence remains for the most part inscrutable: what is given to the reader is a reconstitution filtered through the subjective 'idea[s]' and 'speculat[ions]' (23) of the protagonist. Jeffrey *interprets* the Convergence as flat because it 'fit[s] the circumstances', making aesthetic sense, as reinforced by its name which implies the point at which three-dimensionality collapses into one-dimensionality.

This interpretation of flatness, deliberately taking the geometry of the world at face value, can act as a cognitive tool. In *God Jr.* Jim used the flat architecture of the computer game (a world which, like Jeffrey's doors, emphatically had 'no insides' (*God Jr.* 22)) as a means of cognitive mapping; the game provided a canvas on which he could project and engage with the nuances of his own psychology. Similarly, Jeffrey's interpretation of flat architecture indicates an attempt to verify and locate himself within his inscrutable surroundings. Since he does not know what is behind the doors, he simply takes what he does know as the only reality, making his environment definable and controllable – something he can play with. At the same time, this perception indicates an intuition of a deeply gamic quality pervading the entire operation; this world that takes itself so seriously is, in Jeffrey's perception, a game of chance – *alea*. For him, the cryogenic freezing of bodies in the hope of future immortality is equivalent to whimsically knocking on doors out of curiosity as to whether they are real or facades; it is a 'structural redundancy'.

Despite these elements of perceptual flatness, the Convergence is explicitly organised in 'numbered levels' (33). When Jeffrey arrives he is given a disc appended to a wristband, which allows him 'entry to certain areas on this level and the one above, nowhere else' (10). This establishes the Convergence as an underworld: Jeffrey is positioned in a hierarchy, alternating between two vertical levels, working according to the dynamics of 'under' and

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[545] Nathan Ashman, '"Death Itself Shall Be Deathless": Transrationalism and Eternal Death in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 60.3 (2019), 300–10 (pp. 308, 305).

[546] Ibid., p. 305.

‘over’ discussed in the previous section. The levels within the Convergence are traversed through a lift called the ‘veer’, an experience which is vertiginously disorientating, indicating a shift from *alea* to *ilinx*:

> We three entered an enclosure and as the access door slid shut behind us I became faintly aware of motion that may have been horizontal, a whispered glide at a speed that I could not estimate. Time also seemed beyond my ability to measure. There was a sense of temporal blur and it could have been seconds or possibly minutes before we were inserted into a vertical shaft, proceeding downward, so I imagined, into the numbered levels. (90)

The vertiginous disorientation of the veer is both temporal and spatial, recalling the equation of time and space established at the beginning of the text. The experience approaches *ilinx* and yet, like Barth’s funhouse and Danielewski’s haunted house, affectively crosses the line from pleasure into something darker and stranger. The veer seems to move both horizontally and vertically; levels are markers on a scale of measurement which can extend in either direction of travel. Their ‘numbered’ hierarchy is an abstract categorisation imposed upon the architecture in order to provide a cognitive foothold.

The levels within the convergence are an extrapolation of the position of the Convergence itself as an ‘underworld’ in relation to the world outside. This is made explicit by one of the Convergence spokespersons, who remarks: ‘That world, the world above, […] is being lost to the systems. To the transparent networks that slowly occlude the flow of all those aspects of nature and character that distinguish humans from elevator buttons and doorbells’ (239). This is the level of the network: the woman simultaneously asserts that the world has been lost to networks, while demarcating it as ‘the world above’ in order to create the impression that the underworld they have carved below is outside these networks. She continues to address those who will ‘return to the surface’, detailing their ‘loss of autonomy’, the ‘sense of being virtualised’, their dependence on ‘coded impulses’ and the ‘linked data designed to incorporate you into the megadata’ (239).

The ‘underworld’ alternative to this networked overworld is expressed in the ‘Artis Martinaeu’ section of the text. Embedded between parts I and II, which are narrated by Jeffrey, this section describes the disembodied thoughts of Artis’s preserved consciousness. Cofer identifies the Artis section as ‘narratively disembodied’, illustrating the perils of dwelling

outside the 'embodied and terminal networked society' which Jeffrey chooses.[547] He reads the section as 'horrifying' and 'solipsistic', suggesting that 'it is this brief, decontextualized interval that offers the most damning critique of transhumanism and postmodern melancholia'.[548] In Cofer's reading, 'network' is associated with connection and embodiment; to be outside the network means to be disembodied and therefore disconnected from any possibility of identity. However, the cryogenic underworld can alternatively be read as an extrapolation of the networked overworld rather than a removal from it. Artis experiences the exact features listed by the woman above: a loss of autonomy and a sense of being virtualised, becoming a coded impulse or disembodied set of data. Artis is simply on another level in the network, representing the continuation of the overworld's systematic logic through an underworld that takes it to its logical conclusion. There is no way of getting outside the network; there are only vantage points, levels of perception.

