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**[Beyond] Posthuman Violence: Epic Rewritings of Ethics
in the Contemporary Novel**

by

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degree of
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For my Father

who believed in me more than I do

and without whom

I would not have found a reason to finish this work

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Abstract

My research will consist of a literary investigation into changing representations of violence in the contemporary novel in the context of the paradigm shift from humanism to posthumanism, from reality to fiction. The core of my work, developed through the reading of some research in neuroscience, will concern the examination of the brain as metaphor machine. From here, I will argue that the problem of violence in relation to fiction today is due to the struggle in the human body between transcendence and immanence. The individual has a tendency to transcend reality and in so doing lives violence as fiction even when inflicting pain to the other. I will observe how this transcendence is translated in contemporary narrative forms and I will shape a rhetoric of contemporary literary violence.

My intention is to conduct comparative research across British, American, French and Italian literary fiction of the past 20 years, with a few exceptions. I will explore whether and how, in a globalizing world, it is both possible and necessary to develop a comparative literary analysis of the forms of contemporary violence.

I will observe how the advent of posthumanity or of the fictional man has generated a crisis in the definition of identity and reality in a context in which fiction has taken its place. I will show how the individual re-acts to this condition through violence in order to find authenticity. References will include the works of Deleuze, Badiou, Bauman, Baudrillard, De Man, Agamben, Hayles et alii.

In order to explore the different ramifications of the substitution of fiction to reality and its connection to violence, I will focus on what I consider the main three tools for the creation of simulation today: language, desire and information, through the works of Wallace, McCarthy, Miéville, Ballard, Gibson, Palahniuk et alii.

Finally, the work will focus on the new emphasis given by contemporary writers to literary responsibility after the irresponsible writing (after the death of the author) of postmodernism through the analysis of the New Italian Epic postulated by Wu Ming but applied to the English Weird Fiction writer China Miéville. I will suggest that an attempt to overcome postmodernism is taking place in contemporary global fiction based on a more 'serious' approach (as Wallace would have said), a new ethics of literature, which endeavours to depict the reasons for contemporary violence in fiction and advocates for a balance between the transcendence of fiction and the immanence of reality.

Foreword: Aesthetics and Ontology: The Problem of Transcendence and Immanence or, The Power of Narratives and the Voice

Undertaking the study of violence in contemporary fiction necessarily involves a study of the nature and structure of fiction itself and, more precisely, of the narrative techniques, which constitute it. For this reason then, this study of violence in fiction runs parallel to the study of narratives. The importance of such a study today has been made evident by much research in cognitive science, and specifically that branch of research which shows how the brain relates to the material conditions of reality through metaphors and stories. In other words, the individual creates images in her head with which she processes the real. ‘The real’ is thus not some pre-given state of affairs, but a process, dependent upon a relation between the subject of perception and whatever it takes as its objects: both subject and object are constructed in that relation – and that relation is what we call ‘the real’ or ‘reality’. Consequently, the analysis of narratives offers a key to the way we perceive the world; and, within that, a study of narrative technique will help explain perceptions of violence.

The Brain as Metaphor Machine

This approach then requires at least and ideally a short introduction to the problematic relationship between reality and the brain. However, since this is a work of literary criticism I will outline the question mainly from a literary point of view, rather than resort fully to clinical matters. With this purpose in mind I will overview

David Porush's analysis of Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (1992) in his essay

'Hacking the Brainstem: Postmodern Metaphysics and Stephenson's *Snow Crash*.'¹

This overview will then yield a specific and paradigmatic framework for the work of the rest of this thesis.

Sharing the ideas of cognitive science, Porush argues that the human mind is genetically made to conceive the world through metaphor. Far from being a mere rhetorical tool, metaphor is the process through which the brain gives a meaning to the data taken from the reality outside our heads. In Porush's words:

We are all programmed genetically to conceive of the world *as if* a facility hardwired into human cognition. Think about what the brain does. In simplest terms, it takes physical impressions from an irrational, inchoate reality and transmutes them into thoughts, sensations, and the will to action. That is, it takes information from out there and translates it into meaning in here, in a thoroughly different realm requiring a thoroughly different medium. At the risk of belaboring the obvious, the brain (not the mind, but the physical organ the brain) is a metaphor machine, operating continuously to carry meaning between realms that are in the larger sense thoroughly incommensurable.²

Taking the lead from this claim, we can state that metaphor is a mechanism of translation between the physical and the mental, between the data received through the senses and an image, a story in the brain. Cyberspace - because this is what Porush is dealing with in his essay - is an externalization of this metaphor machine in a shared virtuality.

With this premise, Porush arrives at his definition of transcendence in the history of humanity as the equivalence between metaphor and cognition:

¹ David Porush, 'Hacking the Brainstem: Postmodern Metaphysics and Stephenson's *Snow Crash*', *Configurations* 2.3 (1994), pp. 537-571.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 549-550.

Cyberspace does not originate in--nor is it peculiar to--postmodernism, or even the twentieth century. Rather, the strong expression of this urge to exteriorize our own neurological drama can be found in any cultural moment when we confuse the metaphorical as the cognitive--or rather, *the moment when we recognize that the cognitive is the metaphorical*. This is my definition of transcendence.³

This definition establishes that knowledge is possible only through metaphor, which is a rhetorical and artistic trope.⁴ This implies that in the same way as myth was in ancient times a collection of stories with which man tried to understand the phenomena of the world around him narrative is still nowadays the way man deals with reality. I will deal later with the question of myth in relation to violence. Studies in cognitive science confirm the importance of transcendence, or better, a tendency to abstraction in the creation of knowledge. In his *Splendors and Miseries of the Brain* (2009), the neuroscientist Semir Zeki underlines the importance of abstraction, which he defines in terms of ‘a ubiquitous function of the cerebral cortex, one in which many if not all of its areas are involved...’⁵ According to Zeki, abstraction is the only way to identify the world in its particularities:

If my ability to identify a house as a house depended upon a particular house only, then I would soon be in trouble when confronted with another house. One way of overcoming this difficulty is to generate a concept of a house.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 551. Emphasis in the original.

⁴ Metaphor is after all present in Aristotle both in his *Rhetorics* and in his *Poetics*. In the latter work, Aristotle defines metaphor thus: ‘Metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy. (Aristotle. *Aristotle on the art of poetry* (Kindle Locations 528-530). Public Domain Books. Kindle Edition.) For Aristotle, then, metaphor is a substitution or misplacement of names and a transference. The passage from transference to trans-cendence is quite easy to infer, especially considering the substitution of the name of reality for the name of fiction. It is furthermore interesting to consider that metaphor for Aristotle is a passage and a movement, a concept that will be discussed later in this work.

⁵ Semir Zeki, *Splendors and Miseries of the Brain: Love, Creativity, and the Quest for Human Happiness*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Kindle Edition. (Kindle Location 505).

When the brain acquires a concept of a house, the point of view, the precise shape, the distance, the setting, the size and all else cease to matter for the purpose of identification of the house as a house.⁶

The brain needs to abstract the concept of house from the single instances of house in reality in order to create a category that will allow the brain to recognise the next house. Abstraction becomes a continuous progress or march towards the creation of larger and larger concepts such as that of beauty or love or justice.

This capacity for abstraction and for creating concepts in order to acquire knowledge represents for Zeki both the ‘splendors’ and the ‘miseries’ of the brain:

The splendor of the brain is that it is capable, seemingly effortlessly, of generating so many concepts and thus acting as a very efficient knowledge-acquiring or, if one prefers, knowledge-generating system. The misery that this splendid machinery entails is in fact the result of its very efficiency. The incapacity of our daily experience to live up to and satisfy the synthetic concepts that the brain generates commonly results in a state of permanent dissatisfaction.⁷

The preference of hackers to live in cyberspace rather than in reality stems from the ‘miseries’ of the brain, the failure of reality to live up to the concept. When the world does not fulfil the concept, the individual is frustrated and decides to escape in imaginative realities; and cyberspace constitutes one such reality, a reality that has been explored in much recent narrative fiction. Abstraction then is synonymous with idealization and as such from a means to understanding reality the metaphor machine becomes the instrument for the refusal of one form of reality and its replacement with another.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Kindle Location 565-568.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Kindle Location 998-1001.

In this very dissatisfaction, however, Zeki sees the germ of creativity: ‘a permanent dissatisfaction is one of the most powerful ingredients driving creativity.’⁸ Art owes its birth to a dissatisfaction, a discrepancy between the concept in the brain and the reality perceived by the brain itself. Since both reality and fiction are in the end products of the brain this gap proves that the line between fiction and the real can become more and more subtle. Creativity seems to germinate from the negativity present in this discrepancy in an escalation that brings forward problems of transcendence and imaginary realities.

From Experience to Science

We can take this kind of work – from cognitive psychology – in a more philosophical direction now; and this is the direction in which I will explore it further in the thesis here. A concept that could be of use to get a grip on reality is that of experience which refers to concepts acquired by the brain through living life.

Giorgio Agamben’s *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience* (1978, 1993) also deals with the problem of imagination with a focus on knowledge and experience. According to Agamben, in antiquity imagination was considered as the essential link between the senses and the intellect, *psyche* and *nous*, that is, knowledge. Modern times, however, with the priority given to science, interpret imagination as ‘unreal,’⁹ ‘the subject of mental alienation, visions and magical phenomena – in other words, everything that is excluded by real experience.’¹⁰

⁸ *Ibid.*, Kindle Location 1150-1151.

⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans Liz Heron, London: Verso, 1993, p. 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

Today more than ever narrative has acquired the sense of fiction: from the Latin *fingere* but taken with the meaning of feigning instead of the main meaning of shaping, forming, creating something out of clay or dough (the Indo-European form gives *dheigh- as hypothetical origin of the word, the same form that has given ‘dough’ in English).

Technological tools today take the place of the human brain and the senses in translating reality. In the light of Agamben’s analysis, in fact, science mistrusts experience and externalizes our senses with microscopes and other tools, which make reality measurable.¹¹

Science has taken the place of our senses and as a consequence, William Gibson’s hackers, for example, abandon their bodies in the same way they leave reality behind, in a movement similar to the philosophical process followed – at the very outset of modern European philosophy, and especially of the relation of modernity with the constitution of the subject, the ‘I’ - by Descartes. Descartes in fact starts his theory by an eradication of the senses and the body, in order to reach a form of pure abstract rationality culminating in his ‘Cogito, ergo sum’, that is, in an abstraction

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20. It is also worth considering however (as I will do in later chapters) that the brain still has to interpret the data offered by science. Science fiction is the literary genre that paradoxically rebels against science because its writers translate science in visions of the future. Stephenson has already invented, in his *Snow Crash*, concepts such as avatar (used in chat lines or online games) and an early version of Google Earth. As John Hanke, general manager of Google Earth, said in an interview in 2005; ‘L’idée de départ, qui était de combiner les jeux vidéo avec les cartes et les photos de la planète, circulait dans l’imagination populaire, depuis le roman de Neal Stephenson *Snow Crash* [Le Samouraï virtuel pour la version française] sorti en 1994.’ *Le Monde*, 24/08/2005. http://www.lemonde.fr/economie/article/2005/08/24/1-idee-de-depart-etait-de-combiner-les-jeux-video-avec-les-photos-de-la-planete_682240_3234.html. In 2008, however, Mark Aubin, software engineer at Google Earth writes an article in which he states the idea came from the flipbook *Power of Ten*. ‘Google Earth: From Space to Your Face...and Beyond’, <http://mattiehead.wordpress.com/tag/mark-aubin/>.

from any referentiality, except thought itself.

There is however a difference in the way Gibson's characters and Descartes perceive this act of abstraction from the body: where the former sees this movement as the ultimate end, Descartes instead marks a starting point for a movement that will eventually go back to the body and thus to experience. Furthermore, there is an ethical difference as well considering that Descartes' constitution of the subject in a thinking 'I' is the result of his research for truth whereas the hackers recognize it as an end to any form of leading any form of life. Not surprisingly, in his research for a principle as abstract as truth Descartes repudiates any form of experience. Descartes starts his research from a need for absolute truth beyond doubt and arrives, mistrusting both the senses and the fact that thoughts are not necessarily truer than dreams, to the idea that thinking itself constitutes the basis for being:

But soon after I realized that, while I wanted thus consider that everything was false, it followed necessarily that I who was thinking had to be something; and realizing this truth, I think, so I am, was so solid and assured that the most extravagant supposition of sceptics could not shake it, I decided that I could consider it without a doubt as the first principle of the philosophy I was looking for.¹²

The action of thinking that resides in the individual constitutes, according to this, the principle of existence beyond doubt. But it is morally alarming that cyberspace constitutes an escape from any form of experience when any experience is connected to pain and violence. In other words, where Descartes looks for a scientific method of analysis the reduction of the hackers to pure subjectivity, a pure 'I' moving in a

¹² 'Mais aussitôt après je pris garde que, pendant que je voulois ainsi penser que tout étoit faux, il falloit nécessairement que moi qui le pensois fusse quelque chose; et remarquant que cette vérité, je pense, donc je suis, étoit si ferme et si assurée, que toutes les plus extravagantes suppositions des sceptiques n'étoient pas capables de l'ébranler, je jugeai que je pouvois la recevoir sans scrupule pour le premier principe de la philosophie que je cherchois.' René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, Kindle Locations 1617-1621. I have translated all the extracts from Descartes.

narrative space called cyberspace, stems from their desire to escape a life of suffering and violence.

Even if it is not a teleology of the end of human life as in the case of the hackers but more of an archaeology of the scientific method Descartes has created a philosophy that mistrusts the body and its experiences, privileging the mind or the soul as he prefers to call it: 'I knew then that I was a substance whose essence or nature is only to think and that in order to be it does not need a place or it does not depend on anything material.'¹³ The entire materiality of being is in a non-described substance made of thinking. Reading Descartes' idea of the immateriality of thought at the light of today's neuroscience reveals the theory not so much dated as imprecise in its neglect (due also to the limits of science in his age) of the physicality of the human brain. It is worth stressing that our concept of subjectivity is not radically different by the Cartesian subject but it is on the contrary its natural evolution due to the discoveries of science. The contemporary subject of fiction, as envisioned in cyberpunk, is mostly a thinking 'I', before being a 'human being.à

An immediate consequence of Descartes' transcendental rationality is the justification for the existence of God following the assumption that if man has doubts and is thus imperfect in his research for truth, this necessity for truth and the concept for perfection has to come from somewhere else, a perfect being: 'so that it followed that [the idea of perfection] had been put in me by a nature more perfect than I was, and that had in itself all the perfections I could perceive, that is, to

¹³ 'Je connus de là que j'étois une substance dont toute l'essence ou la nature n'est que de penser, et qui pour être n'a besoin d'aucun lieu ni ne dépend d'aucune chose matérielle.' *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 1624-1626.

explain in one word, who was God.’¹⁴

Following Zeki’s studies, perfection is the consequence of the human brain’s tendency towards conceptualization and thus abstraction. What in Descartes may seem like a logical and reasoned proposition becomes, at the dawning light of modern science, the genetic result of that metaphor machine that is the brain. The idea of God is the ultimate rationalization and abstraction in that it has no links to the real.

Cyberspace then is the place where metaphor is less a link between mind and reality than a broken bridge where the mind does not reach anything. Science has now the power to in-form, to shape reality, without providing however any knowledge because the tools have taken the place of their original function: reading reality. Technology in cyberspace has created an alternative reality, something that we properly identify as fantasy. It is a journey that goes from myth as knowledge to myth as fantasy replaced by science as knowledge and then, finally, to science as fantasy.

Experience & Authority: from Knowledge to Information

In the light of Agamben’s reading, we need to reconsider the connection between imagination and reason, which rules science. Porush’s conception of the brain

¹⁴ ‘...de façon qu’il restoit qu’elle [the idea of perfection] eût été mise en moi par une nature qui fût véritablement plus parfaite que je n’étois, et même qui eût en soi toutes les perfections dont je pouvois avoir quelque idée, c’est à dire, pour m’expliquer en un mot, qui fût Dieu.’ *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 1641-1643.

implies that reality itself is irrational ('an irrational, inchoate reality') so the metaphor machine that is the brain needs to rationalise it. Since however metaphor is usually connected to imagination and creativity it is paradoxical to accept that we are able to rationalise reality only through imagination. Is not metaphor after all a figure of speech that connects different points in different fields of reality or registers of language and regimes of discourse? And is not this a definition of intelligence or at least of intuition? Is not the 'stroke of genius' anything but a sudden connection made between two elements which had never been connected before? Whether the story of Newton and the apple is true or not is not important, but as a narrative example it perfectly illustrates the key point: the imaginative intelligence in Newton has been able to find a connection between the apple and the earth and come, after reflection and experiments, to the realization of a theory of gravity. Imagination helps to develop a rational explanation for a phenomenon, and, indeed, provides a narrative for it (Newton sitting under a tree from which an apple falls), which had not been explained before and, for this reason, had not been rationalized before.

Porush however pays attention to the mistrust that reason itself generates in contemporary writers. He identifies the main problem of contemporary writers in their incapacity to accept transcendence. He finds it paradoxical that cyberpunk as a branch of postmodernism, with its refusal of master narratives or 'essentializing viewpoints'¹⁵ is so open to metaphysics. He recalls, however, the postmodernist 'critique of rationalism, and of the scientific/technological project of our culture in particular.'¹⁶

¹⁵ Porush, p. 539.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

In a tradition that in this sense we can also call post-humanist, if we consider that humanism and modernism were characterised by reason and the *ego cogitans*, the postmodernists undermine the power of reason through ‘epistemological methods’ that rely on the ‘detotalizing’ powers of language. They try ‘to capture the extrarational richness of experience’¹⁷ and to show the failure of science in fulfilling our need for knowledge, as a consequence of what Lyotard has considered a disbelief in meta-narratives, that is, in the existence of a theory that can explain everything. Paradoxically, this mistrust is in direct opposition to the tendency of the brain towards larger and more abstract concepts. Postmodern writers, in other words, seem not to believe in the possibility of conceptualizing reality anymore, favouring instead works made of particularities, classification, etc. The work of Rosi Braidotti becomes useful here for a theorization of the posthuman.

According to Braidotti, a critique of humanism starts with the historical realisation that it is a construct, a fiction that is however the dominating fiction:

Equal only to itself, Europe as universal consciousness transcends its specificity, or, rather, posits the power of transcendence as its distinctive characteristic and humanistic universalism as its particularity. This makes Eurocentrism into more than just a contingent matter of attitude: it is a structural element of our cultural practice, which is also embedded in both theory and institutional and pedagogical practices.¹⁸

Emblem of this humanism is the Vitruvian man, who represents the epitome of this monologic discourse:

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 539.

¹⁸ Braidotti, Rosi, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013. Kindle Edition, p. 15.

The Vitruvian ideal of Man as the standard of both perfection and perfectibility (as shown in figure 1.1) was literally pulled down from his pedestal and deconstructed. This humanistic ideal constituted, in fact, the core of a liberal individualistic view of the subject, which defined perfectibility in terms of autonomy and self-determination.¹⁹

In the extreme individualism of this vision of man, which does not need the Other because he is autonomous, is the insistence on sameness and the negative conception of the Other:

Central to this universalistic posture and its binary logic is the notion of 'difference' as pejoration. Subjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour, whereas Otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart.²⁰

To this dominating narrative Braidotti opposes a monistic materialism in a passage that will become the core for my argument on the posthuman:

My monistic philosophy of becomings rests on the idea that matter, including the specific slice of matter that is human embodiment, is intelligent and self-organizing. This means that matter is not dialectically opposed to culture, nor to technological mediation, but continuous with them. This produces a different scheme of emancipation and a non-dialectical politics of human liberation. This position has another important corollary, namely that political agency need not be critical in the negative sense of oppositional and thus may not be aimed solely or primarily at the production of counter-subjectivities. Subjectivity is rather a process of auto-poiesis or self-styling, which involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values and hence also multiple forms of accountability.²¹

The subject then is a process of auto-poiesis in a continuous dialogue with culture, technology and nature. The individual is accountable in the diverse form she deals with the law and other dominant narratives but also in her relationship with

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 15.

²¹ Ibid., p. 35.

technology and other humans. The individual as a process involves a constant rewriting of individual following the creation of new relationships with the outside world.

Postmodern writers then refuse master narratives because they feel they have lost any sense of authority (reason does not support their narrative anymore) and are thus unable to convey any experience through their writing. In this perspective can be understood Agamben's statement that

experience has its necessary correlation not in knowledge but in authority – that is to say, the power of words and narration; and no one now seems to wield sufficient authority to guarantee the truth of an experience, and if they do, it does not in the least occur to them that their own authority has its roots in an experience.²²

If experience does not belong to anyone and these narratives have no author, there is no knowledge to be acquired by anybody, only information yielded and ridiculed at the same time. The Internet, we could conclude, is exactly the place where knowledge appears in the basic form of information, which is available to anyone while, at the same time, it does not belong to anybody. In other words, following Porush's definition, transcendence is not based anymore on the correlation between knowledge and metaphor but on the correspondence of information and metaphor: this is the condition of transcendence in cyberspace.

A Need for Meaning and Order

However, Porush seems not to give enough importance to the very function of metaphorical understanding, which is the need for the human brain to give meaning.

²² Agamben, *Infancy and History*, p. 16.

Order is a consequence of the brain's necessity to absorb the outside world, and that understanding is essentially formulated as an order that is given to human perceptions. The postmodern acceptance of the failure of master narratives goes against the grain then or, reading it from another perspective, it actually expresses the desperate need for man to find meaning even in the confusion of meanings.

To summarize up to this point: since ancient times metaphor and narratives in general have been the way the brain processes reality and gives it meaning.

Discoveries in neuroscience have further confirmed that the brain is a metaphor machine. Science has, however, nowadays taken the place of the brain in translating reality so that everything we receive now is filtered by technology. The evolution of science has run parallel to that of rationality: reason has taken the place of imagination in giving order to an irrational reality. The belief in reason however became so strong that, in a Cartesian way, reason transcended reality itself and became the only possible starting point for the construction of the individual. In postmodernity however both reason and science have been reappraised and scrutinized, and find themselves now at the mercy of language. Language has become the tool that undermines all the others and it has also played with narrative itself refusing the possibility for any real metanarrative or transcendence. This is followed by the failure of any kind of experience, be it through the brain (metaphor), science or art. The power of narratives has not however diminished. This, therefore, needs further exploration and examination: why is it the case that narrative is still so powerful, and how has it changed in order to retain its power in these changed circumstances?

Following Porush's suggestion that the brain is a metaphor machine, which gives meaning to data acquired from a reality external to the brain itself, we can outline a process in action in cyberpunk. The brain translates data into images and, we could add, into consciousness. The subject becomes the result of an involuntary narrative in which the brain metaphorizes in order to understand. The subject is automatically a writer, an author: that is, the individual authorizes and narrates reality in her brain in an attempt to translate its irrationality into meaning. The fact that cyberspace is a collective creation means that these 'authors' do not have any individual responsibility. Cyberspace does not belong to anybody, nobody has made it, nobody can claim ownership or authority: cyberspace, in other words, is the typical product of postmodernism.

The power of narrative consists in replacing reality with metaphor. What if indeed, instead of helping the individual to process the world, narrative actually transcends it and takes its place? What if a story becomes a myth, that is, as Frank Kermode sustains, a fiction that, having 'forgotten' that it is fiction, is taken as real?²³

Fiction as myth does not need reality anymore, if we take 'reality' as a pre-existing state of affairs that transcends human perception, or the processing of cognitive capacities. In the consequent loss of immanence, the story is undocked from the real: its violence however, only 'mythically fictional', retains its effects over reality. In other words the question I want to posit is whether a transcendental narrative is the beginning of a violence, which has free reign because it has dissolved the chains of

²³ 'Fiction can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fiction.' Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 39.

reality, of consequence and of ethics.

Individual Metaphor Machines: From Frustration to Violence

The central claim of this thesis is an appeal for a new ethics of narrative that takes into account the dangerous attractions of fiction in order for the individual to reconnect to the immanence of life. Being impossible for fiction to become one with reality, this ethics will be based on the creation of a balance between immanence and transcendence, reality and fiction, rather than a return to realism. Since the glamour of fiction is dangerous because narratives allow the individual to control and shape reality, a sense of ethics is fundamental for a writer to deal with the power of narratives and the possibility for violence it offers.

Before moving forward it is necessary at this point to draw the lines of a theory of violence in the light of the concepts of metaphor machine, transcendence and immanence. Having Agamben as constant point of reference in the next few pages I will examine the theories of violence of Hannah Arendt, Slavoj Žižek and Walter Benjamin. My argument is that violence is born of the dissonance between the image of the world in our mind and the irremediable immanence of reality. The gap is found in the very language meant to order reality. The individual is subjugated by the language and the injustice of the Law or, in other words, of a transcendental higher power, which is supposed to be the essence of order. The individual is affected by a sort of impossibility to act and, as a consequence, 're-acts' with violence. The discrepancy between metaphor machine and reality is further increased by the difficulty of projecting the metaphor machine into the outside world through

language and narrative.

As previously noticed, Zeki suggests the existence of a ‘dissatisfaction’ in the individual caused by the failure of any attempts to conciliate our abstract idea of the world in our heads with the real world. In her *On Violence* (1969), Hannah Arendt suggests a similar concept in the ‘severe frustration of the faculty of action in the modern world,’²⁴ as the cause of what she calls ‘the present glorification of violence.’²⁵ To act is, for Arendt, ‘the human answer to the condition of natality.’²⁶ The compelling logic of Arendt’s position can be succinctly stated: if the natural need for action is frustrated man then ‘re-acts’ violently.

The frustrated man is first of all an individual before being part of a group. The metaphor machine itself after all is ultimately individual because it is the means through which the individual human body connects the inside with the outside: no one is inside me but me. This premise is important to confront the distinction Arendt makes between violence and power. Arendt, in fact, posits violence as essentially individual against the power of the many: ‘Power corresponds to the human ability not just to act but to act in concert.’²⁷ Arendt considers power as human, also in the sense of made of many men, its legitimacy coming from the consensus of the many. Violence, on the contrary, is inhuman, instrumental, that is, made of ‘men’s artefacts.’²⁸ The use of instruments enlarges the strength of the individual so much that she can then challenge the power of the many. From this understanding Arendt

²⁴ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence*, New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1970, p. 83.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

comes to the following conclusion: 'The extreme form of power is All against One, the extreme form of violence is One against All.'²⁹

Arendt seems to specify that it is human not simply to be born in order to act but to act with other humans. This clarification is based on the Aristotelean idea that the human is a social being and that power is used solely for the collectivity. The frustration at the origin of violence, however, is due to the fact that the metaphor machine is individual and as such our vision of the world is, in essence, personal. In contrast with Arendt's position above, however, my own argument is that power is not only a social construct but also one that is an artefact. It becomes inhuman when it operates to call into question and to challenge an individual's vision or perception of the world or of what constitutes her or his reality. Such a vision is what has granted the individual a specific ethical stance; and if this is called into question, the challenge to the individual is essentially a challenge that provokes an intrinsically violent response. This is so because the individual is fighting for the survival of her or his vision and ethics. As a consequence, violence might be characterised here as the reaction of an individual to a situation in which power contradicts her ethical and ideal position. Violence is indeed often individual but not inhuman and it is instrumental only because the individual cannot hope to face the many unarmed. However, the power of the many is not without violence as the Law simply wants the complete control over violence.

According to Walter Benjamin in his 'Critique of Violence,' it is in the interests of the Law to control the violence of individuals: 'The possibility that violence, where

²⁹ Ibid., p. 42.

it does not lie in the hands of the relevant law, constitutes a threat thereto, not because of the ends it may pursue but through its very existence outside the law.³⁰ It follows from this that, for Benjamin, an individual is incipiently characterised as violent when – and because - she is outside the Law. Violence, however, is constitutive of the Law and is at its origin as ‘All violence, seen as means, is either law-establishing or law-upholding.’³¹ From this it derives that violence is the general condition of the state under the Law or everyday reality. Violence is, in other words, endemic to a world in which rules the power of the many or Law. In this perspective, individual violence is a response to a more generalised condition of violence.

To read Benjamin’s ideas through the words of my thesis, the Law, as the Power of the Many, is a transcendental entity which, untouched by the whims of individuality, adopts violence to bring order and control over the chaos of individual life.

Individuality is eminently immanent for its own constitution and, as such, follows the directions of the individual metaphor machine, producing a personal vision of order which does not necessarily coincide with the Law, the public idea of order.

This gap between the individual’s personal *Weltanschauung* and the Law may generate frustration and violence when the individual is not allowed to act according to her own ethics.

Benjamin defines the violence of the Law, which I have so far referred to as transcendental, as mythic violence: ‘Mythic violence in its archetypal form is manifestation of the gods, pure and simple. Not means to their ends, scarcely

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, London: Penguin, 29/10/2009. Kindle Edition. Kind Locations 253-256.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 364-365

manifestations of their will, primarily manifestation of their existence.³² The purpose of violence for a god is simply to prove it is not a fiction, a myth, but that it exists and it has a presence in the world. The Law finds a similar affirmation in the death penalty: ‘For in practising violence over matters of life and death, law as such finds greater reinforcement than in any other legal consummation.’³³ Both the Law and the Gods materialise their existence threatening the very immanence of man, his very life. Transcendence necessitates violence to affirm total control over the immanence of individual life. In other words, where the existence of man is self-evident the existence of the law needs to be materialized, made real through violence.

Benjamin distinguishes between mythic violence and divine violence, the former of which establishes the law: ‘Where mythic violence is law-establishing, divine violence destroys law; where the first sets bounds, the second wreaks boundless destruction; where mythic violence apportions blame and calls for expiation simultaneously, divine violence expiates; where the former threatens, the latter strikes; where one is bloody, the other, albeit lethal, kills without bloodshed.’³⁴

Divine violence is pure justice and as such it does not need to be defended or asserted. It is justice before the law was ever created and, as such, it works more as a guideline than a law. Benjamin exemplifies this in the commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’, which does not entail any form of punishment in case of stepping outside what it commands, as punishment is endemic only to the Law.

³² Ibid., Kindle Locations 477-479.

³³ Ibid., Kindle Locations 340-341.

³⁴ Ibid., Kindle Locations 520-522.

Divine violence is not less transcendental than mythic violence but it offers a different kind of ethics. The Law is based on social dominance and the imposition of one vision but, being ultimately a social construct, it has to assert itself against the individual metaphor machine. Divine violence on the contrary suggests precepts but, without direct punishment for transgressions, it adheres better to the ethics of the individual. The individual can, in other words, choose freely whether to abide by the divine or not and as such, her frustration is avoided.

Whereas the violence of the law needs to be continually asserted through its dominance over matters of life and death, divine violence is meant to protect the living even when it deals death: 'Mythic violence is blood violence over bare life for its own sake; its divine counterpart is pure violence over all life for the sake of the living person. The first calls for sacrifices, the second accepts them.'³⁵ The different morality of the Law and of Divine violence is evident in the ends of their actions: the former aim at securing its own existence by threatening human life whereas the latter aims to help the living and, as such, it is pure, that is, uncontaminated by self-interest.

To summarise up to this point, both mythic violence and divine violence are forms of transcendental violence. The former aims to rule over bare life, but in order to do so it needs to constantly reassert its immanence: the violence of the law through the death penalty is the form of this assertion. Divine violence, on the contrary, as form of justice cherishes its transcendence and as such respects the individual not as bare life but as a living being, something more deserving than mere bare life.

³⁵ Ibid., Kindle Locations 529-530.

Treating of divine violence, Slavoj Žižek observes how for Divine violence the victim is guilty of leading a bare life, that is, of merely existing. Mythic violence and the Law, on the contrary, deal with mere existence, whereas divine violence is ‘an expression of pure drive, of the undeadness, the excess of life, which strikes at “bare life” regulated by law.’³⁶ Benjamin believes that human life is more than just breathing and as such, we could add, it does not even constitute an ethical stance. Benjamin refuses with palpable disgust and finds it ‘even dishonourable,’³⁷ to limit man to his mere existence: ‘It is false and ignoble to say that existence is superior to just existence, if existence is simply meant to mean bare life.’³⁸ Divine violence elevates and strikes man in his ‘just existence,’ that is an existence that is characterised by an ethical position on the part of the individual. Divine violence, Žižek continues, is ‘a sign without meaning,’³⁹ ‘the sign of the injustice of the world, of the world being ethically “out of joint,”’⁴⁰ and as such it deals with reality ethically. It does not punish humanity because of its mere existence but because of the way men and women live their lives under the Law they have created.

In its focus over bare life the Law disregards the essence of the human and human ethics. In my own preferred terminology here, what I am calling the uniqueness of the metaphor machine, constitutive of the reality of each individual, corresponds to what Benjamin thought of as the ‘excess of life’. This uniqueness is characterised by two things: first, it is linguistic (for its business is the construction and production of

³⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Violence*, London: Profile Books, 2009, p. 168.

³⁷ Benjamin, Kindle Location 551.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, Kindle Locations 552-553.

³⁹ Žižek, p. 169

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

metaphors); and, secondly, it is marked by ‘excess’, by something that is at odds with necessity, and with the necessity of bare survival. The frustration of the individual at the origin of violence stems not only from her impossibility to act due to the Law and society but also from her incapacity to express her own vision of the world, her metaphor machine, in the world outside her brain. The individual is incapable of showing her metaphor machine to the world because of the limits of language.

In 2008, the already cited philosopher Slavoj Žižek writes his own take on contemporary violence but with a more eminent role given to language. Žižek identifies three different kinds of violence: ‘subjective violence,’ ‘performed by a clearly identifiable agent’⁴¹; ‘symbolic violence,’ ‘embodied in language and its forms, what Heidegger would call “our house of being,”’⁴² which, through language, attempts the ‘imposition of a universe of meaning’⁴³; finally, ‘systemic’ violence, which is invisible as it is part of ‘the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems,’⁴⁴ as in other words, it represents the status quo or the condition of actual and everyday life. This systemic violence is ‘unmarked’ because it is taken for granted and not seen to be violence as such.

Symbolic violence is the one of most interesting elements here for our present argument because of its focus on language. Entire civilizations can be modelled through the power of language, as the power of sacred books like the Bible or the Koran has shown. If the function of the metaphor machine is to give meaning to a

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 1.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

chaotic world then the power of language as instrument in imposing meanings and metaphors has to be considered in all of its scope. Language, and in particular the language of stories, is probably the most powerful of those artefacts Arendt speaks about as the tool of the violent, inhuman man. Metaphor is a weapon when the power of one's narrative is able to affect the narrative of another person. The ancient Greek *Logos*, means after all both reason and word, language constituting a direct connection to the brain machine. Language then, we could say, is both a tool and the base of human reasoning, both inhuman and human. As such, and as every tool, its potential for violence is not in itself but in the use one makes of it.

Following Heidegger, Žižek sees the power of language in 'essencing', creating paths or essences in order to read reality. 'For Heidegger, "essence" is something that depends on the historical context, on the epochal disclosure of being that occurs in and through language.'⁴⁵ Language then historically situates the individual and as such, it imposes a specific vision of the world, and establishes that specific vision as normative. It is therefore incipiently and silently coercive. Language is where the metaphor machine finds external application, where the images in the brain are transposed outside the individual. Metaphor, then, is able to 'essence' the world, to define its nature and as such it is one of the most powerful tools because metaphor ultimately creates reality.

Language's power of creating paths helps, according to Žižek, the substantiation of an ethics of blindness in which the individual is willing to accept to not see, because what she does not see cannot hurt her. In Lacanian terminology, Žižek re-writes the

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 57-58.

problem of the gap between reality and its abstraction: ‘Here we encounter the Lacanian difference between reality and the Real: “reality” is the social reality of the actual people involved in interaction and in the productive processes, while the Real is the inexorable “abstract,” spectral logic of capital that determines what goes on in social reality.’⁴⁶ Žižek underlines how the abstraction of capitalism re-interprets and substitutes reality: that is, to show that the systemic logic overwhelms the reality of the senses. In his analysis, Žižek recognizes a form of blindness to see the violence in reality as the true face of ethics: ‘such a disavowal of reality, such a fetishist attitude of “I know very well that things are horrible in the Soviet Union, but I believe none the less in Soviet socialism” is the innermost constituent of *every* ethical stance.’⁴⁷

To believe in a way of living, in an ethics, Žižek seems to imply, one has to abstract from reality in favour of its idealistic version. The fact that an idea is ethically convincing corresponds to turning a blind eye towards the failure of its application on the real world. The gap between the Real and reality is so vast that the former eclipses the latter. This ethics of blindness is quite different from the ethics of frustration observed in the work of Hannah Arendt. In the latter the individual is frustrated by her incapability of action, by the over-powering challenge to her attempt to live her own metaphors into the world; and, as a consequence, she re-acts with violence. The former instead refuses the existence of systemic violence and falls victim to the essencing powers of capitalist narratives.

The violence of frustration seems to fall in what Žižek has termed as subjective

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 44. Italics in the original.

violence and, as such, its presence is more evident: this is the violence another individual cannot be blind to because it is not hidden like symbolic violence or systemic violence. The narrative of subjective violence is the narrative of the scapegoat and of the serial killer, which society as such uses everyday on the media to hide systemic violence. The individual's metaphor machine is either frustrated or manipulated by a higher, transcendental order, which Benjamin calls the Law and, which we have also called Order, against which the individual is impotent.

To the ethics of blindness and the ethics of frustration I oppose an ethics of narratives that do undermine systemic violence showing it for what it is and that, in doing so, reveal also the frustration of the individual. Taking inspiration from the work of Giorgio Agamben in *Il Linguaggio e la morte*, I will define it as the ethics of the Voice. This ethics will take into account not only the gap between the individual's metaphor machine and the Real – that is, the transcendental metaphor machine of society – but also the failure of language to express the individual's metaphor machine, her interior world. Such an ethics will respect immanence as more than bare life but as something that is 'an excess of life,' something that has a Voice that is something more than the voice of reasoning and language.

For an Ethics of the Voice

In the course of this work I will observe novels that in one way or another are focused on the actions of suicides, murderers, scalp-hunters, false revolutionaries, psychopaths, fighters, godlike AIs, godlike aliens, one and all pursuers of violence although moved by apparently diverse reasons. As different as these reasons may be,

I will delineate a common thread in these characters' difficulty to communicate to the Other their inner metaphor machine. This impossibility to communicate is due to the tension between their transcendent internal life and their immanent presence in the world. When this tension reaches a critical state, when the individual realises the impossibility to transmit the images of her metaphor machine, violence is the outcome and the only way the characters find to transmit their frustration.

Neal in David Foster Wallace's story 'Good Old Neon', best transmits the frustration of trying to convey into words the infinite possibilities of the individual metaphor machine:

The truth is you already know what it's like. You already know the difference between the size and speed of everything that flashes through you and the tiny inadequate bit of it all you can ever let anyone know. As though inside you is this enormous room full of what seems like everything in the whole universe at one time or another and yet the only parts that get out have to somehow squeeze out through one of those tiny key holes you see under the knob in older doors. As if we are all trying to see each other through these tiny keyholes.⁴⁸

The tiny keyholes themselves are but a metaphor to represent the distance between the transcendental creations of the individual metaphor machine and the immanent limits of human communication. To compress the entire universe built by the individual metaphor machine into a few words, a few symbols, is nearly impossible if one tries to convey it directly. Stories however offer different, indirect solutions.

I will endeavour to find the place of the inexpressible in the gap between the metaphor machine and the Other connecting it not only to concepts of transcendence

⁴⁸ David Foster Wallace, 'Good Old Neon', *Oblivion*, London: Abacus, 2005, p. 178.

and immanence but to those of language and death, which appear in Giorgio Agamben's *Il linguaggio e la morte* (1982) from which I will freely extrapolate a few ideas.

Following Heidegger, Agamben posits that our life is a constant 'anticipation of death' since mortality is our destiny from the moment we are born as an essential part of our Dasein, our being-there into the world⁴⁹ or, our very immanence. Moving from Heidegger to Hegel, Agamben recalls that this negativity, this presence of death from birth, is present in language itself, in its *Meinung*, its will-to-say, 'lo stesso voler-dire'⁵⁰: 'this unsaid, in itself, is simply a negative and a universal...'⁵¹ The individual cannot, in other words, say her need to say, her need to use language.

The individual enters language through what Jakobson has referred to as 'shifters'. Words like 'I' or 'there' do not have any direct referent to reality because their referent shifts according to the speaker or the context. The shifter 'I' then has fluid, temporary immanence and as such, it is both transcendental and immanent, form and substance. For Agamben, the shifters represent 'the pure taking place of language,'⁵² whereas the meaning the context gives them, represents their ontic dimension, their referentiality.

The will-to-say of language corresponds to the voice, which is 'pure intention to signify, ... pure will-to-say, in which something gives itself for comprehension

⁴⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Il linguaggio e la morte*, Torino: Einaudi, 2008, p. 10. All translations from this text are mine.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 21.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., p. 37.

without the production yet of an event imbued of meaning.⁵³ The voice is made of sound, thus lasting but the moment of the sound, leaving a sort of echo of itself, that is, it takes the negative dimension of absence: this Voice is at the same time a *not-anymore* (voice) and a *not-yet* (meaning)⁵⁴. This Voice is then both the pure being of the individual and language and, at the same time, non-being, in its privation, fundamental negativity.

In contrast to the pure will-to-say of the Voice, human language has a conscience: ‘human language is the “voice of the conscience”, in that in it conscience exists and is made real, because language is articulated *voice*.’⁵⁵ Referring to Hegel, Agamben explains how the human language articulates the animal voice, the pure sound, in order to create words and meanings. The Voice is pure emotion without articulation, and with the beginning of articulation and meaning it disappears, and as such, it is the voice of death, which stays as a silent echo in the voice of the conscience.⁵⁶ The voice of language then converts the negativity of the Voice, of the pure event of language, into being and meaning, from *langue* to *parole*, from transcendence to immanence.

Agamben pursues his research on language observing how in Heidegger’s *Dasein* man has no voice at all: ‘*Being Da, man is in the place of language without a*

⁵³ ‘...come pura intenzione di significare, come puro voler-dire, in cui qualcosa si dà a comprendere senza che ancora si produca un evento determinato di significato. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁵⁴ ‘...*non-più* (*voce*) and a *not-yet* (significato)...’ *Ibid.*, p. 49. Italics in the original.

⁵⁵ ‘...il linguaggio umano è “voce della coscienza”, in esso la coscienza esiste e si dà realtà, perché il linguaggio è *voce* articolata. *Ibid.*, p. 57. Emphasis in the original.

⁵⁶ Agamben, *Il linguaggio e la morte*, p. 59.

voice.⁵⁷ This means that the shifter *Da* throws the individual into language, and into life, without the individual entering it with her own voice, because language always anticipates Dasein⁵⁸. From the very start then man is thrown not only in a life, which is a constant anticipation of death, but in language by being there as a shifter, something without yet a content or meaning but still a presence.

Agamben however explains that death itself is not the door to the Voice, because the Voice is necessary to comprehend death and the Dasein and it makes all the difference between dying and deceasing.⁵⁹ Deceasing is stopping living without ever finding the Voice, the principle for human conscience. Achieving the Voice means achieving being, existing in an active way and thus the possibility of developing a conscience and with that an individual voice.

Human language then is made of two planes: the plane of the Voice, of the event of language, of its taking-place; and then the plane of discourse itself, where meaning enters the taking-place of language.⁶⁰ To translate it in the language I have used for this work, the Voice lives in the plane of transcendence, but it presents the possibility itself for immanence and meaning to take place. Without the negativity of transcendence, the void it creates, being would have no presence to fill.

The will-to-say of the Voice has not, for Agamben, a psychological dimension but an

⁵⁷ *‘Essendo il Da, l’uomo è nel luogo del linguaggio senza avere una voce.’* Ibid., p.69. Emphasis in the original.

⁵⁸ *‘...il Dasein, si trova nel luogo del linguaggio senza essere portato in esso dalla propria voce, e il linguaggio anticipa già sempre il Dasein, perchè questo si tiene senza voce nel luogo del linguaggio.’* Ibid., p. 71.

⁵⁹ Ibid. , p. 75.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 106.

ethical dimension, in which the individual accepts her presence in language: ‘The Voice is the originary ethical dimension, in which man pronounces his *yes* to language and allows its taking-place.’⁶¹ This is a key point for my thesis because being the foundation for ethics it also means that the Voice is the cornerstone for an ethics of narrative. Dwelling in the place of death at the origin of language, in the very risk of death, one chooses to found her individuality and to later tell her story through her Voice.

Ethics and logic depend on each other according to Agamben because, without the will-to-say, language would not find an opening and the *logos*, or human thought as such, would not even exist. The narrative of our destiny is inside language but cannot be known, even if we use the same language. Ethics is the place where the individual experiments with ‘what has to necessarily remain unsaid in what one says.’⁶² I argue that stories or narrative fictions allow exactly this: the possibility to say the unsayable, to transmit the Voice, even if it is not possible to say it directly.

Agamben does not state this but I would like to suggest, to conclude, that this ethics of the Voice, of the opening of language is, first of all, an opening to the Other. The ethics of the Voice presupposes not only a will-to-say, but a will-to-listen, the possibility of the meeting of two individual voices. The characters of the novels I will study are mostly deaf to the voice of the Other because they are too focused on trying to say what cannot be said. As a consequence, they have forgotten how to listen to the cries of pain of the Other. If this will-to-say is the foundation for human

⁶¹ ‘La Voce è la dimensione etica originaria, in cui l’uomo pronuncia il suo *sì* al linguaggio e consente che esso abbia luogo.’ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁶² ‘... ciò che deve necessariamente restare non detto in ciò che si dice.’ Agamben, *Il linguaggio e la morte*, p. 114.

language and human thought, it would be interesting to found an ethics based on a will-to-listen, on the possibility that language and thought can be shared. I argue for the possibility that human beings can meet somehow in the taking-place of language, in a place before meaning, where ideologies do not matter and what really matters is only the reciprocal will-to-say, the inherent human will-to-communicate. This is what the unsayable is after all.

Structure of the Work: Between Philosophy and Rhetoric

Since I will be moving through the philosophical realms of transcendence and immanence I will separate the present work in four parts, which more or less correspond to domains of philosophy: Philosophy of Language, Desire, Epistemology, and Ethics.

In Philosophy of Language I will observe writers whose work is characterized by a particular attention to the use of language in their stylistic choices. In the first chapter I will scrutinize the narratives of the 'I' in a story by David Foster Wallace, 'Good Old Neon' (2004). This story is a confession, the place in which the self builds herself through language. This will be followed by an analysis of Zygmunt Bauman's theory of liquid modernity, in which identities are constantly changed in the same way as we would buy a new pair of shoes. Identity here is not stable, but casual; not a pre-existent 'I' but a series of positions of subjectivity. From confession to fashion, the narrative of the I will see the struggle between authenticity and the need to be loved by the Other: that is, in the gap between the idealized way we think

the Other sees us, to which we aspire, and the failure we feel not only in attaining that image, but in the realization that, living after a transcendent image, a metaphor, our immanence, our ethics, that is, the way we live our life sounds fake. Suicide, or the violence on the self, is the outcome of the frustration and guilt for this kind of narration the self has undertaken.

In the second chapter of the first part, I will explore the world of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, and the way his style works by subtraction. I will observe his use of epic and above all the dichotomy between judge Holden and the kid, characters without origins who as such acquire, especially in the case of the former, the status of myth. Holden becomes an impossible transcendental figure representing the Law opposed to the almost powerless clemency of the unnamed kid. His clemency is the form his Voice takes in the respect for the life of Others.

Part II of the thesis is then dedicated to Desire, which is not exactly a branch of philosophy but a subject philosophy has often analysed especially in the last century or so with the advent of psychoanalysis. Yet it is a subject that was already faced by Plato in his *Symposium* (385-370 BC). Here I will investigate James Ballard's *Crash* (1973) and the way the middle class tries to find a way out of the boredom of their lives through the creation of new desires. These characters will soon give way to violence entrapped as they become in their own psychopathologies, creations of their metaphor machines that they apply to their immanent life. The Ballardian man is so involved in his fantasies that he thinks other characters are just the product of his desires.

Moving to Epistemology in Part 3, I will not so much observe the connection between philosophy and science as that between philosophy and information. Information has today taken the place of experience and as such it has become the basis for any form of knowledge. I will also briefly present the question Jean-François Lyotard asks in *L'Inhumain* (1988) concerning the end of the universe and the ultimate witness. Lyotard in fact asks: when the sun will ultimately explode, who will witness such an event since the human body is not fit to last this long? In a humanistic take, Lyotard seems to suggest transcending the body in order to create a hardware capable of keeping the human mind alive for longer. In the following three chapters of this part of the thesis I will look for an answer to this metaphysical question.

In the first of these chapters I will study the way his knowledge of clothes and etiquette makes Patrick Bateman in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) literally a bi-dimensional man, who tries to communicate his metaphor machine with the different Others by violating their bodies. Blinded by the image of the Americanness that he strives to achieve, Bateman kills anyone who does not belong to that image.

In chapter ii of this section, Chuck Palahniuk suggests in *Fight Club* (1996) that information can instead be used as a form of revolution for the lower class against the status quo. Through the fight, in fact, the individual becomes protagonist of the narrative of her life. However, the difficulties the unnamed protagonist faces in trying to connect to his fellow humans, to be noticed by them, are such that he literally splits into two personalities, creating Tyler Durden. As a purely fictional

personality, Durden represents the ideal image the narrator has created, in his metaphor machine, of who we would like to be. The product of his fantasy has taken the place of the narrator.

In chapter iii, Part III, I will return to cyberpunk, which has initiated this entire work, by evaluating the role of the character in William Gibson's *Sprawl Trilogy* and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*. From being nothing more than a mere 'point of view' in Gibson, the character will struggle in order to become, in Maurice G. Dantec's *Cosmos Incorporated* (2005) the author of his own life.

In most of the chapters I face the recurring problem of the posthuman, that is the vision of the human today in the era of the ever evolving technological boom, so that I will try to show who is the Ballardian Man, or the posthuman in Ellis and Palahniuk and finally in cyberpunk. But it is with Dantec that I suggest the posthuman, represented by Plotkine, is actually the fictional man, the man struggling in the balance between transcendence and immanence, struck between his imagination and the difficulties to apply the dreams of his metaphor machine over reality and as such, to take control of his life. Plotkine epitomizes the multiple fictional possibilities that technology offers to our reality.

In the Fourth and final part of the thesis, I will deal with ethics and with finding the means for a co-existence of the individual with the Other even in the difficulties of communicating her metaphor machine. In the first chapter I will analyse China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station* applying the theories of Wu Ming and their New Italian Epic (2008). Crisis is the starting point for violence, according to Wu Ming,

because it is the beginning of every conflict, including the one, which operates between transcendence and immanence. Ecocentrism is the solution offered both by Wu Ming 1 and Miéville: that is, attention no more to the internal struggle to communicate, but to the Other, to her voice and suffering.

Ecocentrism is also important in the last chapter of Part IV concerning Miéville's *Embassytown* (2011) in which humans learn to deal with the Language of an alien race, the Ariekei. The concept of what a consciousness is doubles here with the apology of lying as the only way to communicate the self. In the extreme immanence of the Ariekei's Language in which every word corresponds to a referential reality the aliens offer no real personalities, deprived as they are of a metaphor machine. It is the lying of fiction, which ultimately allows us to speak of what cannot be otherwise said.

As I have said it is only through literary devices that the individual can express her Voice, her own difficulty to communicate. As such, literary tools are the basis through which these writers offer solutions. For this reasons I have outlined a rhetoric of contemporary fiction:

- *irony* will characterize the work of Wallace, a 'serious laugh' that involves the detachment of the philosopher in understanding her limited control over immanence;
- *ellipsis* will be key to understand the rarefied and poetic writing of McCarthy and the silence of the kid against the abstract loquacity of Holden;
- where Bateman represents Western man, he becomes *synecdoche* for an

entire people and as such he involves us all in his crimes;

- *paradox* and *oxymoron* define Palahniuk's entire career, always there to shock and wake us to the clichés of modern life;
- the broken *metaphor* of cyberspace will show what happens when the individual escapes reality in order to live in a transcendent world of data, which has supplanted reality *tout court*;
- finally, *hyperbole*, the going outside the self of ecocentrism, will seal Miéville's answer to the problem of the unsayable.

This rhetoric will help me to better convey the difficulties the characters have, not only to deal with the conflict in their head between the metaphorical images they have of life and the life they lead, but also to communicate their internal life and metaphors to the Other. Rhetoric will offer a counter-answer to violence, which is what the characters ultimately choose in order to overcome their internal struggle. Finally, I aim to suggest an ethical way for writers and individuals in general to communicate what good old Neon would call our 'free will.'⁶³ In the different form of epics found in these novels but especially in Miéville I hope to find a new ethics that goes beyond the violence of the posthuman but that offers an alternative to it, an ecocentric ethics that bridges the gap between the metaphor machine that is the brain and the world outside.

⁶³ David Foster Wallace, 'Good Old Neon', *Oblivion*, London: Abacus, 2005, p. 179.

1.1 Confession and Suicide as Violence on the Self in David Foster Wallace's 'Good Old Neon'

‘I wanted everyone to think I was sincere.’⁶⁴

According to Nietzsche, an individual is for the first time aware and conscious of her own actions – that is, she becomes self-conscious – when she has to give an account of the suffering she has caused to another individual. Identity then comes into being when one has to ask oneself: what have I done? Affected by this ethical question the individual has to review her conduct operating a recognition of her own actions according to a specific context of laws and codes. In such a context the individual is forced to reflection in order to defend her self before the authority of the Law, representative of justice and as such entitled to condemn her to face a punishment, which can take violent forms. This is the premise of the connection Judith Butler makes between the creation of the self and violence: ‘Judgement, unbeholden to the ethics implied by the structure of address, tends toward violence.’⁶⁵

Butler continues, quoting Nietzsche’s statement that punishment is “the making of a memory,”⁶⁶ since the self is forced to recollect what she has done in a logic of linearity and causality. Identity then becomes the story the self tells in the hope of redeeming her self from what we could call a crime, or to use the title of Butler’s book, an account of oneself. Butler dismisses Nietzsche's thesis at the beginning of her book stating that ‘there may well be a desire to know and understand that is not

⁶⁴ Wallace, ‘Good Old Neon,’ p. 158.

⁶⁵ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005, p. 63.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

fuelled by the desire to punish, and a desire to explain and narrate that is not prompted by a terror of punishment.’⁶⁷

Chambers and Carver have already pointed out that Butler takes the passage from Nietzsche out of its proper context.⁶⁸ The extract is taken in fact from *On The Genealogy of Morals* (1887) where Nietzsche reflects on the transitory character of the meaning of punishment.⁶⁹ Nietzsche makes a list of a few meanings the act of punishment takes and, among them, punishment ‘as the making of a memory, whether for him who suffers the punishment—so-called “improvement”—or for those who witness its execution.’⁷⁰ Nietzsche here stresses primarily the mark the punishment leaves both on the sufferer and the witness more than he focuses on the start of a narrative of the self.

Butler’s misrepresentation of Nietzsche’s sentence is however interesting because it points at the necessity for the individual to look at her or himself from the point of view of the Other. The individual would not have any reasons to think about her self,⁷¹ as an individual, if not because its actions have consequences for other individuals or in the eyes of the Other. Punishment can take many shapes and the individual can turn to herself in order not to be excluded by society at large, the world of the other selves. The fear of isolation is enough for the individual to become her own judge and executioner. These reflections offer us a useful backdrop

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁶⁸ Samuel A. Chambers and Terence Carver, *Judith Butler and Political Theory: Troubling Politics*, New York: Routledge, 2008, note 13, p. 170.

⁶⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals*, Trans Walter Kaufmann and RJ Hollingdale, New York: Vintage, 1989, p. 80.

⁷⁰ *Ibidem.*, pp. 80-81.

⁷¹ Even the myth of Narcissus after all is about finding the Other in the self.

against which to read David Foster Wallace; and this will form a central area of interest in what follows below, as I advance the argument of this thesis. In this section, I will look at confession and suicide as themselves acts of violence against the self or against selfhood. In turn, this will lead us to a discussion of the very idea of identity, either in the form of a falling or failing identity (and here, Don De Lillo's literary fictions will be important) or in the theoretical terms of Zygmunt Bauman's 'liquid identity' and Paul de man's linguistic self.

This is what happens to Neal, the protagonist of David Foster Wallace's story 'Good Old Neon.' Neal passes through different stages of confession in an attempt to account for the reason why he has committed suicide. The story is not a reading of his last message but a confession after the act, from the afterlife in a sense that I will later explore, thus ensuing that Neon is not under any threat of punishment. Neon feels the need to narrate his story to show to a certain 'David Wallace'⁷², that Neal was not this guy 'with the seemingly almost neon aura around him all the time of scholastic and athletic excellence and popularity and success with the ladies,'⁷³ but a 'fraud.'⁷⁴ Neal's story suggests that we as individuals may give an account of ourselves because we are the first, who need to justify our existence, to give a meaning through it as a story: the confession becomes a parable, an example of the life of a man like us. But it is first of all a story where the narrated I and the narrating I tend to correspond to a certain extent.

The specific extent of this correspondence concerns the question of truth or the

⁷² Wallace, p. 180.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 180

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 140

manipulation of reality on the part of the confessor. This is of local interest in the story; but its theoretical consequences go much further than this actual occasion or occurrence suggests. What follows from this correspondence between narrated and narrating I is, consequently, the relationship between fiction and reality: a confession is the telling of the true story of the confessor's life but, at the same time, the confessor is the only witness of that life and, following from this, the reality of the confession cannot be verified. Reinventing the past is a way of transcending reality and, for this reason, it questions the concept of truth, since one dominant account of truth is that we expect a statement's adherence to non-linguistic reality.

Transcendence is not synonymous with lying but they have a few traits in common: divergence from reality (upwards for transcendence, sideways we could say or downward if we want to take a moralist point of view for lies); both diversions aim at salvation from reality itself (the first towards a higher ideal in most cases, the latter for fear of punishment, success, win over reality, etc.); both use language in one way or another (most religious forms of transcendence depend on a book and one *tells* a lie).

Neal is looking for his true self after a life of telling lies to impress other people. His confession is meant to erase the transcendental myth of the successful Neon. His diversion from reality in the attempt to gain social success ends up in the loss of his individuality and the irremediable failure of language to communicate what he has inside. Neal realizes the paradox that he cannot tell his immediate essence, express his Voice, because it is unsayable. Through death Neal eventually understands the truth, thanks to the writer's ability to communicate Neal's individual Voice through a narrative. Before that, though, Neal chooses suicide – a mode of extreme and

ultimate violence on the self - after he decides that he cannot communicate his Voice, the ultimate truth of who he is inside. We then encounter the dichotomy to which Agamben has pointed us, namely that in which death and language are better articulated as the space of the anticipation of death and the will-to-say of the individual. In the next few pages I will observe how the frustration of his will-to-say will lead Neal to look for death itself.

Neal's story is a confession, both in the religious sense of spiritual confession in the hope of redemption and in the legal sense of confession in front of an authority. It will be useful then for my discourse to quote largely from Paul De Man's analysis in his *Allegories of Reading* (1979) of Rousseau's *Confessions*. In these pages, De Man gives a definition of confession which concerns truth or, we could add referring to Foucault, 'a regime of truth':

To confess is to overcome guilt and shame in the name of truth: it is an epistemological use of language in which ethical values of good and evil are superseded by values of truth and falsehood, one of the implications being that vices such as concupiscence, envy, greed, and the like are vices primarily because they compel one to lie.⁷⁵

Neal's shame at the way David Wallace regards him triggers his narrative of guilt. Guilt does not however come to Neal as the result of the fear of punishment as he is already dead. He is looking for truth as the only form of redemption from shame and in an ultimate attempt at communicating his true self.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Paul De Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, London: Yale University Press, 1979, p. 279.

⁷⁶ There are no hints of any belief in the afterlife in the story. However, Neal is indeed telling his story from the afterlife, but this afterlife Neal lives in is simply the space of his narrative. Or else, we could say that his need-to-say has survived his very life.

Confessing an act however is not enough, writes De Man, ‘one also has to *excuse*.’⁷⁷

De Man takes as an example of this idea an episode in Rousseau’s *Confessions*, in which Rousseau is guilty of theft. In De Man’s narration:

While employed as a servant in an aristocratic Turin house, Rousseau has stolen a “pink and silver colored ribbon.” When the theft is discovered, he accuses a young maidservant of having given him the ribbon, the implication being that she was trying to seduce him. [...] The story ends badly, with both characters being dismissed.⁷⁸

Rousseau’s sense of guilt and need to confess the episode is great since he has accused ‘an innocent girl who has never done him the slightest bit of harm.’⁷⁹

However, De Man points out, Rousseau’s intention is less to confess than to excuse himself in the eyes of the reader. De Man observes that the purpose of the excuse is ‘not to state but to convince.’⁸⁰ Rousseau then is not really interested in telling the truth but in telling a story in which he can narrate his guilt and, at the same time, entice the reader to forgive him or approve his confession: the confession becomes, in other words, an exercise in rhetoric. Thus the fact that a confession is a linguistic act takes the confession into the realm of what de Man calls ‘linguistic’ as opposed to ‘empirical’ selfhood; and it can be analysed precisely as a rhetorical trope. What ‘actually happened’ now becomes secondary to this trope; and, again, de Man’s ‘empirical’ reality, especially with regard to the reality of a self, is revealed as something constituted through the dialectic of perception, expressed linguistically through the identification of an ‘I’ that can be excused. This is obviously of

⁷⁷ De Man, *Allegories of Reading*, p. 280. Italicised in the original.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

importance in any situation where the implied 'guilt' relates to an act of violence. Comparing Rousseau's theft with a similar episode in 'Good Old Neon' will help better understand the role of this kind of narration in the separation between story and reality.

Neal remembers an episode which happened when he 'was only four,'⁸¹ when he broke 'the antique Moser glass bowl that my stepmom had inherited from her biological grandmother and totally loved.'⁸² When his stepfather asks him if he was the one responsible the young Neal 'realized somehow right in the middle of his asking me if I'd broken the bowl that if I said I did it but "confessed" it in a sort of clumsy, implausible way, then he wouldn't believe me and would instead believe that my sister Fern who's my stepparents' biological daughter, was the one.'⁸³ Here we have the confession (the old dead Neal's telling of the episode) of a false confession of guiltiness (the 'clumsy' confession of guiltiness) which hides the truth by stating it: there is a new level added to the mechanism, a higher level of abstraction and meta-narration.

Rousseau makes of his confession an attempt at excusing himself, thus compromising the credibility of his words: '*Qui s'accuse s'excuse*;' writes De Man, 'this sounds convincing and convenient enough, but, in terms of absolute truth, it ruins the seriousness of any confessional discourse by making it self-destructive.'⁸⁴ According to De Man, the language of confession and the language of excuse belong to two different domains: the former is referential, that is, it has to do with truth and

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 148.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ De Man, p. 280.

reality, whereas the latter is a performative act, an attempt to affect the listener or the reader. The result is a split in the very language of confession: ‘confession language,’ De Man explains, ‘can be considered under a double epistemological perspective: it functions as a verifiable referential cognition, but it also functions as a statement whose reliability cannot be verified by empirical means.’⁸⁵ Confession as part knowledge and part fiction is essentially internally split from the start because of the unreliability of the narrator. The confessing ‘I’ is unreliable because her main purpose is primarily to excuse her guilt instead of reaching an ideal form of truth.

In Neal’s case, the performative act of the excuse is even more evident since he ‘performs’ his confession in a ‘clumsy, implausible way:’

I figured out how to create a certain impression by knowing what effect I’d produce in my stepdad by implausibly “confessing” that I’d punched Fern in the arm and stolen her Hula Hoop and had run all the way downstairs with it and started Hula-Hooping in the dining room right by the sideboard with all my stepmom’s antique glassware and figurines on it, while Fern, forgetting all about her arm and hoop because of her concern over the bowl and other glassware, came running downstairs shouting after me, reminding me about how important the rule was that we weren’t supposed to play in the dining room...⁸⁶

Wallace succeeds in creating the image of a child talking fast and for a long time as if making up what he is telling by writing a long paragraph without a full stop and finishing it with three suspension points. Neal immediately ascertains the power of his performance for which he does not feel any guilt, on the contrary: ‘the truth is it felt great. I felt powerful, smart.’⁸⁷ Neal is trapped in his attempt at confession because even now that he really wants to confess he still has to struggle with a

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁸⁶ Wallace, p. 148.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

language outside the domain of truth. Neal was very young when he found out about the transcendent power of manipulating the perception of reality.

Is Neal's confession of a false confession more reliable than Rousseau's? Nobody has ever found out about Rousseau's act but he feels the need to insert the episode in his *Confessions* apparently out of guilt. At the same time, however, he is probably only trying to ingratiate himself with his reader, because what he ultimately wants, we could say, is to be liked. In Wallace's text, Neal wants to tell the truth by proving he is a fraud through his confession. His need to be liked was exactly what brought him to his demise and his posthumous attempt at dismissing his own myth, his own story.

Neal's shame at the episode, also stemming from the admission that he likes his sister: his statement that 'I like her a lot,'⁸⁸ more or less directly echoes Rousseau's concern for the 'innocent servant.' According to De Man, recounting the episode Rousseau 'speculate[s] at length, and with some relish, on the dreadful things that are bound to have happened in the subsequent career of the hapless girl.'⁸⁹ Neal, on his part, asks himself what it could mean for a five year old girl to be considered a liar: 'I'm sure it must be doubly horrible when you were actually telling the truth and they didn't believe you.'⁹⁰

The psychological violence received by Neal's sister and the troubles of the servant in Rousseau are the consequences of narrative acts: narrative acts that are so

⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 150.

⁸⁹ De Man, p. 279.

⁹⁰ Wallace, p. 149.

removed from reality that the stories they tell become synonymous with lie. This is what Agamben means when stating that the works of imagination today, what we call fiction, is in the end a pack of lies instead of a way towards knowledge.⁹¹

Rousseau's and Neal's speculations as to the effects of their actions do not diminish their crime, which is ultimately using fiction as a lie, or of concealing the ethical domain of truth-and-lies under the aesthetic and rhetorical domain of fiction.

The shame apparent in the recounting of these two episodes is only an excuse which allows the self to feel the pleasure of finally taking the 'truth' out of itself: 'shame used as excuse permits repression to function as revelation and thus to make pleasure and guilt interchangeable. Guilt is forgiven because it allows for the pleasure of revealing its repression. It follows that repression is in fact an excuse, one speech act among others.'⁹² De Man's words explain the real reasons for a confession: both Rousseau and Neal merely want to free themselves of a burden and leave a good impression on the reader. The real shame comes at knowing that one actually wants to expose one's own guilt, exhibit it. 'One is more ashamed of the exposure of the desire to expose oneself than of the desire to possess; like Freud's dreams of nakedness, shame is primarily exhibitionistic.'⁹³ Instead of feeling actually guilty Rousseau and Neal want to be revealed in their shame and crime, but whereas Rousseau wants to be accepted by the reader, Neon seems to conceive a more genuine desire to find his true self. His entire confession is a struggle between showing himself as evil and being finally understood: it is an ethic-epistemological

⁹¹ 'For Antiquity, the imagination, which is now expunged from knowledge as "unreal", was the supreme medium of knowledge.' Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, p. 27.

⁹² De Man, p. 286.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

battle where truth can lead to redemption.

As De Man notes in fact, the telling of the episode helps to explain the incongruity of Rousseau's act: the confession tries to make sense of why Rousseau has done it:

the action is understood and, consequently, excused for it was primarily its incongruity that was unforgivable. Knowledge, morality, possession, exposure, affectivity (shame as the synthesis of pleasure and pain), and the performative excuse are all ultimately part of one system that is epistemologically as well as ethically grounded and therefore available as meaning, in the mode of understanding.⁹⁴

The purpose of the narrative is not merely to order reality but to order it into an intelligible meaning. The metaphor machine stimulating any narrative has always had order as its priority but this order has no necessary relation to the reality it tries to explain. This transcendental machine in fact has the capacity to overwhelm the immanent perceptions of the senses. The epistemological narrative has as its protagonist a fictional Rousseau, which is irremediably split from the original the moment the writer starts his *Confessions*.

A clear mode of analysis of what is at issue here is offered by Butler in her consideration of Foucault. According to Foucault, the confession is 'a "manifestation" of the self that does not have to correspond to some putative inner truth, and whose constitutive appearance is *not* to be construed as mere illusion.'⁹⁵ No truth, nor illusion, then, but a performative act, where 'confession becomes the

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

⁹⁵ Butler, p. 112. Italics in the original.

verbal and bodily scene of its self-demonstration.⁹⁶ We could say that the confession is the way the individual wants to be seen on the outside by solving the incongruity of an act committed for which she feels shame and guilt. This becomes the ground where the metaphor machines substitutes the immanent world. In telling his story, then, Rousseau the confessor narrates a tale of Rousseau the character and tries to excuse the action of that character. Pushing De Man's analysis to its logical conclusion, Rousseau the writer can let his character take all the blame and be thus forgiven.

The split inherent in manifestation (or exhibition in De Man's terms) is ultimately a form of sacrifice, Butler says, quoting Foucault again: "You will become the subject of a manifestation of truth when and only when you disappear or you destroy yourself as a real body and a real existence."⁹⁷ To succeed with his confession then Neal first kills himself and it is only after this death that he tells his story, without a real existence needing forgiveness any longer. Neal renounces to his immanent body and becomes pure metaphor, a story in other words, in order to express his Voice. Is violence really the only option Neal had to find truth and tell the unsayable? Was this sacrifice worth it? Who did he make this sacrifice for?

These are the questions to which we can now turn.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

Truth and the Other

Towards the end of his life Neal is overwhelmed by the need for the Other to understand him. By lying, the individual builds a fiction fitting with the expectations of society. Society in this case is another name for the Law that Benjamin talks about when he talks about violence. As Neal says at the very beginning of his story, in fact, ‘pretty much all I’ve ever done all the time is try to create a certain impression of me in other people.’⁹⁸ Society has written the rules that bind Neal in his solipsism of lies and half-truths transcending any form of inner truth. This binding keeps Neal away from any true connection to the Other.

An example of Neal’s relationship with the Other, which helps both to illustrate the manipulative power of the excuse and at the same time the way Neal tries to impress people, is offered by his relationship with his psychiatrist. Neal gives his psychiatrist enough rope to please him even if, ‘the real truth was that my confession of being a fraud and of having wasted time sparring with him over the previous weeks in order to manipulate him into seeing me as exceptional and insightful had itself been kind of manipulative.’⁹⁹ Neal has trapped himself in a vicious cycle where the Other, in this case his psychiatrist, becomes an instrument for Neal’s self to achieve recognition. The end of the cycle is its beginning since Neal realizes that what he has accomplished is to give his psychiatrist what he wanted from him. He has, in other words, perfectly followed the script written by someone else.

The ultimate purpose of Neal’s ability to manipulate the impression he leaves on

⁹⁸ Wallace, p. 141.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

people is a simple human need to be loved by the Other: he wanted, in fact, ‘mostly to be liked or admired. It’s a little more complicated than that, maybe. But when you come right down to it it’s to be liked, loved. Admired, approved of, applauded, whatever.’¹⁰⁰ To be loved and to be applauded are however not the same since the former is more connected to a personal relationship with another human whereas applause appeal more to a performance in front of an audience. Neal passes from the need to be recognized by the people closer to him to the desire to be recognized as a member of Society. This may well be the consequence of a thought that has probably traversed everyone’s mind at least once: the way I am, am I worth or good enough to be loved?

As Rousseau himself says, after all, (and this is also quoted by De Man), in certain circumstances lying is not lying: “To lie without intent and without harm to oneself or to others is not to lie: it is not a lie but a fiction.”¹⁰¹ Rousseau seems to counter-argue what has been said to this point by firmly defining his writing as fiction (a story, which may and may not be real) instead of a lie. The reader is responsible for referencing to reality what she is reading in order to find some truth. According to De Man: ‘Not the fiction itself is to blame for the consequences but its falsely referential reading.’¹⁰² As readers we naturally tend to connect what we read with something outside, determined in reality, because we forget that even if narratives have always a connection to the reality outside they are however metaphors, forms of transcendence.

¹⁰⁰ Wallace, p. 141.

¹⁰¹ De Man, p. 291.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 293.

If we read then that Rousseau was quite ashamed of what he did, the reader believes instinctively that it is what really happened, instead of realising it is a fiction that Rousseau wanted to expose in order to be freed from guilt. De Man admits that it is almost impossible, at least at the beginning of the analysis to discern Rousseau's attempt at truth from his performance: 'It seems to be impossible to isolate the moment in which the fiction stands free of any signification; in the very moment at which it is posited, as well as in the context that it generates, it gets at once misinterpreted into a determination which is, *ipso facto*, overdetermined.' As a consequence of the impossibility to separate between truth and falsification, reality and fiction, every crime can be forgiven: 'it is always possible to face up any experience (to excuse any guilt), because the experience always exists simultaneously as fictional discourse and as empirical event and it is never possible to decide which one of the two possibilities is the right one.'¹⁰³

Truth can then have two different aspects as it is at the same time both the ethical attempt at being truthful, and also the absolute correspondence to reality, which is actually closest to what science tries to do through technology. The tools of science find their purpose in reading reality in a more truthful way than the human mind, which is fallible and relative.¹⁰⁴

This fallibility of the mind to create a correct image of reality is due to the fact that the brain is foremost a metaphor machine. It ultimately creates an individual image of the world, even of the self, that is not universal and never totally immanent. As

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

¹⁰⁴ Later on, I will explore how science as well has failed man in acquiring experience because the data procured by technology in the end replace reality as it happens in cyberpunk.

such, truth is mostly an ideal or an ethical stance where the individual decides more or less consciously if she is adhering to her vision of the truth. Rousseau is by his own admission telling a story about the theft, which does not correspond to the episode he has experienced. If empirical truth is impossible, then ethical truth is what is left to man to confess. Rousseau has failed ethically and to cover his failure he has tried to cover his lies with the name of fiction. Following his own definition, he had meant to lie about the theft in order to protect himself; and the maidservant had to pay the price.

Whereas Rousseau spends time trying to justify his lies, the realization that the projection of his self did not correspond to his true self generates an ethical crisis in the mind of Neal. He comes then to the conclusion that 'my whole life I've been a fraud,'¹⁰⁵ and that 'in reality I actually seemed to have no true inner self.'¹⁰⁶ This realization leads him to the formulation of the fraudulence paradox: 'the fraudulence paradox was that the more time and effort you put into trying to appear impressive or attractive to other people, the less impressive or attractive you felt inside – you were a fraud.'¹⁰⁷ When Neal eventually looks inside himself, he finds an empty space covered on the surface by all the different images of himself that he has created in his life. He decides on death through suicide, an act of violence (a crash accident after taking a lot of pills of various nature)¹⁰⁸ against his own self, even if, in the

¹⁰⁵ Wallace, p. 140.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁰⁸ It is worth quoting the passage in which Neal explains how he is going to kill himself. Wallace, p. 177: 'The idea was to have the accident and whatever explosion and fire was involved occur someplace isolated enough that no one else would see it, so that there would be as little an aspect of performance to the thing as I could manage and no temptation to spend my last few seconds trying to imagine what impression the sight and sound of the impact might make on someone watching. To

very precise and specific way that I have described above, he had committed suicide all of his life.

Paradoxically, Neal undermines his entire narrative and death at the very beginning of the story when he says: 'Not to mention am I maybe full of B.S. about knowing what happens - if I really did kill myself, how can you even be hearing this? Meaning that I am a fraud.'¹⁰⁹ Is Neal really dead? If so, who is really telling us his story? Is the real, referential Neal dead and his fictional self still alive? Is this the ultimate break up created by the transcendence of the individual, that is, the death of the real person in favour of the narrative character?¹¹⁰

In death, Neal realizes that the need for recognition defines us as humans, and that this is what we call free will: 'Of course you're a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it's only a part. Who wouldn't? It's called free will, Sherlock.'¹¹¹ The stories we create of ourselves are the expression of human freedom; the only limit, as we will shortly see, are the restrictions of language.

Free will is also an expression of the individuality of our Voice, our will to say what we want to say of the products of our individual metaphor machine. Our imaginary is personal and as such difficult to convey to another individual metaphor machine. To

his very death, Neal fights for a pure, true act, but does he really succeed?

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

¹¹⁰ We will meet this possibility often in the following chapters especially with the cyberpunk of William Gibson and the postcyberpunk of Maurice Dantec.

¹¹¹ Wallace, p. 179.

expand our Voice outside the brain is part of our free will to say based on our need to be listened to and loved. For this reason the individual assumes a different identity thus becoming a ‘fraud’, that is initiating a separation between the referential self and the self as character. In the next paragraphs I will explore this separation as the figure of speech of irony.

1.2 Irony and the Doubling of the Philosopher

Through De Man’s analysis of Rousseau’s *Confessions* we have experienced the separation of the fictional self from the empirical self. But the confession is not the only case in which the self is split. Again with the De Man, we will now see how irony too has a dividing tendency in the mind of the individual. For De Man, irony is ‘a problem that exists within the self,’¹¹² it ‘[originates] at the cost of the empirical self.’¹¹³ Starting from this understanding of the concept of irony in De Man, I will move to the contemporary situation of liquidity in which we live today according to Zygmunt Bauman. It will be through analysing Bauman’s *Liquid Modernity* (2000) that split identity and violence will be slowly connected and new mechanisms of power will be shown.

In the essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality”, De Man analyzes Charles Baudelaire’s “De l’essence du rire”, where the French poet describes the way irony or ‘le comique’ works. De Man transcribes the definition Baudelaire gives of irony through

¹¹² Paul De Man, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’ in *Blindness and Insight*, London: Methuen & Co, 1983, p. 211.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

the example of a man falling into the street: “‘Le comique,’” writes Baudelaire, “the power of laugh is the one who is laughing and not in the object of the laugh. It’s not the falling man the one who laughs at his own fall, unless he is a philosopher, a man who has acquired, as a habit, the power to quickly double up and to watch as disinterested spectator to the phenomenons of his self.¹¹⁴ First of all, the subject of irony is the laughing observer, le ‘spectateur désintéressé’, whereas the man falling is its object. The observer’s detachment from the action is a primary requirement for irony. If however the falling man is a philosopher he is able to be both subject and object thanks to a doubling, which allows him to see himself falling as if he were only another passer-by in the same street. The philosopher according to Baudelaire then has the capacity to transcend her self, to make a meta-physical jump beyond and in front of her self.

This is the dimension of what Baudelaire calls ‘le comique absolu’ to distinguish it from simple comedy that is aimed at making the other laugh, in ‘an intersubjective relationship’.¹¹⁵ Absolute irony is not an event between two subjects, but the detachment of a self from nature and into the non-human: ‘The *dédoublement* thus designates the activity of a consciousness by which a man differentiates himself from the non-human world. The capacity for such duplication is rare, says Baudelaire, but

¹¹⁴ ‘la puissance du rire est dans le rieur et nullement dans l’objet du rire. Ce n’est point l’homme qui tombe qui rit de sa propre chute, à moins qu’il ne soit un philosophe, un homme qui ait acquis, par habitude, la force de se dédoubler rapidement et d’assister comme spectateur désintéressé aux phénomènes de son *moi*.’ Paul De Man, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’ in *Blindness and Insight*, London: Methuen & Co, 1983, pp. 211-212. All the translations from the texts quoted by De Man in the original French are mine.

¹¹⁵ Paul De Man, ‘The Rhetoric of Temporality’, p. 212.

belongs specifically to those who, like artists or philosophers, deal in language.’¹¹⁶

Ironic discourse, ironic statements, are ‘non-human’ but in the precise sense that they are non-natural, not referring directly and unproblematically to the world. Laughing and talking the philosopher/artist transcends or dies from the world and enters the ironic world of language:

The reflective disjunction not only occurs by *means of* language as a privileged category, but it transfers the self out of the empirical world into a world constituted out of, and in, language—a language that it finds in the world like one entity among other, but that remains unique in being the only entity by means of which it can differentiate itself from the world. Language thus conceived divides the subject into an empirical self, immersed in the world, and a self that becomes like a sign in this attempt at differentiation and self-definition.¹¹⁷

The fictional self is a sign, a metaphor; and as such, it has a meaning, a direction, which is to explain somehow the fall. What is fictional in the world of language is both the man falling and the man laughing because they both live in the world of language now. The empirical world is already opaque, not well defined, unreadable and it is the purpose of the metaphor machine of language to give it a meaning.

What is this meaning then and why does the detached, linguistic, ironic self laugh at its own empirical self falling in the street? In De Man’s reading of Baudelaire’s essay, the answer is that ‘At the moment that the artistic or philosophical, that is, the language-determined, man laughs at himself falling, he is laughing at a mistaken, mystified assumption he was making about himself.’¹¹⁸ The mistake consists in the

¹¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 213.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 213. Italics in the original.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

presumption to possess control over nature: 'man comes to believe that he dominates nature, just as he can, at times, dominate others or watch others dominate him.'¹¹⁹ In the fall he perceives that nature has the power to easily reify him, 'treat him as if he were a thing'¹²⁰, while he has no chance to make nature human, that is, to establish any illusory intersubjective relationship with nature. As in the biblical Fall from grace, man realizes that his state of privilege amongst all creatures has obvious limitations. But whereas the Fall sees man taken away from the transcendental place out of time that is the Garden and thrown in the full dominion of nature where he will grow old and die, the falling man in the street offers to the philosopher a new form of transcendence from nature and the realization of an illusion. The irony is in the reduced status of control and power that man realizes in transcendence: laughing at his own fall man transcends his own nature while, at the same time, accepting his own immanence and fallibility.

A contemporary novel that concedes the fall of man as symbolic of his lack of control over the real is *Falling Man* (2007) by Don DeLillo. The Falling Man, a performance artist, reproduces the pose of the Falling Man in the photograph of Robert Drew taken during the attacks to the Twin Towers on 9/11. The destruction of the Towers represents the failure of the Western man to control reality since the United States found out that they were not untouchable and the artist is there as a reminder of the fall:

She'd heard of him, a performance artist known as Falling Man. He'd appeared several times in the last week, unannounced, in various parts of the city, suspended from one or another structure, always upside down, wearing a suit, a tie and dress shoes. He brought it back, of course, those stark moments

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

in the burning towers when people fell or were forced to jump.¹²¹

Whereas the philosopher sees the terrible irony of the fall, non-philosophers or bystanders take the performance as an offense. 'There were people shouting up at him, outraged at the spectacle, the puppetry of human desperation, a body's last fleet breath and what it held. It held the gaze of the world, she thought. There was the awful openness of it, something we'd not seen, the single falling figure that trails a collective dread, body come down among us all.'¹²²

The cause for outrage however may lie not only in the display of 'human desperation', but also in the display of the truth of human fallibility. It thus works as an admonition against arrogance. Human lives have been lost that were felt until then untouchable because living (working) in the twin pinnacles of the West. In the vain attempt to touch the heavens these Babel towers have instead reminded man of his humanity.

The fall of man is above all the fall of his hubris that is the creation of a concept according to which man is superior to other creatures and the world itself. In this exaggerated creation of his metaphor machine man believes himself superior both to nature and to the chaos of reality. The metaphor machine has mistaken its ability to give order to reality with the power to impose this order over reality and thus substitute it. This hubris makes man believe he is similar to the pure transcendence that is god.

¹²¹ Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*, London: MacMillan, 2001, p. 33. *Kindle Edition*.

¹²² *Ibid.*

DeLillo's novel in fact also mentions en passant another biblical fall, the fall of Lucifer, who challenged god: 'Headlong, free fall, she thought, and this picture burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific.'¹²³ Lucifer, the fallen angel, was the Light-Bringer, in other words, the bringer of enlightenment. For this reason he can be considered as a mistaken philosopher himself and as guilty as man for thinking it was possible to control reality or taking the place of God in all of creation.

The revelation of the impossibility of communicating with nature shows that man's existence is at the same time entrapped in human language and inauthentic because it has no real reference to nature: 'The ironic language,' explains De Man:

splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity. This does not, however, make it into an authentic language, for to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic.'¹²⁴

The consequence of the revelation brought by absolute irony is that it takes the self and breaks it apart, in the etymological sense of absolution from the Latin *solvere*, to loosen. In De Man's words:

The moment the innocence or authenticity of our sense of being in the world is put into question, a far from harmless process gets underway. It may start as a casual bit of play with a stray loose end of the fabric, but before long the entire texture of the self is unravelled and comes apart. The whole process happens at an unsettling speed. Irony possesses an inherent tendency to gain momentum and not to stop until it has run its full course; from the small and

¹²³ De Man, 'Rhetorics of Temporality,' p. 222.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

apparently innocuous exposure of a small self-deception it soon reaches the dimensions of the absolute.¹²⁵

Irony is an impossible force of destruction because it violates every presumption on identity, power or the relationship with the world. Setting a dichotomy and becoming part of the world of language or, following our point of view, realizing our lives in a world of metaphor, the philosopher has either to ride the avalanche or become mad: ‘Sanity can exist only because we are willing to function within the conventions of duplicity and dissimulation, just as social language dissimulates the inherent violence of the actual relationships between human beings. Once this mask is shown to be a mask, the authentic being underneath appears necessarily as on the verge of madness.’¹²⁶

Sanity, in a way, means to ignore the violence of everyday life under the cover and illusion of the social language and conventions. Stretching a little bit what De Man says, this means that without the mask of conventions the individual cannot communicate with the other and is left alone in the throes of madness. Madness as the irrational, the domain where language does not make sense and where the metaphor machine has lost control and cannot give meaning and organise reality anymore. Paradoxically then the language of the ironist is the language of truth, which in this case also means accepting that absolute irony:

is a consciousness of a non-consciousness, a reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself. But this reflection is made possible only by the double structure of ironic language: the ironist invents a form of himself that is “mad” but that does not know its own madness; he then proceeds to reflect

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 215-216.

on his madness thus objectified.¹²⁷

Before analysing the last quote, I would like to point out the difference between ‘duplicity and dissimulation’ and the ‘doubling’ of the artistic and ironic self. The former dissimulates and hides behind the mask of conventions, but it represents a false duplicity since what the mask actually hides is the non-existence of the empirical self. All that remains are the conventions on the surface. The doubling, on the contrary, stands for a true and conscious splitting where language is able to reflect on itself as convention, mystification and illusion, and reveals that there is no authentic connection with nature.

If the ironic consciousness is no more authentic than the empirical consciousness then, it is the end of consciousness itself and the beginning of madness. The mad consciousness reflects on the mad consciousness, as if it were possible to have a self thinking over its non-self. But it is indeed possible, thanks to the ironic language, which gives the ironist the possibility to create a mad self ‘that does not know its own madness’ and that then sits and observes that unconscious mad.

The mad man can become violent or suicidal as in Neon’s case. Ripped apart the fraudulent mask of conventions Neon discovers his inauthenticity and, at the same time, loses his ability to communicate and relate to the others. The realization that his control over his relationship with others was an illusion leads him to a paralysis in solitude and, in the end, to his suicide and the creation of an after-life fictional self, a philosopher detached from life.

¹²⁷ Ibid. p. 216.

Liquid Modernity and the Market of Identities

Zygmunt Bauman will help me now to deepen my analysis of the consequences of the split and the destruction brought about by irony. Midway through his *Liquid Modernity*, Zygmunt Bauman quotes Harvie Ferguson's definition of irony in the postmodern era: 'in the postmodern world all distinctions become fluid, boundaries dissolve, and everything can just as well appear to be its opposite; irony becomes the perpetual sense that things could be somewhat different, though never fundamentally or radically different.'¹²⁸ The split hypothesized by De Man after Baudelaire becomes in Ferguson not the detachment of the mad philosopher but the falling apart of the natural oppositions in things. Black can be white, binary oppositions melt in ironical confusion without solution because difference is abolished. Postmodern irony has uprooted any other illusions the contemporary world still had and melted them in a liquid without recipient or shape.

Ferguson reflects that the consequences for human identity are an evolution of the 'age of irony' into the 'age of glamour' where, due to the impossibility of connecting directly to reality, appearance as fiction becomes the new fashion: 'Modernity thus moves through a period of "authentic" selfhood to one of "ironic" selfhood to a contemporary culture of what might be termed "associative" selfhood – a continuous "loosening" of the tie between "inner" soul and the "outer" form of social relation... Identities, thus, are continuous oscillations...'¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, p. 87

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

The self as pendulum then whose very appearance is in its movement and thus, movement as identity. Appearance brings full attention to externality, following De Man once again, we could say that the mask is even more important now in the social context.

The story of society nowadays becomes then the story of the oscillating movement of masks perfectly exemplified by Neon, who is not able to exist in society without a mask. The passage from 'authentic' to 'ironic' to 'associative' reminds once again of De Man's essay where it is the ironic self that reveals the belief in authenticity as illusion and finds itself at the split between 'inner' (authentic) soul and the 'outer' form of the mask of conventions. When it is appearance that takes importance over interiority there is no more relation between them, the latter risks to be soon forgotten. But as we will soon see, it is not really this the case in the contemporary era, where society imposes the need for the research of identity, some kind of inner self, in the flux of possibilities society itself offers. Neon is taken in the flow and struggles to find his authentic self finally losing to suicide.

According to Zygmunt Bauman, at the early stages of modernity the individuals had solid and stable pillars on which to attach themselves in order to stand in life. 'The task confronting free individuals was,' Bauman explains, 'to use their new freedom to find the appropriate niche and to settle there through conformity: by faithfully following the rules and modes of conduct identified as right and proper for the location.'¹³⁰ These were the fixed rules of social conventions, the social mask, with conformity as a guide for individuals to find their place. Knowing the rules of the

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

place, individuals knew how to behave, because they knew what identity to wear and they knew their place, since that place, we could add, formed their identity. Today, though, those fixed pillars have melted during the shift towards “liquid modernity”. Indeterminacy of roles, rules and places affect the individual, who does not know how to behave anymore, where it is, who it is. In other words, they have lost the direction of narratives or those narrative rules have been broken and are continuously re-arranged. Every day bears new forms of transcendence in the impossible attempt to catch immanence.

In the foreword to his book, Bauman marks the difference between solids and liquids. It is worth quoting at length the passage since it gives an idea of what liquid modernity is:

liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape. Fluids, so to speak, neither fix space nor bind time. While solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralize the impact, and thus downgrade the significance, of time (effectively resist its flow or render it irrelevant), fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but "for a moment". ...Description of fluids are all snapshots, and they need a date at the bottom of the picture.¹³¹

We can easily compare identities to the snapshots Bauman refers to. After irony or the game of the confession have split the identity and proved that there is no authentic self, identities have been taken in the flow of time, lost in time, liquefied in a constant change of shape. The connection with time once again points to an idea of movement and oscillation. This movement is not towards abstraction simply because we have already transcended but it is a movement of constant upgrade, the same as

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

when the individual makes upgrades her smartphone.

In the degraded state of the consumer society presented by Bauman in fact shopping offers the solution to the problem of identity: 'Given the intrinsic volatility and unfixity of all or most identities,' writes Bauman, 'it is the ability to "shop around" in the supermarket of identities, the degree of genuine or putative consumer freedom to select one's identity and to hold to it as long as desired, that becomes the royal road to the fulfilment of identity fantasies.'¹³² Identity is a commodity and as every commodity today, its value is transient, it does not last longer than a desire, a desire continually modified by Society. In order to be accepted by this Society Neal subjugates himself to this market, chasing new identities in order to be accepted and loved.