The term 'level' in *Zero K* does not only apply to architecture; it is used compulsively throughout the novel, more conspicuously than in any other text considered in the thesis so far. It refers to contexts as various as scales, systems, identity, the transition between life and death, perspective, consciousness, cognition, spirituality and language. Besides architecture, one of the most crucial uses of 'level' here is in reference to measurement, linking to the title of the novel; 'Zero K' is the name of the architectural level of the Convergence at which the bodies are frozen, titled for the unit of temperature (142). In keeping with this theme, characters in *Zero K* are preoccupied with measurement. Artis has 'investigated and explained many levels of human development' (47), Jeffrey considers the precision of language 'down into sub-atomic levels' (141), the 'Stenmark' men discuss 'uncontrollable levels of population' (69) and a 'new level of widespread conflict' (70) while the man Jeffrey encounters in the garden comments on 'levels of carbon dioxide' (126). In Part II Stak, the son of Jeffrey's partner Emma, is obsessed with reciting temperatures (176). Emma describes how the 'numbers tell him something' as he 'relishes' the specifying of scale, Fahrenheit and Celsius (176).

This derivation of pleasure and security from measurement and scale is telling. The intense need for classification and quantification through a vocabulary of levels in *Zero K* is a response to feeling a lack of control, as well as disorientation. Everybody in the text is constantly trying to locate themselves by articulating the world around them: representing it,

[547] Cofer, p. 468.

[548] Ibid.

measuring it, organising it into a series of comprehensible maps and scales. This is encapsulated by Jeffrey, who remarks that ‘every act I engaged in had to be articulated at some level, had to be performed with the words intact. I could not chew and swallow without thinking of *chew* and *swallow*’ (89). Such self-consciousness recalls Ambrose in ‘Lost in the Funhouse’: ‘strive as he might to be transported, he heard his mind take notes upon the scene: *This is what they call* passion. *I am experiencing it*’ (84). However, while Ambrose’s proliferating levels of thought seem to inhibit direct experience, DeLillo’s Jeffrey finds himself in an abstracted, self-enclosed world where this self-conscious verification is his only means of orientation – a way of mapping himself in an environment which otherwise slips from his grasp. As in chapter five, levels act as tools: means of navigating both physical and cognitive architectures.

Levels in *Zero K* are a mode of control. The compound’s self-enclosed quality, its vertigo, its translation of ‘the end of the world’ from time into space, its numbered levels, its abstract levels of measurement, are all attempts to impose order. Correspondingly, they imply a deep anxiety about a lack of order – about the unknown, the formless and the unformalised. Yet what is the connection here between levels and the level *game*? Using levels as a form of mastery and control recalls the techniques of gamification discussed in the previous chapter. Levels are essential to the Convergence as an endgame, where scales and points systems create a sense of progression – a feeling of movement and achievement – even if this progression ceases to be meaningful outside its specifically defined framework. They shape an (under)world that can be controlled, giving Ross the opportunity to play the executive function; he calls it ‘Faith-based technology. That’s what it is. Another god’ (9). This is the same principle as the ‘God games’ of chapter five. Like those games, the relative position of playing God loses its valence outside the frame of the game – outside the magic circle of its specific organisation, or in this case the walls of the compound.

In DeLillo’s endgame, the transition between life and death is conceptualised as a change in level. Discussing Artis’s entry into cryogenic suspension, Ross remarks: ‘there’s nothing left for her on this level. She believes that and so do I’ (99). Similarly, when Jeff asks whether the individual is supposed to die before being frozen, Ross replies that the entire process is ‘predicated on the subject’s willingness to make a certain kind of transition to the next level’ (112). Indeed, envisioning life and death as different levels on a scale is appropriate to a distinction between the overworld and underworld, considering the historical associations of the latter with the world of the dead. Yet the concept of a Beckettian endgame, where the end is constantly approached but never reached, is suggested by Ashman: ‘rather than

circumventing death and prolonging life as intended, […] DeLillo instead presents cryonic freezing as a form of eternal death'.[549] This is an endless ending which does not so much circumvent death as create a 'boundless third space of incomprehension and anguish'.[550] Death is 'postponed'; like in Beckett's play, characters are always interacting with the idea of the limit, constantly moving towards the end without ever reaching it.[551] The clearest articulation of this sense of deferral is Jeffrey's comment: 'The other thing I didn't know was what constituted the end. When does the person become the body? There were *levels* of surrender, I thought' (139) [italics mine]. Inside the compound, there are levels of ending. Like asymptotic lines on a graph, the frozen bodies in the ironically-named Convergence are always converging towards the end but never converge; the verb cannot transition from gerund to infinitive. Only thus can they play with the end of the world, as absolute convergence finally negates the possibility of game and – most crucially – of ownership.