The freewill Neal speaks about becomes a false freedom for Bauman. According to the latter, freedom is reinstated nowadays every day through the freedom of 'buying' a new identity. 'In a consumer society, sharing in consumer dependency - in the *universal* dependency on shopping - is the condition *sine qua non* of all *individual* freedom; above all, of the freedom to be different, to "have identity".'¹³³ In order to show the paradox endemic to the problem of identity as commodity, Bauman offers the example of a TV commercial where to the image of a variety of women with different hair styles and colours relates the slogan "'All unique; all individual; all choose X".'¹³⁴ Uniqueness, something that should be totally personal and individualized, is nothing but a commodity used by an entire mass of individuals.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Neal is an extraordinarily capable buyer on the market and as a consumer he is the one to be consumed by the system: anything deep inside is too far away, to be found in the abstract life he has. The freewill Neal talks about is the acceptance of this market but also, the acceptance that the projections of the metaphor machine are part of who we are, even when chosen in an open market. The question is whether or not our Voice, our will-to-say, is transmitted.

With the help of a quote from Albert Camus, Bauman describes the tendency of the individual to look at other individuals' lives with an impression of unity and coherence (and, we could add, authenticity). In Camus' words: 'seen from a distance, their [other people's] existence seems to possess a coherence and a unity which they cannot have, in reality, but which seems evident to the spectator.'"¹³⁵ As Bauman explains the illusion is created by the 'distance' that 'blurs the details and effaces everything that fits ill into the *Gestalt*.' In this illusion we believe that other people's lives are works of art, and we start wanting to make work of arts out of our own lives. These works of art are what we conventionally call identities. 'Whenever we speak of identity,' says Bauman, 'there is at the back of our minds a faint image of harmony, logic, consistency: all those things which the flow of our experience seems - to our perpetual despair - so grossly and abominably to lack.'¹³⁶ Unity and harmony, logic and meaning are what we often look in stories. Metaphor, it is maybe necessary to remind the reader, is the mechanism that allows us to give meaning to reality. As a consequence, identities are fiction in the sense that we build stories of unity in order to find our self. Identity is one of the concepts Zeki talks about when relating the way the brain tends to abstract in order to conceive the different

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

instances of the reality outside. Consequently, the individual brain is only concerned with the idea of unity and control identity gives to the self, not to specific identity chosen.

Bauman makes use of the image of lava to explain how identities form and dissolve: 'identities are more like the spots of crust hardening time and again on the top of volcanic lava which melt and dissolve again before they have time to cool and set.'¹³⁷ Because of the need for coherence and order of the brain the individual is incapable of living a life in the flow, of swimming in the river without acknowledging a solid logic or order to the self. A unique, solid meaning as power of control over nature then is the myth that the postmodern irony has revealed as such. Ridiculed by irony, the extremely self-conscious man epitomized by Neal is so scared because of the lack of solidity and of a permanent identity that it clings 'desperately to things solid and tangible and thus promising duration, whether or not they fit or belong together and whether or not they give ground for expecting that they will stay together once put together.'¹³⁸ Solidity is about duration in time and stability, coherence as Camus writes. Unity makes things stay together because it seems that in dispersion we are lost. We will later see with Katheryn Hayles that dispersion of intelligence and identity is at the core of what we have learned to call the post-human.

For now, I will continue observing that the desperation generated by the fear of madness or non-self (which become synonymous) pushes the individual to solid things. The paradox is that the individual itself has fought in order to be free from

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

the crust, in order to be individualized and independent, since before Enlightenment broke into history. Now it feels dizzy, insecure, inexistent almost, lost in the flow of time where its identity (or identities) is lost in insignificance. Post-humanity will open the way towards an atomization of identity, kept together by force fields¹³⁹.

Neal's example has shown us that this market of identities has the side effect of revealing that the individual has no true inner self, that she is a fraud. Neal's self-consciousness has reached the same level of that of the ironist, since both rely on language as a means to reflect on the self. Neal is aware of the connection between freedom and the flow of identities: 'Of course, you are a fraud, of course what people see is never you. And of course you know this, and of course you try to manage what part they see if you know it's only a part. Who wouldn't? It's called free will, Sherlock.'¹⁴⁰ But as for irony, this consciousness does not help to overcome the lack of the empirical self and, we could add, the need for a solid identity. Neal could not stand the revelation but the question one could ask is whether Neal's true self was not, after all, the changing flow of identities and why he could not accept it.

In other words, why cannot the individual forget the question of the true inner self and what is the inner self compared to the idea of being? The fiction of being as unified and coherent is probably at the bottom of the problem of the self. Neal is after all unable to say: I am this person, because he is one, no one and one hundred thousand as in Luigi Pirandello's eponymous novel.¹⁴¹ The concept of Identity as unification is as overwhelming as the pretences of control of the Law: it has the same

¹³⁹ As we will see with the New Italian Epic of Wu Ming.

¹⁴⁰ Wallace, p. 179.

¹⁴¹ Luigi Pirandello, *Uno, nessuno e centomila*, (1926).

origin as a higher transcendental concept and it is meant to control the individual.

In the extreme freedom to be a thousand different persons freedom itself is suffocated by restrictions. According to Bauman, freedom is ‘a balance between the wishes, the imagination and the ability to act: one feels free in so far as the imagination is not greater than one’s actual desires, while neither of the two reaches beyond the ability to act.’¹⁴² Imagination of course remains the more hyperbolic force in the human brain whereas desire, be it for unity, coherence, etc., is a step lower as the final chains come from the actual ability to act, that is the relationship between imagination and desire with reality.

Bauman distinguishes between ‘subjective’ freedom and ‘objective’ freedom. Subjectively, the individual is frustrated by ‘the pressure of the “reality principle” exerted, according to Sigmund Freud, on the human drive to pleasure and happiness’¹⁴³. In other words, the individual is suffocated by the idea that her ability to act is relative to her capacity to act reasonably, that is, according to ‘reality’. At the same time, it could be that its ‘objective’ ability to act has never had a chance to find a way in the world because of ‘the direct manipulation of the intentions – some sort of “brainwashing”’¹⁴⁴. This brainwashing, perpetrated by media and other social or cultural powers, forces the individual to lower her own conception of ‘objective’ freedom, while subjective freedom crashes against the myth of reality.

We face two realities then: one present in the mind of the individual; the other

¹⁴² Bauman, p. 17.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

created by the media, the ideal concept of Society that affects Neal as well. The first is rooted in experience, during time, the second is manipulated daily and needs constant adaptation. If what Bauman says is interesting it also lack a further piece of understanding. Imagination was born in order to cope and organize reality: reason itself is a by-product of the metaphor machine which is the brain. If reality were not completely a product of imagination, along with the reality principle, there would be no way of manipulating it. All reality is virtual. The implication is that the media work directly on the metaphor machine thus melting even the distinction between the subjective and the objective.

Freedom, first of all, means freedom of movement and movement forward.

According to Bauman ‘we move and are bound to keep moving not so much because of the “delay of gratification”, as Max Weber suggested, as because of the *impossibility* of ever being gratified’¹⁴⁵. Fulfilment is always in front of the individual who is unable to reach it, like a carrot in front of a horse, but, even when it is achievable the desire has already vanished like a ghost. Consequently, Bauman states that 'Being modern means being perpetually ahead of oneself, in a state of constant transgression (in Nietzsche's terms, one cannot be *Mensch* without being, or at least struggling to be, *Urbemensch*)¹⁴⁶. This forward movement is somehow hyperbolic forcing the individual to constantly transcend her self, as if she shifted constantly from her core. Bauman implies that it is a question of desire and gratification. However, I argue – indeed, one central element in the argument of this entire thesis is - that we could dig even deeper and suggest that it is actually a strong echo of the narrative shifting in the human brain between transcendence and

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

immanence, substantiated in the body which is the border between the mind and reality. The individual is in constant movement outside her core and her immanence towards an improbable transcendence.

The individual is not free to choose, however, forced as she is to choose individualization. As Bauman states, ‘individualization is a fate, not a choice. In the land of the individual freedom of choice the option to escape individualization and to refuse participation in the individualizing game is emphatically *not* on the agenda.’¹⁴⁷ The suggestion seems to be that the self is ‘becoming’, because whenever it *is* somebody, it has lost the freedom to be someone else, many others else.

“Individualization”, summarizes Bauman, ‘consists of transforming human “identity” from a “given” into a “task”. Identity as purpose fits with the idea of the individual in constant movement. But what is more, moves the idea of the self from being (with an idea of solid stability) to becoming: ‘Needing to *become* what one *is* is the feature of modern living – and of this living alone.’¹⁴⁸ Paradoxically then becoming is being nowadays with a small ‘b’ due to the incredulity towards the narrative of Being. As a consequence being means to constantly move never to arrive, it is movement itself, thus it is time and not eternity. Evidently, this can add more weight to the fear of death because of the implication that moving fast forward the end will come sooner than later.

The result Bauman envisages for the impossible achievement of the narrative of the self is mistrust toward the Other, the Stranger. As Bauman writes:

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

The danger presented by the company of strangers is a classic self-fulfilling prophecy. It becomes ever easier to blend the sight of the strangers with the diffuse fears of insecurity; what has been merely surmised in the beginning turns into a truth proved many times over, and in the end self-evident.¹⁴⁹

This is the beginning of violence: when the identity of the Other is distorted by fear the individual does not actually see the Other. Insecurity makes the individual intolerant of the other individuals: ‘Insecure people tend to be irritable; they are also intolerant of anything that stands in the way of their desires; and since quite a few of the desires are bound to be frustrated, there is seldom a shortage of things and people to be intolerant of.’¹⁵⁰ The other becomes an obstacle towards the constant movement of desire meaning, in a nutshell: I cannot be myself because of you, get out of my way, or I will move you away.

As briefly seen above, the body then is the battlefield of a struggle also because it lasts longer than anything in the liquid era. As Bauman writes ‘the mortal body is now perhaps the longest-living entity around (in fact, the sole entity whose life-expectation tends to increase over the years).’¹⁵¹ The individual has to protect the body from the outside world and the Other. The body becomes a sort of close circuit that has not to get in contact with other bodies but that, if necessary, has to get rid of the body of the Other.

Time then, becomes the indicator of power because the fastest gets the latest identity and can surpass the body of the other. The rulers are those able to overcome time, to

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

almost erase it into the instant. ‘People who move and act faster,’ Bauman explains us, ‘who come nearest to the momentariness of movement, are now the people who rule.’¹⁵² Liquid power has squished space in an instant. In Bauman’s words:

‘Power can move with the speed of the electronic signal - and so the time required for the movement of its essential ingredients has been reduced to instantaneity. For all practical purposes, power has become truly *exterritorial*, no longer bound, not even slowed down, by the resistance of space (the advent of cellular telephones may well serve as a symbolic "last blow" delivered to the dependency on space...).’¹⁵³

From a rhetoric of hyperbole and movement we have passed to a rhetoric of speed¹⁵⁴

The advantage of all this speed is that of escaping responsibility. In contrast with Foucault’s description of the Benthamite Panopticon where powers could follow everybody’s movements, we now live in a post-Panoptical moment: ‘What matters in post-Panoptical power-relations is that the people operating the levers of power on which the fate of the less volatile partners in the relationship depends can at any moment escape beyond reach – into sheer inaccessibility.’¹⁵⁵

The power connected to speed is not only related to velocity or to the power of escaping, but is also related to the power to accelerate and to ‘procrastinate’ oneself or the other. Again with Bauman:

‘Domination consists in one’s own capacity to escape, to disengage, to “be elsewhere”, and the right to decide the speed with which all that is done – while simultaneously stripping the people on the dominated side of their ability to arrest or constrain their moves or slow them down. The contemporary battle of domination is waged between forces armed,

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁵⁴ Which will be the core of my chapter on James Ballard’s *Crash*.

¹⁵⁵ Bauman, p. 11.

respectively, with the weapons of acceleration and procrastination.¹⁵⁶

Power than consists in timing this speed but it cannot change the need for movement. Reality looks like ‘skating on thin ice;’ writes Bauman. ‘And “in skating over thin ice”, Ralph Waldo Emerson remarked in his essay “Prudence”, “our safety is in our speed”.’¹⁵⁷

Pushed by the rulers to build solidity through identities and afraid of falling, breaking the ice and drowning, the individual re-acts violently in a conditioned mechanism for survival. Freedoms have been corrupted by the media and the body has grown into an obsession. The other looks more and more as an obstacle, the individual feels it has to get rid of the stranger, or of himself as Neal does. Overpowered by irony and self-awareness, by the need to always be on top in the race over identity, Neal has numbed his body with drugs and jumped over a cliff. What we are left with are the remains of his narrative.

* * *

In conclusion, then, we can now say that Neal is the epitome of the individual constantly struggling towards a unique identity but always failing. Confessing his failure he is split between a confessing self and a fictional self, whose story he tells. As an ironist and philosopher he is split between an array of identities available on the market and an internal core, his individual metaphor machine, which impossibly aims towards an ideal of unity before realising that the metaphor machine is

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

foremost a narrative machine constantly creating images and identities. Only with his death and becoming inevitably a piece of his own story, Neal realises that that freedom is the acceptance that he is a series of images and identities. It may be as Bauman claims, that we have no choice but choose an identity because this is what Society, as concept and representation of the Law, expects. But it is also true that the very choice of our identities gives a glimpse of our soul, through a keyhole.

To escape the violence against the Other prescribed by Society, the individual has to move towards the Other. The will-to-say of Neal is met by his intention to speak to a David Wallace, because he may hear his voice. Escaping the transcendental need for unity is only possible by opening to the Other, not as a confession but in the acceptance of one's lies and narratives. In a way, it is David Wallace's will-to-listen who has prompted him to write Neal's story.

1.3 Apocalypse of the Human and Ellipsis in Cormac McCarthy

Violence is the predominant trait of Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (1985), as James Dorson points out: 'The sheer accumulation of atrocities and their matter-of-fact representation, characteristic of the novel, tend to break down any semblance of plot and make it difficult for readers to cognitively process the violence.'¹⁵⁸ Violence is so devastating that its acts collapse not only the plot but, as we shall see in the next few paragraphs, reality as well. The language of signs will come to completely take over reality whereas at the same time trying to impose a total control over reality following the rules of the mythical (in Benjamin's sense) Law of War.

In this chapter I will argue that ellipsis is the figure of speech characterizing *Blood Meridian* and all of McCarthy's work based as it is on omission or, literally, on 'leaving out' (from Greek *leipein*). Elision assumes a metaphysical dimension investing the entirety of McCarthy's writing, which loses quotation marks, reporting verbs, names of the characters etc. Exemplary of this is the start of the novel where the first sixteen years of the unnamed kid are described in less than three pages. Furthermore, the narrator dismisses those pages stating that 'Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been,'¹⁵⁹ thus making of that origin story an anti-origin, a sudden elision of given information. This form of erasure in which the writer both says and unsays leaves a trace that constitutes the humanity of the character, his voice.

¹⁵⁸ James Dorson, 'Demystifying the Judge: Law and Mythical Violence in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*,' *Journal of Modern Literature* Volume 36, Number 2, p. 106.

¹⁵⁹ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, London: Macmillan, 2010, p.2.

McCarthy seems to follow Pierre Macherey's formula: 'for in order to say anything, there are other things *which must not be said*.'¹⁶⁰ This makes him a writer of the Voice: McCarthy is able to express, through all those absences and subtractions, the almost invisible presence of man, 'which must not be said,' because it *cannot* be said: the Voice of man has no words, after all, because it anticipates articulated language.

Concepts such as trace and elision or erasure call to mind the work of Derrida, which I will briefly examine, alongside his analysis of the metaphysics of presence, in order to describe the fundamental figure of the witness in McCarthy. Both Agamben and Derrida will help me come to a definition of the witness in the opposition between Judge Holden and the kid, the ultimate witness and the last witness. Before that, though, I will dwell on the question of disappearance and elision in Cormac McCarthy.

Of the Disappearance of Reality into Signs

In *Blood Meridian*, elision and disappearance, the unsaid and absence, are the main themes. To support this thesis and ground the connection between ellipsis and the metaphysical dimension in McCarthy I will widely quote a few passages from Phillip A. Snyder's aptly titled essay 'Disappearance in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood*

¹⁶⁰ Pierre Macherey, from *A Theory of Literary Production* (1978), in Antony Easthope, Kate McGowan, ed., *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), p. 17.

*Meridian.*¹⁶¹

Snyder argues that the novel narrates not merely a story of the disappearance of the Old West but a story of disappearance *tout court*, that is, it creates a gap between signifier and signified, where the signifier is not able to give an immanent meaning to the object or event. Disappearance as a mode of writing then is a fundamental component of the novel as it is the philosophical and ethical question of extinction of life:

This disappearance motif in *Blood Meridian* figures extinction as something beyond the power of memory or history or artifact or narrative to mark or mediate conclusively because, as poststructuralism and postmodernism have taught us, sign systems tend to mark or mediate the absence rather than the presence of things.¹⁶²

Extinction in the novel has no history and no story because death here is the complete erasure of reality, which is substituted for by pure, transcendental signifiers. One instance of this metaphysical disappearance is the path the Glanton's gang follow, leaving everything behind them dead as if it had never existed:

In the days to come the frail black rebuses of blood in those sands would crack and break and drift away so that in the circuit of few suns all trace of the destruction of these people would be erased. The desert wind would salt their ruins and there would be nothing, nor ghost nor scribe, to tell to any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people had lived in this place and in this place died.¹⁶³

For this capacity of the gang to erase everything, Snyder recognizes the Glanton

¹⁶¹ Phillip A. Snyder, 'Disappearance in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*', *Western American Literature*, Volume 44, Number 2, Summer 2009, pp. 126-139.

¹⁶² *Ibidem*, p. 128.

¹⁶³ Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian*, p. 170.

gang as ‘agents of disappearance,’ whose act of scalphunting is both a signifying gesture and an economic one. The scalp is the signifier for what used to be a human being and, as such, it can be exchanged for something else:

They conduct an unrelenting quest to turn signifieds into signifiers within the strange economy of scalphunting in which a human being—Apache, Comanche, Mexican, man, woman, or child—can be rendered into a gruesome receipt of equal value. This value system erases individuality and sets off a nearly infinite string of signifiers of economic exchange from gold to guns to whiskey to women to whatever. Indeed, embodied as texts themselves, to be read within and without the novel, along with their horses and outfits all festooned with the traces of their narrative pasts, including the artifact accessories of their vanishing trade, the Glanton gang may be composed of material culture archivists after the totalizing manner of Judge Holden. This disappearance agency is first apparent in the novel when Glanton tests his huge sidearm in a courtyard, shooting a cat walking along a wall: “The cat simply disappeared. There was no blood or cry, it just vanished” (82).¹⁶⁴

Transcending signified bodies into signifiers, Glanton and his gang make anything exchangeable as anything can signify anything else. Everything becomes text or symbol, without distinction between the human and the non-human, making of this equality not an ethical act but instead an economic act.

The Glanton gang is set into making signs out of reality which, in the terminology of these pages, means that they are depriving human lives of their immanence, their being-there into the world, and making of them metaphorical objects. For the gang, any human life is just a bare life, in Agamben’s sense of that term: a life reduced to biological fact. Consequently, their actions define them as agents of mythic violence, taking the term ‘mythic violence’ in the sense given to it by Benjamin; that is to say, they are affirming the presence of the Law, the Law of the Judge it would be good to

¹⁶⁴ Snyder, pp. 133-134.

insert footnote references here to both Agamben and Benjamin to help give the reader a sense of where you have picked up on these terms, and why they are appropriate in this context. As typical of such mythical violence the gang are depriving existing reality of individual meanings in order to impose a transcendental order or logos. Theirs then is not a true form of erasure but a hidden form of re-writing, and the imposition of one specific and all-encompassing metaphor.

Considering that the annihilating force of the Glanton gang erases everything as if it had never existed means that their actions have not only a spatial effect but work on a temporal dimension as well, which makes them agents of the present erasing both past and future:

Deployed upon that plain they moved in a constant elision, ordained agents of the actual dividing out the world which they encountered and leaving what had been and what would never be alike extinguished on the ground behind them. Spectre horsemen, pale with dust, anonymous in the crenelated heat.¹⁶⁵

‘Agents of the actual dividing out,’ the metaphoric power of elision of the gang makes them sound more and more like mythical creatures that could be associated with the horsemen of the apocalypse as the last sentence seems to suggest.

Considering that their actions have a metaphysical effect, it is only a natural consequence that they themselves become creatures of fiction, stories to be told to scare children.

As myth, the gang are extrapolated from normal time and live a different time, the time of fiction, that is also a form of eternal, metaphysical present. In Derridean

¹⁶⁵ McCarthy, pp. 167-168

terms, they are agents of presence, which does not leave any trace in the past or the future. The present in fact is not the space of immanence, of the here and now, but it stretches into infinity, in a no-time at all, in the place of metaphysics and transcendence.

This metaphysical present without past or future belongs both to the kid and Judge Holden. As already observed, the kid's past is erased in the first few pages of the novel. It is worth now extending the previous quotation:

Only now is the child finally divested of all that he has been. His origins are become remote as is his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay.¹⁶⁶

Living in this eternal now the boy has the potential to change 'the stuff of creation', that is, to manipulate reality according to his will (I will examine the concept of will later on in this chapter). Only the Judge has a similar power in the novel. Both characters have the power to give or take meaning from reality, imposing metaphors onto a violated reality. What they do with this unlimited power given to their metaphorical machine constitutes the essence of the novel and is also what separates their different ethics. There is the power of the writer or the artist¹⁶⁷, but above all it is the power of the witness to relate and thus more or less consciously shape reality for those who were not there.

Without a past or a future, a character of the present and a possible agent of elision

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁶⁷ Holden is an artist as he draws, dances, plays musical instruments.

himself, the kid helps us to answer to the question: what remains to a man when he is stripped to the core, stripped of everything? What is kept in the silence and absence of this man? What does total elision leave to a man? What kind of ethics is in the hand of an individual, who has the power of metaphor to shape reality? The presence of the kid however is not the metaphysical pressure of the mythical law. On the contrary, the personal ellipsis of the kid means that his presence is his pure being-there.

In antithesis to the kid stands Judge Holden, real representative of the world of the novel and spokesman of the Law of War. It is useful to shortly quote Snyder again in his association of the ability of the Judge to turn reality into drawings as the only traces of what was before. He writes of:

the judge's ritual of turning signifieds (artifacts and other traces) into signifiers (sketches) so he can then "expunge them from the memory of man" (140). In this, the judge aspires to appropriate the role of nature which has the power to erase "all trace of the destruction of these people" so that there would be "nothing, no ghost nor scribe, to tell to any pilgrim in his passing" of either the people or their remnants (174).¹⁶⁸

Judge Holden is a mythical force of nature that is able to re-write the rules of existence itself through his drawings. By drawing, Holden deletes reality and appropriates its meanings and memory, composing a bible, the entire existence of which he is the only owner. Transcending reality into signs, Holden makes himself the only real presence in the novel. Similar to God he is the Logos, the original sign. Citing Derrida, his is 'the transcendental word assuring the possibility of being-word

¹⁶⁸ Snyder, p. 135.

to all other words.¹⁶⁹ The limit of Snyder's interpretation of the novel is in treating the Judge as simply an eraser when, in reality, the Judge puts himself as the originary creator, Being as presence in the philosophical sense. As originary signified, if we keep using Derrida's concepts, Holden is both pure transcendence and originary sign, not only first sign but also first immanence, primordial Being.

The Voice of the Witness

With his ability of somehow having the last word on anything, Holden stands for the anti-storyteller, more of a philosopher or a scientist, an archaeologist or an anthropologist, than a narrator. Holden will never narrate what he has gathered in his book because that would mean to give life back to the world through fiction; rather, he sketches in order to deprive objects and people of their stories and meanings. Power in the novel means the erasure of storytelling itself, as ellipsis becomes the figure for the destruction of narrative. The individual metaphor machine of the Judge eradicates all the other individualities in the novel. There is only one voice in the novel and that is the voice of the Judge in opposition to the silence of the kid.

Comparing Agamben's concept of the voice with that of Derrida¹⁷⁰ will help me make a distinction between the voice of the Judge and the non-voice of the kid. The voice of the Judge is not the Voice, which for Agamben is pure will-to-say, but the articulated voice of the conscience that is already language. To quote Agamben: 'human language is the "voice of the conscience", in that in it conscience exists and

¹⁶⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Johns Hopkins University Press. (Kindle Locations 2977-2978).

¹⁷⁰ Both philosophers have Hegel and, above all, Heidegger as points of reference.

is made real, because language is articulated *voice*.¹⁷¹

Derrida sees the voice as vocalised word as well, if not as the beginning of conscience itself in his critique of the *phoné*. In his words:

It is not by chance that the thought of being, as the thought of this transcendental signified, manifests itself par excellence in the voice [vowel]: that is to say in a language of words [articulated by way of vowels]. The voice is heard (understood) [s'entend]— that undoubtedly is what is called conscience— closest to the self as the absolute effacement of the signifier.¹⁷²

The Judge is conscience, self-awareness in that he is primarily articulated voice that is the only voice heard and understood. He is the only real articulated voice in the novel and, as such, he is not only voice of the Law but also the language of the Law: the Law speaks through his mouth.

Before delving more deeply in the character of the Judge as representative of the Law it is important to spend some time delineating the figure of the witness. The figure of the witness is important for our discourse for two reasons. Firstly, as I have shown with my brief analysis of the discoveries of neuroscience, the reality outside of the body would be a chaotic mass of information without the metaphor machine that is the brain to process that information into a more or less meaningful universe, that is, in a series of individual metaphors. In other words, the individual is always the only witness of reality and, without this witnessing; the reality outside the brain would not exist.

¹⁷¹ ‘...il linguaggio umano è “voce della coscienza”, in esso la coscienza esiste e si dà realtà, perché il linguaggio è *voce* articolata. *Ibid.*, p. 57. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁷² Derrida, *Of Grammatology* Kindle Locations 2964-2967.

In second place, witnessing implies a narrative created by an individual's metaphor machine. The narrative of the witness is the only one we can trust in order to ascertain the existence of an event. In the same way as the confession, the testimony is first of all a speech act. As Giorgio Agamben explains in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz (Remnants of Auschwitz, 1998)*, 'The subject of enunciation consists in full in the discourse and of the discourse but, for this very reason, in it, she cannot say anything, she cannot speak.'¹⁷³ This means that as soon as the witness enters language, saying 'I', she has already escaped the reality she wants to witness and entered language and as a consequence she cannot speak of the event anymore. Whatever she says in fact would be language speaking: 'This can also be expressed by saying that it is not the individual who speaks, but language – but this just means that an impossibility to speak has come to – who knows how – speech itself.'¹⁷⁴

Both as individual metaphor machine and as a speech act, the narrative of the witness is at the same time unreliable and impossible. However, testimony is the only way we have to know the event. Agamben comes to a first conclusion that the subject of testimony is the subject of a desubjectification.¹⁷⁵ In the terms that Agamben uses to describe this structure, in the Nazi concentration camps, the witness is the one who survives man, that is, she is in between the person who has lived the event - the 'muselmann' in the camp who has been de-humanised by the camp - and the survivor to the camp, who has kept her humanity and, for this reason,

¹⁷³ Giorgio Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, p. 108. All the passages quoted from this volume are my translations. Italics in the original. '*Il soggetto dell'enunciazione consiste integralmente nel discorso e del discorso, ma, proprio per questo, in esso, non può dire nulla, non può parlare.*'

¹⁷⁴ *Ibidem.*, p. 109. 'Il che si può anche spreimere dicendo che a parlare è non l'individuo, ma la lingua – ma questo non significa altro se non che un'impossibilità di parlare è venuta – non si sa come – alla parola.'

¹⁷⁵ *Ibidem.* p. 112.

is not completely a witness but has still got a language to tell the event. This original structure, describing the aporia around the camps, can then be extended more generally. The witness is between the human and the no more human. The paradox is that if the real witness is the one who has lost her humanity, to paraphrase Agamben, then the line between human and non-human is really thin, it is impossible to completely destroy the human, there is a trace that always remains: *the witness is that remnant*.¹⁷⁶

The question of testimony as unreliable witnessing of an individual is addressed in the long, short story ‘The Man Who Ended History: A Documentary’¹⁷⁷, in which the science-fiction writer Ken Liu imagines a scientist discovering a machine that allows one person to go back in the past to witness in an incorporeal form an event, which however, disappears after the witnessing: ‘But the past is consumed even as it is seen. The photons enter the lens, and from there they strike an imaging surface, be it your retina or a sheet of film or a digital sensor, and then they are gone, stopped dead in their paths.’¹⁷⁸ Evan Wei, a Chinese-American professor of history uses the machine created by his wife Akemi Kirino to send descendants of the victims of Unit 731 back into the past to witness the atrocities their family members suffered.

Unit 731 was a unit of the Japanese army stationed at Pingfang in China during

¹⁷⁶ *Ibidem*. p. 125. ‘*Il testimone è quel resto.*’ Italics in the original. Evident here is the derivation from Derrida’s ideas of trace and *différant*. One of Agamben’s references for the writing of *Remnants of Auschwitz* is Derrida’s *The Voice and the Phenomenon* (1967).

¹⁷⁷ First published in 2011 and available on the writer’s website http://kenliu.name/binary/liu_the_man_who_ended_history.pdf, the story is now collected in Ken Liu, *The Paper Menagerie*, Head of Zeus. Kindle Edition, from which I will quote.

¹⁷⁸ Liu, Kindle Locations 5945-5947.

World War II. The Unit has been known through history for experimenting on human subjects. Unit 731 is part of a controversy between the Japanese and Chinese governments. The story plays on the fact that many in Japan deny its very existence and none of the members of Unit 731 has ever been prosecuted. The United States have also acquired the data obtained during the experiments. Furthermore, as in Agamben's study of Auschwitz, the real witnesses of the event have not survived.

Liu questions, through different interviews, opinions and testimonies (as the title suggests, the novel is built like a documentary), the legitimacy and the importance of individual testimony. Dr Wei's decision to offer the use of the machine to people emotively connected to the victims instead of historians undermines the legitimacy of their testimony. Is individual testimony irrelevant against History? 'Like early archaeologists who destroyed entire sites as they sought a few precious artifacts, thereby consigning valuable information about the past to oblivion, Wei was destroying the very history that he was trying to save.'¹⁷⁹ History transcends individual stories and it is based as much as possible upon facts. It is, in other words, a master narrative meant to cover everything and, as such, impossible. History takes the place and the dimension of the Law and, for this reason, it forgets the individual. Denying the death and violence suffered by the individual can only be done by history, never by testimony. Using the Kirino particles one can witness an event in the past without being the person actually suffering: human and non-human meet, and the conditions of testimony indicated by Agamben are met. 'We must bear witness and speak for those who cannot speak. We have only one chance to get it

¹⁷⁹ Liu, Kindle Locations 6724-6725.

right.’¹⁸⁰ Testimony is the burden (‘to bear witness’) to speak not only for those who are dead but also for those who have been dehumanised and have lost the ability to humanly speak.

These introductory notes on the witness will allow me now to analyse the figure of the witness in *Blood Meridian*. If Holden is the last one to utter a word or make a sign in the world of the novel, this makes of him the ultimate witness, whereas the kid is the last witness to actually witness a story. It follows now that we can propose that the kid, Holden’s opposite, is the silent witness and the real storyteller in the novel. It is not by chance in fact that the kid is the first character the reader meets, and not by chance that the real story ends with his death at the hands of the Judge: the kid gives us invisible eyes to observe the world of the novel. The kid is the only character with an origin even if that origin is in or under erasure: the reader is somehow asked to relate to him because of his story of abandon and hard choices, an origin that irremediably leaves its traces in the reader. It is the same as telling someone: ‘don’t think of an elephant!’¹⁸¹ The kid, in other words, always leaves a trace of himself in the mind of the reader. The kid is in a way this text’s version of the silent musselmann in Agamben’s account of the camps, the one who does not survive but lives a trace of himself in the story. He is Voice whereas Holden is language, articulated voice.

The importance of the role of the witness in asserting reality is repeatedly recalled by Judge Holden in the course of the novel:

¹⁸⁰ Liu, Kindle Location 6803.

¹⁸¹ George Lakoff, *Don’t Think of an Elephant! Know your Values and Frame the Debate*, White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing, 2004.

The posting of witnesses by a third and other path altogether might also be called in evidence as appearing to beggar chance, yet the judge, who had put his horse forward until he was abreast of the speculants, said that in this was expressed the very nature of the witness and that his proximity was no third thing but rather the prime, for what could be said to occur unobserved?’¹⁸²

It is the old question George Berkeley posits in his *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710) about reality and perception: ‘The objects of sense exist only when they are perceived; the trees therefore are in the garden, or the chairs in the parlour, no longer than while there is somebody by to perceive them.’¹⁸³ Holden offers a similar provocation to the kid when the latter tells the judge that he has seen and travelled to many places: ‘Did you post witnesses? he said. To report to you on the continuing existence of those places once you’d quit them?’¹⁸⁴

Following Berkeley and Holden then the event occurs only if there is an observer, a witness to validate its existence. Objects disappear when we close our eyes, Berkeley continues, reality stops existing: ‘Upon SHUTTING MY EYES all the furniture in the room is reduced to nothing, and barely upon opening them it is again created.’¹⁸⁵ Following the metaphor machine hypothesis, that is, that the brain conceives reality literally through metaphors, we already know that the brain elaborates information from outside reality so it is only logical to admit that it is the brain itself that creates reality. However, Berkeley’s view is pushed to its extremes when signifiers and signified are split and only the first, only the products of the brain and imagination,

¹⁸² McCarthy, p. 147.

¹⁸³ George, Berkeley. *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Kindle Edition. Kindle Locations 598-599..

¹⁸⁴ McCarthy, p. 322. These sentences also offer a few example of McCarthy’s elision of quotation marks.

¹⁸⁵ Berkeley, Kindle Locations 599-600.

remain. In other words, if the individual sees a tree falling or a chair in a room with her eyes closed, they still exist even if they have ceased to exist in reality.

The words of the witness, her signifiers, acquire a material existence that surpasses even the relevance of the witness herself: 'Words are things. The words he is in possession of he cannot be deprived of. Their authority transcends his ignorance of their meaning.'¹⁸⁶ The authority of the witness' words is more important than the witness' understanding. Words move beyond whoever has uttered them and will stand as witnesses on their own in the same way as novels survive their authors and stories survive their tellers. In the same way signs survive their meanings and acquire new ones, because metaphors transcend reality.

The Transcendental Suzerain: Knowledge as Control

Whereas the kid may be considered as the last witness in a world moving towards annihilation, Holden is the ultimate witness, the holder of reality, as his drawings contain reality's last vestiges. Holden's ultimate goal is to control reality through the complete control over the signs of the world. As the keeper of the world who, contrary to the mere witness, has complete knowledge and control over what he witnesses and over the words he mouths, Holden is the suzerain, in whom knowledge and existence, metaphor machine and reality, correspond:

Whatever exists, he said. Whatever in creation exists without my knowledge exists without my consent.

He looked about at the dark forest in which they were bivouacked. He

¹⁸⁶ McCarthy, p. 78.

nodded toward the specimens he'd collected. These anonymous creatures, he said, may seem little or nothing in the world. Yet the smallest crumb can devour us. Any smallest thing beneath yon rock out of men's knowing. Only nature can enslave man and only when the existence of each last entity is routed out and made to stand naked before him will he be properly suzerain of the earth. What's a suzerain?

A keeper. A keeper or overlord.

Why not say keeper then?

Because he is a special kind of keeper. A suzerain rules even where there are other rulers. His authority countermands local judgments.

Toadvine spat.

The judge placed his hands on the ground. He looked at his inquisitor. This is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation.

Toadvine sat with his boots crossed before the fire. No man can acquaint himself with everthing on this earth, he said.

The judge tilted his great head. The man who believes that the secrets of the world are forever hidden lives in mystery and fear. Superstition will drag him down. The rain will erode the deeds of his life. But that man who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by the decision alone have taken charge of the world and it is only by such taking charge that he will effect a way to dictate the terms of his own fate.¹⁸⁷

If with Porush we have seen how the cognitive corresponds to the metaphorical, in his definition of transcendence - which also means that knowledge is metaphorical and transcendental - then Holden is the Keeper of the Transcendental. Holden holds everything that can be known to man in his hands, because knowledge is control over reality. For the Judge the equivalence between his knowledge and existence - the fact that something is allowed to exist only if he knows about it and allows it to exist - implies that immanence comes after Logos, after cognition. It is a direct consequence of his conception for the witness according to which reality exists only thanks to the witness. This Law, set by the Judge upon the world, makes everything that is beyond his comprehension, everything that is beyond his personal metaphor machine, unlawful. As such, the presence of clemency in the kid corrupts the conception of the world of the Judge. Clemency then becomes the incomprehensible

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

presence of immanence in the world, the last vestige of humanity.

Clemency presents the paradox of something that in itself is a concept – clemency cannot be touched, visualised, etc. – while, at the same time, it can only manifest itself in immanence, in the actions of men. In its transcendentalism - and here is another paradox - the suzerain's knowledge is purely material, because he cannot control what he cannot draw. For the Judge, however, the knowledge of reality, its transcendental state, is more important than its actual existence because reality is by nature autonomous and thus cannot be controlled. If the metaphor machine's purpose is to put the world in order, that is, controlling it, reality in its chaos is anarchic, namely, it does not abide by any rule the brain tries to impose on it. Holden's transcendentalism, exemplified in his act of signifying reality in his drawings, is a violent attempt at the total dominion of the metaphor machine over reality.

The Law of the Judge

In order to move our discourse from that of a linguistic signifiers/signified problem to that concerning the ethical struggle between clemency and the Law in the Benjamin sense of mythical violence I will engage the arguments in James Dorson's analysis of the novel.

Dorson points out that abstracting objects and living beings into signifiers also means that Holden with his sketches makes currency out of the objects he portrays: 'This is the kind of currency into which the judge aims to convert the world. He

reduces the material world into units that can be scaled and measured.’¹⁸⁸ This is evidence here, once again, of the incredible capacity of the Judge to rationalize reality into a sign, in this case, an economical one. The consequence, from an ethical point of view, is that where everything equals everything else everyone is expendable and exchangeable so that nothing is of particular value. Life then loses any immanent value, violence making of scalps the squalid determinant of a man’s wealth. The Judge then is not only the Keeper of Transcendental knowledge, but also the Keeper of the Ledger of lives.

From his theory of exchange in the novel Dorson arrives at the conclusion that if everything can be measured and calculated in advance then even fate is controllable: ‘If everything is commensurable, then the scales of the world are fixed. There can be no contingency, no ambiguity, no resistance, because everything is already accounted for. In such a world nothing is indeterminate because everything is predetermined.’¹⁸⁹ This passage is revealing in our argument because the world is considered as completely collected in the Judge’s book. However, Dorson does not take into account the possibility that the book is a by-product of the metaphor machine of the Judge. It is impossible to distinguish in the novel between the vision of the world the Judge explicates in his many monologues and the world of the novel itself. The question then is whether the Judge is a spokesman of the world of the novel, or whether the novel is the product of his metaphor machine, making him the second half of the ultimate witness duo, alongside the kid.

The Judge in fact seems to fit into the definition of mythical violence as that is

¹⁸⁸ Dorson, p. 113.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

theorised by Walter Benjamin in the sense of law-establishing.¹⁹⁰ Holden makes the rules of reality like the gods of old myths. As a god of old, Holden controls fate because his mythical Law punishes whoever does not accept it. To explain the connection between mythical violence and fate, Benjamin offers the example of the Niobe legend:

Granted, the action of Apollo and Artemis might appear to be simply a punishment. But their violence sets up a law rather than punishing infringement of an existing law. Niobe's arrogance invites her undoing not because it breaks the law but because it challenges fate – to a fight in which fate must be victorious and only in victory, possibly, reveals a law.¹⁹¹

Fate is the will and presence of the gods made manifest through the Law. Like Apollo and Artemis, the Judge oversees fate simply because he makes that Law, and in continually evoking his control over fate he actually manifests himself as god.

To increase the mythical status of the Judge, McCarthy takes him outside time and space. Holden in fact seems not to age and, even more than the kid, he is a man without an origin:

Whoever would seek out his history through what unraveling of loins and ledgerbooks must stand at last darkened and dumb at the shore of a void without terminus or origin and whatever science he might bring to bear upon the dusty primal matter blowing down out of the millennia will discover no trace of any ultimate atavistic egg by which to reckon his commencing.¹⁹²

In the same way as the reality he annihilates with his drawing and the violence of his

¹⁹⁰ Benjamin, Kindle Location 520.

¹⁹¹ Benjamin, Kindle Locations 479-481.

¹⁹² McCarthy, p. 302. According to Rick Wallach, Holden's lack of origin associates him with other villains of American literature: 'We could say, in fact, that the figure of the evil archon in American letters is characterized by originary obscurity and subversion of any coherent principle to sustain its ontogeny from moment to moment.' Rick Wallach, 'Judge Holden, *Blood Meridian's* Evil Archon', Wade Hall, Rick Wallach, Ed. *Sacred Violence Vol. 2*, El Paso: Texas Western Press, 2002, p.1

Law, Holden leaves no trace, nothing that anyone can catch or control, he seems to have come out of nowhere and at the same time he seems to have always been there.

Dorson argues that the Judge himself is the only referent of the world he creates:

In dissolving the world into signs, the judge is able to claim sovereign power, as there can be no autonomous existence outside of his words to challenge his power. At the same time, because he destroys the referents of his words and sketches, his speech becomes as self referential as it is self-serving, his rhetoric as vacuous as it is forceful.¹⁹³

In his total ellipsis of reality, the Judge of course remains the only referent, the only real being. The Judge aims to live in a world where he talks only to himself about himself and whose only inhabitant is himself: this is the paradox of the ultimate witness, the ultimate transcendental, self-referential man, according to which nothing exists beyond the metaphors of his brain. The world offered by the Judge however is not a postmodernist gimmick on the part of McCarthy but it has to be taken literally as the depiction of a world made only of signifiers, made of nothingness and silence: if Holden stops talking the world stops existing. This is somehow the speculative consequence of Berkeley's theory of perception and of cognitive science studies seen above.

Another consequence is that the event in the end matters less than the witness whose narrative dictates the event. This represents another reason why Holden is an anti-storyteller because a real teller disappears when her story is told. Reading a story we often completely forget about the narrator or the writer as involved as we are in the plot or the sentences, which invisibly capture our minds. In Holden's discourse he

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

always comes before reality, being literally larger than life. In Holden's vision of reality, however, everyone is a witness and, in an alternation of being and perception, everyone can 'write' about everyone else in their own book: 'The judge smiled. Whether in my book or not, every man is tabernacled in every other and he in exchange and so on in an endless complexity of being and witness to the uttermost edge of the world.'¹⁹⁴ Men are witnesses of each other and in this position their perception of the other battles with the other's being. I do not exist if another one has not witnessed my existence, the Judge's theory seems to say, and he, the ultimate witness, is the only one to have everything and everyone written in his book.

The Kid as Elliptical Character

In contrast to the almost omniscient and assertive nature of the Judge the kid's vision is limited, his presence almost non-existent, immaterial, as Harold Bloom points out: 'The Kid cannot be called the center - his consciousness is too intimate, he fades out too often, quite deliberately.'¹⁹⁵ Furthermore Bloom argues that the kid does not appear to be endowed with a personality until the very last part of the novel, where 'He finally shows, in his laconic way, considerable moral force and courage.'¹⁹⁶

Bloom, however, appears to be underestimating the fact that McCarthy starts the novel with the kid, giving the reader all the information she needs, making of the kid's story a frame in which the Glanton gang's story sits. Bloom however

¹⁹⁴ McCarthy, p. 135.

¹⁹⁵ Peter Josyph, 'Tragic Ecstasy: A Conversation about McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*', *Sacred Violence Vol. 2*, p. 208.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

recognizes the implicit presence and role of the kid in the novel even when he is not evidently present:

But the Judge is not able to fully articulate it, though he does say to the Kid: “Was it always your idea that if you did not speak you would not be recognized?” (328). Which implies that the Judge *has* recognized him as someone who matters, someone who is implicit, although we do not know what the burden of that implicitness is.¹⁹⁷

I argue that it is the very ability of the kid to ‘fade out’ that makes him the perfect witness, the one the reader even forgets is there. He is witness according to Agamben, that is, between the human and the inhuman, whose Voice is but a trace that never really disappears.

This fading out of the kid makes of him the perfect elliptical character, elusive not because cryptic, but because he has a tendency to disappear from the scene. The kid is difficult to evaluate because of his nature of anti-character: it is difficult to immerse oneself in a character that is not there except in the crucial moments he shows his gift for clemency. These moments in which the kid almost unconsciously displays his ethics are even more vivid because of the negative, absent presence of this character.

The Law of War and the Battle of Wills

The silent figure of the kid is contrasted by the loquacious presence of the judge, who invests with his words the entire silent world of the novel. Dorson concludes his

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

essay by suggesting that violence in the novel is due to the need to overcome this silence of meaning or, in other words and in my own preferred terms, of the genetic need of the metaphor machine to give meaning to the outside:

Blood Meridian's violence, then, is not the result of a violent strain in the human genome, but the product of a chronic yearning for narrative meaning to make sense of the world. Once constructed and widely accepted, however, such narratives are likely to become rigid and oppressive, at once our lodestar and straightjacket, coaxing us toward a future *telos* as inescapable as Judge Holden's all-encompassing embrace. Because this desire for certainty against the everbaffling mystery of the world has a strong tendency to preclude critical reflection on where our beliefs and self-imposed laws are leading us, *Blood Meridian* leaves us with the uneasy feeling that we are trapped within an endless cycle of fear and mythical violence.¹⁹⁸

Having sketched the world into transcendental signifiers the Judge leaves all other witnesses at a loss for meaning and with it, a loss for signified reality. However, my argument contests the suggestion that the Judge is giving us a narrative. On the contrary, the Judge is imposing a metaphysics on reality without telling a story. His philosophy is indeed 'rigid and oppressive' but it is so because he is a god who wants to impose himself through mythical violence. Dorson bases his argument on Benjamin's theory but comes short of it not underlining that Holden's myth has no narrative.