Jeffrey calls the compound the 'billionaire's myth of immortality. […] What else was there for Ross to acquire? Give the futurists their blood money and they will make it possible for you to live forever. The pod would be his final shrine of entitlement' (117). Yet this ownership is a pretence; Ross can only pretend to own the end of the world, and the architecture of the Convergence, with its lack of windows, is geared towards reinforcing this illusion. Sealed and enigmatic, the compound provides a space for cognitive projection. Jeffrey attempts to map himself within it by taking its surfaces as totalities, interpreting the doors as flat facades in a way that evokes funhouse optical illusions – a resemblance reinforced by the vertiginous movement of the 'veer'. Nevertheless, the level game in *Zero K* is not only played through the architecture: levels compulsively infiltrate the text's vocabulary, indicating a desire for order and measurement which betrays an underlying anxiety about formlessness and, recalling Barth, *lostness*. Levels as scales of measurement are tools of cognitive mapping. They act in the same way as gamification strategies, instilling a sense of progression, achievement and teleology within a closed and self-contained system. Still, the lines of the Convergence never fully converge: the text begins at the end and is continuously inching towards it, moving deeper and deeper into its own architectural magic circle. If reality – as Baudrillard suggests – has become the game of reality, the end in the Convergence is abstracted into the game of the end.

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[549] Ashman, p. 301.

[550] Ibid., p. 307.

[551] Ibid., p. 309.

V. Beyond Levels

The ending of *Zero K* seeks, through Jeffrey, an alternative to the endgame of the Convergence; the protagonist's rejection of the facility reveals a desire to escape from a world of asymptotic scales and measurements. All three texts evoke a form of mysticism attained at the limits of a system, drawing upon a vocabulary of wonder, revelation and enlightenment to hypothesise an affective experience of immanence where levels are no longer necessary as tools or conceptual apparatus.

Mystical elements are present across DeLillo's oeuvre, partly inspired by his Catholic upbringing, though there is debate as to whether this spirituality is charged with real redemptive power or is more symptomatic of an unrealised striving.[552] I follow the critical consensus that his writing is more spiritual than formally or doctrinally religious.[553] The same could be said for Powers; while *Plowing the Dark* and *The Overstory* engage with religions as diverse as Islam, Christianity and Buddhism, they affirm only a more abstract and affective sense of mystery and miracle. In an interview, Everett Hamner suggests that Powers's narrators 'exhort readers to greater attentiveness, presence, *awe*', and asks what he would say to readers who those who might 'dismiss this habit of wonder' as 'childish' and 'mystical'.[554] Powers replies that he conceives of three levels in dramatic conflict: the psychological, the social/political and the environmental. He suggests that 'Awe and wonder are the first, most basic tools involved in turning toward and becoming attentive to that meaning above and beyond our own'.[555] These affective conditions, Powers proposes, are means of transitioning to a higher level of perception.

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[552] For a thorough discussion of DeLillo and Catholicism, see Amy Hungerford, 'Don DeLillo's Latin Mass', *Contemporary Literature*, 47.3 (2006), 343–80. Thomas McClure also sets DeLillo in a context of postmodern spirituality in 'Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 41.1 (1995), 141–63.

[553] Hungerford suggests that DeLillo's novels demonstrate how 'religious mysticism can be conserved in a literary register when belief in religious teachings has been eroded or abandoned', p. 348. Similarly, Kathryn Ludwig asserts that religion in DeLillo 'not reaffirmed so much as it is engaged' in 'Don DeLillo's *Underworld* and the Postsecular in Contemporary Fiction', *Religion & Literature*, 41.3 (2009), 82–91 (p. 83).

[554] Everett Hamner, 'Here's to Unsuicide: An Interview with Richard Powers', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 7 April 2018 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/heres-to-unsuicide-an-interview-with-richard-powers/> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[555] Ibid.

Challenging Jagoda's remark that the network novel 'aestheticizes immanent interconnectedness without any hope of transcendence', I have suggested that all three novels depict transcendence through levels of perspective ('underworlds' and 'overworlds') in the process of navigating the world-as-network, and I now propose that they finally hypothesise a relinquishing of perspectivity itself in the experience of immanence.[556] DeLillo's level 'outside […] comprehension' is the level in which there are no more levels, only equivalent connections, but this condition is necessarily only experienced at the 'end' of subjectivity. It suggests an alternative, experiential form of knowledge that participates in pure presence.

Peter Boxall calls *Underworld* a 'novel of apocalypse', a term suggesting both cataclysmic finality and something revealed or disclosed, from the Greek *αποκάλυψη* and the biblical book of Revelations.[557] The most explicit moment of apocalypse-as-revelation in *Underworld* is at the end, when the public and Sister Edgar see the figure of a recently deceased orphaned girl called Esmerelda appear illuminated on a billboard advertising orange juice. It is unclear as to whether the image is a trick of the light or something more supernatural. Sister Edgar's fellow nun Gracie does not believe in the miracle, suggesting that 'It's just the *under*sheet', 'A technical flaw that causes the image underneath, the image from the papered-over ad to show through the current ad' (822) [italics mine]. Gracie relegates the event to an underworld, yet Sister Edgar takes the leap of faith, questioning 'Why should there be an ad under the orange juice ad? Surely they remove one ad before installing another' (822). She accepts the 'sense of someone living *in* the image, an animating spirit' (822) [italics mine]. To believe that the girl is *within* the ad involves accepting a paradox, rejecting the perceptual organisation of underworlds and overworlds in favour of an affective sense of immanence.

After the mystical event of the billboard, Sister Edgar can die in peace, but instead of 'heaven' she enters 'cyberspace' (825) – what Peter Knight calls a 'quasi-spiritual transcendence through the ultimate connectivity of the web'.[558] Leaving underworlds and overworlds behind, Sister Edgar enters the network. Here 'identity' in the popular sense of individual distinctness ('a set of characteristics or a description that distinguishes a person or thing from others' (OED 2b)) returns to its original meaning of 'absolute or essential sameness' (OED 1a). Sister Edgar is dissected into her component parts, each hyperlinked to its likeness

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[556] Jagoda, p. 45.

[557] Peter Boxall, *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 186.

[558] Knight, p. 831.

as she 'joins the other Edgar' of the text (826). Since the logic governing cyberspace is formal similarity, any depth perception collapses, implying a convergence attained only in the end: 'it all culminates here' (825).

Yet this culmination is necessarily hypothetical; DeLillo's speculative cyberspace tonally departs from the otherwise historical and realistic narrative, suggesting a space in which there is no more to discover, no more to reveal, no more underworlds or overworlds because there are no more prepositions. Prepositions are broken down and turned inside out as the narrative asks: 'Is cyberspace a thing within the world or is it the other way around?' (826). Immanence can only be characterised as 'within' from a hypothetical outside, which is antithetical to immanence, illustrating the paradoxes inherent in the language of immanent criticism that Adorno noted above. As put by Deleuze and Guattari, 'Immanence is immanent only to itself and consequently captures everything, absorbs All-One, and leaves nothing remaining to which it could be immanent'.[559] Prepositions of transcendence give way to a transcendence of prepositions because in the hypothesised realisation of total presence there is no further need for relationality.

Boxall articulates a tension in *Underworld* between 'apocalyptic homogenisation' and a 'resistance to apocalyptic closure', remarking that 'The art work draws its radical critical possibility, in *Underworld*, not from the movement towards reconciliation and peace, but from disjunction, from the irreconcilability of different forms'.[560] Perhaps this disjunction is also the friction between subjective perception and the objective network which cannot be fully known. This is a generative friction between levels and networks, the former asserting subjective location, the latter objective connection, separated by a synaptic gap crossed only by transitioning (within the fictional world of the novel) from the factual to the hypothetical.

While the ending of *Underworld* posits a transcendence of the prepositions of its title and premise, *Zero K* seeks a way to transcend the compulsive scales and measurements that constitute its own preoccupation. The novel ends with an affirmation of Jeffrey's choice to leave behind to the world of the Convergence with its attempts to defy death and 'own' (or, pretend to own) the end of the world. Recalling the opening, he sees the 'lurking image of my father telling me that everybody wants to own the end of the world' (274), and yet the line takes on a different resonance at the end of the narrative. Now this notion of ownership has been

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[559] *What is Philosophy?*, p. 45.

[560] Boxall, *Possibility of Fiction*, pp. 186, 207.

dismissed, relinquished – transcended – as Jeff turns his attention to the immanence of the sky. Sitting on a bus, he watches the particularly 'striking' (274) sunset over the city, accompanied by the 'howls of awe' (274) made by a boy overwhelmed by the sight. Discussing the ending of *Zero K*, Laura Barrett suggests that

> In contrast to the lives serving as art in the Convergence, Jeff's art serves life, as he pays more than scant attention to silence and stillness, the everyday moment and fleeting gesture, […] the sacredness of ordinary language and extraordinary sights. He accepts them with uncanny insight.[561]

This 'insight' provides a similar revelation to *Underworld*, based on a secular sense of the mystical; just as Sister Edgar's cyberspace is explicitly 'not heaven', so Jeff ends with 'I didn't need heaven's light. I had the boy's cries of wonder' (274). The ending is a form of enlightenment, where the compulsion and control associated with scales and measurements break into an affective 'wonder'. In rejecting the underworld of the Convergence and the overworld of capitalist ownership, Jeff cognitively rejects place prepositions – and since there are no prepositions, with their relational deferrals, there is no asymptote and no endgame. Through this mode of perception, he momentarily abandons the world's corporate systems with their gamic immortality and instead enters an immanence which collapses time as well as space. This perspective offers an alternative glimpse of immortality, based on the proximity of the present rather than speculations of the future.

A specific vocabulary of enlightenment is developed most fully in *The Overstory*, with its central figure of the tree. The eight distinct narratives of Powers's novel, rhizomatically conjoined in the centre of the plot, untwine again at the end as each storyline concludes individually. These conclusions frequently take the form of a second enlightenment: if the first was an ecological epiphany, transcending into a more holistic worldview, the second entails an affective realisation of immanent interconnectedness. The body of the novel is a progression through levels of perception, towards the 'overstory' of ecological awareness: an understanding of the world's network that is nevertheless limited by one's own subjectivity. However, Powers suggests that the superlative knowledge of this network is something more experiential – *immanent* – achieved only at a point of conclusion.

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[561] Laura Barrett, '"[R]adiance in Dailiness": The Uncanny Ordinary in Don DeLillo's *Zero K*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 42.1 (2018), 106–23 (p. 122).