According to the Judge war is the human trade, a transcendental entity that awaits man in order to find substantiation:

It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him. The ultimate trade awaiting its ultimate practitioner.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

That is the way it was and will be. That way and not some other way.¹⁹⁹

The myth of the Law of War starts comparing this Law to the ultimate immanence of stone. In the words of the Judge war is specific to man, ‘its ultimate practitioner,’ and is the only way to be for man. The being-there into the world of man comes to mean not simply an inevitable path towards death but a path through war. Being the incarnation of War, according to the Law, War is man’s true immanence, what makes him human. It is evident here how the individual metaphor machine of the Judge imposes its vision through a mechanism that changes transcendence into immanence, interpretation of the world into essence of the world.

Evoking the image of the two players of cards playing with their own lives, the Judge argues for an ethics of the Other in which the relationship between self and Other is the ultimate Darwinian test of one against one, with the annihilation of the Other as sole purpose:

A turn of the card. The whole universe for such a player has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man’s hand or that man at his. What more certain validation of a man’s worth could there be? This enhancement of the game to its ultimate state admits no argument concerning the notion of fate. The selection of one man over another is a preference absolute and irrevocable and it is a dull man indeed who could reckon so profound a decision without agency or significance either one. In such games as have for their stake the annihilation of the defeated the decisions are quite clear. This man holding this particular arrangement of cards in his hand is thereby removed from existence. This is the nature of war, whose stake is at once the game and the authority and the justification. Seen so, war is the truest form of divination. It is the testing of one’s will and the will of another within that larger will which because it binds them is therefore forced to select. War is the ultimate game because war is at last a forcing of the unity of existence. War is god.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ McCarthy, Cormac (2010-12-10). *Blood Meridian* (Picador Books) (p. 245). Macmillan Publishers UK. Kindle Edition.

²⁰⁰ McCarthy, pp. 246-247.

The turn of the card evokes the transcendental moment when a man is dealing directly with life and death as if his entire life could be summed up in the game. In this 'game' the relationship with the Other is based on an either/or conflict: the self or the Other have to disappear from existence. As if there was only one physical space that the self and the Other can occupy in the state of war the presence of one entails the absence of the Other without a trace.

Holden's reiteration of the word 'ultimate' curiously defines the metaphysics of the entire novel as apocalyptic in the double meaning the word has acquired, signalling both a final revelation and also the end of the world. The 'ultimate witness,' the 'ultimate game', are both fully part of a philosophy of war in which everything aims towards the end and extinction of the world and of the Other. The ultimate witness is such because she has eliminated everyone else, playing the same game of cards with everyone: the world of the novel is made only for one person, the only presence allowed.

The act itself of disposing of the Other, according to Holden, dismisses fate as the player's life is in his own hands and all meaning in his life is at the disposal of his will. War is ultimately a battle of wills that are thus reunited in one, unspecified, 'ultimate will', which is war itself: war is god because it unifies the ultimate will of men. As it is evident, this is not the will-to-say that we have examined so far but a more Nietzschean Will to Power, *Wille zur Macht*. Winning the game is not so much the result of a will-to-live but the result of a drive to overcome the Other, to be her master, as Nietzsche writes in his *Also Sprach Zarathustra* (1896): 'Only where

there is life, is there also will: not, however, Will to Life, but— so teach I thee— Will to Power!’²⁰¹ Life itself then is bent to this will and even the greatest, like the Judge, risks everything for this game for death or, in Nietzsche’s words: ‘It is the surrender of the greatest to run risk and danger, and play dice for death.’²⁰² The game is part of this battle of wills to become the ultimate master. With his Will to Power, the Judge is master over signs and over articulated language. He has lost his humanity and his Voice, his will-to-say and his will-to-listen. When the Judge speaks he does not want to be heard or to communicate to another human being because no human beings are allowed to exist without his approval. As seen above, the Judge is his only reference into the world and he mostly talks to himself and in order to affirm his own presence.

Game, authority and justification characterize war and Holden represents all three in the way he plays to death with the kid, in the way he fights to exert his authority over nature and in his role as Judge, who justifies himself in long paragraphs like the previous. The will of the judge is so strong in the novel that he appears the one to create this world of war and the kid is the only one to resist this will in rare moments of clemency.

The judge considers the kid as flawed, as if having an elision in his heart called clemency, which goes against the grain of the Law of War: ‘No assassin, called the judge. And no partisan either. There’s a flawed place in the fabric of your heart. Do you think I could not know? You alone were mutinous. You alone reserved in your

²⁰¹ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra A book for all and none* (Kindle Locations 1650-1651). Kindle Edition.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, Kindle Location 1640.

soul some corner of clemency for the heathen.²⁰³ The kid is the only one not to bend to the will of the Judge thus involuntarily offering a testimony different from the one of the judge.

According to the Judge however, the kid is an unwilling witness, the only one to judge his own actions before history itself:

You came forward, he said, to take part in a work. But you were a witness against yourself. You sat in judgment on your own deeds. You put your own allowances before the judgments of history and you broke with the body of which you were pledged a part and poisoned it in all its enterprise.²⁰⁴

A witness against himself, the kid corrupts with his clemency the natural tendency, in the judge's eyes, of the human body towards violence. This unwillingness makes the kid silent, without articulated voice in contrast to the Judge. The kid has no will-to-say but he seems to have a form of will-to-listen in his attention paid to the deaths of the heathens.

Of Order and Clemency

In a comparison between *Blood Meridian* and the *Iliad*, which takes inspiration from Simone Weil's essay '*Iliad, ou le Poème de la Force*' (1939), David Williams observes that in both works violence is a necessity of order:

That there are constants in human behaviour such as the attraction to violence, and the absolute equity according to which the *force* of violence

²⁰³ McCarthy, pp. 292-293.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

respects neither the just or the unjust, does not resign one to the inscrutable whims of fate or the actions of unintelligible gods, rather it leads one to a search for order and the possibility of regularity in the functioning of the universe.²⁰⁵

This ‘force of order’ Williams suggests has the same function as the metaphor machine: to give order to a chaotic reality. Violence originates from the need for a particular idea of order that an individual, Holden in our case, has of the world.

The kid goes against this logic of might when he does not kill Shelby, a member of the gang that has been injured and has to be dispatched because he cannot ride anymore. As Williams writes: ‘It is not the kid’s misplaced clemency (Shelby most likely had to endure a worse death at the hands of the Sonoran cavalry than by the kid), but his failure to adhere to the rules of *force* that brings him into conflict with the Judge.’²⁰⁶ Even though Williams recognises the contradiction in the fact that the kid does not seem clement in sparing Shelby, concerned as he is in proving that the Judge sees him as an adversary because he goes against the Law of War and Order, he does not dwell on the question of the existence of this contradiction. The kid has no sadistic intent in letting Shelby live, so where – we should ask - is his clemency?

Etymologically, clemency relates to a state of calmness. By extension it has meant a sort of calmness coming from authority. The Judge is frustrated because of the kid’s calmness in his ethical decisions even if he had an internal order, which the world outside – the world of the Judge – could not attack. In this sense, the Judge’s frustration is not a far echo from Arendt’s concept of frustration, according to which

²⁰⁵ David Williams, ‘*Blood Meridian* and Classical Greek Thought’, Nicholas Monk ed., *Intertextual and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cormac McCarthy*, p. 8.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

violence is caused by ‘severe frustration of the faculty of action in the modern world.’²⁰⁷ Holden is frustrated by the fact that his individual metaphor machine is ‘calmly’ rejected by that of the kid: Holden’s words have no agency against the impassivity of the kid.

An important point however that Williams raises is the fact that the Judge ‘can never transcend *force*, but is bound to it.’²⁰⁸ For Williams it is the kid who transcends whereas Holden is too immanent and restrictive in his vision of existence. I contend however that he lives in symbiosis with the transcendent fundamental *force* whereas the kid is bound only to his individual and immanent metaphor machine. The paradox seen above is that the Judge’s constant verbosity is aimed at making the transcendent Law of War present and, as such, real.

Further demonstration of the Judge’s abstractness is that not only he has no origin but he seems to be indescribable, as Michael Madsen points out: ‘But what frightens us the most: his murderous and cruel actions, or the simple fact that he exists and that we cannot fully understand him? It is ironic that a novel written in such vibrant and hauntingly beautiful prose essentially becomes an example of how language fails us.’²⁰⁹ Holden escapes the reader’s need for order and clarity, remaining a mythical creature beyond human comprehension. In the end, he becomes part of the world of chaos that he wants to control.

²⁰⁷ Arendt, p. 83.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁰⁹ Michael Madsen, “A Nameless Wheeling in the Night”. *Shapes of Evil in Cormac McCarthy’s Blood Meridian and John Carpenter’s Halloween*,” Nicholas Monk, ed., *Intertextual and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cormac McCarthy*, p. 106.

Against the historical Law of War Holden posits the moral law, which he considers as unnatural, artificial, in other words, a fiction:

Moral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak. Historical law subverts it at every turn. A moral view can never be proven right or wrong by any ultimate test. A man falling dead in a duel is not thought thereby to be proven in error as to his views.²¹⁰

In the ultimate game of cards the loser is not proven wrong by his death; his death merely states that his will was weaker than the winner's. In conclusion the Judge is a mythical creature that has to constantly affirm his existence and presence through words and violence.

Is ethics an acquired trait developed by human culture or an innate act? The Judge advocates for the former, and even his cruel attempt at annihilation probably stems from a primordial instinct to dominion that opposes ethics. However, the kid has not learned clemency in his life; he has not been educated into it but develops it naturally, immanently. As the narrator points out in fact in the very first page of the novel: 'He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence.'²¹¹ Experience has taught the kid about violence as an acquired trait so that his very existence contradicts every one of the Judge's statements.

The kid is a different kind of witness, a narrator of that fiction that is ethics, trying to apply it in and to his world. The logic of the text suggests that the natural order of things is war - a position represented by the ultimate witness that is the Judge -

²¹⁰ McCarthy, p. 247.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

whereas in the figure of the kid the book suggests that an ethical position is possible and, even if a fiction or doomed to fail, it is something that can be undertaken. The kid has more than a chance to kill the judge, who is the villain of the novel, but he does not do so, following his code, maybe unable to kill an unarmed man. According to the judge this is the kid's failure but ethically or morally the kid has to be saved.

The kid's restrictions in language and his nameless state make more evident his connection to his inner Voice, that is, in his silences he hides his language in order to express his will-to-say. In contrast to Judge Holden the kid does not try to impose his will on reality, he retreats from it instead. His will-to-say expresses the Voice of Clemency which opposes the Law of War. The violence of the kid is divine compared to the mythic violence of the gang because he is not trying to impose the presence of the law, but he is representative of an absence, the absence of the mythic law itself that he refuses with his clemency. 'It is false and ignoble to say that existence is superior to just existence, if existence is simply meant to mean bare life,'²¹² to quote Benjamin again. The kid lives a just existence and sees life as more than bare life. In this, even if as an agent of absence, he also represents that excess of life that Benjamin respected in human beings.

²¹² Benjamin, Kindle Locations 552-553.

2 Desire

This section of the thesis, on desire, is the shortest, and is mostly concerned with the work of James Ballard. We have already however treated desire when talking about Bauman's liquid modernity and the desire for identity. The market of identities represent a desire for meaning and sense that is immediately connected to the works of the metaphor machine: the metaphor machine does not only try to order a reality outside but also the one inside. Neon did not survive the search for identity, stuck as he was in the laws of Society. Ballard's characters will have the same problem, and will need to shed their identities in order to acquire new ones in order to follow new desires.

This desire for order in the individual will be very present in the following chapters as well, and it will often be concerned with the role of the Other. The Other will be often an obstacle for the development of the individual, will need to learn to share his individual metaphor machine and learn to listen to the metaphors of the Other. This section is shorter than the previous one and the but it is central in position and scope because it will traverse the entire book.

2.1 ‘People who Find the World Meaningless Find Meaning in Pointless Violence’: Boredom, Psychopathology and Violence in the ‘Extreme Metaphors’ of J. G. Ballard

In the works of J.G. Ballard violence becomes the expression of contemporary professional middle-class boredom. In the present chapter, I will explore how the professional middle class represent the world of Ballard and the reasons for their outbursts of violence. Oppressed by boredom and isolation as a consequence of a life where all of their desires have been fulfilled, the characters will look for new and more abstract desires that give sense to their lives.

According to Soren Kierkegaard, ‘Boredom rests upon the nothingness that winds its way through existence.’²¹³ Boredom then comes of a vacuum, a hole through immanent life, like a bullet of empty transcendence. This nothingness, I will argue in the following pages, is caused in the Ballardian middle class by their having all of their desires fulfilled. Kierkegaard himself many decades before had seen the paradox of what he calls a ‘pantheistic’ form of boredom: ‘Pantheism, in general, contains the quality of fullness; with boredom it is the opposite, it is based on emptiness, but is for that very reason a pantheistic category.’²¹⁴ Emptiness and fullness trade places so that to the fullness of satisfaction in life corresponds to the

²¹³ Soren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, trans Alastair Hannay, London: Penguin, 2004, p. 190.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

emptiness of boredom. Furthermore, Kierkegaard creates the connection between boredom and evil in the maxim: 'Boredom is a root of all evil.'²¹⁵

I will develop the relationship between boredom, desire and transcendence following two paths of inquiry. The first path or road - to use a terminology close to *Crash* - will focus on the concept of stylization and will explore a world dominated by the representation of reality in which the reproduction of the camera will be considered more real than the event it is filming. The image will not only transcend reality then but replace it and will create a new code of desire based on the stylization of gestures and behaviours, that is, on a new set of rituals. The work of Jean Baudrillard on simulacra will help me develop the ramifications of a world where characters do not realise that what they think is their immanent existence has in reality been substituted by an abstraction, a simulation.

A second path will be prompted by the figure of 'the intermediary in desire' as proposed by René Girard in his *Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque* (1961). The mediator is an individual that imposes on another individual what to desire, and as such he (the mediator is always a 'he' in Ballard) recurs in Ballard's novels at least since *Crash* (1973). The mediator exerts such an attraction especially over other male characters that the latter forget their own immanence, their individual presence in the world, in order to identify themselves with the mediator. The question is if it is worth escaping a middle-class mind conditioning in order to be influenced by someone promising freedom, and if so then violence will come to prominence in the following pages.

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 185.

Through the analysis of *Crash*, but also of *High-Rise* (1975) and *Millennium People* (2003) I will try to define a form of the posthuman that I will call the Ballardian Man. Following the lead of the Mediator of Desire, the Ballardian man follows the rules of stylisation, constantly editing his life in order to fulfil the mediator's psychopathology. The Ballardian man has no personality, but he is his profession, a member of the middle class whom boredom and violence push to act towards sex and violence.

The Road to Stylization: a Ritual for Bored People

In his *Simulacra and Simulations* (1981), Jean Baudrillard defines simulation as 'the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.'²¹⁶, that is, a situation in which an abstract model has supplanted the original. Translating Baudrillard's definition through our dichotomy transcendence/immanence means to imagine a world where human imagination has produced an alternative reality, which is purely transcendental yet is also so complete, so hyperreal, that man does not realise that he is not experiencing life because he has lost his immanence, his presence into the world. According to Baudrillard, the superposition of simulation over reality has closed the gap between the two, between transcendence and immanence: 'Something has disappeared: the sovereign difference, between one and the other, that constituted the charm of abstraction.'²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, p. 1.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

In a virtual world man does not realise the immateriality of his existence unless he is aware he is in a simulation. In this situation the limitations of human life in fulfilling desires are completely supplanted by a world where he can get whatever he wants. This world of fulfilled desires is the world presented by Ballard in his introduction to *Crash*:

We have annexed the future into the present, as merely one of those manifold alternatives open to us. Options multiply around us, and we live in an almost infantile world where any demand, any possibility, whether for life-styles, travel, sexual roles and identities, can be satisfied instantly.²¹⁸

Ballard never refers to boredom in the piece, but it is not going too far to say that boredom is the consequence of the world of the middle class that he refers to. In a search for new desires the middle class is tempted by prohibited violence, such as that which is seen in *Millennium People*, where the ‘educated professional class’²¹⁹ try the taste of revolution.

In a simulated world every gesture is devoid of immanence but belongs to a code of behaviours, a stylization to use Ballard’s vocabulary. Every gesture is abstracted from its material existence as if it were a sketch of reality where only a few lines have been drawn or as if the reality were constituted by gestures coming from a script. This world is the world of television and representation in which every act is stylized, that is, a reproduction of something already seen, the completion of a ritual, every gesture totally self-conscious. Only in *Crash*, the noun ‘stylization’ with its declination in the different forms of discourse (adjective, verb, etc.) recurs in plenty

²¹⁸ J.G. Ballard, *Crash*, London: Vintage, 1973, p. 4.

²¹⁹ J.G. Ballard, *Millennium People*, London: Flamingo, 2003, p. 5

of pages.²²⁰

Roger Luckhurst argues that the repetition of the model in Ballard is always imperfect because it never exactly follows the model or the image in the mind of the character. Following Deleuze, Luckhurst suggests that the repetition in Ballard introduces a difference, ‘the uncanny double.’ ‘Nothing could be further from the similitude of Baudrillard’s “era of simulation”, in which everything is reduced to indifferent equivalence, the same story (the story of the Same) told over and over again for every cultural event.’²²¹ Referencing Scott Durham, Luckhurst sustains that evidence of the failure of the simulacrum and thus of the age of simulation is the failure in Vaughan’s attempt to have a car crash with Elizabeth Taylor.²²²

Luckhurst’s reading is valid when contrasting a Baudrillardian reading of Ballard but it is less effective when facing a discourse of stylisation. As we shall see in the next few paragraphs stylisation is not so much an attempt to reproduce exactly a model, that is, a question of repetition, but more of a movement of abstraction of every human action. Vaughan’s failure is only a failure if we strictly follow Baudrillard and his idea of reproduction of the Same whereas Vaughan’s action is actually the product of his personal psychopathology, a product of his mind: there is a referent here in the metaphor machine, which is the brain. This makes Vaughan’s psychopathology and the game of stylisation at the same time more immanent and more transcendent than Baudrillard’s simulation.

²²⁰ Ballard, *Crash*, pp. 12, 22,23,34,100,103,129,142,157,161,169,216 constitute sufficient examples.

²²¹ Roger Luckhurst, *The Angle Between Two Walls*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997, p. 128.

²²² *Ibid.*, p. 127.

In the novel, stylization is almost always connected to sexual acts in which the characters try to reproduce car crashes and the shapes of the car, but these acts are devoid of traditional sexuality. An example taken from the beginning of *Crash* will allow for an exploration of the various aspects of stylization. The protagonist of the novel James Ballard has just had the accident that will change his conception of sex and technology. In the crash against Dr Helen Remington's husband's car, the man dies on Ballard's windshield while the doctor is extracted alive from the car. Urine comes down between Dr Remington's legs while Ballard observes her, his legs blocked in his car:

However, all I could see was the unusual junction of her thighs, opened towards me in this deformed way. It was not the sexuality of the posture that stayed in my mind, but the stylization of the terrible events that had involved us, the extremes of pain and violence ritualized in this gesture of her legs, like the exaggerated pirouette of a mentally defective girl I had once seen performing in a Christmas play at an institution.²²³

Comparing the doctor's position with the 'exaggerated pirouette' of the girl underlines the unnaturalness of the legs and the resulting feeling is that of a mechanical performance. The crash, the violent event, has already destabilized Ballard's vision of life, as if he has been taken away from it, dead in his humanity. As he is not, in a way, present anymore in his body the vision does not acquire a sexual dimension, at least at this stage of the novel. In a psychological analysis we would think that this retreat from the feelings of the body is a coping mechanism against the violence of the accident, but Ballard the writer never dwells too much on

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

such considerations in the novel.²²⁴

Ballard the character's vision deforms everything in his life from that accident onwards, deforming the entire reality of the novel through his psychopathology.

'Reality' then becomes a simulation created by his unstable mind. In this light can be understood for instance his descriptions of the movements of his rescuers:

Even their smallest movements seemed to be formalized, hands reaching towards me in a series of coded gestures. If one of them had unbuttoned his coarse serge trousers to reveal his genitalia, and pressed his penis into the bloody crotch of my armpit, even this bizarre act would have been acceptable in terms of the stylization of violence and rescue.²²⁵

What Ballard seems to say here is that in the pantomime of violence and rescue, such formalized gesture would not have been out of place because it is part of a ritual that connects violence and sex, where the excitement of sex is connected to the danger of death.

Stylization is a design of the mind meant, exactly as the images of the metaphor machine, to give a new order to a life upset by violence and, as such, it can be assimilated to a sexual fantasy. In another moment in the novel in fact, Ballard's wife, Catherine, believes that her secretary, Karen, is attracted by her. She starts to fantasize about their possible lesbian relationship, but these fantasies start to make her relationship with Ballard and their relationships with other people 'more and

²²⁴ This transcending beyond the body is a movement that will return in the entirety of the cyberpunk movement and especially in the work of William Gibson, as we will later see in 3.3, whose hackers continually escape the pains of the flesh.

²²⁵ Ballard, *Crash*, p. 23.

more abstract.’²²⁶ This abstract sexuality allows James and Catherine to shift to a new sexuality that is purely transcendental and consequently, can be attached to any body: ‘These descriptions seemed to be a language in search of objects, or even, perhaps, the beginnings of a new sexuality divorced from any possible physical expression.’²²⁷ Triggered by the violence of the car crash, the characters in the novel live a new sexuality that has no body but lives in the mind and follows its stylised designs, thus somehow achieving the ability to reach an orgasm only through thought.

The Road Seen Through the Camera

The new sexuality of the transcendental Ballardian man – or what we can call Ballard’s personal answer to the question of the Post-Human - is then triggered by a state in which every desire is easily fulfilled. In a later novel, *Millennium People*, Ballard explains how this state of the Ballardian man, belonging to the middle class, is a state of utter boredom. In the novel a group of people living in a residential area called Chelsea Marina, organise a revolution against fulfilment and everything that makes them middle class. As Sally, the wife of David Markham, protagonist of the novel, explains to him: “‘We’re all bored, David, desperately bored. We’re like children left for too long in a playroom. After a while we have to start breaking up the toys, even the ones we like.’”²²⁸

‘Breaking up the toys’ is a gentle way to explain the need for violence of the middle

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

class who, in their spoiled existence, know violence only in its simulated form, namely, the television screen. At the beginning of the novel David and Sally are watching the news of a bomb exploded at the Heathrow airport; and they would never have been really affected by this, were it not that David knows one of the victims on the screen: his first wife Laura.

The age of simulation is the age of the media, which is characterized by the prioritisation of visuality, thus favouring the eye and the reproduction of images. The Ballardian man sees reality through the lenses of the camera because he is unable to see immanent reality anymore through the naked eyes. We have already observed this detachment from experience in the relationship between imagination and science with Giorgio Agamben, according to which science, and thus the eye of the camera, has taken the place of the experience of the body.

Vaughan in *Crash* constantly moves around with camera sets in order to shoot car crashes and their mutilated victims. He then tries to reproduce them in complicated sexual acts. He also studies crashes involving celebrities, and his dream is to have a car crash with the actress Elizabeth Taylor, as someone that has explicitly made of representation her life.

Laing, in *High-Rise*, reflects that: 'The true light of the high-rise was the metallic flash of the Polaroid camera, that intermittent radiation which recorded a moment of hoped-for-violence for some later voyeuristic pleasure.'²²⁹ The 'voyeur' is the viewer, the spectator who sits in front of the TV and lets stylised life pass in front of

²²⁹ James Ballard, *High-rise*, London: Cape, 1975, p. 129.

his eyes on the TV screen. Simulated, transcendent violence cannot touch the viewer and there lies the pleasure of emotions beyond the body: in front of the TV the body becomes immaterial.

Most of Ballard's characters however are not content with just viewing but instead use the camera to improve their social performance, what Bauman has defined as a mask, a temporary chosen identity. One of Wilder's lovers is a producer of pornographic films who takes note of every position she assumes during sexual intercourse with him. Wilder can only conclude that 'The limitless professional expertise of the high-rise had its unsettling aspects.'²³⁰ Her own body for the woman becomes an object of study, whose relation to herself is only limited to the power she has to control and stylise her movements: she can edit her body through the eye of the camera.

The quote above highlights the connection between representation as reproduction of reality and professionalism as part of the set of social codes, that is, of the code of stylization. The camera makes of the Ballardian man a professional, and professionals are people whose individuality is limited to their job, to what they do and not to who they are. In novels such as *High-Rise* and *Millennium People*, the characters are mostly described by their professions. An example from *High-Rise* will shed some more light on this concept:

Almost within arm's reach, the immaculate figure of a well-to-do art dealer was squaring up to Laing, the lapels of his dinner-jacket flexing like an over-worked bellows. On either side of him were the middle-aged wives of a stock-exchange jobber and a society photographer, staring distastefully at

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

Laing's white sports-clothes and sneakers.²³¹

Laing does not know their names, only their professions, but this piece of information is enough to distinguish them for their higher social status, which explains their repulsion at Laing's appearance.

The professional cameraman has realised that an event has to be recorded to have a meaning. This is because in reproduction the Ballardian man can control the event and eventually edit it. After a session of tape-recording his own belches, Wilder records his rape of Charlotte Melville:

The first time he struck her, cuffing her to the bedroom floor, he tried to record her gasp, but the reel had jammed. He freed it carefully, bent down and slapped her again, only stopping when he had recorded her now deliberate cries to his satisfaction. He enjoyed terrorizing her, taping down her exaggerated but nonetheless frightened gasps. During their clumsy sexual act on the mattress in the child's bedroom he left the tape-recorder switched on beside them on the floor and played back the sounds of this brief rape, editing together the noise of her tearing clothes and panting anger.²³²

Wilder has a double control over the rape: firstly, he is able to rape a woman without too much trouble; secondly, he is able to edit and control the recording of the rape.

This ability to manipulate the event, to keep slapping Charlotte until he is satisfied is a ring-a-ring-a-roses where violence, desire, simulation and power keep their hands together. The sexual act itself is quite clumsy because the act itself has lost its meaning and is not really part of the sexual fantasy. Wilder is trying to reproduce his own psychopathology, an image in his mind, and substitute it for the immanent physical act. In this search for the better image or metaphor there is no preoccupation

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²³² *Ibid.*, p. 153.

for the violent component of the act. Charlotte too willingly becomes part of the performance because she recognizes her role is that of the victim in the narrative the recorder is producing.²³³

The example of Wilder constantly editing the event perfectly exemplifies why simulation in Ballard works only if considered as a form of psychopathology. It is not the repetition that Luckhurst criticizes in Baudrillard's reading of Ballard that is in question here, but rather the control over an event that has already happened through the editing (not the repetition) allowed by the media. The power to control the event (everyone has the potential to become a McCarthyesque Judge Holden) is central in the realisation of whatever psychopathology Wilder has in his mind.

Before starting the revolution at Chelsea Marina, Kay Churchill was a film professor who suggests to her students that they should apply their studies to their life, making of that life an object of study and, inevitably, an abstraction:

“I thought they needed a day trip to reality... I told them to take their cameras into the bedroom and make a porn film. Fucking is what they do in their spare time, so why not look at it through a camera lens? They wouldn't learn much about sex, but they learn a lot about film.”²³⁴

Kay paradoxically invites her students to look at their sex (real) life through the lenses of a camera thus making it more unreal, a simulation.

The control of reality through the camera equates to the overcoming of the reference

²³³ It should be pointed out that this time the reproduction is auditive and not visual: simulation works prominently but not exclusively through the image.

²³⁴ J.G. Ballard, *Millenium People*, p. 53.

through the simulation. Where Holden used sketches and words to take control over the referent, the camera in Ballard expands this control of the metaphor machine over Reality. As in *Blood Meridian* this oversimplification of the world outside the self means that the individual considers, as part of the simulation, even the actual suffering caused to the Other. In both McCarthy and Ballard the question is that of the control over reality and the Other. Stylization in fact is not so different from Holden's sketching and the eye of the camera is that of the witness, the one who decides of the last edited version of the event.

The Solitary Road: Middle Class vs Themselves

It becomes irrelevant to the characters that what they control is not reality anymore but its psychopathological simulation because they have already reached a physical detachment from reality as a consequence of violent events. In the same way in fact as the car crash awakens in James Ballard the possibilities of violence, the televised event of Laura's death irrupts in David's tedious life and in the lives of the people at Chelsea Marina. The strict relation of causality between violence and boredom is later confirmed by the attitude of the police force. 'But the police seemed bored, usually an omen of violent action.'²³⁵ Boredom generates an instinctive desire to get out of it and violence seems the only way the bourgeoisie find to overthrow such a state of immobility.

This immobility is assured by the education the middle class have received and by their acceptance of the rules of society. Kay Churchill says that middle class are kept

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

under control: ““Not with guns and gulags, but with social codes. The right way to have sex, treat your wife, flirt at tennis parties or start an affair. There are unspoken rules we all have to learn.””²³⁶ Being educated in the proper way to behave, these people are not free to be what they want because they are a picture inscribed in a pre-existing frame. Boredom is the stricture for the rules that leave no room outside the simulated, pre-ordained world.

Since the social codes apply to a Society the revolution of Chelsea Marina can only be collective since, in the end, no one wants to be isolated, to be really free of the sociality of the constraints. These rules are not so different from those Good Old Neon had to withstand in order not to be alone. The Ballardian middle class rages against the same rules of a transcendent Society or Law, which led to Neal’s suicide. In Ballard however the middle class are not so self-conscious as to literally live in their heads, as it happened for Neal/Neon, because they have already exported their personal psychopathological metaphors outside into the world.

A few extracts taken from *High-Rise* offer a more concrete idea of the sense of isolation in the Ballardian man. Isolation is the natural side effect of people focused on career and individual self-realization. If the myth of the self-made man teaches us something, then it is that if this man were really self-made then he would not need anyone’s help, leaving him completely isolated and independent from the Society of men. Robert Laing’s sister insists that he should live in the high rise for the possibility it offers him to be totally alone after his divorce: ““You could be alone

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

here, in an empty building – think of *that*, Robert.”²³⁷ The high-rise itself is a self-contained environment meant for the isolation of the individual: ‘The high-rise was a huge machine designed to serve, not the collective body of tenants, but the individual resident in isolation.’²³⁸

When the problems start in the high-rise people break their isolation to form groups of tenants until they divide the building in three main groups according to their income. The problems relate to the maintenance of the building, with lifts not working properly or air conditioning malfunctioning. Far from being a real annoyance, as Wilder, one of the three narrators of the novel, observes: ‘the residents enjoyed this breakdown of its services, and the growing confrontation between themselves. All this brought them together, and ended the frigid isolation of the previous months.’²³⁹ When the situation degenerates to its extremes, the class groups and then the smaller clusters of tenants dissolve until the tenants go back to be single cells. Royal expresses this return to isolation: ‘Strangely enough, Royal reflected, they would soon be back where they had begun, each tenant isolated within his own apartment.’²⁴⁰

The Ballardian man then moves from isolation, to collective rebellion to his own condition, to final isolation. This kind of closed circle reflects both Baudrillard’s idea that in the capitalistic society of simulation there is no real change and also the fact that psychopathology may be collective but in the end, being a product of the mind, it is ultimately individual, part of the individual brain. The reader in fact crosses

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 158-159.

Ballard's psychopathology and Laing's, because Ballard the writer's novels have always a first person point of view. Even when collective, it is the psychopathology of a particular individual that we will call, following Girard, the mediator, that invests all other individuals.

The Road of the Intermediator: the Word of the Scientist

Following a violent event then the Ballardian man is pushed to come out of the cocoon of a comfortable life thus foregoing the body and accessing a level of transcendence in which he can live his sexual fantasies in a simulated hyperreality that is nothing but a psychopathology. At this level, the unconscious and the simulation are the same and there is nothing that psychoanalysis can do to distinguish the subconscious from reality. As Baudrillard writes: 'What can psychoanalysis do with the duplication of the discourse of the unconscious in the discourse of simulation that can never again be unmasked, since it is not false either?'²⁴¹ The unconscious is as real as simulation, that is, it has taken the place of reality, the only referents left are in the mind of the individual. Psychopathology then is the particular simulacrum of a particular individual, a particular map, which has taken the place of a particular territory, whereas hyperreality or simulation is the place where these transcendental fantasies meet.

Since psychopathology is individual but also able to occlude the collective mind because of its extension of the unconscious into the collective imaginary it can be concluded that all of Ballard's stories reflect the particular psychopathology of one

²⁴¹ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*.

character. Be it Ballard or Markham this individual's unconscious is however stimulated and manipulated by a figure that embodies the new kind of desire the middle class are looking for. In the tradition of Nietzsche's Overman or even Christ then, the Ballardian man has its prophets as well, namely, Vaughan in *Crash* and Gould in *Millennium People*. Assimilating the figures of Vaughan and Gould to the theories of René Girard, these characters represent the mediators of the desires of the narrating characters Ballard and Markham.

To explain the figure of the 'mediator of desire'²⁴², Girard takes as example Don Quichotte and his fascination for the knight Amadis the Gaule, in a time in which knights are all but extinguished. Don Quichotte wants to live the life of an erring knight just like Amadis and in this, as Girard point out, he loses his individuality: 'Don Quichotte has renounced, in Amadis's favour, to the fundamental prerogative of the individual: he does not choose the objects of his desire anymore, it's Amadis who chooses for him.'²⁴³ Girard argues that the individual loses any sense of reality when his desires are not her own anymore: 'From the moment the influence of the mediator marks his presence, the sense of the real is lost, any judgment is paralysed.'²⁴⁴ In the case of the Ballardian man, this explains how Ballard or Markham lose touch with their own lives to enter the psychopathology of their respective mediators, so that for instance Vaughan's obsession with car crashes becomes Ballard's.

²⁴² René Girard, *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*, Paris: Grasset, 1961, p.12.

²⁴³ 'Don Quichotte a renoncé, en faveur d'Amadis, à la prérogative fondamentale de l'individu: il ne choisit plus les objets de son désir, c'est Amadis qui doit choisir pour lui.' *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12. All the translation from the French for this edition are mine.

²⁴⁴ 'Dès que l'influence du médiateur se fait sentir, le sens du réel est perdu, le jugement est paralysé.' *Ibid.*, p. 13.

The role of the mediator as prophet and the power his charisma exercises on the middle class is well exemplified by Dr Gould in *Millennium People*. Gould literally seduces David Markham ('My seduction by Dr Richard Gould...' ²⁴⁵), but David is not the only one. At the beginning of the novel, when David is getting acquainted with the people of Chelsea Marina he has a feeling that their boredom hides a religious sense of expectancy:

I sensed that a primitive religion was being born, a faith in search of a god to worship. Congregations roamed the streets, hungry for a charismatic figure who would emerge sooner or later from the wilderness of a suburban shopping mall and scent a promising wind of passion and credulity. ²⁴⁶

Richard Gould assumes the role with a vision of the future for people who think there is nothing new ahead: 'He came into our lives like a figure from one of tomorrow's dreams, a stranger who took for granted that we would become his most devoted disciples.' ²⁴⁷ Gould filled in a void; he came in the moment in which people were more open to the possibility of listening. His charisma is the result of the pre-existing needs of an entire class that is bored and needs new desires, a new look at the future.

The mediator is the one who dictates what to desire not by simply imposing his will onto a willing crowd, but by desiring and experimenting himself; and it comes as no surprise, therefore, that both Vaughan and Makham are men of science. Even if often considered a writer of science-fiction, Ballard is not really a writer of research, a

²⁴⁵ J.G. Ballard, *Millennium People*, p. 13.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

writer of hard fiction. Even though Ballard's characters are known by their professions, Ballard never explores these professions as they are just labels that indicate either their social status or their social role. As a consequence, what Ballard really means in the figure so important for him of the scientist is not so much the scientific dimension, with its descriptions of technologies and their applications to reality, as the dimension of the experimenter. The scientist in Ballard is not someone that knows everything, but someone instead who does not know anything at all but experiments on reality.

In his introduction to *Crash* added two decades after the publication of the book, Ballard states that the writer's 'role is that of the scientist, whether on safari or in his laboratory, faced with an unknown terrain or subject. All he can do is to devise various hypotheses and test them against the facts.'²⁴⁸ Previously, Ballard has stated that 'the writer knows nothing any longer.'²⁴⁹ Not only there is no more omniscient author, but the moral authority of the writer has disappeared altogether because he is in no superior position compared to the world. He has to experiment just as a scientist does, making hypotheses, trying to verify them.

The scientists are the most extreme characters in Ballard's novels because they experiment their fantasies on themselves and in this sense, Ballard writes extreme and experimental books: '*Crash* is such a book, an extreme metaphor for an extreme situation, a kit of desperate measures only for use in an extreme crisis.'²⁵⁰ As a writer who already foresees the end of the world, Ballard works with extreme metaphors,

²⁴⁸ Ballard, *Crash*, pp. 5-6.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

fantasies that are almost difficult to accept. In the same way as Vaughan manages to car crash various times in order to study their effects on his desires, Ballard, the narrator, experiments through his characters. In other words, Ballard the writer creates a psychopathology in the novel *Crash* in which Vaughan creates a psychopathology of the car crash, which fascinates and assimilates Ballard the character, who dreams of becoming Vaughan, both mediator and character. In a simulated world, the world of the novel is not necessarily less real than the reality we live.

This theory of mediated desire runs parallel to liquid desire as observed by Baumann. It is not only the media which advertise our new identities, but they also have stronger representatives in people like Vaughan. Ballard, the character, loses his identity and wears someone else's desires, his identity completely shifted. The accident has melted Ballard's previous identity and Vaughan is helping him preparing a new one.

Ballard, the narrator of the novel, dreams of being Vaughan as when he is in Vaughan's car, a Lincoln, alone, and a policeman comes towards him, thinking that he is Vaughan, whom the authorities are investigating: 'When he saw me behind the wheel he moved on, but for a moment I had relished being identified with Vaughan and the uncertain images of crime and violence that were forming in the eyes of the police.'²⁵¹ When Vaughan dies, he is driving Ballard's car, which Ballard had bought in the same model as the car he had when he had his accident. With his purchase Ballard is already trying to reproduce his own accident but when it is Vaughan who

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

dies, he feels that he himself died: ‘When we reached the accident site, below the flyover I felt that I was visiting, incognito, the place of my own death. Not far from here, my own accident had taken place in a car identical to the vehicle in which Vaughan had died.’²⁵² With his death through Vaughan’s, Ballard is free from immanence now without an origin and without a hand: he is a pure mediator now, a shifter of desire.

Earlier on in the novel Ballard had already noticed a sense of loss of immanence when Vaughan was around: ‘This sense of disembodiment, of the unreality of my own muscles and bones, increased when Vaughan appeared.’²⁵³ Or as Girard explains it: ‘As the role of the metaphysical grows, in desire, the role of the physical diminishes. The more the mediator gets closer, the more the passion intensifies, the more the object is drained of any concrete value.’²⁵⁴ The desire Girard talks about in his book is purely transcendent, metaphysical.²⁵⁵

This emptying or ellipsis of the individual is very similar to the sketching and signifying of Holden, as we have seen in my descriptions and analysis of McCarthy earlier in this thesis. This hollowing is generated by the sort of lack that desire should fulfil but, being a lack of the material, it transforms itself in something beyond the body. The Ballardian man is an empty shell that follows stylised protocols and wears different identities. The strongest identity is the mediator who moves and shifts desire into a community. Whereas the Judge promoted the Law of

²⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 221.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²⁵⁴ ‘A mesure que le rôle du *métaphysique* grandit, dans le désir, le rôle du *physique* diminue. Plus le médiateur se rapproche, plus la passion se fait intense et plus l’objet se vide de valeur concrète.’ Girard, p. 91.

²⁵⁵ An antecedent of the hacker’s desire to lose her body. See chapter 3.3.

War and Death, that ends with the total annihilation of the Other, in Ballard the individual takes the place of the Other, and the only role surviving is that of the Mediator.

According to Girard, the subject tends to assimilate himself to the mediator, especially in the case of the Dostoievskian hero: ‘The Dostoievskian hero, as the Proustian hero, dreams of absorbing, assimilating the being of the mediator. He imagines a perfect synthesis between the force of the mediator and his own “intelligence.” He wants to become the *Other* without stopping being himself.’²⁵⁶ In the post-subject era described by Bauman, and having already died as a man, Ballard can be easily assimilated to Vaughan, his individuality, lost. The ease with which Ballard can hypothetically abandon his life is made even more viable for the fact that he hates his life. As Girard writes: ‘In order to thus merge into the substance of the *Other*, one must feel an invincible repugnance towards one’s own substance.’²⁵⁷ Frustration at one’s own self, already observed in *Good Old Neon*, is the starting point for this hollowing.

In a simulated reality, Ballard cannot really distinguish reality from the metaphors of his mind. The identification with Vaughan reaches such a level that Ballard considers him as a projection of his mind: ‘We had heard nothing of Vaughan since he had taken my car from the garage. Increasingly I was convinced that Vaughan was a projection of my own fantasies and obsessions, and that in some way I had let

²⁵⁶ ‘Le héros dostoïevskien, comme le héros proustien, rêve d’absorber, d’assimiler l’être du médiateur. Il imagine une synthèse parfaite entre la force de ce médiateur et sa propre « intelligence ». Il veut devenir l’*Autre* sans cesser d’être lui-même.’ Girard, p. 60.

²⁵⁷ ‘Pour vouloir se fondre ainsi dans la substance de l’*Autre*, il faut éprouver pour sa propre substance une répugnance invincible.’ *Ibid.*.

him down.²⁵⁸ Ballard's fantasies are so vast that they absorb and make disappear other characters.

The influence of Gould on Markham is so strong that he abandons all cognition of morality and believes in Gould's innocence when he learns the truth that Gould killed his wife: 'I was shocked and depressed by myself. For months I had been the dupe of a small coterie at Chelsea Marina... Surprisingly, I still felt concerned for him.'²⁵⁹ David is disappointed by himself, not by Gould, because as a psychologist he should have been less susceptible to psychological influences. And he reminds himself of his profession only to find an absurd way not to accept what Gould is and has done. He thinks that Gould delusionally believes himself a terrorist, taking credit for actions he has not really committed.²⁶⁰ Until the end, David feels a debit towards Gould: 'The long search for Laura's murderer had come to an end and, by claiming to have killed her, this demented paediatrician had set me free.'"²⁶¹ The reader cannot but feel that it is David the demented, the self-delusional, thinking to be free when actually he goes back to his old, secure, life while not accepting the truth about Gould and himself: he will never escape his self.

Ballard's homosexual attraction for Vaughan has no real sexual component as it is transcendental: 'The placing of my penis in his rectum as we lay together in the rear seat of his car would be an event as stylized and abstracted as those recorded in Vaughan's photographs.'²⁶² It is like reproducing one of those poses in the photos of

²⁵⁸ Ballard, *Crash*, p. 220.

²⁵⁹ Ballard, *Millennium People*, p. 252.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 263.

²⁶² Ballard, *Crash*, p. 103.

car crashes that Vaughan collects. Since the fact that Vaughan's body is a male body is not relevant, it is more an act of the mind that justifies the act itself:

Vaughan excited some latent homosexual impulse only within the cabin of his car or driving along the highway. His attraction lay... in the stylization of posture achieved between Vaughan and the car. Detached from his automobile, particularly his own emblem-filled highway cruiser, Vaughan ceased to hold any interest.²⁶³

The powerful charisma of the scientist is directly connected to his mediatic power. Vaughan is a TV scientist, who has 'combined a high degree of personal glamour – heavy black hair over a scarred face, an American combat jacket – with an aggressive lecture-theatre manner and complete conviction in his subject matter, the application of computerized techniques to the control of all international traffic systems.'²⁶⁴ In a sense, Vaughan combines knowledge (Vaughan is a 'computer specialist,' but we do not see any trace of his knowledge), with coolness. His expertise in crashes of famous stars - like 'the Mansfield and the Camus crashes – even Kennedy's – indefinitely,²⁶⁵ for the Road Research Laboratory - allows Vaughan to re-create accidents in order to study their effects and consequences.

Being a TV personality, Vaughan is continuously conscious of the way he looks and the effect of his charisma: 'Watching him from my car, parked alongside his own, I could see that even now Vaughan was dramatizing himself for the benefit of these anonymous passers-by, holding his position in the spotlight as if waiting for invisible

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 123. This postmodern tendency to reference popular culture along with the constant presence of death brings to mind Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985).

television cameras to frame him.’²⁶⁶ Vaughan is pure representation, but it is this that makes him so attractive and powerful. As Catherine says, ““Vaughan annexes people to him. There’s still a strong element of the TV personality about his whole style’²⁶⁷ TV personality, of course, does not mean that one has a personality at all: Vaughan is a pure figure of desire.