One instance of this is in the storyline of Dorothy and Ray Brinkman. Towards the end of the novel Dorothy, caring for her now paralysed husband, reads to him from the book on trees written by Patricia Westerford. After the first few lines, she finds herself reeling: 'Every leaf out there connects, underground. Dorothy takes the news like a shocking revelation' (443). This 'revelation' of connectivity is glimpsed at the end of the narrative and the end of her life, after a long accumulation of knowledge and experience. After the overstory, Dorothy sees the understory ('underground') as the text suggests that both are equivalent. Prepositions are collapsed since, in the moment of revelation, their tools are no longer needed. Nevertheless, enlightenment is achieved at the cessation of perception: the final section of Dorothy and Ray's narrative describes Ray's death. The last few sentences he thinks but cannot express concern the 'imminent harm' to the environment permitted by the law (498). This unites the imminence of time with the immanence of space: an awareness of his role *within* the spatial structure of ecology is only achieved at the temporal end of his life, and the threatened temporal end of the ecological system as we know it. As a man who has spent his life working and justifying law, this is Ray's final enlightenment. The word 'imminent' sticks to the narrative, repeating again and again, articulating the distinction between the speed of humans and the speed of trees. Yet realisation of imminence comes 'too late' (498), at the convergence of revelation and apocalypse; of anagnorisis and catastrophe.

Still, the theme of enlightenment in *Overstory* is most consistently explored in the storyline of Mimi. When she is a child, her Chinese father shows her scroll that has been in the family for generation, depicting the Buddha's enlightenment. Mimi is fascinated by what she sees, as well as her father's comments: 'They solve life. They pass the final exam' (34); 'They see every answer. Nothing hurt them anymore' (35). The scroll, which Mimi inherits, recurs throughout the text, as does the question of enlightenment, culminating at the end of the novel. Mimi's conclusion begins as follows: 'At midnight, on this hill-side, perched in the dark above this city with her pine standing in for a Bo, Mimi gets enlightened' (499). Her enlightenment consists of a communication with the tree, where she receives its semaphoric messages and senses currents rising from the roots, 'relayed over great distances through fungal synapses linked up in a network the size of a planet' (499). Enlightenment is the perception of the planetary *network*, the ability to experience how everything connects. This is achieved through imagining a state without subjectivity, since she 'sees and hears this by direct gathering, through her limbs' (500) – it is a physical rather than intellectual knowledge, which comes at a physical price. After this experience she finds she cannot move, her 'voice won't work' and

her 'limbs stiffen' (501), enacting the logic that enlightenment necessitates absolute detachment from the physical world.

One of the messages that Mimi receives through the trees during this experience is the statement that 'There's as much belowground as above' (500). Here the prepositions 'above' and 'below' are finally equalised, their tools no longer needed, as the overstory meets the understory in absolute balance: symmetrical equivalence. In keeping with Deleuze and Guattari's grammatical formulation of 'and' versus 'to be', Mimi engages in a series of questions and answers that verify being. To her thoughts of 'I'm hungry', the tree replies '*Be hungry*'; 'I'm thirsty' prompts '*Be thirsty*'; 'I hurt' is answered by '*Be still and feel*' [sic] (500). The enlightened union with nature instructs her to experience rather than solve each need, participating in its essence. Here 'to be' unites with 'and': she *is* hungry, *and* thirsty, *and* in pain, accumulating multiple states of being at once, dissolving herself across a network of experiences. She understands that the world will be reclaimed by nature 'once *the real world* ends' [sic] (500). Powers's italics here suggest an irony to 'the real world', recalling Baudrillard's game of reality and implying that the so-called 'real' world is subordinate to some higher or hypothetical plane of existence.

VI. Conclusion

The endings of these texts suggest an enlightenment consisting of immanence: an experience posited as a hypothetical or imagined condition, which necessarily can only be gestured towards rather than expressed. In this envisioned conclusion, 'and' combines with 'to be' because at the end, the limit, one can be *and* be *and* be at every node of the network; everything is connected 'in the *end'* (*Underworld* 826) [italics mine]. Like the idea of 'solv[ing] life' (*Overstory* 34), the solution to the game of reality is simultaneous revelation and apocalypse, two terms where ending and knowing converge. At the end of time, sequentiality collapses into a point of simultaneity. This point is the apex of the rope pyramid: the perspective facilitated when the game of *ilinx* is complete. From the top-down view the pyramid's levels are perceptually flattened into equivalence, achieving the closest approximation of totality save for the obstacle of one's own perceiving self. The next level is only reached by leaving levels behind – throwing away the ladders, since they have fulfilled their function as cognitive tools, and attaining a hypothesised experiential knowledge of the world's immanent network. The apocalypse is when the magic circle dissolves, and the game of reality is complete.

Conclusion

Games with Reality

I. Games of Reality; Games with Reality

The end of the thesis similarly allows for a top-down perspective; having progressed sequentially through various case studies, we can now survey them simultaneously, drawing together the broader themes and trajectories. Throughout this thesis I have analysed the postmodern preoccupation with levels of reality, and the evolution of this theme through the developing medium of digital technology. McHale's ontological dominant might be said to have morphed into a technological dominant; since the mid-1990s, the advent of personal computers and smartphones has contributed to profound changes in contemporary culture. The transition from television to the internet corresponds with a shift from spectacle to interactivity, providing new opportunities for world-making.

It was within a context saturated with depictions of alternative 'realities', facilitated by mass media, that Baudrillard claimed: 'reality has passed completely into the game of reality'. Representations have become so integrated with reality, he suggests, that a distinction between them can no longer be meaningfully made – a feeling expressed in much postmodern fiction. Nevertheless, through a close analysis of Baudrillard's own rhetoric I have attempted to illustrate how ontological levels are a heuristic necessity, performing explanatory work. The evocation of the map-territory distinction is inseparable from its conflation, and is also a source of aesthetic fascination. Levels of reality remain the 'modulus' – or absolute value – of Baudrillard's thought. This tension is encapsulated by the figure of Hofstadter's strange loop, which provides a means of reconciling 'levels' as hierarchy with 'level' as flatness by accounting for scale. Through a geometrical paradox, the global equivalence of representation and reality can coexist with local distinction.

Appropriately, an instantiation of a strange loop opens Barth's seminal short story collection *Lost in the Funhouse* through the Möbius strip of 'Frame-tale'. In these stories, Barth plays with the idea of infinite regress and the circularity of being unable to progress. At the same time, his writing is far from static. Unpacking the architectural aspects of 'Lost in the Funhouse' – by examining both the specific metaphor of the funhouse, and the narrative structure of the short story – reveals a relationship between the ontological and the architectural as the spatial navigation of physical funhouses maps onto the conceptual navigation of Barth's

text. Although these diegetic levels collapse into equivalence from an external perspective (as articulated in 'Menelaiad': 'it's all one tale' (139)), local distinctions are experienced in the process of navigation, as one slips or climbs between narrative voices. It is this movement which stimulates a sense of 'fun' that is inextricably linked to spatiality, akin to the kinetic traversal of a playground.

Still, navigating a funhouse without an exit constitutes an infinite game: a game played for the purpose of continuing to play. Wallace's 'Westward the Course of Empire Takes its Way' responds to Barth's text by manipulating the metaphor of the funhouse and expressing a need for purpose. This critique simultaneously testifies to the enduring appeal of the funhouse metaphor, and illustrates how the apparatus of postmodern fiction (namely, *levels*, both ontological and architectural) continues to be used, only re-configured. Wallace theoretically transforms the funhouse from a place of exploration to a place of incubation, calling for a restoration of the properties of nurture and development. Levels remain a preoccupation, but Wallace seeks to make these levels linear rather than circular.

If 'Westward' articulates a manifesto, *Infinite Jest* provides the praxis. The *mise en abyme* was a kind of conclusion for Barth, but for Wallace it constitutes the starting point; he finds himself the inheritor of a literary infinite regress, and his self-imposed task is to seek a way out. This is performed through his attempt to invert the direction of the *mise en abyme* so that movement is outward rather than inward. An analogy is drawn with an older literary form through Wallace's evocation of *Hamlet* and the 'play within the play' device. In both texts, the inner play performs a catalytic function on the narrative that contains it.

The sprawl of external media surrounding *Infinite Jest* suggests that the text has succeeded in stimulating outward communication rather than inward regress, the latter of which was embodied by the film 'Infinite Jest'. Making an oxymoron of its title, *Infinite Jest* explores means of retrieving the finite from the infinite, zooming in from global equivalence to local distinction. Setting borders and boundaries – in other words, reimplementing the outlines of Huizinga's magic circle – is a means of escaping the spiral of addiction and retrieving the capacity for play. This is enacted formally through the physical features of the text, including the shrinking space between primary text and endnotes. Constituting a form of 'exercise' with physical markers of progress, this process of spatial navigation draws the reader's attention from the conceptually infinite to the materially finite.

Such an emphasis on materiality participates in a wider trend towards an 'aesthetics of bookishness': a response to a perceived threat to the book associated with the rise of digital

technology, where *House of Leaves* and *Tree of Codes* are illustrative examples. Following on from *Infinite Jest*, I suggested that the parallelism of responses depicted within *House of Leaves* is inverted in the experience of the reader, where the text's typographical manipulations mediate uncanny content through playful form. Indeed, the aesthetic proximity of funhouses and haunted houses was implicit in the opening of 'Lost in the Funhouse', which mentions the possibility of fear and confusion alongside fun. Nevertheless, this transformation also operates in the reverse: playfulness can slip into uncanniness if the boundaries of the magic circle suddenly disappear, as evinced through events in the plot of *House of Leaves*. In *Tree of Codes*, a comparison between the original and exhumed text similarly reveals the tonal transitions attending an additional level of abstraction, where playfulness is stimulated by irony.