In the same way as Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian*, Vaughan does not have a past or an origin but represents a pure movement forward: he is pure action. His emptiness is captivating because Vaughan is able to adapt himself to the people he wants to control, giving them what they want: ‘As he surveyed the scene I had the sense that Vaughan was controlling us all, giving each of us what we most wanted and most feared.’²⁶⁸ Humouring the desires of the bored middle class, Vaughan becomes able to control them in the same way as Holden acts as a mythic, unstoppable force. Through their actions and words both of them create a void through their transcendent presence. They are both prophets at the end of times promising violence and new desires. Vaughan however dies and is substituted by Ballard, whereas Holden kills the kid, guilty of not succumbing to the Judge’s influence. Ballard becomes Vaughan because the mediator does never really die since he is a role, not a person or, in a sense of Bauman, a persona, a mask, a metaphor and conduit for desire.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

3 Epistemology

Introduction: Again, the Question of the Ultimate Witness

Devoting a chapter to epistemology, the theory of knowledge, may appear awkward considering that the majority of these pages will mostly be devoted to the proposition that information takes the place of knowledge. The difference suggested here between knowledge and information stems once again from the distinction between immanence and transcendence. Whereas knowledge is acquired in the brain and marks our body and our very actions, information derives from a different, more transcendental approach in which the very necessity for the body is challenged.

When we learn a new language and we can speak it, it becomes part of our knowledge, but when we acquire a new piece of information we do not need to memorize it. Nowadays, however, translating tools and programmes supply us with the possibility to move from one language to another without learning it (with all of the limitations of these tools, limitations that are becoming less and less). We fall into the paradox whereby we are able to translate a word from a language we do not know anything about, that is, a language that is not ours, as we cannot speak it. We can see a pattern, the grammar of the language, but it does not belong to us. As seen in our introduction, science and technology have created a gap between man and its reception of the world. The distinction between knowledge and information is one consequence of such a gap.

It would be useful to start this chapter with an understanding of what information is.

The verb to inform comes from the Latin ‘in’ and ‘forma’ meaning to shape, to give a form, also to educate. Information could also mean outline, concept, idea, in other words, knowledge with a shape, a formed thought with which to shape another person. Later on, it will mean the communication of data, as it is used today.

In this latter sense it comes to indicate the communication of something that is considered as true, a fact. Being considered as fact information acquires authority and thus the power to shape someone’s mind, to educate and, perhaps necessarily, also condition and force someone to act in a certain way. Informing has ultimately a performative power. Living in the age of information technology it is obvious that the incredible increase in the transfer of information favoured by the new technologies is a phenomenon that tends to alter the human condition into what many call posthumanism.

To this purpose it is interesting to take into examination Jean-Francois Lyotard’s essay ‘Si l’on peut penser sans corps’ (‘If one can think without a body’), collected in *L’Inhumain: Causeries sur le temps* (1988)²⁶⁹. In the introduction to the collection, Lyotard posits the question of what being human means. In a very humanistic perspective, being human means to be educated (to be informed, to be shaped): to learn language, enter social life and develop a conscience. At infancy, man is still not human since he does not have language yet so that the infant is nothing more than a beast or a savage.²⁷⁰ Lyotard’s point is heavily grounded on

²⁶⁹ Jean-François Lyotard, *L’Inhumain: Causeries sur le temps*, Paris : Galilée, 1988. All the translations from this text are mine.

²⁷⁰ It would be interesting to develop a debate on the question of abortion that such a premise entails, but this is not the aim of the present work. It is however important to raise the question of what it would mean if being human equalled having language.

Western humanism and Enlightenment's primacy of reason, and it arguably brings back the distinction between nature and culture.

Man, in fact, has to overcome his infant state and develop a second nature (culture) and enter a community: 'What do we call human in man, the initial misery of his infancy or his capacity to acquire a 'second' nature which, thanks to language, makes him capable of taking part to a communal life, of adult conscience and reasoning.'²⁷¹ The human condition is exactly the battle of the adult who has arrived 'to full humanity, to the effective realisation of the spirit as conscience, knowledge and will'²⁷² against 'the obscure wildness of his infancy.'²⁷³ Conscience, knowledge and will through the development of language seem to be the mark of man against the dark, primordial wildness of infancy.

The primacy of *logos* and culture over infancy and nature manifests itself here as a transcendental approach towards the human. To become human means in fact to abandon an immanent state of nature towards a state of reason, a double transcendental identity. The human is the result of a process of civilization or, in the original meaning of information, of being shaped into adult form through education and the transmission of knowledge. Being human, in this sense, does not correspond to 'being humane' as reason or knowledge 'per se' do not imply any ethics.

²⁷¹ 'Qu'appellera-t-on humain dans l'homme, la misère initiale de son enfance ou sa capacité d'acquérir une "seconde" nature qui, grâce au langage, le rend apte au partage de la vie commune, à la conscience et à la raison adultes?' Lyotard, *L'Inhumain*, p. 11.

²⁷² 'à la pleine humanité, à la réalisation effective de l'esprit comme conscience, connaissance et volonté.' *Ibidem*, p. 12.

²⁷³ 'l'obscur sauvagerie de son enfance.' *Ibid.*

This premise allows us to better understand both the essay ‘Si l’on peut penser sans corps’, and also Lyotard’s tendency to privilege the transcendental over the immanent. In the essay Lyotard explains that the human mind is a mechanism for the filtration of information:

Any material system, which filters information useful to its survival, stores it and treats it, and which induces, from the regulatory instance, channels, that is, interventions on its environment, which at the very least assure its perpetuation is technical. The human is not so different in nature from such a system.²⁷⁴

There is a parallel between the idea of the propagation of information in Lyotard and the propagation of genetic information such as we see it in the work of Richard Dawkins. According to Dawkins, ‘I prefer to think of the body as a colony of genes, and of the cell as a convenient working unit for the chemical industries of the genes.’²⁷⁵ The gene is the specific information whose only aim is the propagation of itself through the human body as well as in the animal body: ‘Animals became active go-getting gene vehicles: gene machines.’²⁷⁶ If the brain is a metaphor machine, then the body is a gene machine, meant for the propagation of information.

In Dawkins, genetic information needs the body for its propagation whereas Lyotard, on the contrary, believes that science should find something more enduring than the human body to preserve our minds. At the end of our galaxy, Lyotard surmises, the body will die too so we will need a better body to transmit the human mind beyond

²⁷⁴ ‘Est technique n’importe quel système matériel qui filtre l’information utile à sa survie, la mémorise et la traite, et qui induit, à partir de l’instance régulatrice, des conduits, c’est-à-dire des interventions sur son environnement, qui assurent au moins sa perpétuation. L’humain n’est pas différent par nature d’un tel objet.’

²⁷⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, first edition 1976, p. 46.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

the end. Lyotard dreams of information independent of its carrier, going even beyond the biological mechanism of genes, which are instead embedded in the body they have helped create.

The message then acquires priority over the medium. Is not the individual, however, a medium that is able to modify the message it is meant to transmit? After all, it is still not possible to predict which part of the individual will be transmitted in the DNA to the progeny and how much it will be modified in being constantly separated. Can what Lyotard says be true? Can the body be negligible? Does not the way we store information change if we have the body of a man or that of a woman, for a simple example?

The similarities of these theories should not be underestimated and, above all, it should be brought to our attention that they allow for the discharge of the body the moment a better surrogate is found. In this sense, even the identification of the individual with the body becomes obsolete. The individual is no body and has no body; individuality is replaced by the concept of sameness that will resonate in both Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (two of the novels we are going to examine in this chapter), a sameness very similar to the one we have encountered in Ballard's novels. When individuality is impossible then immanence itself is unthinkable as the individual can only be immanent in her individuality. Abstraction and transcendence in fact are based on sameness, adding up data towards a theory, a concept, such as the concept of individuality in a movement from the particular to the general. When one person can be replaced with another, then individuality is exchangeable, as Bauman has pointed out, something

that can be bought and sold.

The danger endemic to these theories is that they allow for the violation of the individual body in favour of something bigger, transcendental, be it information or desire²⁷⁷ or identity. Violence, just like information, passes through bodies but it leaves its marks, its scars. Information and desire create a source of power that is allowed to exert violence in order for them to be transmitted. As we have seen, Bauman too states that the body is the only element of stability today and what we try most to protect. This also means that it is the place where we hurt the most.

What distinguishes man from the other technical systems of propagation of information, according to Lyotard, is his propensity to be ‘omnivore en matière d’informations’²⁷⁸, and his capacity for meta-thinking through a symbolic system that makes him able to observe information and the way he thinks from the outside:

Above all, he has a symbolic system that is arbitrary both in its semantics and its syntax, which makes him more independent from his immediate environment, and recursive (Hofstadter), which allows him to use as reference, besides information itself, the way he processes it, in other words, himself. Consequently of treating his own rules as information and induce other ways of processing information.²⁷⁹

Arbitrariness and recursiveness characterize the human system and make it both independent from the world around it and able to think about its own thoughts. These

²⁷⁷ As we have seen with Bauman and Ballard. Font size

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ Surtout, il est doté d’un système symbolique à la fois arbitraire dans sa sémantique et sa syntaxe, ce qui le rend plus indépendant de l’environnement immédiate, et récursif (Hofstadter), ce qui lui permet de prendre en référence, outre les informations elles-mêmes, la manière qu’il a de le traiter, c’est-à-dire lui-même. Donc de traiter ses propres règles à leur tour comme des informations et d’induire d’autres manières de traiter les informations. *Ibid.*

characteristics certainly facilitate the development of a purely transcendental system, independent from any outside reality and, at the same time, able to create a system of self-reference that after a while can be able to perpetuate itself, thus losing the need for any original input from reality. This purely transcendental system is apt to generate concepts and thus fictional entities, which in cyberpunk will take life as gods.

The connection to cyberpunk is paradoxically suggested by Lyotard himself when he describes the body as hardware: ‘One can consider the body as hardware of the technical, complex device, which is thought.’²⁸⁰ Consequently the human mind is a software so complex that modern technology has not yet been able to create an Artificial Intelligence that could stand a chance to replace it. But we will see the consequences of this idea in the chapter on cyberpunk.

With a very humanistic perspective, Lyotard’s ultimate goal for man’s immortality is to have a mind that can bear witness to the explosion of the sun and the destruction of the body: ‘To think without a body is the condition to think of the death of the bodies, solar, earthly, and of thoughts inseparable from the bodies.’²⁸¹ This would also imply that thoughts separated from the body are different, maybe more abstract, but we will not know if we do not witness thought without a body.

The ultimate witness is a transcendental being without anchorage to reality but what she witnesses. Lyotard’s main concern is then the figure of the ultimate witness as I

²⁸⁰ ‘On peut considérer le corps comme le *hardware* du dispositif technique complexe qu’est la pensée.’ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

²⁸¹ ‘Penser sans corps est la condition pour penser la mort des corps, solaires, terrestres et des pensées inséparables des corps.’ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

have called it based on Judge Holden's speeches in McCarthy. It is not only then the witness, who has the last word, as Holden maintains, but the ultimate witness is also the one, who witnesses the last events. Lyotard suggests a last form of transcendence where either the last bit of information dies with the last event or in which it survives the event. But what is the purpose of a witness without a listener?

The presence of an essay about the immortality of thought in a collection concerned with the question of the inhuman is very interesting. If what is worth saving to bear witness for the future is only the mind, then it would seem logical to equate mind with the human and to see the body as something superfluous. The mind is, after all, the technical device in its educational development that evolves man towards his humanity from the state of nature that sees him as an inhuman infant. The question also arises: if the brain is a metaphor machine, what is the mind without the brain? If it remains a metaphor machine how reliable can it be as a witness? What difference is there between the remains of the human mind and a recording machine?

Is this the posthuman (Lyotard never actually uses this term)? But Rosi Braidotti does, and in her work the conception is different. As we have seen, Braidotti believes in monistic philosophy based on Spinoza, which 'define[s] matter as vital and self-organizing, thereby producing the staggering combination of "vitalist materialism"'. Because this approach rejects all forms of transcendentalism, it is also known as "radical immanence".²⁸² Braidotti believes in a radical materialism which is in direct opposition to Lyotard's humanistic pre-eminence given to the Logos and the

²⁸² Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 56.

mind. Braidotti rejects such notions of anthropocentrism but does accept the introduction of technology in life. Better still:

My monistic philosophy of becomings rests on the idea that matter, including the specific slice of matter that is human embodiment, is intelligent and self-organizing. This means that matter is not dialectically opposed to culture, nor to technological mediation, but continuous with them.²⁸³

Information should be considered as part of this matter, not above it or in dialectical opposition. Technology and the body should live together in the posthuman. Does information then really give an answer to what is human? If we follow Braidotti, it can indeed, provided we limit the concept of human to the one considered by Lyotard and his humanism, but not if we consider the human as humane.

What kind of narrative is symptomatic of the Age of Information then? In what relation is this kind of narrative with violence? What if violence goes unpunished since the body is no more necessary? Being information without a soul as James Wood has stated a few years ago²⁸⁴, does it imply a lack of concern for the medium of the communication? In other words, can violence be justified if it permits a flow of information? Does information generate violence? In the following chapters I will try and find answers to some if not all questions.

Returning to the original meaning of information as the shaping of an idea it is

²⁸³ Ibid., p. 35.

²⁸⁴ James Wood, 'Tell me how does it feel?', *The Guardian*, 6 October 2001 (<http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,,563868,00.html>). The title of the article is telling: Wood argues that postmodernist writers are more concerned with showing off their knowledge than to represent what 'human beings' are, 'how somebody felt about somebody', because they are too focused on writing novels 'of immense self-consciousness with no selves in them at all'.

noticeable how this does not imply a knowledge or truth but, on the contrary, it is a *forma*, form, not content, or better, content put into a shape. As we will see, in Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* content and form will merge into each other.

This suggestion brings me to the core of my argument relating to information: if language is the means through which a narrative takes form and desire is the purpose and the reason for narrative, what we aim for or what other people want us to want, information is the form mistaken for the content, science taken for truth. If information is a shaping in fact, more than the transmission of knowledge, be it truthful or not, the content is flattened into the shape one gives to it. Somehow, not even science is strictly related to truth since new discoveries are constantly made that add a stronger truth to previous knowledge. An easy example is the theory of gravity from Newton, to Einstein, to the Super Strings Theory. If the subsequent theories do not falsify Newton's laws, they create exceptions to them and explain why they really work. Finally, a political promise is exactly the kind of information, very similar to the one in advertising, in which what is said is meant to convince through its effect, not through its level of truth.

Information is where fiction uses reality as a tool to satisfy or stimulate desire.

Information is one of the strongest rhetorical devices man has ever used, the placebo for truth. As Palahniuk's *Lullaby* (2002) shows, though, digging in the details is also a way to miss the big picture.

In this chapter then, I will examine the power of such a literary tool as information in novels that have acquired the status of cult books: Bret Easton Ellis' *American*

Psycho and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996).

When I say that information in *Fight Club*, for instance, is a rhetorical device I do not mean to say that it is necessarily false. On the contrary, the majority of the information in the novel appears to be 'true'. What makes the book a cult is that the book uses information as a form of revolution against the simulated reality we live in.

In *American Psycho*, all the information concerns how to dress, how to be fit, how to shave, in a comical apotheosis of what it means to be a yuppie. The information in the novel acquires truthfulness in the consensus about etiquette, which has taken the place of ethics. It does not matter if the information in the novel is real, but what is important is that it is absolutely useless. As Carla Freccero has noted, the novel is outrageous because it does not convey any knowledge at all: it 'is also obscenely nonproductive of knowledge.'²⁸⁵ In a novel where information is empty, form becomes content becomes form.

What these two books have in common is their violent, male protagonists. In the case of Patrick Bateman, information leads to a total lack of guilt or any sense of responsibility where violence is conducted as a search for the self. In the case of Tyler Durden, information as truth is more important than everything else, and violence becomes essential to reach freedom from conditioning. A message recurring in Palahniuk's novels from *Fight Club* to *Invisible Monsters* (1999) to *Lullaby* is that to be free and reach the truth one has to sacrifice what one loves most. Through their

²⁸⁵ Carla Freccero, "Historical Violence, Censorship, and the Serial Killer: The Case of *American Psycho*", *Diacritics*, Vol. 27 No. 2 (Summer 2007), p. 45.

violence, both characters are looking for something. Durden wants freedom from capitalist society while Bateman is looking for his own self in the boredom of capitalist realization. For the former, violence is a possibility for change, for the latter no change is possible and violence is a means to keep the status quo going.

3.1 Synecdoche of Murder, Surface and the Narrative of the Superego: The Infernal Irony of American Psycho

To have provoked a publisher to reject a finished manuscript without demanding the return of a substantial advance; to have prompted hate mail and death threats; to have aroused a women's organization to call for a boycott of the book's new publisher -- why, it's as if "American Psycho" had returned us to some bygone age when books were still a matter of life and death instead of something to distract us on a flight between JFK and LAX.²⁸⁶

James Annesley defines Ellis' novel alongside others published in the same period as 'blank fiction,' because these writers 'prefer blank, atonal perspectives and fragile, glassy visions.'²⁸⁷ We are faced once again with a narrative of emptiness, which follows McCarthy and Ballard. Annesley defines a style that is blank, atonal and fragile though, which goes against the narrative of Will of judge Holden and places Ellis as a closer descendent to the work of Ballard. In the course of the following pages I will refer to Annesley's text to try and see how his analysis can help to advance and clarify the arguments of this present thesis.

There are three aspects or problems to follow to understand *American Psycho* as a text that is representative of violence in the age of information, and thus to find an adequate explanation for its shape. The first aspect is rhetorical, and it refers to synecdoche, according to which Patrick Bateman is a representative of the American yuppie of the '80s – he is a 'part' who is understood to be typical of the 'whole' that is yuppie life. This narrative of synecdoche also explains why the novel consciously

²⁸⁶ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "'Psycho': Whither Death Without Life?" *New York Times* 11 March 1991.

²⁸⁷ James Annesley, *Blank Fictions: Consumerism, Culture And The Contemporary American Novel*. London: Pluto Press, 1998, p. 2.

fails as a thriller or crime novel: if Bateman is only a representative for a certain category of man, it is not possible to distinguish him from the next man. At the end of this line the question of Bateman's non-accountability will also be explored, through Agamben's *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*.

The second aspect is the bi-dimensional surface according to which the world of the novel is based on what the characters wear, and on flat characterization and binary oppositions of rich vs poor, man vs woman.

The third and last aspect is the Superego or the problem of the sadist, which (following Deleuze here) observes how Bateman's violence is at the same time the product of the rationalization of the ego, the pure transcendence of collective society, and an attempt at finding a human contact in the body of the Other.

With the interconnections between these aspects we will see the creation of a post-human hell based on the rules of what we can call infernal irony. In this place a first answer to Lyotard's question about the ultimate witness will be given.

Synecdoche and the Human

While it is clear that there are extensive differences among Ballard, Wallace and Ellis, I want to attend here to the *thematic* overlaps in their work. Such thematic overlaps become apparent when they are read in the light of the kind of liquid modern world delineated by Bauman.

American Psycho is set in the same world delineated by Bauman, Ballard and Wallace, that is, in the place where identity is cracking apart in a flow of never ending possibilities; of the world after all desires seem to be satisfied; of the failure of language. Patrick Bateman is overwhelmed by the consumerist, fluid society he lives in: he and the people around him have no real identity but, instead of shopping for an identity, they all choose to be the same person, ‘everyone looks familiar, everyone looks the same.’²⁸⁸

Patrick’s killing of Paul Owen will be enough as an example of the effects of this sameness. When he is on the verge of killing him, Owen, a man Bateman envies, mistakes Patrick for one Marcus Halberstam. When Patrick simulates Owen’s voice on the answering machine of Owen’s phone saying that he is in London, people start seeing him in London,²⁸⁹ so that Owen’s disappearance goes unnoticed for a long time. When one looks like everybody else and feels one has lost one’s own identity, then one is also anonymous.

This sameness then corresponds to a model of wealth (‘*Everybody’s rich.*’²⁹⁰), which is embodied in the novel, for example, in the figure of Donald Trump, Bateman’s personal hero. As Sylvia Söderlind writes:

In postmodern America, “for the sake of form,” the inner and outer, private and public, must split into two reflecting surfaces. The rhetorical equivalent of this projection of depth on to surface is the literalization of metaphor, which accounts for a number of puns in the novel, or its substitution by metonymy, both of which strategies are hallmarks of postmodern allegory. According to this logic of depthlessness, there can be no differentiation

²⁸⁸ Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*, London: Picador, 1991, p. 61.

²⁸⁹ See for instance, Ellis, *American Psycho*, pp. 272-273 and 388.

²⁹⁰ Ellis, p. 23.

between fantasy—predicated on depth and interiority—and action: hence the impossibility of relegating Patrick’s crimes to the realm of the imaginary.²⁹¹

The reduction of content into form, typical of in-formation is, rhetorically speaking, the ‘literalization of metaphor’, that is, the realization of the world of psychopathology and simulation, which means, in another paradoxical turn, that the novel represents the impossibility of imagination because everything Patrick imagines he puts into act or realises. That is, he makes real that which is supposedly only imaginary.

Taking my cue from Söderlind, but extending it further I argue here that the extensive use in the novel of metonymy (that is the use of a concept in the place of another) and synecdoche (that is, the reference to a part to intend the whole), which explains why everyone in the novel looks and acts the same. The characters are constantly mistaken for someone else because no one is imbued with enough immanence to be nothing but abstractions of a human being and thus, at the same time, undermining the very essence of what could have been a crime novel: if Patrick is at the same time Marcus he is not accountable for his crimes.

Patrick is a synecdoche that stands for the American yuppies of the ‘80s, a specimen for an epoch and as such he is a sort of everyman, an abstraction or example, that is, a part of the whole which, like a fractal, reflects the whole. According to Annesley, what disturbs Ellis’ readers is that Patrick is ‘normal’:

²⁹¹ Sylvia Söderlind, “Branding the Body American: Violence and Self-fashioning from *The Scarlet Letter* to *American Psycho*”, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, Volume 38, Number 1, 2008, pp. 71-72.

Ellis adds to this disturbing vision by presenting Bateman not as some horrific aberration, but as a yuppie everyman. He is, as far as his elite acquaintances are concerned, essentially normal. It is not just that he 'looks pretty much the same' as everybody else, or that he wears the same clothes, shops in the same stores and seems to share the same values, it is, more alarmingly, that he is 'total GQ' and a complete conformist.²⁹²

As Söderlind points out however, the problem lays not in the fact that Patrick is the typical American yuppie but in Patrick's confusion between American and human: 'Patrick's misreading of "American" as "human,"' writes Söderlind, 'which has infected so much criticism, becomes doubly ironic in light of the novel's diagnosis of the ills of America as resulting from a vision which excludes a large part of humanity within its own borders.'²⁹³

The homeless do not belong to Patrick's definition of what is American (the white Anglo-Saxon male rich American), and thus human, so they are not humans or subhumans - 'sottouomini', in Agamben's terms²⁹⁴ - but simply prey: 'As Ellis stretches the synecdochal logic of American exceptionalism to its absurd extreme, what remains of the nation's identity is the psychotic self.'²⁹⁵ In other words, Ellis kills the Other because she is not a synecdoche for what he considers as humanity, for what he considers as 'normal.' Both metonymy and synecdoche are evidently transcendental, rhetorical tools, but in a novel in which metaphor becomes literal, a similar abstraction and condemnation of the complexities of immanent life results in generalized violence for whoever does not represent Patrick's idea of Americanness.

²⁹² Annesley, 19

²⁹³ Söderlind, p. 74.

²⁹⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, Torino: Bollati Boringheri, 1998, p. 19.

²⁹⁵ Söderlind, p. 74.

Rosi Braidotti explains this logic of sameness in connection to the idea itself of humanism:

The human of Humanism is neither an ideal nor an objective statistical average or middle ground. It rather spells out a systematized standard of recognizability – of Sameness – by which all others can be assessed, regulated and allotted to a designated social location. The human is a normative convention, which does not make it inherently negative, just highly regulatory and hence instrumental to practices of exclusion and discrimination. The human norm stands for normality, normalcy and normativity. It functions by transposing a specific mode of being human into a generalized standard, which acquires transcendent values as the human: from male to masculine and onto human as the universalized format of humanity.²⁹⁶

The homeless are not human because they do not belong to the logic of normalcy as they do not follow the rules of Society, they are outside it. The homeless' guilt is that they are not the same as Patrick Bateman, they are instead irremediably Other, non-normal, outside the Law and thus, perfect victims.

An explanation for why characters cannot recognize each other is that they do not pay attention to the Other's face but to her clothes. Clothes stand metonymically for the people wearing them. The characters are unable to recognize each other's face because they are too focused on what they are wearing. Their clothing though is not used to distinguish them, but only to highlight their taste and their wealth, in the same way as professions and job titles stand for the people in Ballard.

According to Berthold Schoene the reason why all characters look the same is that they are nothing but doubles of Bateman:

²⁹⁶ Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, p. 26.

there are no characters in *American Psycho* who are not primarily reflections or imaginary extensions of Patrick's self. Tim Price, whom we encounter in the opening scene, is not Patrick's friend or rival, but the first in a long series of doppelgängers. Evelyn and Courtney, the first two women we meet, are as identically dressed as the men and, like Patricia—yet another girl dated by Patrick and, conspicuously, his female twin by name—blur in and out of his story like overexposed emanations from the deepest recesses of his hypersensitive, claustrophobically crowded mind.²⁹⁷

As it is the case for Ballard (the character in *Crash*) thinking Vaughan is a product of his psychopathology, Schoene recognizes the characters in the novel as products of Bateman's imagination. However, to read the novel as a projection of Patrick's mind would contradict the intentions of the writer evident from the very title of the novel. Ellis is dealing with Americanness in the novel and one of its most typical traits, that is, individuality. Schoene stops at the level of pure individuality, where everything is a copy of the self, but what the writer is actually showing is that even the self is a copy of a copy of a copy. In a pure Baudrillardian simulation of identity there is no original: Patrick is a specimen of society, where everybody is the same. Patrick is simply the representative of a specific class, in a specific country in a specific era (late 80s of the last century).²⁹⁸ In a sort of hyper-individuality, individuality itself is lost and Ellis is describing this loss.

Annesley observes how the lack of origin means that Bateman is a product of society, just like everyone else and, for this reason, no psychological explanations are sufficient to distinguish him from us:

The failure to supply an existential background is compounded by Ellis's

²⁹⁷ Berthold Schoene, 'Serial Masculinity: Psychopathology and Oedipal Violence in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*' *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 54 number 2, Summer 2008, pp. 382-383.

²⁹⁸ 'The New York of the 1980s is a central reference point for the majority of these writers,' writes Annesley referring to the writers of blank fictions. In Annesley, *Blank Fictions*, p. 2.

silence on Bateman's family history and personal past. This approach closes down the possibility that the reader could explain Bateman's behaviour in relation to either his experiences or his relationships. This approach enables Ellis to create a text that makes society responsible for Bateman's crimes. He is not killing to define himself, or killing because of some childhood trauma, but killing purely and simply in terms that respond to the forces of the mass media and the free market.²⁹⁹

Furthermore, not only is it the case that Bateman has no original but, in line with Ballard's Vaughan and McCarthy's Holden, he also has no past and thus, in this elision, he does not offer any psychoanalytical explanation. Bateman, however, differs from Holden (a mythical figure), and Vaughan (a prophet and mediator), for being indeed an abstraction but at the same time an everyday man, a synecdoche for an entire category.

The notion of being a character without an origin becomes very important when connected to the reading of Bateman as serial killer. According to Carla Freccero, the serial killer narratives have always had a concern with individuality:

In serial killer stories the sources of pathology lie in a decontextualized family romance separable from the social order. What is somatized in the figure of the serial killer, then, is also an ideology of violence that presents violence as something originating in the private sphere.³⁰⁰

The serial killer is the individual par excellence because everybody wants to see her isolated. Her violence is private and the consequence of her personal experiences, to some drama that happened in an earlier phase of her life and, at the same time, her violence is also public as the serial killer is the contemporary historical figure that

²⁹⁹ I will come back to this passage in a few paragraphs because it offers interesting hints for understanding the relationship between Bateman and Society and also for his relationship with his own identity.

³⁰⁰ Carla Freccero, p. 48.

we use as a scapegoat to expiate the sins of our entire society: 'The serial killer,'

Freccero explains:

is a popular American figure of dementia, universally regarded as unthreatening precisely because of his singularity, the nonrationality of his pathology, and the individualized and eccentric nature of his violence. A serial killer is not the oppressed masses, and although his murders are usually lurid, his reach is limited. In this sense, the serial killer serves the function of a fetish in public culture: he is the means of the disavowal of institutionalized violence, while the "seriality" of his acts of violence marks the place of recognition in this disavowal. Through the serial killer, then, we recognize and simultaneously refuse the violence-saturated quality of the culture, by situating its source in an individual with a psychosexual dysfunction.³⁰¹

Isolating the violence that surrounds us in the figure of the killer, this kind of narrative exempts us from having anything to do with it thus claiming the serial killer as an extraordinary figure. *American Psycho*, on the contrary, 'does not offer its readers the serial killer as consoling fantasy'³⁰², since Bateman is every American individual of the late 80s. Without an origin or an original it is difficult to accept the idea that Patrick Bateman very probably had a happy childhood: this would mean the impossibility of identifying the reasons and motives for his crimes.

It is useful now to go back to the work of Agamben on the witness in the camp in order to better understand this sense of Patrick's unaccountability. When Agamben speaks of the inhumanity that the muselmann had to suffer he notices how the perpetrators of this violence were not touched by this inhumanity, so they remained men, 'honest men.'³⁰³ Agamben explains how the men of the SS did not experience the *power* of suffering the inhuman as they could not, as they followed the orders of

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

³⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³⁰³ Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, p. 72.

the Law: this made of them ‘normal,’ ‘honest’ men. This is the reason why, according to Agamben, they are incapable of testifying to the atrocities they have committed: they were not capable of witnessing the inhumanity of the camp.³⁰⁴

As already observed, Bateman considers his victims are sub-humans or not humans so that, not only does he not feel responsible for their deaths but, on the contrary, he seems to perpetuate the status quo. He is not responsible because he does follow the rules of Society and, accordingly, he is never arrested. According to Agamben, taking responsibility has to do with the law, not with ethics: ‘The gesture of taking responsibility is then purely juridical and not ethical.’³⁰⁵ The Law is the mythical Law of Society, which does not touch the normal like Patrick.

For this reason, the homeless’ body is available for experimenting upon, as if Bateman were another of Ballard’s scientists.³⁰⁶ Analysing Primo Levi’s words on the muselmann, the victim who has lost any humanity in the camp, Agamben recognizes such a figure not as a person but as ‘a place for experimenting,’ in which ‘every ethical limit loses its meaning.’³⁰⁷ The homeless represents a border, a line where the limits of ethics are stretched to new lengths and in which Bateman can experience his own untouchability, his own playing with the limits of morality. Patrick Bateman is never going to be punished because being non-American and non-human, the body of the homeless or the woman is beyond the limits of the Law.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ ‘Il gesto dell’assumere responsabilità è, dunque, genuinamente giuridico e non etico.’ My translation. Giorgio Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, p. 20.

³⁰⁶ Söderlind, p. 75. This concern for ‘meat’ will be later developed in the discussion over cyberpunk. See Part III, chapter iii.

³⁰⁷ Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, p. 57.

Following the line of synecdoche then Patrick Bateman is a representative, a part of the whole that is the white, middle or upper class American which, for him equals to being human. Patrick is too abstract to be punished; his face is the same as the next fellow, and for this reason he has no face of his own and no origin. He cannot be the scapegoat for Society because without an immanent life he has no real body that can suffer punishment. Anything outside of the human category of the White American Male is considered as non-human and non-immanent, not-there, and on the bodies, the meat, of the homeless the American Psycho can experiment, unpunished and unpunishable because a crime is a crime only when perpetrated against a human.

From Bi-Dimensionality to One-Dimensional Thought

‘Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in...’³⁰⁸, says Patrick in a rare moment of epiphany towards the end of the novel. Surface is the result of the flattening of content into form, corresponding to the definition of information and, where clothes metonymically represent the human, surface is also the dimension of Ellis’ transcendental man.

In a review that appeared in the New York Times Christopher Lehmann-Haupt underlines the abstract, bi-dimensional quality of the character ‘Patrick Bateman’:

For all the viscera and gore he spills, this Wall Street monster is not a flesh-and-blood character, nor is it a realistic world that his demented narrative creates. There are too many devices that transform it into a lifeless abstraction. There are the relentless fashion notes that identify the designer of every stitch of clothing nearly every character wears.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 375.

³⁰⁹ Lehmann-Haupt.

As is the case with many critics of the novel, Lehmann-Haupt still posits the question of realism where we have already observed, with Söderlind, that the distinction between what is real and what is imagination is superfluous in the novel. The distinction between reality and imagination must be replaced by one between transcendence and immanence to determine the real impact of the novel.

In an answer to his critics, Ellis argues that he was representing the society he saw around him: 'I was writing about a society in which the surface became the only thing. Everything was surface - food, clothes - that is what defined people. So I wrote a book that is all surface action; no narrative, no characters to latch onto, flat, endlessly repetitive.'³¹⁰ If Lehmann-Haupt reduces the novel to bi-dimensionality, Ellis claims that the situation is even worse, in a story without narrative. Information as repetition and abstraction, in other words, makes of the novel an anti-narrative.

The abstraction seen in Ballard depicts a world that is our own brought to its extremes of rationality, similar to the world in Ellis' narrative. If the Ballardian world is made of the psychopathology of the characters, Ellis' is made of characters that are actually clothes. They wear their personality on their skin as their personality is made of body fitness and wealth, in a society in which what one is under the skin of one's clothes has no meaning. As we have seen with Baumann in fact, personalities are mere crusts on lava that last just the time to shop for another identity. Ellis accuses the world of being a story without narrative and that is what the readers of the novel cannot accept.

³¹⁰ Roger Cohen, 'Bret Easton Ellis Answers Critics of *American Psycho*.' *New York Times* 6 March 1991.

Lehmann-Haupt argues that the bi-dimensionality of the novel renders the violence of the novel cartoon-like:

Since the people involved are unreal and the physiology of what is done to them impossible, it is not so difficult to conceive of their scenes as a Tom and Jerry cartoon with human body parts. An authorial mind that can build a construction out of a rat, a Habitrail and a female torso has gone far beyond the casual degradation of women into an expression of sadistic rage as an abstract end in itself.³¹¹

The critic sharply depicts the cartoon-like sadistic tone of the novel but, once again, he seems to accuse the writer's narrative instead of seeing it as the work of a critic of the negativity of society. Ellis' post-human is a man more and more abstract, whose violence becomes experimentation, exaggerated, ridiculous, caricatural, but not less real. The body has become a cartoon because it is a bare body without rights, which can consequently be dissected and manipulated, the only limit being imagination. As in Ballard, the fact that violence becomes abstract does not make sufferance less real. The caricatural tone of the novel should not be a tool to understate the violence in the novel but, on the contrary, it should warn us of the violence in the world.³¹² As Annesley notices in fact violence as described in literature is always symbolic:

Violence in literature serves a complex symbolic and communicative function. Any analysis of violent imagery in contemporary American narrative must try to consider the implications raised by this reliance on the

³¹¹ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt.

³¹² What Ellis does for contemporary society, though, is nothing new if compared to the perspective of aristocracy of centuries past as it is illustrated for instance in an episode in *Il Giorno* (1763-1765), by Giuseppe Parini in which an aristocratic woman treats humanly her dog and as objects her servants. Ellis makes use of the same irony of the Italian poet but with a violent twist to adapt it to his vision of contemporaneity.

expressive possibilities offered by the language of violence.³¹³

And, as such, we can consider the caricature of violence to be an actual caricature of the violence in society.

Lehmann-Haupt concludes his review in a purely humanistic and logocentric way basing the failure of the novel on its lack of meaning: ‘The trouble with *American Psycho* is, of course, that you can't create a meaningless world out of meaninglessness. Surface, surface, surface can not serve to define substance. For meaninglessness to cohere, it needs a context of meaning.’³¹⁴ The purely transcendental world of surface cannot have a meaning because the metaphor machine that is the brain does not need to interpret a reality outside there: everything is metaphor, an image in the simulation.

In a way very similar to the novels of Ballard, Annesley connects the abstractions and ‘superficialities’ (my term) in the novel to the flattening caused by looking at the world as through a flat TV screen: ‘This screening, in classically Baudrillardian fashion, appears to restrict his ability to distinguish between reality and illusion to the extent that his violent acts become, in his imagination, indistinguishable from the unreal images he sees around him.’³¹⁵

This very detachment is what makes him unable to see his victims as cartoons, not real people: ‘He is unable to see the misery created by his behaviour because he lives his life in a world that has become as unreal to him as TV.’³¹⁶

³¹³ Annesley, *Blank Fictions*, p. 12.

³¹⁴ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt.

³¹⁵ Annesley, *Blank Fictions*, p. 18

³¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 18.

Annesley's main argument is that Bateman is a product of the level of commodification in American society, where everything can be bought and sold:

In *American Psycho* Ellis offers violence as a metaphor for the processes of commodification that are infiltrating, objectifying and cutting up the social body of late twentieth century America. The proliferation of media simulations throughout contemporary society is seen to encourage these violent acts, with the novel's implication being that commercial culture, in all its manifestations, is dangerous and destructive.³¹⁷

This is a process very similar to the one encountered in McCarthy where the Glanton gang transforms bodies into scalps and, as such, into currency. In Ellis, the bodies are already clothes, their faces indistinguishable.

The question of bi-dimensionality acquires more meaning when we read it through the work of thinkers such as Bauman and Butler. If the former demonstrates that identity is a moment of condensation in the liquidity of contemporary society, the latter explains that the self or the story of the self sees the individual start thinking about herself in a tri-dimensional way in order to give an account of her actions. This does not happen in *American Psycho*, in which Bateman does not ever need to justify his actions, give an account of himself, and for this reason - his flatness notwithstanding - his abstraction never reaches levels of self-awareness. Bateman is, in other words, imprisoned in the flatness of his mind, in a limbo between the immanence of the body and the possibilities of self-awareness that true transcendence could offer.

If, following Bauman, speed is essential today, the fact that the characters in the

³¹⁷ Ibid., p. 22.

novel are their actions more than ever implies that their personalities can be coded in binary dimensions and thus faster transmitted. This is a first answer to Lyotard's predicament about the survival of the mind, that, in other words, the mind can survive if it loses dimensions. One of these dimensions is necessarily responsibility, that is, the need to give an account of oneself.

At this point, however, we may also suggest, through the work of Marcuse, that considering the oneness - of sameness of individuals presented in the novel that connects the discussion about synecdoche and the one about surface - we could also argue that the dimensions in the novel are not two, but simply one, making of Patrick Bateman a one-dimensional man.

Herbert Marcuse describes a society in which the individual is completely absorbed into society and as such, all thoughts are one thought: 'an immediate identification of the individual with his society and, through it, with the society as a whole.'³¹⁸

Bateman then is both individual and Society, no difference can be made, no real individuality can be recorded otherwise he would lose his 'normalcy.'

In this imposition not only of the mythical Law but of mythical one-dimensional thought, the individual is 'mutilated, "abstract,"' and as such 'experiences (and expresses) only that which is given to him (given in a literal sense), who has only the facts and not the factors, whose behavior is one-dimensional and manipulated.'³¹⁹

Already in our discussion of the serial killer we have observed with Freccero that

³¹⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, New York: Routledge, Kindle Edition, p.12.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

Patrick fails in representing the exceptional serial killer and with Annesley and Bauman we have seen that commodification influences and takes the place of the individual. Annesley is then correct in his hypothesis that Bateman is the one dimensional product of a commodified and mass mediated society.

Finally, the blank, one-dimensional language of the novel and of Bateman can be attributed to the fact mentioned above that he is incapable of real abstraction and self-awareness, of giving an account of himself. As Bateman too says in another moment of epiphany: ‘it did not occur to me, *ever*, that people were good or that a man was capable of change or that the world could be a better place ... Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted.’³²⁰ As Marcuse explains, metalanguage is impossible when there is only one language:

But if this metalanguage is really to break through the totalitarian scope of the established universe of discourse, in which the different dimensions of language are integrated and assimilated, it must be capable of denoting the societal processes which have determined and “closed” the established universe of discourse.³²¹

Whereas Neal seems to be too self-conscious, aware of the language of Society and of his use of it, Bateman is completely assimilated in this one-dimensional language. So Bateman is not merely part of a screened-out and cartoon-like Society but of a Society in which everyone not only looks the same but thinks the same. Once again, there is no way for Bateman out of his spiral of violence imposed from above.

³²⁰ Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 375.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.

The Mythical Law and the Superego

Bateman's explosions of violence are as repetitive (serial, a series) as any description of clothing in the novel. Gilles Deleuze identifies repetition as a defining character of sadism, through which the sadist tries to realize the 'crime absolu'³²² in the iteration of partial, impersonal crimes. This mythical crime is made of a conception of pure reason as ultimate negativity³²³. The absolute crime is, in other words, a transcendental act of pure reason that can happen only because repetition slowly cancels the immanence indicative of the single, individual act. A crime becomes impersonal in its seriality, which means the abstraction of its singularity.

Deleuze connects this reiteration of violence with the 'famous *apathy* of the libertine,'³²⁴ that is the detachment from the world of an entire society bored to death, which is at the same time the one both Ballard and Ellis describe. The question one has to pose however is whether the sadist uses violence as an alternative to the repetition of society or if, on the contrary, the repetition of violence does nothing but perpetuate the status quo.

Freccero borrows from Deleuze's *Coldness and Cruelty* the idea that the sadist wants to demonstrate something with his actions: 'Deleuze notes that the sadist's intention is not to persuade or convince his reader, but to demonstrate: to demonstrate that reason itself is violence through the cold impersonality and singularity of its

³²² Gilles Deleuze, *Présentation de Sacher-Masoch. Le froid et le cruel*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967, p. 23.

³²³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³²⁴ 'fameuse *apathie* du libertin.' *Ibid.* Emphasis in the original. All translations from this text are mine.

demonstration.³²⁵ While this theory is interesting it is however difficult to imagine that Bateman is trying to demonstrate anything. On the contrary, I would suggest that Bateman is slowly escaping the cold intellectual demonstrations of the sadist along the course of the novel.³²⁶ Bateman is not an epitome for reason since he considers reflection useless. The paradox of reason and meta-reasoning is that reflection, the thinking about the self, is, in a very postmodern fashion, an empty exercise that has no use.

This is why I argue that the mode of the novel is not demonstrative - as in the case of the sadist according to Deleuze - but purely descriptive. Bateman does not have any overall theory he wants to demonstrate through his actions since he does not even have an opinion unless it concerns fashion design or general etiquette in society. Bateman's violence is matter-of-fact, mirroring the way things are and the way things will be. Every description of violence is the same as the description of a new suit or a new stereo: it has no logic but it is pure information without reflection on itself. After a while the novel generates a level of expectation for the next moment of violence that the reader knows will soon come: violence becomes a routine without a purpose, which is exactly the scary power the narrative of the novel exercises.

Freccero continues by explaining how 'the sadist identifies so exclusively with the superego that his ego no longer exists except as it is externalized onto the other.'³²⁷ Patrick's self has disappeared and has melted in something that completely adheres

³²⁵ Freccero, p. 53.

³²⁶ Especially in the first part of the novel Bateman is a master of etiquette and enjoys to explain how better to be dressed. But his is a telling, not a showing or demonstrating.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*

to the expectations of Society. The one-dimensionality and sameness of Bateman is the result then of the complete disappearance of his ego into his superego: ego and superego in other words are one and the same dimension.

To expand Freccero's statement, we could say that the superego ruling over Patrick is that of a transcendental society based on the way one appears, a typical, patriarchal society as Bertold Schoene points out: 'Patrick epitomizes modernity's residual male self...'³²⁸ For this reason, the faces of the ego that the sadistic superego has to punish are the poor homeless, the non-WASP, the non-men (women and gay), the non-human (animals), etc. Again with Schoene, we could say that 'To win recognition as a man, Oedipal boys must radically cut themselves off from the feminine³²⁹, which is accomplished through repression and which results in neurotic self-division. Effectively, they must split the world, as well as themselves, into a heroic manly "me" on the one hand and a despicable effeminate "not-me" on the other.'³³⁰

Schoene's general theory in his essay is that Bateman represents the contemporary man that cannot accept the loss of his ego in favour of the superego and that for this reason has become more and more autistic whereas women have been more open in realizing the situation:

In terms of their lack of autonomy vis-à-vis the omnipotent control of the superego, there is no difference between men and women; only men have managed to disavow their powerlessness by projecting it onto women and

³²⁸ Schoene, p. 385

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

successfully repressing all knowledge of this projection.³³¹

Bateman is then a one-dimensional character that moves in space but not really in time, considering that his actions are repetitions of the same act: murder. The repetition of such an act transcends him in the negativity (in the sense of a negation of life or immanence) of pure reason, which is also the dominion of the Superego. As a representative of the Law of the Superego, Bateman behaves and looks like everyone else and this creates the alibi for the perfect crime because this also means that Bateman does not need to justify himself and thus does not need to give an account of himself. This however does not mean that he does not feel the need for immanence, to find individuality for himself.

Bateman is indeed part of the Superego like the hackers are part of cyberspace, but he seems in the course of the novel to show a resurfacing of the ego in an attempt to be recognized among the liquidity and the fuzziness of the narrative of the Superego. Instead of theorizing the realization of an ideal already actualized in his world, Patrick is often unsatisfied by his own violent exploits, which he feels ultimately pointless. Instead of taking advantage of his unaccountability, Bateman appears, through his acts, to be in need of being recognized as the killer, as the one who did it, someone special, the serial killer that society needs as a scapegoat: an individual with an individual Voice.

In such a context, however, the confession of the killer, typical of the crime narrative, is bound to fail whereas it is still possible in the work of David Foster Wallace. Neon's story in fact is a long confession of all the lies the protagonist has

³³¹ *Ibid.* p. 387.

said in his life. The story is his final attempt to communicate the truth and give an account of himself and the reason why he has committed suicide.

American Psycho on the contrary represents the bankruptcy of communication and thus of confession because people do not care who their addressees are (they often mistake them for someone else). They communicate emptiness, or, in other words, they do not communicate any knowledge; the sender, as well as Old Good Neon, only wants to make an impression.