The flipside to these typographically and materially experimental texts, defined against digital technology, are texts that are formally conventional but explore the effects of technology thematically. *Plowing the Dark*, *God Jr.* and *The Circle* all depict the seduction of achieving mastery over virtual worlds, playing the gods of these games of reality. At the same time, characters in all three texts are controlled by their very feeling of control, which can act as a distraction or diversion – just the game of Eschaton functions as a distraction in *Infinite Jest*, and just as Baudrillard's Disneyland distracts from the fact that the game of reality is everywhere. As made explicit in *Plowing the Dark*, the texts evoke the spectrum of Plato's cave allegory: characters may be standing in the light in one context, but they are shadows in another.

Such power dynamics have been manifested in various ways throughout the thesis; *Infinite Jest* suggests that the reality of helpless citizens becomes a game on a higher level of political organisation, and in *House of Leaves* those trapped inside the crazy architectures of the text experience horror while the readers outside experience play. Nevertheless, in chapter five we see how the 'world within a world' ontological dominant is actualised through digital technology. In line with the shift from spectacle to interactivity, these texts depict worlds which subjects can actively control, entering and editing their contents. At the same time, unlike the formal experimentation of *House of Leaves*, *Tree of Codes*, *Infinite Jest* and *Lost in the Funhouse*, the texts studied here are formally conventional, which has the effect of manipulating the dynamics of control and complicity experienced by readers.

Further probing the relationship between levels and technology, my thesis concluded with an investigation of the role of levels in networks. I teased out the levels implicit in 'network novels' such as *Underworld* and *The Overstory*, as well as DeLillo's *Zero K*. I

illustrated how an understanding of the world as network coexists with the limitations of subjective perception, which engages hierarchies of knowledge. These correspond with hierarchies inherent in the spatial navigation of the physical world, returning to the idea of embodied metaphor; a physically higher position allows observation of a larger span of territory than when one is physically lower. This is expressed most overtly in the ecological infrastructure of Powers's *The Overstory*, where the physical perspectives facilitated by trees correlate with metaphysical experiences of revelation and enlightenment. In the man-made cryptogenic facility in *Zero K*, the division and organisation of this architecture in terms of 'levels' reveals how, as in *The Circle*, levels can be a means of gaining a sense of control: cognitively mapping one's relative position within a fixed system. Ultimately, all three texts conclude with an affective experience of immanence which is impossible to articulate: a quasi-mystical point where levels of perception cease to exist, achieved by reaching the limits of subjectivity.

To unite two key strands of this thesis, the traversal of ontological levels maps onto the traversal of hierarchical levels because of the nature of embodied experience. The conceptual 'fun' of Barth's funhouse can be understood through the physical movement enabled by children's play equipment, and in *Underworld* and *The Overstory* the relationship between levels of knowledge and levels of enlightenment correspond with physical analogies, whether through the ecology of trees or underground political facilities.

Throughout the thesis I have attempted to illustrate how various oppositions can be integrated. The figure of the rope pyramid represents a concrete fusion of Deleuze and Guattari's arborescent and rhizomatic structures, and the texts I have studied reveal how levels participate in both play and purpose; indeed, in the case of video game levels, purpose is an integral part of play. Moreover, a global network can be composed of local levels, the latter of which demarcate the limits of subjective perception and the inherent relativity of spatial positioning. In Baudrillard's work, expressions of immanence and equivalence are dependent upon a vocabulary of dimensionality, where conserving the 'reality principle' theoretically retains a transition between ontological levels as the modulus, or absolute value, of Baudrillard's thought. Here, a condition of immanent connectedness coexists with relative transcendence through self-enclosed systems or scales of perception, whether envisioned through a vocabulary of bubbles or underworlds. Running through these instantiations of levels is an implicit theology, extrapolating the ancient analogy between author and God. From this

analogy arises a mysticism in the desire to reach the limits of the system, where physics and metaphysics break into paradox.

Returning to Baudrillard, we might say that fiction has indeed responded to the game of reality by playing games *with* reality. Multiplying and manipulating ontological levels through the medium of literature is a means of interrogating the dynamics involved in the negotiation of these levels, which can be summarised as follows: that one person's reality is somebody else's game, depending on where they are located in the hierarchy of political systems; that the physical kinesis of navigating spatial levels can stimulate 'fun', as demonstrated by the structure of children's playgrounds, and that this spatiality can be applied to the abstract navigation of narrative levels; that games can act as a Trojan horse of distraction or deferral, such as the 'poison in jest' in *Infinite Jest* and the Cavern in *Plowing the Dark*; that levels of mediation determine the relationship between experiences of fun, fear, confusion, uncanniness and playfulness; that the prepositional dynamics of spatial location evoked by levels constitute a feature of subjective experience.

Fiction, then, provides a space for hypothesis and experiment. Responding to games 'of' reality through games 'with' reality generates insights about how the qualitative effects of negotiating these games. Rather than reinforcing its status as a world within the world, the fiction discussed in this thesis plays a reality full of fictions at its own game.

II. Levels Today

Ending the time span of this thesis in 2018 is to end just before a historical watershed moment. Through Zoom, Teams, Google Meet and other media necessitated by the national pandemic, we have now been negotiating more virtual realities than ever. Since early 2020 we have experienced the further immaterialisation of familiar architectures, witnessing walls and floors becoming backgrounds and break-out rooms. Sealed into separate units during lockdowns, we have developed a vocabulary of 'bubbles' that actualises Baudrillard's diagnosis of an already-existing social tendency. Added to this is the magic circle of Netflix with its monopoly of the entertainment industry, providing another simulated space in which individuals can spend their leisure time.

More broadly, the cancellations and restrictions imposed on all forms of travel have caused many people's worlds to shrink physically and expand virtually. As if actualising Baudrillard's writing on vacuums and immanence, distance was effectively abolished; during

the depths of lockdown somebody living in the next city is, to all intents and purposes, equivalent to somebody on the other side of the world, where the determining factor is not physical distance but time zones and internet connection. This has had its benefits, as the increased reliance on the instantaneity of the internet has created new forms of working and communication. Meetings previously limited by transportation have been taking place immediately with international participants, as everybody as equally and immanently present – provided that they have the technological infrastructure. These changes have resulted in a radical reconfiguration of ontological experience, with implications that are still in the process of unfolding.

Concurrently, in a globalised economic system everybody is invisibly complicit in the funding of conflicts which may seem remote. For those outside the field, these events are perceived through the 'magic circle' of the internet and television screen – one person's reality is, for another person, simply one channel among many. On an even wider scale, these events are taking place in a progressively precarious environmental infrastructure, where the ecological enlightenment that Powers aimed to stimulate in 2018 was initially eclipsed by the emergence of pandemic the year after. In all of these events we can perceive dynamics discussed in this thesis: control exerted *over* virtual worlds, in the manipulation of media; control exerted *by* virtual worlds, in the seduction of gaming; the catalytic effect of self-similarity between representation and reality, as manipulated by targeted advertising; the transformation of horrific experiences into entertainment on another level of mediation, as in comparisons between the news and entertainment industry; the continued security of confirming one's level or location in corporate industries or gamified systems.

Elaborating on the latter, an engagement with ontological levels is compounded by an engagement with hierarchical levels. It might be said that the society of the spectacle has become a society of stratification, where the use of apps to track and measure all aspects of our lives provides a particular sense of control during the current circumstances of uncertainty, and encourages competition with ourselves as much as with others. Tailored to ergonomic perfection, the magic circle of the smartphone is home to thousands of further miniature magic circles of smartphone apps. Techniques of gamification solicit a ludic engagement with these apps, as individuals measure the level of money in bank accounts, the number of likes on social media, the level of linguistic achievement on Duolingo, the level of loyalty points in Costa coffee, the level of athletic performance on Strava. Fitbits calculate steps, sleep statistics and heart rate. We rank and are ranked by Uber drivers in the manner of the *Nosedive* (2016)

episode in the British television series *Black Mirror*; in this dystopian world, each person has a social score on their smartphone which increases or decreases according to their behaviour, unlocking opportunities or implementing restrictions. This ironically anticipated the increasing operation of a 'Social Credit System' in China, which aims for social regulation by giving people scores based on behaviour.[562] China's system reduces points for 'transgressions' such as jaywalking or fraud and increasing points for positive action including donating to charity.[563]

To come full circle – or, indeed, to *spiral* in a way which simultaneously shifts and aligns – these moralistic levels suggest a contemporary translation of Dante's spiritual levels. The difference is simply that they exist in a political framework rather than a religious one. Both cases draw upon a human proclivity towards progression – or, as suggested in chapter five, the *idea* of progression. With the rise of New Age spiritualism and its co-opting of ancient religious practices such as yoga (whose popular appeal is exemplified by the upsurge of YouTube yoga during the pandemic), perhaps Dante's mystical levels are not as far removed from contemporary society as we might think. Following the spectrum from the somatic to the spiritual, the *exercise* of the funhouse becomes the *ascesis* of the mystic, where the physical navigation of hierarchies transforms into the metaphysical navigation of realities. The ontological meets the hierarchical through conceptualisations facilitated by embodied experience.

Recalling the parallels between adventure playgrounds and monkey enclosures, there is perhaps an evolutionary attraction to the navigation of levels: to travelling between ground and treetop, floor and ceiling, cellar and attic, ladder and slide, shadow and light, cave and sky, novice and expert, fiction and reality, profane and sacred, material and spiritual, *Inferno* and *Paradiso*, underworld and overstory. Levels are a fundamental metaphor we live by – a feature of both physics and metaphysics, determined by the spatial surroundings with which humans universally interact.

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[562] Mara Hvistendahl, 'Inside China's Vast New Experiment in Social Ranking', *Wired*, 14 December 2017 <https://www.wired.com/story/age-of-social-credit/> [accessed 26 September 2021].

[563] Nicole Kobie, 'The Complicated Truth About China's Social Credit System', *Wired*, 7 June 2019 <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/china-social-credit-system-explained> [accessed 26 September 2021].

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