The argument here demonstrates that Patrick Bateman manifests his Voice, his will-to-say in the confession of his acts and of his loneliness³³², while living in a Society in which he cannot express an individual articulated voice and create a real relationship. The effect is often comical or worthy of a comedy gag, as the following examples will show.

When Evelyn, his girlfriend, asks him why he does not come over to her suite (she is scared after her neighbour has disappeared), Patrick answers: ““Because your neighbor’s head was in my freezer.” I yawn, stretching. “Listen. Dinner? Where? Can you hear me?””³³³ In another situation, his friends hear him but they think Patrick is making a sexual joke: ““You know, guys, it’s not beyond my capacity to drive a lead pipe repeatedly into a girl’s vagina,” I tell Van Patten and McDermott, then add, after a silence I mistake for shock, finally on their parts an acute perception of my cruelty, “but compassionately.” “We all know about *your* lead pipe, Bateman,” McDermott says. “Stop bragging.” “Is he like trying to tell us he has a big

³³² See for instance, Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 257.

³³³ *Ibid.*, p.118.

dick?” Van Patten asks Craig.³³⁴ Bateman though does not listen in his turn to their replies.

In a world of one-dimensional language, no individuality is transmitted but only pure information, meaningless facts. There is nothing one can say to anybody else that is of any use or novelty: if we all think the same there is no point in communication as everything would come out as platitude. Paradoxically, Bateman behaves as if violence may anchor him to reality but he is unaware that he is simply perpetuating the pointless performances of a sadist.

Killing becomes a way for Bateman to have at least the attention of his victims and their acknowledgment that it is he who is killing them, and no one else. A similar situation is represented in the American serial *Dexter*³³⁵, where the serial murderer and homonym protagonist confesses to his victims before killing and cutting them to pieces. After all, people who are going to die are necessarily focused on their murderer thus satisfying the killer’s need for power and for individuality.

Every murder represents an example of what Jameson has called ‘intensity’, a consequence of the postmodern ‘waning of affect,’³³⁶ that is a moment particularly ‘charged of affect.’³³⁷ In other words, in a world where his voice cannot express his emotions, Patrick lives intense moments of humanity, of contact with other humans beings, in the same moment in which he is killing them. These moments of intensity

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

³³⁵ Based on the Dexter series of novels by Jeff Lindsay published between 2004 and 2013. The TV series ran from 2006 to 2013.

³³⁶ Fredric Jameson. *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke UP, 1991, p. 10

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

metonymically represent what is left of the human, as outbursts of lights through the unsayable. Murder facilitates the re-establishment of a basic form of communication where the killer is the sender and the victim the receiver. It is a one way communication, because Bateman has no will-to-listen: it is all about him after all. Murder is the form of communication of the sadist that is bound to fail since its result is the death of the receiver and with it, the loss of the message. As his ego struggles into existence only in the moment of killing, Patrick needs to constantly re-establish the contact with the Other, and consequently perpetrate serial murders.

In the most revealing episode of miscommunication Patrick is confessing to one of his colleagues about his murderous activity on his answering machine. After a few weeks Patrick finally meets that person, who does not even recognize him as Bateman but as one Donaldson and thinks he was making a prank at the expenses of Bateman:

“No!” I shout. “Now, Carnes. Listen to me. Listen very, very carefully. I – killed-Paul-Owen-and-I-liked-it. I can’t make myself any clearer.” My stress causes me to choke on the words.
 “But that’s simply not possible,” he says, brushing me off. “And I’m not finding this amusing anymore.”
 “It never was supposed to be!” I bellow, and then “Why isn’t it possible?”
 “It’s just not,” he says, eyeing me worriedly.
 “Why not?” I shout again over the music, though there’s really no need to, adding, “You stupid bastard.”
 He stares at me as if we are both underwater and shouts back, very clearly over the din of the club, “Because... I had... dinner ... with Paul Owen... twice... in London... *just ten days ago.*”³³⁸

As we have seen in the first part of the present work, confession consists in a split between the confessing self and the confessed self. In *American Psycho*, this split

³³⁸ Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 388.

has increased so much that there only exists a confessed self which, being a part of the Superego and as such a simulation, cannot be held accountable according to Butler's theory. The confessing self or original self is not present in telling the story and if a story is told it has no author and as such no one to take any ethical responsibility.

Patrick Bateman represents our own negativity and hate because, as Freccero realizes, we all are Patrick Bateman:

The story *American Psycho* tells is the story of the superego, the father, the law. The sadism and violence of the law are enacted upon the bodily ego of the self (this is how we and he are victims), a self now externalized as other: a dog, a beggar, a child, some prostitutes, a gay man, some women, and a colleague—all of them are him, all of them are us, and we are him.³³⁹

The narrative of the Superego is a narrative beyond the ego, beyond any distinction between the characters. As the narrative without ego is non-dialogic it can only communicate information, no real personalities, no real ideas of change. The superego has lost any real moral function because it does not have anything or anyone to punish. Post-humanity or inhumanity is pure biopolitics where life itself is ultimately at stake and reduced to the transmission of information (the DNA) and thus controllable, modifiable. 'Modifiable' here does not mean to bring change, and the repetitive violence of the sadist is there to perpetuate the status quo.

³³⁹ Freccero, p. 54.

Infernal Irony

Carla Freccero points out how the non-transmission of knowledge is the greatest charge against the novel. In her opinion, critics miss the first words of the novel, working as a sort of key to its reading: ‘ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE is scrawled in blood red lettering on the side of the Chemical Bank. . .’³⁴⁰ According to Freccero, Ellis cites ‘what is perhaps the most famous and time-worn literary deployment of mimetic violence, known to Dante scholars as "infernal irony.”³⁴¹ Expanding Freccero’s statement, it could be said that the novel is an infernal reversal of the idea we have of the ‘80s: if the yuppies went to hell, the novel would be their hell circle and their punishment would be an eternity of repetition, boredom and flatness.

This narrative of hell well sums up the image of the novel that I have tried to convey up until now. Hell is the result of the psychopathology of the collective mind of the Superego or, to simplify, it is the meta-narrative reflecting on the erasure of the ego and the final victory of society as a unified mind. As if this Hell were painted by a Pre-Raphaelite, it represents a return to a bi-dimensionality or even a one-dimensionality in which content and form conflate and the ultimate punishment is the expiration of story in the accumulation of episodes that do not really add up to anything. Hell is where we are when violence becomes a cartoon, like a drawing that can bleed. Infernal irony is this caricature of the suffering body in an age in which

³⁴⁰ Ellis, *American Psycho*, p. 3.

³⁴¹ Freccero, p. 51.

the United States thought they were living a moment of Heaven.

I would like to further develop Freccero's idea of 'infernal irony' here by recuperating Baudelaire's and De Man's theories on irony. Ellis brings the literary device of irony to the point in which not only the writing self is separated from the written self (the writer from its main character) but the latter is also split from his own immanent self, that is, his own humanity. Dante has brought his humanity in hell whereas Ellis, maybe too enraged, as Lehmann-Haupt points out³⁴², has distanced his own in outrage and has created an empty vessel, an 'honest' man.

The world of *American Psycho* is the ironic counterpart to the heaven imagined by the American individual, that is, 'heaven is what you want it to be,' found recently in a novel such as *The Lovely Bones* (2002) and the conclusion of the TV serial *Lost* (2004-2010). If one really gets into one's self-made paradise, everything is blurred, boring and flat, the heaven on earth of the desire immediately fulfilled present in Baumann and Ballard.

Synecdoche, one-dimensionality and superego are one and the same aspect of the infernal irony. This hell offers, in conclusion, a first answer to Lyotard's question of the ultimate witness. *American Psycho* does not have anything to send into the future, nothing reasonable if not the infantile violence of the superficial, superegotistical mind. But, paradoxically, Patrick Bateman's one-dimensional mind is the easiest to treat in binary terms.

³⁴² 'You get the feeling that Mr. Ellis began writing his novel with a single huge emotion of outrage, and that he never in his three years of working on it paused to modulate that emotion or to ask if it was helping to construct an imaginary world.' Christopher Lehmann-Haupt.

Lyotard's dream of exporting thoughts as software finds here however many negative implications. On the one hand, Patrick is a simplification of the software itself. On the other, it implicates that giving importance to the software means that the hardware can be discarded, tortured, and made to melt into acid. Lyotard seems to bring back to life the Christian dichotomy mind/body and it is paradoxical in an age where the way the body looks is so important. The problem though is that the body is actually a victim for the image the mind has of it, the image created by the Superego and thus by Society itself. The body is ultimately malleable to violence, plastic surgery or biomedical prosthesis.

Another question is that of the lack of personality substituted by simplified information. The information age means a loss of humanity in the sense of communication with the other, feeling the other. Ballard has already posited the question whether it is not reason itself that is the main problem of man, what renders him less human while still distinguishing man from animal. In Ballard, man becomes too abstract to care for its own suffering and actually the mutilation of the body becomes a moment of discovery of new possibilities whereas in Ellis, Patrick tries new possibilities for communication in the body of the Other.

If 'American' in the novel is a synecdoche for 'human' it means that the Superego of the American culture can also be intended as the Western world superego. Clothes and information stand metonymically for man so that man becomes something different from human.

The world of *American Psycho* then is characterised by the nonexistence of ethics where ethics is replaced by etiquette. The narrative powerfully represents such a world in a bending of form and content together where one cannot go without the other. As a crime fiction it challenges the genre itself by frustrating the reader through repetitions that do not aim to solve any mystery; there is no witness because everybody looks the same and society itself is Patrick's alibi; communication is almost at a degree zero so that even if Patrick actually confesses his murders, nobody believes him or even listens to him. Irony is so powerful that the idea itself of murder sounds ridiculous.

As a work of literature the novel challenges not only the conception of what a work of art should be, but it also challenges Society tout court in its liquid form. The violence in the novel is endemic to the world it depicts and the style is voluntarily descriptive, leaving violence room to express itself without any authorial distance and, at the same time, without a real Voice.

If we are reduced to useless information, without even a story to tell, a narrative to express ourselves and be accountable for, then it is doubtful whether we have really anything worth transmitting to the future. Patrick Bateman cannot be a witness because he is incapable of being subject to suffering and has no will-to-listen to the suffering of the Other.

3.2 Oxymoron, Snowflakes and Lack: The Infernal Irony of Chuck Palahniuk

Fight Club is full of information on how to make a silencer³⁴³, nitro-glycerine³⁴⁴ and napalm³⁴⁵. As Tyler says, ‘This how-to stuff isn’t in any history books,’³⁴⁶ as if he wanted to reveal the hidden history of the world and thus bring the end of history itself. There is no conspiracy theory in Palahniuk, no men behind the curtains, but information and objects and capital behind everything, as if they were living entities. As violent as its use may be, for this American writer, information allows for individual empowerment. Far from being nihilistic or pessimistic, Palahniuk’s use of information is very different from the zero (nihil) level that information acquires in Ellis’ *American Psycho*. On the contrary, his work suggests that information is a means to reach independence and freedom from capitalistic culture even if it is a ‘hopeless freedom’.

In the following sections I will analyse the novel under the headings of similar problems to those that I observed in the previous chapter: a) rhetoric, where I will individuate oxymoron as main rhetorical tool in Palahniuk’s writing based as it is on paradoxes and opposition to the point that his main character has a split personality, a real oxymoronic man; b) individuality, where I will try to delineate Palahniuk’s vision of the individual as a snowflake; and c) in the last section I will deal with the problem of the relationships with the Other and I will indicate a lack of human relationships the narrator suffers and how this is due to the lack of a father-figure, a God-like figure to tell him what to do.

³⁴³ Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, London: Vintage, 2010, p. 11.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid*

The study of these main problems will help me depict Palahniuk's infernal irony, in parallel with that of *American Psycho*, in which freedom comes only through pain and death. This depiction of hell will pave the way to the main question of the Voice in Palahniuk that comes from the lack in human relations and the difficulty for the characters to express their need for the Other.

Eduardo Mendieta argues that, even if it is not possible to write the 'great American novel', Palahniuk is writing the next best thing: writing a series of novels observing different aspects of contemporary America:

He has taken on a culture that has become so gargantuan, fragmented, and differentiated but at the same time so rich, so self-reflexive, so historicized and also so mimicked that one novel cannot tell its story in one narrative with one dramatic thread. Many novels, many short cuts, many vignettes, are necessary: one polyphonic, asynchronous, temporally bi-directional, hyper-textual, and cyber-encyclopedic novel made up of individual novels, where each novel is the *Bildungsroman* of an American hero but told in reverse.³⁴⁷

Mendieta's encyclopaedic reading of Palahniuk insightfully suggests a form of induction, where in logic we mean an abstraction or general conclusion or theory derived from particular cases or facts. Induction as a form of abstraction or transcendence is important if we wish to understand how Palahniuk's satire tries to grasp a portrait (as such, inevitably abstract) of contemporary American.

As Mendieta says in fact, Palahniuk 'is a writer with a mission, a vision, and a very

³⁴⁷ Eduardo Mendieta, 'Surviving American Culture: On Chuck Palahniuk', *Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 29, Number 2, October 2005, pp., pp. 394-395.

distinctive style.’³⁴⁸ His definition is a useful guide for this chapter. In the first part I will observe Palahniuk’s mission to portray snapshots or splits of contemporary life, or ‘postcards from the future’³⁴⁹, in order to create a larger picture or photo-album of American contemporary culture.

The Oxymoronic Man

If Bret Easton Ellis’s infernal irony was based on metonymy and synecdoche, in Palahniuk hell is very oxymoronic and paradoxical. Palahniuk’s sentence is built on the effect of contrasts between two parts that only apparently contradict one another while actually creating a distinct logic of rebellion and violence.

To offer an example: ‘the first step to eternal life is you have to die.’³⁵⁰ The apparent paradox of finding life in death is easily explained by the fact that one can indeed reach eternal, transcendent life only with the death of the immanent body. Another example: ‘Everyone smiles with that invisible gun to their head.’³⁵¹ In this case, the gun undermines what the idea of smile could imply since the sentence refers to the smile of the dying, of the people in the cancer or brain parasites groups, who know that they are dying. The paradox can also reach a level of twisted poetry: ‘Marla said she wanted to have Tyler’s abortion’.³⁵²

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

³⁴⁹ Quote taken from the 1999 novel *Invisible Monsters* and used as title for the 2003 documentary *Postcards From the Future: The Chuck Palahniuk Documentary*.

³⁵⁰ Palahniuk, p. 11.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

In these examples Palahniuk builds a philosophy of contradiction whose purpose seems to be to shake the status quo with anarchy. If anarchy is a state without a ruler, then the ruler for Palahniuk is society itself and the way it breeds us everywhere. The only way the writer seems to find to wake us out of it is through paradox, reaching the transcendental ideal of individual freedom through the immanent suffering of the body.

But to remain within the context of rhetorical tropes, we can say that if analogy is a sort of flash version of metaphor, then we can consider oxymoron as somehow a flash version of paradox, both aiming at creating an apparent self-contradicting effect. Oxymoron is a compressed paradox such as: ‘Losing all hope was freedom,’³⁵³ that can also be rewritten as hopeless freedom.

These sentences bring to mind the oxymoric propaganda in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: ‘War is Peace. Freedom is Slavery. Ignorance is Strength.’³⁵⁴ In Orwell’s dystopian novel such slogans are used as propaganda to control people by telling them that peace can be obtained only through war (whereas peace is supposed to be the opposite of war); that only being a slave one can be free; and that ignorance is not only a blessing but strength, a source of power.

In Palahniuk the intention is quite the opposite since freedom, while hopeless, is not aimed at slavery. On the contrary, Tyler wants to attack culture itself and its one-dimensional thought. The logic of capitalism is much subtler than the too obvious propaganda of Big Brother.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

³⁵⁴ George Orwell, *1984*, London: Penguin, 2004.

As Andrew Hewitt explains in his reading of David Fincher's 1999 movie based on the novel, the film shows that capitalism in itself is not totalitarian because it does not entail a need to believe in the system or for propaganda because one simply lives in capitalism. As the ideology of the day, it is this belief 'by acting' that constitutes the 'totalitarian aspect of capitalism,' 'even if we do not wittingly act out of an explicit belief.'³⁵⁵ Capitalism is, in other words, immanent, an invisible enemy that needs to be eradicated by transcendent anarchy, a form of abstraction from the culture we live in.

George Lakoff suggests that among the metaphors that condition our lives there are orientational metaphors: 'These spatial orientations arise from the fact that we have bodies of the sort we have and that they function as they do in our physical environment.'³⁵⁶ Since we are animals that stand on their two legs, up has a positive connotation in contrast to down. Examples Lakoff offers are: 'I'm feeling *up*. That *boosted* my spirits. My spirits *rose*. You're in *high* spirits ... I'm feeling *down*. I'm *depressed*. He's really *low* these days. I *fell* into a depression. My spirits *sank*.'³⁵⁷

Comprehensibly then Tyler Durden invites the narrator of *Fight Club* to reach the bottom because only when he has lost everything will man be free of any conditioning. Objects, the family, the past are all hindrances towards the expression of the individual: "It's only after you've lost everything," Tyler says, "that you're

³⁵⁵ Andrew Hewitt, 'Fight Club and the Violence of Neo-Fascist Ressentiment', *Telos*, issue 136 (Fall 2006), p. 108.

³⁵⁶ George Lakoff, *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago, 2008, p. 14.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

free to do anything.”³⁵⁸ Steven Gold comments on this sentence saying that it represents the moment in which Tyler shows his real intention to dominate the narrator: ‘Tyler contends that he is trying to help the Narrator “evolve.” In reality, he is inducing him to submit.’³⁵⁹ While this can be an interesting reading of the novel, especially when Tyler becomes the undisputed leader of Project Mayhem, its literal meaning should not be undermined. Losing means for Palahniuk to lose oneself, and, with it, all the cultural background that identity is built upon, in order to reach freedom.

The individual in the novel is represented by the narrator, who has no name: he is just an example, one of the many, a sort of synecdoche for the lower class. He spends his life looking at IKEA brochures and ordering from their catalogues. After meeting Tyler he realizes that a life spent accumulating objects is a life which one has lost control of: ‘Then you’re trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you.’³⁶⁰ Entrapped in his capitalistic existence and unable to rationally escape his existence, the narrator gives birth to another personality, which may set him free.

The narrator himself can be considered as oxymoronic in the equation that makes him share the same body with Tyler. The oxymoronic subject is half transcendental and half immanent, Tyler and the Narrator, an individual split into opposite personalities. The narrator and Tyler are in fact completely different, the former a loser, unable to take ownership of his own life and reduced to go to 12-step groups in

³⁵⁸ Palahniuk, p. 70.

³⁵⁹ Steven N. Gold, 'Fight Club: A Depiction of Contemporary Society as Dissociogenic', *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 5: 2 (2004), p. 28.

³⁶⁰ Palahniuk, p. 44.

order to build human relationships whereas the latter is strong-willed, anarchic and a natural leader. According to Gold, Tyler was somehow born out of the narrator's unconscious attraction for the independent Marla:

The Narrator is too oblivious to his own feelings to realize he is attracted to Marla, and even if he did know this, he would be too timid and inhibited to approach her. Tyler has the assertiveness to engage with Marla. As the Narrator's alter ego, he possesses the confidence bordering on macho cockiness that the Narrator lacks and admires.³⁶¹

Tyler then was born out of desire both for freedom but also a desire to establish a relationship with another human being.

Omar Lizardo instead offers a different explanation to the oxymoronic character based on bulimia according to which 'unbridled consumption is represented by *overeating*, and Puritan self-control by *anorexia*.'³⁶² Tyler brings back self-control and order through Project Mayhem where discipline is very important thus behaving as a New Puritan (transcendent) whereas the narrator's dependency on IKEA catalogues is symptomatic of overeating (exaggerated materiality or immanence). The result is a 'split subject'³⁶³ or an oxymoronic subject.

Tyler is evidently the fiction, the split personality emerged from the original narrator, but in the course of the novel, he becomes immanent, taking over the body of the protagonist while the narrator becomes a mere witness to his body in action. Tyler communicates facts, information, whereas the narrator, as witness, tells a story,

³⁶¹ Gold, p. 27.

³⁶² Omar Lizardo, 'Fight Club, or the Cultural Contradictions of Late Capitalism', *Journal for Cultural Research*, Volume 11, Number 3 (JULY 2007), p. 227, note 4.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 225.

Tyler's story, that is secretly (even to him) his own story. In other words, *Fight Club* is the story of an anonymous individual telling the story of the rise and fall of his own dissociated personality.

Tyler represents in the most literal sense Kermode's definition of myth, which is, a fiction that is forgetting that it is only a fiction: 'We have to distinguish between myths and fictions. Fiction can degenerate into myths whenever they are not consciously held to be fiction.'³⁶⁴ Tyler is a necessary myth in the narrator's attempt at freedom from his own life. The narrator splits himself and creates a personality, which echoes the figure of the intermediary or prophet that we have already encountered in Ballard. The intermediary becomes the thing itself he should mediate.³⁶⁵

Tyler is information spread by word of mouth, everybody knows him and, what is worse, he is becoming a legend: "“Everybody knows about the birthmark,” the bartender says. “It’s part of the legend. You’re turning into a fucking legend, man.””³⁶⁶ A legend is a story repeated from mouth to mouth that people start to believe as true, just like myth in Kermode. In other words, all the information coalesces in myth and Tyler himself suggests - in a reversal of what happens in *Crash* where Ballard thinks he has created Vaughan out of his desire - that maybe the Narrator is the actual fiction:

‘Oh, this is bullshit. This is a dream. Tyler is a projection. He’s a dissociative

³⁶⁴ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 39.

³⁶⁵ In fact, there is an underlining tone of homosexuality here as in *Crash* in the attraction of the narrator for the intermediary.

³⁶⁶ Palahniuk, p. 159.

personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination.

“Fuck that shit,” Tyler says. “Maybe you’re *my* schizophrenic hallucination.”³⁶⁷

Tyler is the perfect epitome of simulation but in the shape of a man, who starts to believe that he is the real thing. Tyler is a psychopathology (to use Ballard’s terminology), that becomes a person and takes the place of the original, since the narrator does not even have a name. As Gold says:

It is certainly no accident that it is Tyler, the supposed alter, who has a name, while the Narrator, the ostensible “host” personality, does not. The Narrator is essentially a cipher, a non-entity. In many respects, Tyler has more “substance,” and certainly more backbone, than the Narrator does.³⁶⁸

The fact that the narrator does not have a name and is a ‘cipher, a non-entity,’ not immanent enough, while his split personality does have a name is important for the political role of the novel. Without a name and a real personality, the narrator is the perfect everyman that by synecdoche represents the contemporary American way in the same way as Patrick Bateman represented the American yuppies of the Eighties.

Being a Snowflake or the Problem of Individuality

The narrator represents both the concept of the everyman, a pure abstraction from reality and the individual, the actuality from which the everyman should be abstracted. The question then is: how can the individual be an everyman, someone without real individuality?

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

³⁶⁸ Gold, p. 25.

We have already found the answer to these questions in the reading of Zygmunt Bauman's *Liquid Society*. According to Bauman nowadays we are free to 'buy' a new identity whenever we want, just as Neon does in Wallace's story. Buying itself is the symbol of capitalist society as proved by the narrator's obsession with IKEA: individuality is just another object of consumption: 'In a consumer society,' writes Bauman, 'sharing in consumer dependency - in the *universal* dependency on shopping - is the condition *sine qua non* of all *individual* freedom; above all, of the freedom to be different, to "have identity".'³⁶⁹ In order to show the paradox endemic to the problem of identity as commodity, Bauman offers the example of a TV commercial where to the image of a variety of women with different hair styles and colours relates the slogan "All unique; all individual; all choose X".³⁷⁰ Individuality today is both unique and shared, all choosing between the same products, the same identities.

In order to illustrate the question of individuality Palahniuk makes use of the metaphor of the snowflake, following the myth of the individual as unique as a snowflake. One of Tyler's space monkeys reads some of Tyler's scripts:

"You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everyone else, and we are all part of the same compost pile."

The space monkey continues, "Our culture has made us all the same. No one is truly white or black or rich, anymore. We all want the same. Individually, we are nothing."³⁷¹

³⁶⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, pp. 83-84.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

³⁷¹ Palahniuk, p. 134.

If, following Bauman, everybody can shop for identity, then all identities have the same value or, in other words, they are the same. It does not matter which identity one chooses because they are not what one is. It is because of this lack of substance of the individual that a fiction like Tyler can take a place, because Tyler does not take the place of another person, he simply fills a vacant space.

Following almost directly from *American Psycho*, this void in human substance seems created by consumerism since what is consumed is nothing but the human. According to Mendieta, consuming is typically American: ‘to consume is American, and through consumption we enact our civil religion, our duty for country and motherland.’³⁷² The problem is that consuming is another factor that increases our sameness:

the more there is to consume, the more products there are on the shelf, the more we consume the same. Massive quantities translate into uncertainty, even angst. Where there is so much, and each choice is a leap of faith, the common and familiar becomes a respite from uncertainty and intractable massiveness. Sameness becomes the solace of the overwhelmed. But where everyone can have the same, each must distinguish him or herself by being unique. Uniqueness itself must turn into a commodity.³⁷³

This familiarity that counterpoints the vastness of choice is everything the fight club is against but, paradoxically, everybody in the fight club and in project mayhem would like to be Tyler Durden, and to have his personality. They would all choose to wear his face thus surrendering his anti-capitalistic revolution to the black hole of capitalism. The unconscious need for a fictional alternative to life plays a major role in understanding the contemporary appeal for fiction. Tyler is not consumed by

³⁷² Mendieta, p. 398.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

capitalism, on the contrary, he is inventing a maybe improbable but captivating form of anarchy. He is telling everyone that no one is a snowflake and, in his intentions, maybe he did invite his fighters to abandon all hope of personality. Unfortunately, Tyler offers himself as an alternative personality, which all the monkeys want to emulate.

In the same way as Ellis' Bateman, the purpose of Palahniuk's narrator is to make of his character a specimen for humankind, an example of what a 'real' human being is, so that his past does not exactly mark him as an individual but as an example, that is, to quote Agamben: 'one singularity among others, which, however, stands for each of them and serves for all. On one hand, every example is treated in effect as a real particular case; but on the other, it remains understood that it cannot serve in its particularity.'³⁷⁴ As an example, the narrator cannot be considered in his particularity: he is a synecdoche that works both as individual and as the whole of individuality in contemporary America.

According to Lizardo, Tyler has a Calvinistic attitude towards individuality. He argues that Tyler tries to 're-program' the members of Project Mayhem in order to delete 'the dominant neo-Romantic and hedonistic ideology that emphasizes their "intrinsic" worth and special status as a person.'³⁷⁵ Lizardo sees here a reminiscence of 'the radical rationalization of Lutheranism by John Calvin, in which God's transcendental majesty and absolute omniscience and omnipotence dwarfed and

³⁷⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* trans Michael Hardt, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 10.

³⁷⁵ Lizardo, p. 238.

rendered despicable the lonely human's mortal flesh.³⁷⁶ Lizardo comments further that Durden's version of Calvinism though, 'represents a Nihilistic, post-Nietzschean version of this cosmology, in which all that remains is the decaying human flesh without the possibility of redemption.'³⁷⁷ The better argument instead, however, is that for Durden this is only a starting point towards what he considers freedom and not an end in itself. It is easy to agree that Tyler's (metaphorical) gun is always aimed at the end, but this end represents the annihilation of the individual as cultivated by contemporary culture, not the end of man himself.

In his way, Tyler finds an answer to a simple question: if uniqueness is just a commodity and its authenticity is thus undermined, what is the point of choosing? According to Bauman, the individual is not really free to choose since she is forced to make the choice for individualization: she is forced to be someone. As Bauman writes, 'individualization is a fate, not a choice. In the land of the individual freedom of choice the option to escape individualization and to refuse participation in the individualizing game is emphatically *not* on the agenda.'³⁷⁸ Tyler tries to eliminate the problem of choice itself, accepting that any choice is pointless and that this is the only possible starting point for a new life.

From the one-dimensionality of Patrick Bateman we have moved to the oxymoronic and ironic split of the nameless narrator of *Fight Club*. In order to find his Voice and individuality, the narrator has given birth to a personality, which represents the myth and legend of individuality against the mythical law of Society. Tyler Durden is the

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

product of the metaphor machine of the narrator, whose functions appears to be to give the narrator an individual Voice to finally speak to the Other and thus respond to that lack or void of human relationships.

Of Lack or in the Name of the Father

Fight Club tries to explore how such a fictional personality has come to be through the story of the narrator. Compared to Bateman the narrator of *Fight Club* has a past, as vague as it may be, hinted by different references to his father and soon generalized in all the men that take part into the fight club, men who have been raised by their mothers³⁷⁹, and that, for this reason, are in search of their male identity.

From what the narrator says, we know that Tyler did not have a father³⁸⁰, but he does. His father left his family when he was only six years old: 'Me', the narrator says, 'I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything. My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years, this isn't so much like a family as it's like he sets up a franchise.'³⁸¹ The idea of family as franchise in the hands of the father reflects the belief in the Father as representative of capital. The narrator does not remember anything about his father. The father is hence perceived more as a lack (Tyler does not have a father either, of course) than as an influence, thus reflecting the emptiness of the narrator. The need to fill in the void left by the

³⁷⁹ 'What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women.' Palahniuk, p. 50.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

father is so great that the presence of the woman/mother is almost obliterated in the novel, with the single exception of Marla.

Lizardo brings the question of the father as lack to its Lacanian consequences: ‘This is Lacan’s (Frankfurt school-inspired) insight when stating that the absence of the “law-of-father” in modern society is in fact an even *greater* prison than its presence: when *everything* is permitted then enjoyment is truly evacuated from the social field, insofar as this latter requires the minimal presence of a formal prohibition in order to sustain its (performative) essence.’³⁸² Without a father, the individual is under no restrictions and is permitted to do and desire whatever he wants, a situation already portrayed in *American Psycho* and narrated in various works by Ballard.

The most transcendental level of the Father corresponds to God, who is the template for the former or, in Tyler’s words: ““What you have to understand is your father was your model for God.””³⁸³ God is invisible but omnipresent and for this reason well represents the Lack or Void - that is, something we do not have, cannot see, but strongly believe in. This lack can only have such a power if it is transcendental or fictional, in other words, a myth. Only someone who does not have a father can fantasize of his existence. As absence the Father cannot be more godlike and it is in this instance that every cue that the society of information gives is priceless and worth imitating. The transcendental nature of god is matched by Durden’s fictional nature explaining the profound attraction the monkeys have for him.

In order to free the people in the fight club from the Father however, Tyler falls into

³⁸² Lizardo, p. 227.

³⁸³ Palahniuk, p. 140.

another of his paradoxes. The narrator surmises that Tyler's violence (which is the narrator's violence) is meant to attract God's attention because the lack for the father is mostly a fear of being ignored by the Other, being abandoned by him: 'How Tyler saw it was that getting God's attention for being bad was better than getting no attention at all. Maybe because God's hate is better than His indifference.'³⁸⁴ Being noticed means being punished, which is still better than the nothingness and solitude: 'Which is worse, hell or nothing? Only if we're caught and punished can we be saved.'³⁸⁵ Tyler and the fatherless misbehave for a childish but human need for attention.

Before entering the fight club the narrator has tried to solve his insomnia problems by taking part in twelve-step groups where he can start human relations and get the attention he needs:

'This is why I loved the support groups so much, if people thought you were dying, they gave you their full attention.
If this might be the last time they saw you, they really saw you.'³⁸⁶

Whereas Patrick Bateman tries to escape the Superego by killing, the narrator builds lies, in a way similar to Old Neon but pushed to the extremes of death. The various Fight Clubs are nothing but an arena for people in search of attention. In the middle of the fighting ground, the fighters are the absolute protagonists, after having spent a life as loser.

Mendieta sustains the argument that lack is more metaphysical in the American

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

individual: ‘a void of meaning, a lack of direction,’³⁸⁷ of which consumerism takes advantage. To be worthy of the gratification that buying and consuming produces:

they must be remade in the image of the true men. The male image is continuously unmade and remade in the image of the perfect male, an image that is asymptotically elusive. But these dreams of unchallenged power, of always-to-be-achieved full masculinity are belied by the reality of unemployment, powerlessness, meaninglessness, lack of connection, of responsibility. The ideal and the real are so irreconcilable, so distant, that men can but only be rendered schizophrenic. Men must create community so as to find meaning, even if this community is based on futility. The *Fight Club*, which gives its name to the novel, becomes the desperate means to incite solidarity among strangers by means of a community of secrecy.³⁸⁸

Tyler wants his monkeys to accept that they are nothing, meaningless, powerless. This incredible dimension of lack that requires to be filled in by a fiction is generated by this need for being-there in the world, and for being noticed for one’s individual presence and having one’s Voice heard. This lack of immanence corresponds to a lacuna in human relationships. The fighters do not know how to say this lack, which is both too abstract, because it is the lack of the Other as expressed metaphorically by the absence of God and too immanent, because this inability to relate to the other is replaced by knowing the Other violently, connected to him literally by punching him. The frustration caused by this inability to say is replaced by the language of the fist. This inability to say is caused by the existence of only a one-dimensional language or, on the other side, by the language of information. The amount of information present in the novel is there to hide, with its overwhelming presence, this void, which is left unsaid.

This space of the unsaid lives between the ‘fiction’ of the fight club and the ‘reality’

³⁸⁷ Mendieta, p. 396.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 396-397.

the fighters live in their regular lives: ‘Who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world.’³⁸⁹ The club functions as a suspension of reality in which the social roles can be turned upside down and a perfect loser can become a formidable fighter. Paradoxically though, the reality they live is a capitalist simulation. To this simulation the fighters prefer the fiction of the fight club where they can explore themselves, the limits of their bodies and accept who they are. The immanence of the fight ultimately feels more real than the abstract Law of Society.

Another Visit to the Hell of Infernal Irony

Fight Club presents many of the characteristics of the infernal irony Freccero reads in *American Psycho*³⁹⁰. In this hell, ironically what you buy controls you, only one of many contradictions, paradoxes and oxymorons. If allegory can be considered as an extended metaphor, satire works as extended oxymoron, and it thus becomes a genre well suited to showing the contradictions of contemporary life. Only reaching the bottom of this hell leads to freedom, like Dante moving from Limbo down towards Lucifer. Only losing every hope can man reach infernal freedom. We should not forget the beginning of the Third Canto of Dante’s *Inferno*, already quoted at the beginning of *American Psycho*: ‘Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’entrate.’³⁹¹ Tyler’s hopeless freedom satirizes reality from the bottom but he never presents us with a way out of hell. Marla has no transcendental dimension like Beatrice but, on the contrary, is the one to cause the split of personalities in the narrator.

³⁸⁹ Palahniuk, p. 49.

³⁹⁰ It is not by chance then that one of his latest novels, *Damned* (2011), is set in hell.

³⁹¹ Later in the novel Palahniuk will also write: ““You are not your hopes.”” Palahniuk, p. 143.

This split of satire however is very different from the ironic split we have observed with De Man and Baudelaire. If both Baudelaire and Palahniuk see the detachment as a means to understand the impossibility of any control over reality, the laugh proposed by Palahniuk is harsher, more cynical even. Tyler does not acquire knowledge from the revelation but instead he acquires mere information, which means that he does not learn anything, he does not reach the detachment of the philosopher, he does not stop and think, but instead he starts a propaganda based on an accumulation of information in order to fight against that vast amount of acquired knowledge that is culture.

The philosopher in Baudelaire is aware of the split in the same way as Neon is aware he is a fraud. The narrator of *Fight Club*, on the contrary, is not aware of his split until the very end of the novel. He is dissociated by the person he is observing and does not realize he is talking about a character he himself has created: in other words, the narrator does not see the split and does not acquire knowledge because he has not even fallen yet:

Tyler says I'm nowhere near hitting the bottom, yet. And if I don't fall all the way, I can't be saved. Jesus did it with his crucifixion thing. I shouldn't just abandon money and property and knowledge. This isn't just a weekend retreat. I should run from self-improvement, and I should be running toward disaster. I can't just play it safe anymore.³⁹²

Improvement is immediately connected to knowledge: the more I learn to play an instrument the more I will improve in it. Knowledge represents a progression in opposition to the zero level of information. Whereas in Dante sinners commiserate

³⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 70.

their fate, Tyler Durden invites us to embrace it and reach the bottom since only out of destruction and the loss of every hope, of everything we consider dear, freedom can be reached³⁹³.

A fundamental part of the infernal satire of capitalism is the way Tyler accumulates monetary resources for his apocalypse by taking advantage of inverting the obsessions of the rich. Tyler in fact produces soap for the rich through a process of re-elaboration of the fat they have dismissed through liposuction. In a way, as Tyler says, this is ‘a kind of Robin Hood thing,’³⁹⁴ Out of something the rich have discarded as reprehensible waste, out mostly of vanity, Tyler creates richness but also something to clean the body.

This description of life as hell makes of Palahniuk an apocalyptic writer in the same league with Ballard certainly, but also with Lyotard. For Palahniuk, however, the end, in the same way as reaching the bottom, is the only way to start: ““Someday,” Tyler says, “you will die, and until you know that, you’re useless to me””³⁹⁵. Or: ““Disaster is a natural part of my evolution,” Tyler whispered, “toward tragedy and dissolution.””³⁹⁶

The works of Ballard, Palahniuk and Ellis all point in the direction of an end for their present of simulation. They differ in the temporal perspective they take towards the end. In works such as *High-Rise* and *Crash*, Ballard shows the evolution towards the

³⁹³ Actually, this seems to be the message in most of Palahniuk’s works as we will later see.

³⁹⁴ Palahniuk, p. 150.

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

end of civilization (in the former) and an attempt to re-create desire after the end (in the latter). Ballard shows how the end of reality and the advent of simulation pave the way for the destruction of man. Ellis's characters instead have surrendered to the end of reality except for a few moments of search for the self through violence. While in Ballard violence represents the possibility of new desires, in Ellis it just keeps the status quo going. Finally in Chuck Palahniuk violence is a means towards a form of self-destruction that is not aimed at desire, but at the end of everything, desire and stories included in what we have defined as hopeless freedom.

The Search for the Voice in Palahniuk

The fighters believe that their fight goes beyond the limitations of words to speak the unsayable: 'What happens at fight club doesn't happen in words.'³⁹⁷ This is another recurrence of that instance that we have initiated with the analysis of Wallace's 'Good Old Neon' or, in other words, of the constant discovery of the inadequacy of words in expressing the individual's feelings and most internal mind up to the dimension between transcendence and immanence where we have placed the human will-to-say, the Voice of the Witness. The ethical question we need to find an answer to is whether violence is an adequate substitute for this inadequacy.

What the characters cannot describe is the feeling of being alive, of being-there, that a fight conveys: 'You aren't alive anywhere like you're alive at fight club. When it's you and one other guy under that one light in the middle of all those watching. Fight

³⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

club isn't about winning or losing fights. Fight club isn't about words.³⁹⁸ Fight club is not about telling stories of the self, about justifying one's presence in society or giving an account of oneself, but about feeling one's own presence into the world, one's immanence. The fight represents the possibility to break through the dissociative field that surrounds the individual and that according to Gold 'dulls' the individual's relationship with the world: 'Briefly stated, dissociation as it is construed in *Fight Club* can be defined as constriction of the ability to access immediate experience of the self, connection to other people, or the here and now.'³⁹⁹

Gold's main thesis is that the narrator is dissociated from reality and the Other because of the way contemporary culture educates him. According to this thesis, the individual's capacity to relate with the reality outside her and with her own feelings is dulled, made opaque as if, we could say, her mind was living in a bubble.

As a psychologist Gold reports the case of dissociative clients: 'Just as many dissociative clients report that self-injury "cuts" through the oppressive numbness they experience, fight club shatters the men's dissociation, allowing them to wake up to their feelings and helping them feel connected to each other.'⁴⁰⁰ Pain signals the body's presence and with it, the presence of life, of being there simply and without having to explain it in words.

The power of stories, however, is given more prominence in the novel when the

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁹ Steven N. Gold, p. 15.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

narrator tells of his experience as part of twelve-step groups. The narrator feels that through those stories, fictional or ‘real’, individual Voices are ultimately transmitted between human beings: ‘And when they spoke, they weren’t telling you a story. When the two of you talked, you were building something, and afterward you were both different than before.’⁴⁰¹

However, as Gold points out, this humanity the narrator is trying to relate is lost because he is lying: ‘It is all, however, ultimately illusory because it is based on the perception that the Narrator, like the other members of the group, has a life-threatening disease.’⁴⁰² Gold does not consider that it is the fictionality of his own stories that make the narrator so human, his need to tell a lie in order to interact with other human beings, as we have observed with Neon.

Andrew Hewitt examines the masochism in the novel considering pain as a form of authenticity, which the individual lacks today: ‘Pain is the experience of authenticity reworked not as a discredited—and potentially aggressive—*expression*, but as a radically physical and aestheticized ethics of bodily *impression*.’⁴⁰³ The ethics suggested by Hewitt is immanent and lived in the body, literally impressed in it, thus making such impression a physical, literal mark, a scar, of the individual’s authentic identity. The sharpness of pain awakens through the fog of dullness and, at least for a moment, the individual is there, unique in her pain.

Once again the paradox is that such an immanent form of recognition of presence, of

⁴⁰¹ Palahniuk, p. 107.

⁴⁰² Steven N. Gold, p. 20.

⁴⁰³ Hewitt, pp. 115-116.

being there, comes from the doctrine of the fictional and split personality of an individual so numb that he has lost any contact not only with the Other but with his own self. The narrator has ultimately lost control of his metaphor machine and in order to deal with his inadequacy to outside reality, the metaphor takes on a personality that tries to physically put an order to the world through destruction in Project Mayhem: ‘This was the goal of Project Mayhem, Tyler said, the complete and right-away destruction of civilization.’⁴⁰⁴

Suicide and self-immolation is the last step required by an ethics based on the marking of pain because in the moment of violent death, both immanence (extreme pain) and transcendence (the body is lost) meet and the individual acquires a name: ‘Only in death will we have our own names since only in death are we no longer part of the effort. In death we become heroes.’⁴⁰⁵ Individuality is a conquest that arrives with death, when one is remembered for the way one has died but also when, once all immanence has disappeared, what remains is the word, the name, the piece of language left to the narrator.

Following Hegel observing how in violent death an animal has a voice, Agamben observes that the voice is ‘expression and memory of the death of the animal.’⁴⁰⁶ The death cry of the animal is not yet the articulated voice of language, but it is the voice of death, which still remembers the living being.⁴⁰⁷ This is the Voice that says of a presence that is not there anymore and, for Agamben, it is the place where language

⁴⁰⁴ Palahniuk, p. 125.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

⁴⁰⁶ ‘espressione e memoria della morte dell’animale.’ Agamben, *Il Linguaggio e la morte*, p. 58. Font size

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

takes place. It is this death that Tyler evokes as the ultimate testament and testimony of the individual. This is the only possible Voice of the witness.

From the very beginning the narrator tries to take on the Name of the Father by expanding the metaphor machine, the image the brain creates through the impressions of society (the Superego) to deal with reality, into a fictional personality. This personality is a hero and as such it has a name, Tyler Durden, which he, the narrator, can only ultimately acquire through his sacrifice. His sacrifice however fails because the narrator prepares a defective bomb: if he had died he would have lost his real, unknown name and become forever Tyler Durden.

In the last pages of the novel, the narrator looks for a solution to the conundrum of individuality and he finds it in oxymoron, that is, in the space between one face and the other, in the neither/nor:

We are not special.
We are not crap or trash, either.
We just are.
We just are, and what happens just happens.
And God says, "No, that's not right."
Yeah. Well. Whatever. You can't teach God anything.⁴⁰⁸

In the end, God is not the figure the individual should imitate but the one that should learn. The individual is neither unique nor 'crap' and its essence is in its just being, in just being-there in the world with her Voice, letting it happen.

To conclude, how does *Fight Club* answer to the question of humanity Lyotard

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

poses? The posthuman in the work of Chuck Palahniuk is a split subject who has lost his subjectivity, a living oxymoron split between consumption and restriction.

Information increases the level of violence where there is no ethics anymore, only this need for extinction and self-destruction. The narrator is not a reliable witness because he generates fictions he is not aware of. He lies in order to connect with the Other; he creates fictional relationships with people who are dying (thus simulating his own death many times for each group he attends to); afterwards, his subconscious creates a fictional persona that believes itself more immanent than the narrator. How can a man whose metaphor machine has lost any connection to immanence be a reliable witness of the end? He is witness to his own creation, just like Doctor Frankenstein witnessing the monster. From the perspective of the witness such as we see it described in Agamben, though, we could say that the narrator has come close to finding a Voice, but also that this voice belongs to him only oxymoronically, in his split personality. The witness in Agamben is split between subjectification and de-subjectification, as we have seen, and the narrator of *Fight Club* lives this condition of fluctuation, without ever however finding a balance, a way to express his will-to-say. As it was the case for Neon, Ballard and Patrick Bateman, he has no interest for the Other and her suffering, he never sees the Other as another subject caught in the same search. He created the Other with his metaphor machine but realised too late that Tyler Durden was no Other.

3.3 Body and the Character: Authority and the Role of the Witness in Cyberpunk and Postcyberpunk

‘Vie artificielle? Mais existe-t-il encore en ce monde une vie qui ne le soit pas ?’⁴⁰⁹

N. Katherine Hayles argues that the usage of the point of view in Gibson is his most effective technique in envisioning cyberspace and also the vehicle to engender the transcendental core of the writer’s narrative. From the question of the point of view, I will develop a brief theory of the character in cyberpunk in parallel with the conception of the individual in posthumanism. The connecting node will be the concept of ‘pattern’ analysed by Hayles as the main characteristic of the cybernetic revolution. I will recognize pattern as synonymous with the idea of cliché and the predictability of people.

A theory of the character in cyberpunk is necessary in order to understand properly the relation between the character and the individual in contemporary fiction. In the last few chapters I have studied three types of the posthuman: the Ballardian man, Patrick Bateman, and the narrator/Tyler Durden. I have observed these characters as representative of contemporary man’s search for individuality. Until now I have left silent the relationship between character itself and the individual. In this chapter I will more closely relate my argument to this particular connection and to how it evolves in the posthuman. Tyler Durden is already a product of the metaphor machine of the narrator to have a grasp over reality. With the work of Maurice Dantec I will arrive at the conclusion that the posthuman is a fictional individual, and

⁴⁰⁹ Maurice G. Dantec, *Cosmos Incorporated*, Paris: Albin Michel, 2005, p. 337.

as such, lives in a constant fluctuation between character and ‘real’ individual. This theory is not far removed from Bauman’s idea of identity as interchangeable, because what this idea implies is that identity is indeed a fictional construction. The account of oneself that Butler talks about is the creation on the part of the individual of a fictional character with which to face society.

The Character and the Individual

Before moving forward it is useful to trace a brief history of the character. I will use as a reference text the work of Arrigo Stara *L’avventura del personaggio*⁴¹⁰ (2004, *The Adventure of the Character*) while at the same time focusing on the connection between character and individual. One of the techniques Stara attempts to define the character is observing the etymology of the Italian word for character, ‘personaggio.’ The Latin word *persona* derives from the Etruscan word *phersu*, which means ‘theatrical mask.’⁴¹¹ Bauman’s idea of identity as mask is already present at the origin of the idea of the character. Furthermore, *persona* used to be ‘used to indicate the individual in general.’⁴¹² From its etymology Stara comes to the conclusion that:

Even *la persona* is in conclusion at the beginning a character (*personaggio*), the essential character; a sort of indispensable fiction, which man uses in his contact with the world and the others, a fiction that allows him to represent himself as unity, be it as a body, psychic, linguistic, spiritual, juridical, in the most important circumstances of his existence.⁴¹³

⁴¹⁰ Arrigo Stara, *L’Avventura del Personaggio*, Firenze: Le Monnier, 2004. All the translations from this text are mine.

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*

⁴¹³ *Ibid.* ‘Anche *la persona* sarebbe insomma in origine un *personaggio*, il *personaggio* essenziale; una sorta di finzione indispensabile, della quale l’uomo si serve nei suoi contatti con il mondo e con gli altri, una finzione che gli permette di

In his journey through the history of the character Stara individuates two principles or forms of criticism to analyse the character: the first is an ‘opaque criticism’⁴¹⁴ according to which the character is first and foremost made of signs and consequently irremediably non-referential, opaque or immanent: their immanence as a sign makes any referentiality to the outside world impossible. The second form, ‘transparent criticism,’ accepts the possibility that the reader may fall into the illusion that the character is an individual and not a mere construct of words, that, in other words, the character is not completely arbitrary. Between opacity and transparency, non-referentiality and non-arbitrariness Stara seems to resolve the problem of the character in a balance between, on the one hand, an excess of the sign but, on the other hand and at the same time, as a fiction, an illusion.

The connection between the character and the ‘real person’ was already known in ancient times to be based on violence. Aristotle suggests that the identification with the character allows the reader to purify herself from any violence that she can brood upon inside through what he called catharsis. In other words, living the passionate actions of the characters through their points of view, the reader will be less prone to act violently in real life.

Plato, on the contrary, worries in his *Ion* about the powerful effect of narratives in driving poets and viewers or readers out of their minds, to see them dispossessed of their identities. There is no purification but a loss of the self in the technique of the

rappresentarsi come un’unità corporea, psichica, linguistica, spiritual, giuridica, nelle circostanze fondamentali della sua esistenza.’

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

point of view.

E.M. Forster establishes an interesting difference between the character and the individual: ‘We know each other approximately, by external signs, and these serve well enough as a basis for society and even for intimacy. But people in a novel can be understood completely by the reader, if the novelist wishes; their inner as well as their outer life can be exposed.’⁴¹⁵ The character is someone we can know from the inside as well, not only from external sign like individuals.

According to Forster a character is real ‘when the novelist knows everything about it.’⁴¹⁶ Interestingly, Forster sees the principle of reality in a character in how transparent it is for its writer: of individuals on the contrary we have very limited knowledge, they are opaque. A real character then is the complete opposite of a real individual.

In his distinction between flat characters and round characters Forster deepens his theory. Flat characters ‘are constructed round a single idea or quality; when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round.’⁴¹⁷ Flat characters are easy to recognise and remember, and easy to predict and, above all, permanent: ‘All of us, even the sophisticated, yearn for permanence, and to the unsophisticated permanence is the chief excuse for a work of art.’⁴¹⁸ Flat characters are transcendent basic metaphors, ideas easy to remember and recognise

⁴¹⁵ E M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2016, p.47. First published in 1905.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

because they are always something already seen before. Round characters, on the contrary, acquire the dimension of unpredictability: 'The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is flat pretending to be round.'⁴¹⁹ The idea of arbitrariness and of opacity of the character returns: the writer may well know everything about a character but this is not necessarily true of the reader, who may hit against the immanence of that construct of signs.

In more recent years, Hélène Cixous advocates against the assimilation between character and reader. Comparing the character and the individual, Cixous observes that the subject is made of a 'mass of Egos,' all finding their origin in the unconscious, that are excluded in the character, which furnishes a very specific Ego:

Actually, if "character" is the product of a repression of subjectivity, and if the handling of literary scenes is done under the aegis of masterdom, of the conscious, which conventionalizes, evaluates, and codes so as to conform to set types, according to cultural demand, then the imperishable text can be recognized by its ability to evade the prevailing attempts at re-appropriating meaning and at establishing mastery, with which the myth (for it is a myth) of "character" collaborates insofar as it is a sign, a cog in the literary machinery.⁴²⁰

The character then it is a crystallization of the individual in a way that 'masters' her and thus controls her. The writer in this sense is the actual master of the individual as signified on the page. Where Forster argued that the character is the more real the more the writer knows him Cixous seems to imply that the more the writer knows her character the less real it is.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., p. 78.

⁴²⁰ Hélène Cixous, 'The Character of "Character"' trans Keith Cohen, *New Literary History*, Vol. 5, No. 2, Changing Views of Character (Winter, 1974), p. 384.

With a hint to what the simulation theorized by Baudrillard will be, Cixous rejects the illusion of the character, because of the danger of remaining trapped in ‘the treadmill of reproduction’⁴²¹ and ‘the syndrome of role-playing.’⁴²² We have already observed the role of reproduction of the same personalities and of role-playing in the game of professions and the exchangeable role of the mediator in Ballard, but also in the entirely exchangeable characters of *American Psycho*. With Cixous we can say that every character in these novels is a marionette playing a conventional role:

So long as we take to be the representation of a true subject that which is only a mask, so long as we ignore the fact that the "subject" is an effect of the unconscious and that it never stops producing the unconscious--which is unanalyzable, uncharacterizable, we will remain prisoners of monotonous machination that turns every "character" into a marionette.⁴²³

With a concern that echoes Plato, Cixous warns against the power the poet has to master his audience, control it with illusions: ‘he deprives it of the real world and plunges it into a place of violence, where he moves it, tortures it, impassions it - in short, makes it dance to the tune of his pipe.’⁴²⁴ This space of violence is that of the writer’s own imaginary, we would say the product of her metaphor machine or, with Ballard, of her psychopathology. The main danger of the false and simulated identification of character and individual is that ‘fiction that would insinuate itself as the true reality.’⁴²⁵

⁴²¹ Ibid., p. 387.

⁴²² Ibid.

⁴²³ Ibid.

⁴²⁴ Ibid., p. 400.

⁴²⁵ Ibid., p. 401.

The consequence is that not only that the individual is replaced by a specific, fictional mask instead of the multitudes of Egos offered by her unconscious, but that the writer becomes the master in a similar way to that of the intermediary in Ballard. The control that the mediator or the superego in Ellis exercise is done through the metaphor machine, through the creations of masks and simulations.

The question of the character also brings us back to the text with which I have started my analysis of the connection between information and violence in contemporary fiction: that is, Lyotard's 'Si l'on peut penser sans corps,' where Lyotard asks the question of the ultimate narrator and witness at the end of the Earth, when the sun itself will die.

Raising once again the Lyotard problem will lead me to an analysis of the question of the witness and the point of view, which are narratively speaking very often the same. In the same way as the witness is the only narrator we have of an event we have not witnessed ourselves, the character offers us the only point of view of a reality, cyberspace in our case, which would not even exist without it. From Plato to Cixous we have seen the devastating effect the character can have on the individual.

Taking the cue from Agamben's analysis of the witness in *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, I will go deeper into the question of the character as agent or as passive existent of events. The duality active/passive in the Gibsonian character will be mirrored by that between transcendence and immanence.

At this point, we will be finally able to approach the question of the violence on the

body evident in such transcendental narratives. When characters are reduced to points of view without developing a real personality, they become ghosts of humans: this is the posthuman for William Gibson.⁴²⁶ In opposition to the Braidotti posthuman as monistic matter the body is abandoned as pure meat and as such it can be manipulated or escaped at will. The posthuman becomes a narrative being in cyberpunk and postcyberpunk and we will need to observe the ramifications of this transcendental leap.

The Question of the Point of View in the Broken Metaphor of Cyberspace

Hayles argues that one of the prevalent techniques William Gibson makes use of to express the novelty of cyberspace is the point of view or 'pov' (as she abbreviates it) in the novel. The innovation concerns the revelation, in a very postmodern way, that it is the point of view that creates the reality the reader experiences when reading:

In cyberspace, point of view does not emanate from the character; rather, the pov literally is the character. If a pov is annihilated, the character disappears with it, ceasing to exist as a consciousness in and out of cyberspace. The realistic fiction of a narrator who observes but does not create is thus unmasked in cyberspace. The effect is not primarily metafictional, however, but it is in a literal sense metaphysical, above and beyond physicality.⁴²⁷

Paradoxically, it is not cyberspace which disappears but the character tout court. The

⁴²⁶ Epitome of the transcendental character is Angie Mitchell. Inside the narrative, Angie is a tool for everybody: her father, the artificial entities known as the Loa, her audience. She is a shell of a human and there is no real change between when she has a body and when she loses it, because she was never the owner of her own body.

⁴²⁷ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, University of Chicago, 2008, p. 38.

character has neither an internal nor an external world, but its existence is limited to its offering a vision of cyberspace. The character is the same as someone who is sleeping, and for this reason, her consciousness is inexistent until she does not open her eyes onto the world and comes to a stop when she closes her eyes: it is the same mechanism of the hacker flipping in and out of cyberspace.

Hackers are nothing more than eyes offering the same perspective we find in a video game in which the player does not see the character she is moving but only his hands or weapons, as in a first person shooter games such as Halo or Doom. Like a camera, they direct us to where the action is going to pass, in the same way as a camera tells us where the story is going in a film. We know only what the camera has recorded, all the rest does not exist and can only be guessed.

This is exactly the problem raised by Lyotard: what happens if nobody is able to witness an event because no observer exists anymore? Lyotard can maybe be accused of using logocentric arguments to sustain the importance of man in the universe, as if the universe would not continue without man. However, it is also true that reality does not matter anymore to man if there is no man to tell it. Scientists can only make hypothesis on how the end of the world will be, as writers have done at least since ancient times.⁴²⁸

The Lyotard problem can be simply turned into a re-proposition of the Berkeleyan statement that ‘to be is to be perceived’ or ‘if a tree falls in a forest...’, which questions the relationship between perception and reality. However old the concept

⁴²⁸ It is enough to think of the *Book of Revelation* by John of Patmos.

may be it is far from trite and it is important for our discourse to pay attention to it. Being a point of view, witnessing an event and opening a door to its very existence, means to give great predominance over the senses of the human body and especially the optical nerve. Through the body and only through the body data are received in the brain to render the world metaphorically, the brain being part of the body too.

If Gibson posits the problem of the pov as creator to an attentive critical eye, as Hayles maintains, I contend, however, that he fails to reveal it as a narrative technique to a less shrewd reader. The role of the character as maker of worlds is better understood and developed in post-cyberpunk works such as *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson and *Cosmos Incorporated* by Maurice G. Dantec, which actually reflect not only on the work of Gibson, but on postmodernism in general.

The very name of one of its two main points of view in *Snow Crash*, Hiro Protagonist⁴²⁹, makes clear Stephenson's attempt at showing that cyberspace (what he calls Metaverse⁴³⁰) is a narrative invention, a fiction. As such, it has to follow narrative rules and avoid incoherence at all costs.

Stephenson treats his Metaverse for the metaphor it is: 'You can't just materialize anywhere in the Metaverse, like Captain Kirk beaming down from on high. This would be confusing and irritating to the people around you. *It would break the metaphor.*'⁴³¹ The Metaverse is a metaphor that stands for reality and as such it has narrative power up to the moment it follows narrative rules, which have to keep a

⁴²⁹ Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*, London: Penguin, 1993, p. 17.

⁴³⁰ A name very apt to indicate not only the meta-fictional level of his invention, but also its meta-physical level.

⁴³¹ Stephenson, p. 34. My italics.

certain level of referentiality and coherence, where people do not appear from nowhere.

When Hiro kills an avatar in the Metaverse with his sword one can see through the maimed avatar, since its body is not made of flesh: ‘It breaks the metaphor. The avatar is not acting like a real body. It reminds all The Black Sun’s patrons that they are living in a fantasy world. People hate to be reminded of this.’⁴³²

Curiously an act of violence reveals the truth of the fictional world, literally cutting through the fiction. Since Hiro does not really kill anybody, the killing works as a form of catharsis, where he uses violence only in a fictional context while at the same time fulfilling Hiro’s self-image as a swordsman. Aristotle considered suffering as part of tragic and epic: ‘A third part [of the plot after Peripety and Discovery] is Suffering; which we may define as an action of a destructive or painful nature, such as murders on the stage, tortures, woundings, and the like.’⁴³³ Hiro’s violence has indeed a cathartic effect in purifying the reader and the user of Metaverse of the illusion that the Metaverse is nothing but a fiction.

Hayles describes cyberspace as a pure narrative space given life by the hackers. Even when Necromancer and Wintermute become one, in fact, they do not become the authors of cyberspace: they become the matrix itself, the ‘whole show.’⁴³⁴ Hayles describes cyberspace as the extension into narrative space of a mathematical concept. ‘Cyberspace is created by transforming a data matrix into a landscape in which

⁴³² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁴³³ Aristotle, *Poetics*.

⁴³⁴ William Gibson, *Neuromancer*, London: HarperCollins, 1995, p. 316.

narratives can happen. In mathematics, “matrix” is a technical term denoting data that have been arranged into an n-dimensional array.⁴³⁵

The matrix becomes a narrative, however, only when we move inside it, that is, only when we are being characters in a more or less fictional setting. Only when there is a movement in time too: ‘Narrative becomes possible when this spatiality is given a temporal dimension by the pov’s movement through it. The pov is located in space, but it exists in time.’⁴³⁶ Cyberspace needs the temporal dimension of the hacker, her experience. As if we were staring at a point in an impressionist painting and we see only a stain of colour, but then moving back of a few steps we can see the entire picture. Or else, we could imagine staring at the same frame forever without ever being able to watch the film.

Not by chance the reader stops experiencing cyberspace in Gibson’s *Sprawl Trilogy* when Bobby, Angie and the Finn become ghosts: they have lost the dimension of time typical of humans and become part of the space of information. Since they become ‘virtually’ immortal they are actually outside the human body.

Since movement corresponds to action - as opposed to immobile contemplation - the observer in cyberpunk can only be mobile. The character in Gibson never stops to think about her world, in glaring contrast to Stephenson’s lengthy explanations about Enki and the Metavirus in *Snow Crash*. Being a humanist and a rationalist, Stephenson believes in the moment of contemplation and reflection over reality. But

⁴³⁵ Hayles, p. 38.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 38. Aristotle says that the verb ‘is a composite significant sound involving the idea of time’ Aristotle, *Poetics*. The character is the subject of a verb and for this very reason, she lives in time.

besides these moments of rationalization, even *Snow Crash* is packed with action.

Aristotle had after all already considered the character as synonymous with action:

Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions – what we do – that we are happy or the reverse. In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the Characters; they include the Characters for the sake of the action. So that it is action in it, i.e. its Fable or Plot, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing.⁴³⁷

This seems a good description not only of tragedy but of the cyberpunk narrative as well, where the plots (varying according to the number of povs) need agents more than characters.⁴³⁸ The effect of catharsis relies not only on the identification with the characters but also with the characters doing something tragic or violent.

In the point of view à la Gibson, however, the space of the eyes is quite thick: for the hacker cyberspace means first of all detachment. Watching with one's eyes does not mean to be really involved: it means just to be a pair of eyes. Consequent to this attitude is the distinction between information and knowledge that we have already observed: the hacker wants to know but not experience in the physical sense, thus not building knowledge but acquiring data.

In Gibson cyberspace is reality, so much so that his characters can lose their bodies and live in it. As a narrative space, the individual reader is lost in the illusion and simulation of the character, not even aware of the loss of referentiality that Stara

⁴³⁷ Aristotle, *Poetics*.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*

talks about. The illusion of the art of writing disappears and takes the place of reality. The Metaverse, on the contrary, is more rational, it shows the cogs and it is closer to what our present reality has proven cyberspace would be. Naming his character Hiro Protagonist, Stephenson reveals Hiro is more a narrative function than an accomplished individual, thus unmasking the fictional dimension of cyberspace. His characters are revealed as flat (Forster), just made of pure actions, they are never reality, always referential. They may be arbitrary in their 'real' world and act and fail accordingly, but when they are in the Metaverse they are non-arbitrary and follow strict narrative rules.

Stephenson's characters in fact do not become ghosts but have avatars, fictional selves/personalities to display in the Metaverse. In complete opposition to the narrator in *Fight Club*, they are aware of this split and, following Cixous, they are aware they are wearing a mask in a fictional world. The avatar is a symbolic representation, which allows the user to represent herself the way she wants to be seen. Through the avatar, the user enters a narrative and it is conscious of it in the same way as the reader realizes it. The user already knows she is a character in a narrative fiction.

The metavirus that invades both reality and the Metaverse, which at first glance could make one think that indeed reality and the Metaverse are both real, is actually evidence of the danger of the narrative of cyberspace. Stephenson tries to give a pseudo-scientific reason for the effect the virus has on the hackers while in the Metaverse. Spending a lot of time looking at binary codes, Hiro and the others have

formed neurolinguistic pathways in their brains⁴³⁹, which make them vulnerable to a virus appearing in bitmap format. The technical reality of the Metaverse allows the virus to have an effect both in reality and in the Metaverse. Attacking the deep structures of the brain, the virus dismantles the logos of the individual making of her a zombie or robot that can be easily controlled: in other words, the virus strips man of his individuality and makes of it an empty mask, a void persona.

The virus works like a meme, that is, ‘a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*.’⁴⁴⁰ This unit is essentially a piece of information that moves from brain to brain like a virus. In the tradition of Dawkins, the virus is strictly connected to religion, in this case by L. Bob Rife:

All people have religions. It’s like we have religion receptors built into our brain cells, or something, and we’ll latch onto anything that’ll fill that niche for us. Now, religion used to be essentially viral – a piece of information that replicated inside the human mind, jumping from one person to the next. That’s the way it used to be, and unfortunately, that’s the way it’s headed right now.⁴⁴¹

Religion simply relates to some deep structure in the human brain, very similar, it could be suggested, to the space where desire lies and where a mediator is needed.

The virus destroys the individual metaphor machines and turns individuals into flat characters following simple orders. It is transcendental because it deprives the individual of the mechanism (the metaphor machine in the brain) thanks to which she is aware and can make sense of the world around her. The virus destroys this

⁴³⁹ Stephenson, p. 117.

⁴⁴⁰ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, first edition 1976, p. 191.

⁴⁴¹ Neal Stephenson, pp. 187-188.

need for immanence, of one's conscious presence into the world.

The transcendental dimension of the virus then legitimizes its connection to religion. In *Snow Crash*, the metavirus is presented in the novel as 'an informational entity'⁴⁴² or disease as the representation of evil⁴⁴³, which is evil only insofar as it attacks humans at a level beyond that of their consciousness or individuality. Ideas of religion, meme and information are at the base of the divinity of the Loa in Gibson's *Sprawl Trilogy*. Gods and religions are basic forms of the transcendental powers of the metaphor machine of the human brain to deal with reality, and, because of their powerful ancestry, they work beyond immanent individuality. The mediator in Ballard or even the writer in Cixous has a very similar power: control over the individual's metaphor machine.

Stephenson however presents the metavirus as the pillar of civilization and as an essential component of life: 'The metavirus is everywhere. Anywhere life exists, the metavirus is there, too, propagating through it.'⁴⁴⁴ Both Lyotard and Stephenson see man as a system for the assimilation of information so it is only natural that the metavirus is part of life, but it is also an antagonist of language and logos, of humanism intended as the belief in human reason. No matter how much human reason is developed a meme or virus will always affect deep parts of the brain. The basic metaphor of the metavirus defeats more complex metaphors such as individuality or the idea of the self, in the same way as a single metaphor can destroy an entire allegory. The metavirus can reproduce itself because it is a very basic form

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 371.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 118: 'You know, to the Mesopotamians, there was no independent concept of evil. Just disease and ill health. Evil was a synonym for disease.'

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 378.

of information, 0/1 whereas a complex individual metaphor machine is virtually impossible to replicate and, for this reason, it is so much more fragile.

The Sumerians as described by Stephenson are very similar to Gibson's characters but whereas the latter are only points of view, eyes, the Sumerians were merely ears:

“The Sumerian word for ‘mind,’ or ‘wisdom,’ is identical to the word for ‘ear’. That’s all those people were: ears with bodies attached. Passive receivers of information. But Enki was different. Enki was an *en* who just happened to be especially good at his job. He had the unusual ability to write new *me* - he was a hacker. He was, actually, the first modern man, a fully conscious human being, just like us.”⁴⁴⁵

Enki is the hacker, the manipulator of codes, as Hayles (who is however still referring to Gibson's novels) explains. Following Derrida, Hayles announces not merely the narrator's passage from speaker to scribe, but also, going further than Derrida, the advent of the cyborg ‘authorized to access the relevant codes.’⁴⁴⁶ The narrator then becomes ‘a keyboarder, a hacker, a manipulator of codes.’⁴⁴⁷ This means the passage for the writer/narrator from a moment of unconscious writing to a moment of awareness of her tools.

Whereas Gibson's characters create unconsciously by being observers, Stephenson's hackers are explicitly the makers of the Metaverse, and there are no divine entities in charge. Hiro has created for instance the sword-fighting program that runs in the Metaverse.⁴⁴⁸ In another example, Hiro needs something to deal with the scroll containing the metavirus. For this reason, he creates the tool he needs from nothing,

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 371-372.

⁴⁴⁶ Hayles, p. 43.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴⁴⁸ Stephenson, p. 95.

data:

It's not easy working with a piece of data that can kill you. But that's okay. In Reality, people work with dangerous substances all the time – radioactive isotopes and toxic chemicals. You just have to have the right tools: remote manipulator arms, gloves, goggles, leaded glass. And in Flatland⁴⁴⁹, when you need a tool, you just sit down and write it. So Hiro starts by writing a few simple programs that enable him to manipulate the contents of the scroll without ever seeing it.⁴⁵⁰

It has to be understood that Hiro has no real authority over the metaverse. The metaverse remains a collective space without ownership: it is a shared narrative space. What Hiro is fighting against is a dominating narrative that flattens all the other individual narratives.

According to the definition of information suggested by Claude Shannon as quoted by Hayles, it relies not on meaning but on pattern: 'Shannon's theory defines information as a probability function with no dimensions, no materiality, and no necessary connection with meaning. It is a pattern, not a presence.'⁴⁵¹ As already partially observed, information is pure form without content or without a body.

This premise leads to an understanding of the Loa as the epitome of the Gibsonian character: they really have no body and no referentiality⁴⁵², literally, they do not exist if not in the matrix and, consequently, they have no powers outside the matrix: they are a purely fictional - and thus transcendental - entity. They are meaningless

⁴⁴⁹ Once again, the metaverse is only a space of two dimensions (not only it has no time in itself, but not even depth).

⁴⁵⁰ Stephenson, p. 329.

⁴⁵¹ Hayles, p. 18

⁴⁵² One cannot consider being a Loa as a reference to reality, but they certainly use a symbolic form of referentiality, they need symbols to inhabit.

because they are not the product of an individual metaphor machine, they are not there to explain anything, like old myths used to do.

The Loa choose to identify themselves with the gods from Voodoo merely in order to interact with humans: to communicate with humans they have to speak through metaphors or become characters in a fiction. Flat as they are they do not even really have the functions of ancient gods according to which Neptune stands for the sea, Apollo for the sun, etc. The Loa cannot be ‘Hiro’es or ‘Protagonists’ because a hero has to have immanent agency, agency beyond fiction.

For a theory of the character in cyberpunk, we need to consider a concept very close to that of Hayles’s ‘pattern’, that is, the concept of universality. Universality is an important feature of the character. If a character is too real a reader can never identify with it, because we are never exactly as another person, we never share the same dreams or feelings. A reader gets attached to a few features of the character but if she finds too many aspects she does not share she will not be able to feel for the character. A character is more universal than a ‘real person’ for the very reason that it belongs to a tradition or a historical culture, it follows narrative-cultural laws that the reader understands. Stara points out that Aristotle believed characters are representatives of a culture, to which they belong⁴⁵³: Aristotle speaks in favour of the defeat of any referentialism.⁴⁵⁴

The same of course can be said of people because if it is possible to read a person

⁴⁵³ Arrigo Stara, *L’Avventura del Personaggio*, Firenze: Le Monnier, 2004, pp. 52-53.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

through her body language, for instance, this means that they are surface, like characters in a book, that they are maybe too transparent. Their gestures or their patterns reveal their inner life too, their subconscious and their past. The way a person speaks can tell a lot about where they were born, the cultural environment they grew up into, etc. A person, then, is a superficial space that takes life through narration, the intervention of time and depth. We recognize that a person is sad because we have already seen sadness on a person's face in the past. One of the main concepts in Milan Kundera's *Immortality* (1990) is based on a gesture transferred from mother to daughter as a pervasive meme.

When we consider a person as superficial or shallow it is because we recognize too easily the clichés and patterns⁴⁵⁵, which make that person. When the combination of patterns does not leave room for any form of randomness or new information, the person becomes pure white noise: this is the difference between the transparency of a flat character and the opaqueness of a round character or, better, of a character of which we ignore the internal nature.

In the same way as the reader can identify with the character if she can recognize part of her or her experiences in the fictional person, so we get closer to people, who we have shared experience with, or a sort of 'sympathy', that is, sharing feelings together with another person. If I insist so much on the parallel between a 'real' person and a fictional one, it is to underline how easy it can be to identify with a character even when such a character is as transcendental as Gibson's characters.

⁴⁵⁵ From this perspective cliché and pattern can actually be considered as synonymous.

So the simpler the set of patterns representing a character, the more abstract or transcendental, the easier it is for the reader to identify herself with it. A point of view is the perfect place for the reader to actually live through the eyes of the character without any consciousness: an observer does not have an opinion and does not follow particular patterns.

Stara analyses Plato's *Ion*, in which the main character loses his individuality in the mimesis of epic. Plato believes in the 'principium individuationem' according to which individuality has to be protected no matter the cost.⁴⁵⁶ Ion loses himself exactly in the violent actions of the characters he identifies with. Plato fears fiction because it deprives the individual of her individuality: the more violent the actions of a character are the more the viewer is destined to succumb and lose herself, in opposition to Aristotle's later theorisation of catharsis. Is the power of the point of view, the metaphor that sees the reader in the place of the character, so powerful even when the mimetic nature of the character is limited and it is nothing but a function?

When a character is only a point of view we risk losing the possibility of interpretation of the text, the necessary detachment the reader has to have to deal with the matters at hand, in order to recognize her desires, understand them and question them. Again with Cixous, this is fiction that would insinuate itself as the true reality,⁴⁵⁷ where the character replaces the individual, who is reading about the character. This is why it is important to appreciate the task Stephenson has imposed upon himself: he pushes the reader to interpret by breaking the metaphor and inviting

⁴⁵⁶ Stara, p. 41.

⁴⁵⁷ Cixous, p. 401.

the reader to think with long excursus. A pattern should be recognized as a pattern, after all, in order for to extrapolate information or even learn from it.

Hayles offers an example of a character, which is a pattern in *Neuromancer* in Dixie Flatline: ‘Dixie Flatline, a cowboy who encountered something in cyberspace that flattened his EEG, ceased to exist as a physical body and lives now as a personality construct within the computer, defined by the magnetic patterns that store his identity.’⁴⁵⁸ Dixie Flatline is literally a series of patterns: he cannot grow or change his personality: he can only follow the pattern of the person, who used to be him, with his recognizable style. Information itself is the only content for the form of patterns called ‘Dixie Flatline.’

As Wintermute underlines, predictability is what distinguishes the Flatline from humans:

‘You guys,’ The Finn said, ‘you’re a pain. The Flatline here, if you were all like him, it would be real simple. He’s a construct, just a buncha ROM, so he always does what I expect him to. My projections said there wasn’t much chance of Molly wandering in on Ashpool’s big exit scene, give you one example.’ He sighed.⁴⁵⁹

It is a certain level of randomness that characterizes human beings, the impossibility of ever predicting an exact human behaviour because of the complex mix of patterns. This is the opacity Stara observes but also the subject according to Cixous.

Dixie also shows us what happens when the pattern is not incarnated in a body. I will

⁴⁵⁸ Hayles, p. 36.

⁴⁵⁹ Gibson, *Neuromancer*, p. 245.

content myself with reminding us here of how disturbing it is for Case to hear the Flatline laughing in cyberspace: laughter, as Good Old Neon taught us, is something that makes us human, but a laughing pattern is the most inhuman sound one can hear: ‘The Flatline laughed. “Wish you weren’t so damn jolly today, man. That laugh of yours sort of gets me in the spine.”’⁴⁶⁰ Or another earlier example: ‘When the construct laughed, It came through as something else, not laughter, but a stab of cold down Case’s spine.’⁴⁶¹ This represents a contradiction in Case’s refusal of the body: if Case prefers cyberspace over the body, why is he so disturbed by someone who is actually a part of it? Is he not horrified by something inhuman that acts like a human?

If the individual is so close to the character what is the role of the writer and author? Where is the place of authority between the individual and the character? Who is responsible for violence: the character, the writer or the individual/reader?

In the *Ion*, Socrates describes the poet as possessed by the gods when producing poetry. The term Plato uses is actually ‘inspiration’: ‘there is a divinity moving you, like that contained in the stone which Euripides calls a magnet.’⁴⁶² The poet actually looks more like a prophet than an artist: ‘For the poet is a light and winged and holy thing, and there is no invention in him until he has been inspired and is out of his senses, and the mind is no longer in him: when he has not attained to this state, he is powerless and is unable to utter his oracles.’⁴⁶³ The poet is such only when she is possessed and transcends, ‘light’, ‘winged’ and ‘holy’. In this state, however, the

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁴⁶² Plato, *Ion*. Kindle Edition.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*

poet loses herself: she loses control of herself and the control of her mind. The poet becomes merely a vehicle, a tool, just like Angie is a tool for the Loa:

God takes away the mind of the poets, and uses them as his ministers, as he also uses divines and holy prophets, in order that we who hear them may know them to be speaking not of themselves who utter these priceless words in a state of unconsciousness, but that God himself is the speaker, and that through them he is conversing with us.⁴⁶⁴

Cixous rejects this idea of the possession of the poet when she affirms that the poet is the master.⁴⁶⁵

A simple, Platonic conclusion would be that poets, characters, and all the possessed are empty vessels for ideas or information. For this to be possible, we should imagine a transcendental place made of thoughts and information, a place where godlike entities - made of information or born out of the imagination of man - can live. Cyberspace is exactly this place, an imaginary place, which speaks through the mind of the possessed.

However, I do not believe that this hypothetical space exists or is more important than reality because in that case, it would not be the place of imagination anymore. It seems to me that this is more a place of deresponsibilization or of the abandonment of an ethical life. A place of no agency, which is the place where the Loa are gods, would be a place without movement; and without movement we would have only a surface without an observer. For this reason, to a character-without-agency has to correspond an agent, and to a passive character has also to correspond an active one.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁵ Cixous, p. 384.

If this does not happen metaphor is really ultimately a synonymous for death. Death is the place where violence cannot happen, but it is also the place where the human is violated and annihilated.

This space of Death of the individual metaphor is where we have lost our will-to-say and will-to-listen. For this reason, in an ethics of extreme solipsism this is also the place where we forget about the Other. This conception of the posthuman present in the work of William Gibson is completely different from that of Rosi Braidotti. As if writing against the Gibsonian posthuman, Braidotti writes: ‘The emphasis on immanence allows us to respect the bond of mutual dependence between bodies and technological others, while avoiding the contempt for the flesh and the trans-humanist fantasy of escape from the finite materiality of the enfleshed self.’⁴⁶⁶ The escape from the limitations of the body, which in Gibson translate as the suffering of the body and in Lyotard as in the temporary dimension of the human body, is ultimately a fantasy, that is a fiction that instead of looking for a place where the human body and technology co-exist, abandon the former instead in order to lose themselves in the latter.

To the complete deresponsibilisation of the character in cyberpunk, where the character does not want to feel anymore, Braidotti opposes a posthuman whose subjectivity is a process of self-creation: ‘Subjectivity is rather a process of auto-poiesis or self-styling, which involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values and hence also multiple forms of accountability.’⁴⁶⁷ In a similar way to Cixous according to which the individual is a multitude of egos,

⁴⁶⁶ Braidotti, pp. 90-91.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

Braidotti envisages an individual who is responsible in every form she takes, because every mask she takes is the product of her own personal metaphor machine. There is no Law of Fiction that should take over the posthuman individual.

The Witness and the Problem of Authority

In order to try and give a new and extended answer to the Lyotard question about the witness I will now connect the witness with the narrative of the pov in Gibson. As we have seen in McCarthy, the witness is the only source of the event: without a witness one cannot tell if an event has really happened. The pov of the character in *Neuromancer* is the only testimony we have of the events in the novel. The writer controls the reader through the character thus creating a reality more real than the real (Cixous), in which the reader gets lost and forgets she is reading a work of fiction. To examine this question of the character as witness I will take, once again, the work of Giorgio Agamben.

In *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, Agamben posits the question of the witness in the infamous Polish concentration camp. The presence of the witness in an extreme situation is well apt to describe the situation in the dystopia that is described in cyberpunk novels. Agamben states that subjectivity (and especially that of the witness, who is a survivor too) originates from shame and repulsion towards oneself. Starting with Levinas' ideas on shame, Agamben comments that shame is based on the 'the impossibility of our being to desolidarize from oneself, on its absolute

incapacity to break with one self,⁴⁶⁸ that is, an impossibility not to be with oneself and to escape one's own objectification. One cannot subtract oneself to the eye of the Other in the same way as one cannot escape the pain of the body. Shame is the individual as both subject and subjected, active and passive.

Similar to shame are disgust and repulsion towards oneself that is, following Benjamin via Agamben, 'the fear of being recognized by what disgusts us.'⁴⁶⁹ Case in *Neuromancer* is disgusted by the meat of his own body, by his very biological life, by the needs of the meat. He feels so ashamed that he takes on suicidal actions and contracts in the hope of getting rid of the very presence of his body.

Molly is able somehow to escape the presence of her body when she works as a meat puppet. In Gibson's world, the separation between the body and the mind is so total that thanks to the implantation of a 'cut-out chip',⁴⁷⁰ a prostitute can dissociate herself from her body while she is with a client. With different software available, a client can choose any perversion he can think of and the girl will be mostly unaware. She can witness from far away and in pure passivity the events of which her body is protagonist. In pure passivity, she has only flashes of memories of what happens when she is 'out'. This situation puts the problem of shame on stand-by but it also entails an instrumentation of the body, a refusal of whatever happens to it, provided Molly's conscience has no memory of it. The 'cut-out chip' does nothing but physically disembodify her so that her body becomes 'the body', which can be easily

⁴⁶⁸ 'Impossibilità del nostro essere di desolidalizzarsi da sé, sulla sua assoluta incapacità a rompere con se stesso,' Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, p. 96.

My translation

⁴⁶⁹ 'La paura di essere riconosciuti da ciò di cui proviamo schifo.' *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁴⁷⁰ Gibson, *Neuromancer*, p. 177.

used for different performances. When her employers find out that Molly is buying prosthesis to make her body a weapon with the money they pay her they offer her for more and more peculiar services until one time she wakes up fully conscious with a client, both of them full of blood and a dead girl between them. As Molly describes it, the situation is similar to cyberspace or of simstim, where you have the point of view (Hayles' pov) of a body, which you do not feel as your own: "I wasn't conscious. It's like cyberspace, but blank. Silver. It smells like rain ... You can see yourself orgasm, it's like a little nova right out on the rim of space. But I was starting to *remember*. Like dreams, you know."⁴⁷¹

In cyberspace a hacker is unconscious like a meat puppet, as she experiences it as a mere pov in the same way as Bateman in *American Psycho* and the Ballardian man experience life as a film through the lenses of a camera. Seeing oneself orgasm could bring shame but it does not happen because shame belongs to consciousness and the self, whereas the point of view is like the shifters linguists talk about. Agamben explains that shifters are words such as the pronominal pronouns 'I', 'you', or the adverbs 'here', 'now', etc. who are used by different people as I can say 'I' but the person close to me can say 'I' too: the referent shifts. Like the hacker's pov, the shifters do not have in fact any real referent: 'Common characteristics of these signs is that they do not possess, like other words, a lexical meaning, defined in real terms, but they can identify a sense for themselves only through a reference to the instance of discourse containing them.'⁴⁷²

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-178. Italics in the original.

⁴⁷² Carattere comune di tutti questi segni è che essi non possiedono, come le altre parole, un significato lessicale, definibile in termini reali, ma possono identificare il loro senso solo attraverso un rimando all'istanza di discorso che li contiene.' Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, p. 107.

Whenever I use a shifter, I enter language and somehow exit reality: ‘the psychosomatic individual has to integrally abolish herself and desubjectify herself as real individual in order to become the subject of the enunciation and identify herself with the pure shifter ‘I’, absolutely deprived of any substance or any content but the mere reference to the instance of discourse.’⁴⁷³ Without content, the individual has lost her ‘soma’, her body, and whatever she will say will be part of the discourse and not of reality. Becoming the subject of the sentence the individual is subjected and desubjected by language.

What I call the transcendental gesture of the hacker, the flipping into cyberspace, has a very similar connotation: the subject is not a subject but a character, a point of view, the moment she enters the narrative space that is cyberspace. It has been remarked how Gibson and Stephenson have anticipated the internet and other trends of information technologies, but it is important not to forget that cyberspace is essentially a narrative space, an instance of discourse and, for this reason, it follows linguistic rules. Once the hacker flips into cyberspace it is faced with the impossibility of actually saying⁴⁷⁴ because it is now the witness of a purely linguistic moment. For this very reason, the hacker has lost agency the moment she flips and loses her body.

⁴⁷³ ‘L’individuo psicosomatico deve integralmente abolirsi e desoggettivarsi in quanto individuo reale per diventare il soggetto dell’enunciazione e identificarsi nel puro *shifter* “io”, assolutamente privo di ogni sostanzialità e di ogni contenuto che non sia il mero riferimento all’istanza di discorso.’ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁴⁷⁴ ‘The subject of the enunciation consists wholly in the discourse and of the discourse, but for this very reason, in it she cannot say anything, she cannot talk.’ ‘Il soggetto dell’enunciazione consiste integralmente nel discorso e del discorso, ma, proprio per questo, in esso, non può dire nulla, non può parlare.’ Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, p. 108.

In such a condition it is difficult to feel violence as violence explodes only with consciousness, and with that comes also the shame and disgust for what one has been part of:

‘I came up. I was into this routine with a customer...’ She dug her fingers deep in the foam. ‘Senator, he was. Knew his fat face right away. She was all ...’ She tugged at the temperfoam. “Dead. And that fat prick, he was saying, “What’s wrong. What’s wrong?” ‘Cause we weren’t *finished* yet...’ She began to shake.⁴⁷⁵

Molly then kills the senator as violence is her ethical and conscious response to violence. No pov kills because killing and being hurt in cyberpunk is always a response of the body in connection with the mind: consciousness is the result of shame, because shame is made of the mind’s awareness of the body.

The writer lives a similar situation of activity/passivity, subjectification/desubjectification. Agamben quotes the letter Keats writes to John Woodhouse on the 27th October 1818. In this letter Keats argues that the poet has no identity because, as Ion, he always inhabits someone else’s body: the poet ‘has no identity - he’s constantly in place of - and occupying some other body.’⁴⁷⁶ To be more correct it should be said that the writer stands for someone else, *as if* she were that person, in a metaphorical stance that even here loses one term, the writer herself, who goes missing in the body she is speaking from.

The place of writing is the place of absolute deresponsibilization because ‘not one

⁴⁷⁵ Gibson, *Neuromancer*, p. 178.

⁴⁷⁶ il poeta ‘non ha identità – è continuamente in luogo di – e riempiendo qualche altro corpo’ Giorgio Agamben, *Quel che resta di Auschwitz*, p. 104.

word,' writes Keats, that I pronounce can be taken with certainty as an opinion coming from my identical nature - and how could it, since I do not have a nature?'

⁴⁷⁷ If the writer is someone else when she writes, there is no way we can accuse her of anything. If that is true, not only the writer as the ghost in Gibson and the Sumerian in Stephenson have no ethical life, but to reach this level the writer, the ghost and the Sumerian have to act violently towards themselves, annihilate their own selves: that is the price to pay for transcendence.

Who is the witness then, the observer, the pov and how can it reconcile with the survival of the logos hoped by Lyotard? How can we trust the writer? After all, she is the only witness of the worlds she creates through the character. According to Agamben, there is no real subject of testimony but more of a field of forces: 'Every testimony is a process or a field of forces constantly crossed by subjectification and desubjectification.'⁴⁷⁸ This is the same multitude of egos of Cixous and the constant process of auto-poiesis of Braidotti.

Even when the writer writes about reality she cannot do it entirely, because in writing she has entered a narrative, a space of possibilities and disembodiment, of the impossibility of responsibility and the place where authority is in doubt. In the non-authority of the writer maybe lies the possibility for us to *choose* if we want to believe or not. When we start to read and we start to interpret the fictional world and compare it with our world, without the writer literally doing it, we start to share her

⁴⁷⁷ 'Non una sola parola che io pronuncio può essere presa con certezza come un'opinione che nasce dalla mia identica natura – e come potrebbe, dal momento che io non ho una natura?' *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁴⁷⁸ 'Ogni testimonianza è un processo o un campo di forse incessantemente percorso da correnti di soggettivazione e di desoggettivazione.' *Ibid.*, p. 112.

authority. Under such authority, we readers take on our shoulders the ethical ramifications of the violence present in fiction because it is our own violence. There are books that simply dwell in the violence inside us; others wake us to it and give us a chance to witness our own violent inner life. Disembodied, we do not recognize ourselves in the violence of the narrative, we find ourselves with nothing to say, pure points of view. But the witness is a balance of forces that needs the body, the non-narrative instance to mature a reflection and an ethical stance towards violence. The witness of narrative is a balance between writer, character and reader that disembody and re-embody themselves constantly, as the character is exactly the metaphor that can save and damn us, the metaphor that gives us another body at least for the time of the narrative and tells us of the possibilities of the future. Cyberpunk is the place where the future is lost and there is nothing to witness, no will-to-say the event.

The Fictional Posthuman, the Ethics of the Character as Author

I would like to conclude this chapter with a brief analysis of what happens when a character undertakes an ethical journey towards life: that is, a character who escapes the dynamics of writer and reader, of the witness and becomes the event itself, it becomes a subject. The protagonist of Dantec's *Cosmos Incorporated*, Plotkine is a character that becomes the writer of his own life, taking full authority of it, and then he becomes a man, and loses that authority and dies.

The posthuman as auto-poiesis is a man who has taken full narrative control not only over his mental and political life, but also over his biological life. For this reason, he modifies his own body with science-fictional prostheses but also with tools that are

nowadays common: glasses are posthuman prostheses that allow seeing when one cannot; a hard drive is a place where we can transfer our memories; a car is a prosthesis for movement⁴⁷⁹, etc. The posthuman can modify herself according to what her imagination suggests and the resources of technology.

Narrative control, in fact, means that the posthuman can make a myth of herself, modify her persona and her personality, become a character of her own fiction: in other words, she can choose her masks. This is the question of the posthuman in the end: the narrative possibilities of reality, the possibility of becoming the writer of one's own life. The posthuman has the fictional power of modifying her own life, victim and executioner of her own life: it can violate the human as never before. But what is the stance of the posthuman as creator of her own fiction, that is, of the individual created by every one of us through our personal metaphor machine, what is the relation of this entity to ethics?

To answer this question I deem useful to take the case of the character Serguei Plotkine, protagonist of *Cosmos Incorporated*. Plotkine is a post-human killer living in a society dominated by machines where even the human body is constituted by machines and men are the 'simple "biological" operators of the world-machine.'⁴⁸⁰ In other words, it is a world where cyberspace and reality have coagulated in one world, where all metaphors are real: 'Plotkine is going to realize soon enough that there aren't any metaphors here, or better, that they have taken shape into the

⁴⁷⁹ We have already observed the car as posthuman prosthesis in Ballard's *Crash*.

⁴⁸⁰ 'Simples opérateurs "biologiques" du monde-machine.' Dantec, *Cosmos Incorporated*, p. 273.

world.⁴⁸¹ Plotkine does not flip into cyberspace as cyberspace is everywhere; at most, he speaks with his cybernetic guardian angel Metatron, a developed AI, which is actually derived from the angel Metatron, the Voice of God.

Viviane Velvet McNellis is Plotkine's creator: she has the fire of Metatron, of the word that becomes reality:

And this very fire, manifestation of a Logos, which finds its articulation beyond Good and evil, beyond even the Tree of Knowledge because it is its eternal guardian in the shape of the whirling sword, this fire allows him to create worlds, to write them, to narrate them, to give them life. This fire of the Word made Act, this is the same fire that burns, destroys, consumes the bringer of this Word.⁴⁸²

The power of creation is beyond knowledge and consciousness or the Logos (beyond the limitation of humanism and Lyotard), it cannot be either understood or witnessed, and it is not a place for ethics. Such power destroys the creator, the writer, who as such starts a process of annihilation of her body. How does Plotkine react to such a revelation?

‘I am then a living narration, answered the young woman. So you have invented me. I am not really a being made of flesh? I am... a simulacrum, like my computer angel.’⁴⁸³

⁴⁸¹ ‘Plotkine va vite se rendre compte qu’ici il n’y a pas de métaphores ou, plus exactement, qu’elles ont pris forme dans le monde.’ *Ibid.*, p. 354. This translation and the following from the novel are mine.

⁴⁸² ‘Et ce même feu, manifestation d’un Logos qui ne s’articule que par-delà le Bien et le Mal, par-delà même l’arbre de la Connaissance car il en est le gardien éternel sous la forme de l’épée tournoyante, ce feu lui permet de créer des mondes, de les écrire, de les narrer, de leur donner vie. Ce feu de la Parole faite Acte, ce feu est aussi ce qui brûle, détruit, consume le porteur de cette Parole.’ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

⁴⁸³ ‘Je suis une narration vivante, répondit la jeune femme. Donc vous m’avez inventée. Je ne suis pas vraiment un être de chair ? Je suis... un *simulacre*, comme mon propre ange numérique ?’ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

His disappointment and sense of loss at being a fiction is answered by what I consider one of the most fascinating description of a character: ‘You are a line that constantly joins the real and infinity, you’re a paradox, so an impossible truth, but compossible with all the others. You have a real physical existence, and yet it has never existed.’⁴⁸⁴ The physical existence of the character is in the reader, who identifies with it; it is an impossible truth because the character is a man but is a man only on paper, a possibility that meets reality but is never real, a shifter that can be inhabited by an infinite number of readers, but still one character with one name.

Plotkine is dangerous as a killer because he is not limited by the rules of reality; his own fictionality puts him outside knowledge, logos and ethics. Even more dangerously, Plotkine is a character who is already conscious, already a step towards humanity, because he is aware of his role of agent of the narrative event: ‘Plotkine was the Agent, who put in touch all of these impossible worlds, he was that which happens, the bringer of the event.’⁴⁸⁵

Plotkine’s antagonist is l’enfant-Machine, who like Angie, is a medium for the machines: ‘The child-Machine was never in the middle but on the outskirts, he was the interface, hyperlink, a hollow space, he was the media who the machines of the world used, machines he had put in a box in order for them to communicate with

⁴⁸⁴ ‘Vous êtes une ligne qui rejoint constamment le réel à l’infini, vous êtes un paradoxe, donc une vérité impossible, mais compossible avec toutes les autres. Vous avez une véritable existence physique, et pourtant elle n’a jamais existé.’ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

⁴⁸⁵ ‘Plotkine, il était l’Agent qui mettait en contact tous ces mondes impossibles, il était ce qui advient, le porteur de l’événement, il était plus dangereux encore qu’un morceau de chaos tombé sur la terre, se disait-il.’ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

each other.’⁴⁸⁶ If Angie was an empty vessel in Gibson in the hands of Dantec her passivity is seen as a virus that robs man of his freedom and individuality, of his very narrative: ‘The child-Box had to be considered, for this reason, as the dissolving agent of all narration.’⁴⁸⁷

Plotkine, the dangerous fictional character, takes control of his life becoming its poet (etymologically the word ‘poet’ derives from *poiesis*), doubled as subject and object of his own life: ‘He wrote at his desk, in room 108 of the Laika hotel, but at the same time his other ‘I’, become an ‘I’ other, actualized the narration in the Created World.’⁴⁸⁸ The shifter ‘je’ coagulates both writer and character in the balance of subjectification and desubjectification of the witness.

Plotkine becomes a man the moment he dies,⁴⁸⁹ because the possibility of really dying in a body, escaping the immortality of fiction is the greatest price for Plotkine in entering an ethical, ‘radical immanence.’ When he loses the power of the fictional character in the weak state of a normal man, that he knows he is powerless and alive in front of the killers waiting for him: ‘He wasn’t but a normal man now. He had strictly no chance whatsoever.’⁴⁹⁰

⁴⁸⁶ ‘L’enfant-Machine ne se tenait pas au centre mais à la périphérie, il était interface, hyperlien, il était un espace en creux, il était le media dont se servaient les machines du monde qu’il avait mises en boîte pour communiquer entre elles.’ *Ibid.*, p. 412.

⁴⁸⁷ ‘L’enfant-Boîte devait, pour cette raison, être considéré comme l’agent dissolutif de toute narration.’ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

⁴⁸⁸ ‘Il écrivait sur son bureau, dans la chambre 108 de l’hôtel Laika, mais dans le même temps son autre « je », devenu un « je » autre, actualisait simultanément la narration dans le Monde Créé.’ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 536.

⁴⁹⁰ ‘Il n’était plus qu’un homme normal maintenant. Il n’avait strictement aucune chance.’ *Ibid.*, p. 536.

In death he can make his Voice heard, his will to live is his will-to-say his humanity. To quote Agamben again: ‘the voice is death which preserves and remembers the living as dead and, at the same time, immediately traces and memory of death, pure negativity.’⁴⁹¹ The event Plotkine witnesses is his own death and only from death, like Neon in Wallace’s story, can he be human. Becoming a subject he loses control over his narrative because in every narrative one loses oneself in language. However, with his death, with the Voice which is the starting point of the articulated voice, which is conscience, he becomes posthuman in the sense Braidotti gives it as ‘radical immanence,’ in complete opposition to the transcendental transhuman of traditional cyberpunk.

Plotkine’s example illustrates a path inverse to that undertaken by Gibson’s characters. If Count Zero undertakes a journey from immanence to transcendence, from man to character, Plotkine moves from transcendence to immanence. Whereas death for Count Zero equals the possible eternity in a fictional space as a ghost, for Plotkine it is synonymous with reality. An ethical choice is made only when there is the possibility of death, in immanence. The final violence Plotkine suffers reveals pain as the fundamental aspect of being human, in a parallel with the characters in *Fight Club*.

There cannot be a witness of the end of times as Lyotard envisions it without a body that can actually die. Lyotard invites us to a paradox, of a character without agency lost in a narrative. At the same time, however, the writer can *imagine* man at the end

⁴⁹¹ ‘La voce è morte che conserva e ricorda il vivente come morto e, insieme, immediatamente traccia e memoria della morte, negatività pura.’ Agamben, *Il linguaggio e la morte*, p. 59.

of times. The writer is the witness of the future, but only if she keeps a body that can suffer, if she is subject and object; writer, character and man: this is the only authority the writer needs: that of a prophet of the possible.

4 Ethics

4.1 Crisis, Hyperbole and the Ethics of Ecocentrism: The New Epic of Wu Ming and China Miéville

The journey undertaken with this research has conducted us more than once to the question of the Voice, that inexpressible will-to-say of the individual at the roots of her need to communicate to the Other her metaphor machine. It has taken various forms and various names: in ‘Good Old Neon’ by David Foster Wallace, ‘what one has inside’ is what the narrator fails to convey; somewhere else, in Giorgio Agamben it takes the name of *infancy*, an inability to speak, or better, the birthplace of language; in cyberpunk it is the disgust/fear for the body, etc. Wu Ming 1 of the Italian collective Wu Ming calls it epic.⁴⁹²

In the title to this dissertation I use the word epic to describe new narrative approaches to the problem of ethics. I have however not yet discussed what I intend by epic and what its connection with ethics is. In the following chapter I will deal with this connection in order to propose a way of intending ethics in fiction beyond the posthuman violence that we have discussed so far. To explore the New Italian Epic I will apply it to an English author, China Miéville, and his *Perdido Street Station* (2000) in order to show how this contemporary form of epic is not limited to

⁴⁹² Wu Ming 1, *New Italian Epic*, “Memorandum 1993-2008”. All of my quotations are taken from the published edition (the actual third version of the memorandum after a version 2.0 appeared in October 2008 and the first was published online in April 2008), and published in 2009 by Einaudi. This last edition contains the memorandum, (divided in ‘New Italian Epic’ and ‘Sentimiento Nuevo’) and ‘Noi dobbiamo essere I genitori’ by Wu Ming 1 and ‘La salvezza di Euridice,’ by Wu Ming 2. If not indicated otherwise, the quotes are from Wu Ming 1’s essay.

the Italian peninsula. I will observe especially three lines of inquiry into the plane of epic which correspond to the premise for epic, that is conflict or the line of crisis; the style of epic, in the line of hyperbole or excess; and finally in the line of ecocentrism I will propose a new form of ethics in balance between transcendence and immanence, the individual and the other.

The Problem of Epic and the Individual

Mikhail Bakhtin describes the characteristics of epic as ‘Absolute conclusiveness and closedness is the outstanding feature of the temporally valorized epic past.’⁴⁹³

This past that Bakhtin, following Goethe and Schiller, calls the "absolute past."⁴⁹⁴

The past is absolute in the sense that it cannot be changed and is then concluded and closed to the present reader or listener:

‘The epic past is called the "absolute past" for good reason: it is both monochronic and valorized (hierarchical); it lacks any relativity, that is, any gradual, purely temporal progressions that might connect it with the present. It is walled off absolutely from all subsequent times, and above all from those times in which the singer and his listeners are located. This boundary, consequently, is immanent in the form of the epic itself and is felt and heard in its every word.’⁴⁹⁵

The way Bakhtin describes the epic form reminds of the monologisms we have already observed in the narratives of *Society in Wallace* and *Ballard*, of the *Law in McCarthy* and the one-dimensional narrative of the *Superego in Ellis*. All of these narratives represent the mythical form of violence described by Benjamin. They are

⁴⁹³ M. M. Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Austin, Texas: University of Texas, 1981, Kindle Location 470.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid. Kindle Location 425.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., Kindle Location 462-465.

monologic and one-dimensional because they aim to control and overcome the individual metaphor machine.

Bakhtin himself individuates the absolute distance between the epic narrative and the individual narrative: 'By its very nature the epic world of the absolute past is inaccessible to personal experience and does not permit an individual, personal point of view or evaluation.'⁴⁹⁶ The dominating language of poetry and the past that the epic form makes use of is the language that cannot be touched because of this distance from the contemporary individual. In the previous pages I have pointed out the violence these dominating transcendental narrative have over the individual narrative so why am I suggesting the epic form as a solution *against* the dominating narrative? Also, how is it possible to use a form 'walled' in the past to describe the ethics of *contemporary* narratives?

To this epic Bakhtin opposes the novel, the narrative of the incomplete present, where 'The novelist is drawn toward everything that is not yet completed.'⁴⁹⁷ The novel is the narrative of the contemporary, still going time in contrast with the epic world, which 'is constructed in the zone of an absolute distanced image, beyond the sphere of possible contact with the developing, incomplete and therefore re-thinking and re-evaluating present.'⁴⁹⁸ The novel then destroys the transcendental nature of the epic form by obliterating the idea of a time that is immutable.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., Kindle Location 473-474.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., Kindle Location 613.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., Kindle Location 492-493.

Bakhtin argues for a distinction between epic as immutable memory, a fixed image in the past and the knowledge that is possible only through direct experience in the novel:

In ancient literature it is memory, and not knowledge, that serves as the source and power for the creative impulse. That is how it was, it is impossible to change it: the tradition of the past is sacred. There is as yet no consciousness of the possible relativity of any past. The novel, by contrast, is determined by experience, knowledge edge and practice (the future).⁴⁹⁹

Here we see how this distinction between epic and novel becomes problematic in the works I have studied so far: I have argued with Agamben about the devaluation of direct experience due to the development of science and the substitution of media and other forms of dominating mythic narratives for the experiences and interpretations of the individual metaphor machine. In other words, the novel today cannot express experience, only facts. The memory of the event depends on the narrative of the witness and, as such, memory is always individual without being less mythic. The narrative of judge Holden is individual but epic at the same time, because it is set in a past that is not McCarthy, but a sort of absolute past, while at the same time, it is the narration of a mythic Law of War promulgated by one individual of epic stature. The narrative of the kid is not anti-epic, but it is meant to break the totality of the eternal past of the Judge and the dominion of the mythic narrative.

The epic described by Bakhtin corresponds to the mythic narration then but, as I will argue in the next section, it is not the only form of epic available today. Interestingly, Bakhtin recognizes the distance between epic and novel in the laughter: ‘It is

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., Kindle Location 458-460.

precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance. As a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close.⁵⁰⁰ This is the comical laughter that has nothing to do with the irony of the philosopher that we have seen with Wallace, Baudelaire and De Man. The philosopher in fact has a distance from his contemporaneity and it is only in this distance that he can see himself falling and laugh. This is the very distance from the mythic narrative Bakhtin deplores and, for this reason, I would consider the epic in Bakhtin and the mythical narrative as one and the same. At this point, then, I have distanced myself from the description of epic in Bakhtin but I have not yet explained what the epic re-writings of ethics in the contemporary novel are.

According to György Lukács, ‘the novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality.’⁵⁰¹ As well as in Bakhtin, epic is a totality for Lukács, something whole that, in the contemporary novel, loses its grip on meaning. By totality Lukács means that epic is subjectless,⁵⁰² thus echoing Bakhtin’s concern.

Lukács however is comparing verse and prose and the relationship in the epic narration between the heaviness of tragic verse and the lightness of epic verse. Heaviness for Lukács is that of a world where meaning is difficult to grasp, whereas

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., Kindle Location 558-560.

⁵⁰¹ György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1971, p. 56.

⁵⁰² Ibid., p. 58.

the epic prose of the novel is lighter because it represents ‘a world henceforth immanently radiant with found meaning.’⁵⁰³

Lukács describes this game between heaviness and lightness, immanence and transcendence describing Dante’s verse: ‘The immanence of the meaning of life is present and existent in Dante’s world, but only in the beyond: it is the perfect immanence of the transcendent.’⁵⁰⁴ It is in his imagined Inferno, the product of his metaphor machine, that Dante finds the immanence of the meaning of life. I would like to insist on Lukács’ underlining that the meaning of life is immanent, that is, translated in the terms of my argument, the metaphor machine is meant to give meaning to an immanent, chaotic reality. The distance for Lukács is that of the tragic verse, which is too heavy to grasp meaning, too individual almost, because it represents the metaphor apparatus of the poet. Instead of looking for the immanence of the meaning of life, the lyrical poet shuts himself in his fantasies. Lyric poetry ‘can create a protean mythology of substantial subjectivity out of the constitutive strength of its ignorance.’⁵⁰⁵ The poet ignores immanent reality and gets lost in his own metaphor machine.

Paradoxically, Lukács observes, when the subject ‘dissolves the whole outside world in mood,’⁵⁰⁶ she tends to lose her subjectivity: ‘The desire to know a world cleansed of all wanting and all willing transforms the subject into an a-subjective, constructive and constructing embodiment of cognitive functions.’⁵⁰⁷ This means that the

⁵⁰³ Ibid., p. 59.

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 59.

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 63.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 65.

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid.

individual surrenders to the mythic narrative of society and of its laws. Only ethics can then save the individual: ‘it can only avoid falling prey to laws and moods if the arena of its actions, the normative object of its actions, is made of the stuff of pure ethics.’⁵⁰⁸ Only can the ethical life save the individual from falling into the self-absorption of the personal metaphor machine that has lost interest in finding meanings in the immanence of life on one said and from the de-subjectification created by surrendering to the mythical Law.

The epic hero according to Lukács is no individual because ‘when the world is internally homogenous, men do not differ qualitatively from one another,’⁵⁰⁹ which is the one-dimensional world of the mythic narrative which we have observed in Ballard and Ellis. The autonomous life of the individual is only possible when ‘incapable of becoming a symbol through deeds and dissolving them in turn into symbols.’⁵¹⁰ The individual ethical life then is only possible when her actions do not become metaphor, that is, when they lose their immanence. In the typical monological voice of epic the individual is lost, becomes a Hiro Protagonist or a Patrick Bateman.

Epic narrates ‘not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community,’⁵¹¹ and for this reason, in such a world, personal responsibility, ethics is impossible: ‘The omnipotence of ethics, which posits every soul as autonomous and incomparable, is still unknown in such a world.’⁵¹²

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 66.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹¹ Ibid.

⁵¹² Ibid.

We have found once again ourselves in a description of epic, in which the individual and, consequently, ethics are lost. At the same time, however, we should pay attention to the movement between the solipsism of Wallace or of the poet against the mythic domination of the Law in which the subject has to find a balance or an anchor: in both cases in fact the individual loses her personal immanence of the meaning of life. The Epic form represents this struggle which is not only a struggle for ethics but for individuality itself. The epic form envisioned by Lukács then, leads us to a stronger connection between individual and ethics: ethics is immanent (and, consequently, individual) and its purpose is the purpose of the metaphor machine: to give meaning to an immanent reality.

In more recent years, Franco Moretti introduces the term ‘modern epic’ to define texts like Goethe’s *Faust*, that is narrative revealing ‘a discrepancy between the totalizing will of the epic and the subdivided reality of the modern world.’⁵¹³ Compared to the epic in Bakhtin, these works ‘live in history,’⁵¹⁴ not in a distant past. Following Hegel, Moretti describes the epic hero as no longer about to be universal, to stand out as an exceptional individual while at the same time, being a representative for humanity: ‘With the coming of the State, in short, individuality must no longer give totality a form, but confine itself to obeying it: master its own energies, and keep to what is prescribed.’⁵¹⁵ The *Faust* represents then ‘an epic with no hero,’⁵¹⁶ where the protagonist’s actions are mostly internal: ‘the genuinely epic

⁵¹³ Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic. The World System from Goethe to García Márquez*, London: Verso, 1996, p. 5.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

immensity – the experience allotted to the whole of mankind – of a universe to be ‘embraced in one’s inner self.’⁵¹⁷ This closure into the self sees the hero to be deeply rooted in history and her present: ‘The universal hero, in short, as a figure based upon the universal *dominion* of the West.’⁵¹⁸ From here, Moretti notices how in modern epic ‘history this becomes a gigantic *metaphor for geography*.’⁵¹⁹ This idea is in line with Moretti’s concept of world-system:

In world-systems analysis the coordinates change, as the onset of capitalism brusquely reduces the many independent spaces needed for the origin of species (or of languages) to just three positions: core, periphery, semi-periphery. The world becomes one, and unequal: one, because capitalism constrains production everywhere on the planet; and unequal, because its network of exchanges requires, and reinforces, a marked unevenness between the three areas.⁵²⁰

Modern epic has to deal with relationships of dominance, where the West is at the core and all the rest is either semi-periphery or periphery. The world is no more enclosed in the past, in time, but in geography, space. We have seen something similar in *American Psycho* where the sociological synecdoche man represented by Bateman is actually a geographical representation of the West.

Moretti is then important for our discourse for two reasons: first because he introduces epic works that are not set in a distant, ‘absolute’ past anymore but which deal with contemporaneity in a relation with space, not time without, for this reason, being less victims of a dominant narrative: in this case that of the West which invests all the narratives I have studied: Wallace, McCarthy, Ballard, Ellis.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., p. 52.

⁵²⁰ Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading*, London: Verso, 2013, Kindle Locations 1977-1981.

Secondly, it sees the hero as more of an individual and less of a universal. However, in narratives like *American Psycho* we have seen how this fall of the epic hero does not mean that the protagonist of the novel is not less an example, a synecdoche for humanity but, on the contrary, it reinforces the fall of individuality *tout court*.

In conclusion to this short excursus on epic I would like to summarise pointing out that epic has always been about the struggle between a totality and the individual for the sake of individuality itself. From a dominating narrative, be it a closed past or a core geography, the individual's metaphor machine is always at stake. As noticed by Bakhtin, the epic narrative so far has always been monologic, that is, the narrative of a dominant metaphor machine, of the mythic Law. As a consequence, there is not only no room for the individual narrative but no conception of the Other at all.

Lukács has suggested the connection between the individual and ethics and as such we can argue that without the individual there can be no conception of the Other and, as such, the Other will be always at the periphery of the mythic epic of the Law. We cannot be satisfied with similar epic forms and in the next sections I will argue that China Miéville offers a new, more ethical form of epic and I will do this by concerning myself with a theory of the epic that finally takes into account the importance of the Other. This theory was published in 2009 by Wu Ming 1 under the name of *New Italian Epic*. I will abstract in a way from the Italian component of the theory in order to arrive to a more generally theory of contemporary epic as rewriting of ethics.

The New Epic and the State of Crisis

Epic narratives, Wu Ming 1 explains, are stories of nations, of heroic or mythical actions, stories bigger than the individual or at least, with a historical background of crisis or change: ‘wars, anabasis, journeys of initiation, fights for survival, always inside larger conflicts deciding of the fate of classes, peoples, nations or even the entire human race, in the background of historical crisis, catastrophes, collapsing social formations.’⁵²¹ Here Wu Ming 1 stresses the epic dimension of the subject matter in something that extends beyond the individual so that we come to a first feature of epic: epic is concerned with Man with a capital letter in a historical process. Here Wu Ming 1 still follows the tradition of epic, the balance between the individual and humanity.

Wu Ming 1’s definition also provides another key that is even more important for my discourse because in a way subverts what he has just affirmed: epic deals with crisis and chance, which come to be through wars and conflicts, in other words, through violence. Crisis is etymologically the dimension of separation and split, where the one becomes many, or else, where Man is split into men, where individuals cannot be so simply reunited in one single humanity, one single story or history. Split, as we have seen, is also the dimension of irony, of the conflict of the self with the world through the metaphor machine of the brain, and it is ultimately the conflict between transcendence and immanence. Epic then deals with humanity

⁵²¹ ‘Guerre, anabasi, viaggi iniziatici, lotte per la sopravvivenza, sempre all’interno di conflitti più vasti che decidono le sorti di classi, popoli, nazioni o addirittura dell’intera umanità, sugli sfondi di crisi storiche, catastrofi, formazioni sociali al collasso.’ Wu Ming 1, *New Italian Epic*, “Memorandum 1993-2008”, Torino: Einaudi, 2009, p. 15.

in its critical condition of separation and conflict, in a continuous balance (or unbalance) between humanity as a whole and the individuals, who constitute it. Violence is at the core of the impossibility for humanity to be one.

China Miéville makes crisis theory the pivotal element of his *Perdido Street Station*. Isaac studies a unified energy theory⁵²², which he calls crisis energy and under which all the different thaumaturgies,⁵²³ that is, the control of the elements, in the novel are connected. Crisis energy is set off in the transition from one element to the other: ‘Transition. The point where one thing becomes another. ... The zone where the disparate becomes part of the whole.’⁵²⁴ This means that this form of energy is generated in the space of the synecdoche, which indeed is a unifying figure of speech, but also the place where the part and the whole, the individual and humanity enter in conflict. The individual is the example and stands for humanity, the crisis of the individual is the crisis of an entire species.

Thus formulated, the question seems less scientific than rhetoric, but as Isaac himself is aware, it is mostly a question of philosophy: ‘It’s *philosophy*.’⁵²⁵ Isaac leaves the calculations to the supreme machine, the primordial A.I. or C.I. (Constructed Intelligence) in the novel. The machine will never be able to reproduce Isaac’s theory because it lacks philosophy, a leap of creativity and imagination. Philosophy, Isaac explains, is made of a triangle with at the three points the physical, the social and the occult or the mental (that is, everything concerning gods, the spiritual, magic

⁵²² China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*, London: Macmillan, 2000, p. 35.

⁵²³ ‘Hexes and charms are mostly the manipulation of theoretical particles – the “enchanted particles” – called *thaumaturgons*.’ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁵²⁴ Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*, p. 51.

⁵²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

if we want).⁵²⁶ He then distinguishes two unified theories: one static, the other moving:

See, if you think that matter and therefore the unified force under investigation are essentially *static*, then falling, flying, rolling, changing your mind, casting a spell, growing older, moving, are basically *deviations* from an essential state. Otherwise, you think that motion is part of the fabric of ontology, and the question's how best to theorize that.⁵²⁷

Isaac is a MUFTI, 'a Moving Unified Field Theorist',⁵²⁸ that is, he basis his theory on the potential energy of movement. In *Blood Meridian*, *Crash*, *American Psycho*, *Fight Club* we have explored sudden explosions of violence in novels made essential of movement, be it along the old Far West, in the motorways, in crazy serial murders or in fights and revolutions in postmodern society. These are all novels of crisis, of the individual splitting herself from the social Laws after the frustrations that this Law forces on their individual metaphor machine. The status quo, the paradoxical staticity of liquid society is a problem at the core of all of these novels where characters that are apparently completely absorbed by society start shaking the status quo with acts of violence that they themselves at times seem not to be aware of. This crisis is immanent in the frustration of the individual metaphor machine that genetically struggles to make its Voice heard.

If we position a piece of wood ten feet from the floor, it has the potential energy to turn into kinetic energy and fall:

See, potential energy's all about placing something in a situation where it's

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 203-205.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*

teetering, where it's about to change state. Just like when you put enough strain on a group of people, they'll suddenly explode. They'll go from grumpy and quiescent to violent and creative in one moment. The transition from one state to another's affected by taking something – a social group, a piece of wood, a hex – to a place where its interactions with other forces make its *own energy* pull against its current state.⁵²⁹

The sentence above perfectly describes what happens in *Millennium People* and *High-rise* where Ballard depicts the bored middle class suddenly exploding, only to later go back to their status quo. Crisis and potential, the possibility also not to (Agamben), are one and the same. When the crisis energy becomes act in fact it should be hypothesized, it empties itself and is no energy anymore. When the piece of wood falls, it has fallen, it has no more energy left, it is static, probably destroyed in the same way as a revolution cannot last forever but it has to settle in a new political form.

The problem is that the explosion can be either violent or creative or both. Agamben would say that a painter is a painter even if she is not painting. She has the potential to be a painter but like Bartleby she can choose not to. According to Isaac, this potentiality has an incredible amount of energy, which tipped on the right side can be used. This energy is both a division and a transition in the sense that the piece of wood is divided between two states and has the potential to pass from one to the other. Body, mind and our spiritual dimension are all unbalanced by crisis energy. We could also say science, the social and the spiritual/artistic.

What is more revelatory of crisis theory is that philosophically speaking, being is naturally in crisis: 'the point of crisis theory is that things are in crisis just as part of

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 206-207.

being.⁵³⁰ Consequently, man is born in the world in crisis: he is a being in crisis, always on the point of being thrown beyond his potentiality. Man is full of the possibility both of creativity and violence: it is in his very being. The nature of man is a difficult balance between transcendence and immanence where hypothetical and thus transcendent energy can only be released in immanence.

Wu Ming 1 also argues that epic does not relate only to the dimensions of the subject matter but also to the effort on the part of the writer to create vast narratives:

Epic are the dimensions of the problems to solve in order to write these books, task that requires usually years, and even longer when the work is destined to transcend measure and limits of the novel-form, such as in the case of transmedia narrations, which continue in different contexts.⁵³¹
(Emphasis in the original)

Epic is the amount of time it takes for the writer to produce such works, which take her important portions of their life. The writer sacrifices time in exchange for the production of works that transcend the novel or genre itself, time to cover a large amount of space. All the novels analysed so far, except for the works of Ballard, are large books, even if not extremely long. ‘Good Old Neon,’ is extremely long considering it is a short form.

Sacrifice, exchange and transcendence are terms that need to be analysed. Sacrifice is a sacred act, an act (from Lat. *facere*) or rite that is also devotion, to a god or, in our case, a purpose. A sacrifice may have a transcendental, teleological aim but it is

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁵³¹ ‘Sono *epiche* le dimensioni dei problemi da risolvere per scrivere questi libri, compito che di solito richiede diversi anni, e ancora più quando l’opera è destinata a trascendere misura e confini della forma-romanzo, come nel caso di narrazioni transmediali, che proseguono in diversi contesti.’ Wu Ming 1, p. 15.

immanent, connected to life all the same. A priest makes a sacrifice in order to receive something from a god, it is a form of exchange, of giving away something important (life itself has been given in the past as sacrifice) in order to obtain something even more important. Why would a writer spend so much time of her life to write something, which is less worth than her life?

China Miéville develops concepts in his novels such as sacrifice, exchange and translation in different and fantastic ways. The idea of remaking developed in the Bas-Lag trilogy represents a form of exchange as *contrapasso*. *Contrapasso* was widely used in Dante's *Comedy*, and consists in the punishment the people condemned in Hell and Purgatory receive, which is the opposite of the sin they have committed in life. Freccero in her analysis of *American Psycho* has defined it as infernal irony.

Remaking sees people, who have committed crimes being punished with body modifications reflecting their crime. A woman, who has killed her baby because it would not stop crying, is condemned to this remaking: 'Her baby's arms are going to be grafted to her face. "So she doesn't forget what she did," [the Magister] says.'⁵³²

Derkhan, who relates the anecdote to Isaac thus comments: "I'm an art critic, Isaac," Derkhan said eventually. "Remaking's art, you know. Sick art. The imagination it takes!" Only to continue: "Remaking's creativity gone bad. Gone rotten. Gone *rancid*."⁵³³ Remaking is another form of a psychopathology that takes an immanent presence in reality through the modifications of the human body.

Remaking is the punishment for individuals who have acted against the mythical

⁵³² Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*, p. 115.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*

Law and is the way the Law re-instates its dominion. Remaking is a punishment against individuality as there are never two remakings that are the same they make, according to infernal irony, an individual ‘special.’

As it is evident we are in the realm of pure biopolitics: the body of the criminal or simply of the dissident is utterly vulnerable in the hands of the people in power. The body can be manipulated, violated, ultimately ridiculed and remade for new purposes more akin to what the powerful require. Or else, the remaking is in service of the industry of pleasure:

There were rumours that many had been sentenced to some other Remaking, only to find themselves Remade by the punishment factories according to strange carnal designs and sold to the pimps and madams. It was a profitable sideline run by the bio-thaumaturges of the state.⁵³⁴

The ease with which it is possible to transform the body for pleasure reminds of cyberpunk, but also of the abuse of the female body Patrick Bateman is guilty of.

Miéville offers a description of the Remade prostitutes:

David paced past naked bodies covered in breasts like plump scales; monstrous crablike torsos with nubile girlish legs at both ends; a woman who gazed at him with intelligent eyes above a second vulva, her mouth a vertical slit with moist labia, a meat-echo of the other vagina between her splayed legs. Two little boys gazing bewildered at the massive phalluses they sprouted. A hermaphrodite with many hands.⁵³⁵

Crisis then is at the core of the epic struggle between the potential of the individual’s metaphor machine and the totalitarian Law of Society. The potential for violence of

⁵³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 416.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 416.

the metaphor machine stays latent until the individual reaches the limit of her frustration. When she rebels the individual is the infernal irony of remaking. Remaking is a distortion of Braidotti posthuman as work in progress in her relationship to technology. To quote Braidotti's definition of subjectivity once again: 'Subjectivity is rather a process of auto-poiesis or self-styling, which involves complex and continuous negotiations with dominant norms and values and hence also multiple forms of accountability.'⁵³⁶ Remaking breaks this process of auto-poiesis by forcing a mask, an identity, that of the criminal that is forever accountable for her desire of being an individual.

Hyperbole and Transcendence

Epic transcends the individual, a specific historical period (the time of the epic story can span many years, like in the case of the *Odyssey*), a specific place and/or genres. Going beyond is an important feature of epic and is the genre that maybe exemplifies better the struggle with its own immanence. The amplitude of the subject matter and the number of characters has to be balanced by the attention to the individual, like Homer does in the *Iliad* when he depicts Hector saying goodbye to wife Andromache and son Astyanax (scared of his helmet) before going into battle in the book XI of the *Iliad*.

Transcendence indicates a vertical movement (from the Latin *scandere*, to climb) towards other spheres, often otherworldly. The New Epic however deals with humanity (even when gods are among its characters) and the world: it is immanent.

⁵³⁶ Braidotti, p. 35.

Epic is not transcendent but hyperbolic. I argue then that hyperbole is the figure of speech characteristic of the epic form.

Hyperbole is not an ascending movement but a throwing (*bolein* in Greek) over or beyond (*hyper*): it is a jump over genre boundaries, over dimensions and a writer's throwing herself beyond her limits (which might be, in a poetic way, what happened to David Foster Wallace). Transcendence goes up whereas hyperbole has no direction except the outward. Once again, it could be pointed out that to throw is a verb of violence compared to climb. *Bolein* indicates the throwing of a missile for instance.

Hyperbole is exaggeration but in the etymological sense of piling up, constantly adding, moving (the Latin *gerere* is a verb of movement, meaning carry). Epic as the genre of hyperbole involves a continuous expansion, a sudden, violent movement out of the core towards the Other, towards what is outside the individual. In this sense, the hyperbolic individual finds himself continuously in her surroundings and her encounters with the other.

Wu Ming 1 explains the essence of the epic in its opposition with realism. Even if most of the stories of the New Italian Epic belong to the crime fiction genre, that is, deal with a realistic world, realism is not their main aim. On the contrary, there is a difference between realism and epic that is the difference between denotation and connotation: 'Realism,' writes Wu Ming 1, 'is in search of a representation of the world as "objective" as possible, close to (materialism) "the perceptive compromise" called "reality"; it presupposes then a working on *denotation*, on the main, shared

meanings.’⁵³⁷ Realism is based on a strict correspondence between the sign and the object, with a straightforward meaning that can be easily perceived whereas epic is based on connotation : ‘it’s the result of a working on the tone, on the figurative sense, on the affective attributes of words, on the vast and multiform reverberation of meanings, *all* meanings of a story.’⁵³⁸ Connotation is more the regime of metaphor and imagination, both transcendence in the multitude of meanings and immanence in that the meanings are never abstract, because they always mean something, they always have a more or less implicit reference to reality.

According to Wu Ming 1, man always ultimately discards pure realism because it is only a compromise, that is, the acceptance of impossibility. Epic aims at something deeper, less ‘real’ but more pressing, something that cannot be defined in reality, something very akin to the unsayable will-to-say.

Connotation is more natural⁵³⁹ to man than the construction that is reality. Wu Ming 1 reminds us once again that science has proved that metaphor is literally and physically part of the human brain, the way we relate to the world: ‘neuroscience has ascertained that the metaphoric is *corporeal*, it is a dimension which is not abstract at all but very actual, described in the *literalness* of cerebral processes.’⁵⁴⁰ Metaphor

⁵³⁷ ‘Il realismo è la ricerca di una rappresentazione per quanto possibile « oggettiva » del mondo, vicina al (tangibile, materialismo) « compromesso percettivo » chiamato « realtà » ; presuppone quindi un lavoro sulla *denotazione*, sui significati principali e condivisi. Wu Ming, pp. 68-69. Italics in the original.

⁵³⁸ ‘è il risultato di un lavoro sul tono, sui sensi figurati, sugli attributi affettivi delle parole, sul vasto e multiforme riverberare dei significati, *tutti* i significati del racconto.’ *Ibid.* p. 69.

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁵⁴⁰ ‘Le neuroscienze hanno appurato che il metaforico è *corporeo*, è una dimensione non astratta ma concretissima, descrivibile nella *letteralità* dei processi cerebrali.’ *Ibid.*, p. 70. See also what Wu Ming 2 writes: ‘La scienza cognitiva ha scoperto che

has a body and if connotation is a necessary part of cognition it is because only imagination can create metaphors connecting two realities, then connotation is ingrained in the human brain.

According to Wu Ming 1, ‘in the same way as connotation is a “more” of the word, a surplus of meaning, which escapes and transforms so epic is a ‘more’ of the story, a “discrepancy” with respect to the events related. In epic hyperbole goes on a rampage, each element denser, more charged, more vivid, and yet, at the same time more elusive, hard to define and surround. Epic is a surplus on the story, its hyperbolic dimension, bigger but less defined.’⁵⁴¹ This element, denser, more charged (of meaning or than meaning) but at the same time harder to define because always elusive is exactly the something that cannot be said, but only narrated, making of epic the space of the Voice, of the possibility of the will-to-say. The potential of the condition of crisis in the individual is rooted in the individual’s need-to-say her metaphor machine, to have a Voice that is simply but meaningfully a surplus, something more than just the words we say.

Epic then is both crisis, that is, split and violent struggle and the dimension of the Voice and the hyperbolic. I will now explore the possibility that the Voice is created as a surplus by violence or else, if it is violence, which is a direct result of the incapacity to grasp the unsayable. In other words, violence can be the reaction to

il pensiero lavora per lo più in maniera inconscia e che buona parte di questi meccanismi neurali richiamano strutture narrative.’ Wu Ming 2, ‘Il « mondo nuovo » delle storie,’ in Wu Ming, *New Italian Epic*, p. 135. Italics in the original.

⁵⁴¹ ‘Come la connotazione è un “di più” del vocabolo, eccedenza di significato che sfugge e si trasforma, così l’epica è un « di più » del racconto, uno « scarto » rispetto agli eventi narrati. Nell’epica si scatena l’iperbole, ogni elemento è più denso, più carico, più vivido, eppure al tempo stesso più sfuggente, difficile da definire e contornare.’ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

something we cannot understand or express (the Voice comes before consciousness or Logos). However, it is also possible that epic and violence have only in common a certain excess, a constant exaggeration, a going too far. What distinguishes them and makes the New Italian Epic so significant in contemporary fiction is a new ethics of narrative. Wu Ming 1 proposes a different attitude to human hubris that he calls ecocentrism.

Ecocentrism and the Other

The ethics of the NIE offers a different perspective to Lyotard's question of the last and ultimate witness. The end of the world is another going too far, the ultimate excess that means the death of everything, when the end of the teller comes. The Voice lives in the space of this unknown which belongs to man because it is individual but is also outside him, like an object, because he cannot reach or grasp it. Violence is then converted in fear of the unknown, which is often reverted into an attraction for it. The concern for the future becomes synonymous with concepts of consciousness and the deep space inside man.

There is something in stories that cannot be easily grasped because stories can tell something that we cannot explain in other ways. Writing the story 'Good Old Neon', David Foster Wallace has been able to tell what Neon was not able to explain, Wallace gave a feeling of the inexpressible, and we understood it without being able to explain it. As Wu Ming 2 writes: 'We often grasp a concept or an event only if we find the right words to describe it. A similitude can make us understand the

connection between two facts better than a causal explanation.’⁵⁴² This sentence explains my insistence on creating a sort of rhetoric of contemporary fiction because it is often through figures of speech that the individual will-to-say can be conveyed. Considering the brain is a metaphor machine it is only logical that rhetoric is an indispensable tool for us to understand.

Wu Ming 1 invites to accept the fact that the world is going to end, but his question is on the now, not on the future itself: not, that is, what we can do to witness the end, but what we can do *now* to keep it away or to reach it in a more human, ethical way. In other words, he asks how to live towards the end, which, on a private level, is the question of how the individual should live before her ineluctable death (which is the individual’s end of the world as she dies as witness).

Wu Ming 1 suggests that in order to accept the end we have to step away from our hubris and arrogance: ‘Yes, hubris and short-sightedness are what we can *not* accept anymore. We cannot accept that the species is doing anything to speed up the process of extinction and make it the most painful - and the less dignified - as possible.’⁵⁴³ Hubris generates a blindness towards the Other, which is an echo of the Christian church’s refusal to accept the Copernican revolution, to accept that the earth was not at the centre of the solar system and that man was not a privileged creature.

⁵⁴² ‘Spesso riusciamo a capire un concetto, o un evento, solo se troviamo le parole giuste per descriverlo. Una similitudine può farci comprendere il legame tra due fatti molto più di una spiegazione causale.’ Wu Ming 2, ‘Una termodinamica della fantasia’, in Wu Ming, *New Italian Epic*, pp. 191-192.

⁵⁴³ ‘Sì, tracotanza. Tracotanza e ristrettezza di vedute sono quello che *non* possiamo più accettare. Non possiamo accettare che la specie stia facendo di tutto per accelerare il processo di estinzione e renderlo il più doloroso – e il meno dignitoso – possibile.’ Wu Ming, *New Italian Epic*, p. 57. Emphasis in the original.

Braidotti has individuated in this hubris over the ideal of Man the remnants of a humanism that has no place in the posthuman age:

The Vitruvian ideal of Man as the standard of both perfection and perfectibility (as shown in figure 1.1) was literally pulled down from his pedestal and deconstructed. This humanistic ideal constituted, in fact, the core of a liberal individualistic view of the subject, which defined perfectibility in terms of autonomy and self-determination.⁵⁴⁴

Autonomous and self-determined the individual would be isolated by the world outside herself and the Other. The Other in fact becomes the opposite of the individual:

Central to this universalistic posture and its binary logic is the notion of 'difference' as pejoration. Subjectivity is equated with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behaviour, whereas Otherness is defined as its negative and specular counterpart.⁵⁴⁵

Wu Ming 1 observes how either cultural or natural this anthropocentrism means that man is unable to deal with his accidental nature:

And yet anthropocentrism,' writes Wu Ming 1, 'is alive and well and fights against us. Scientific discoveries, objective evidence, the crisis of the Subject, the downfall of old ideologies. Nothing has dissuaded mankind from the absurd idea that man is at the centre of the universe, the Chosen Species - on the contrary, we are not even a species, we transcend taxonomies, we are the only beings imbued with a soul, the only interlocutors of God.'⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴⁴ Braidotti, p. 23.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

⁵⁴⁶ 'è vivo e vegeto, e lotta contro di noi. Scoperte scientifiche, prove oggettive, crisi del Soggetto, crolli di vecchie ideologie. Nulla pare aver distolto il genere umano dall'assurda idea di essere al centro dell'universo, la Specie Eletta – anzi, per molti non siamo nemmeno una specie, trascendiamo le tassonomie, siamo gli unici esseri dotati di anima, unici interlocutori di Dio. Wu Ming 1, p. 58.

To this suicidal anthropocentrism, Wu Ming 1 opposes what he calls ecocentrism, a point of view, not merely empty or transcendental as in Gibson's cyberpunk, but always Other, ex-anthropo-centric, ex-centric.⁵⁴⁷ Ecocentrism explains the recurrence of such themes in the NIE as going crazy, going out of oneself through metamorphosis, fighting against the loss of the self.⁵⁴⁸ The core of the individual is continually pulled out in a centrifugal movement towards the periphery that makes, I would say, the individual continually explode. This means not only that the core is not stable but also that the individual constantly moves outwardly and, as a consequence, towards the Other. The Other is always on the periphery as other literatures, as Moretti suggests, are at the periphery of core world-systems.

Ecocentrism however is not only a thematic or ethical aspect of the NIE narrative but also an important technical one based on the 'squinting, sideways glance', 'the gamble of the point of view.'⁵⁴⁹ where ethics and style meet. 'The epic hero, when he is present, is not at the centre of everything but he has a slanted influence on the action. When he is not present, his function is taken by a multitude, by objects and places, by context and by time.'⁵⁵⁰ The epic hero is not at the centre of the story in the same way as the force field of the NIE has no central leader or core, in the same way as the individual has troubles with her core. There is literally nothing at the centre neither of the NIE nor of its narratives. This tendency is the opposite of the one Franco Moretti proposes for the modern epic that starts with Goethe's *Faust*.

Modern epic for Moretti represents a passage 'from polyphony, towards

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁵⁴⁹ «sguardo obliquo », 'azzardo del punto di vista' *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁵⁵⁰ 'L'eroe epico, quando c'è, non è al centro di tutto ma influisce sull'azione in modo sghembo. Quando non c'è, la sua funzione viene svolta dalla moltitudine, da cose e luoghi, dal contesto e dal tempo.' *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

monologism,⁵⁵¹ whereas in the NIE monologism is very difficult in that there is no main logic or voice.

Ecocentrism is the opposite of egocentrism and then of a monologic vision of life. The Wu Ming collective represents this attempt to avoid even the monologic voice of the author: four writers (previously five), writing under one pen name in an attempt to extirpate any individual voice at the root. In their works, voices indeed are spread among many examples of humanity but they also include objects or a bar as in 54 (2002).

In his study of the work of Bakhtin, Augusto Ponzio details the relationship between the 'I' and the Other. Ponzio affirms that the 'I' is a compromise of the internal dialogue between the individual and the Other.⁵⁵² This dialogue is immanent in language because our own words are always the words of the Other: 'despite all of his efforts, the I cannot contain the word of the Other, the Other's accentuations, the Other's thoughts, in the limits of her own identity: everything connotating alterity escapes the identity of the I like a sack with a hole.'⁵⁵³ We encounter here another form of the hyperbole at the very basis of language, the excess of the words of the Other in our own words, the words that we learn as children from our parents, and the other adults.

⁵⁵¹ Moretti, *Modern Epic*, p. 73. Moretti however reflects on a tradition that goes from Hegel to Bakhtin.

⁵⁵² Augusto Ponzio, *La rivoluzione bachtiniana. Il pensiero di Bakhtin e l'ideologia contemporanea*, Bari: Levante Editori, 1997, p. 17. All the translations from this text are mine.

⁵⁵³ 'Malgrado tutti I suoi sforzi, l'io non riesce a contenere la parola altrui, le accenzuazioni altrui, i pensieri altrui, entro i limiti della sua propria identità : tutto ciò che connota l'alterità fuorisce dall'identità dell'io come da un sacco bucato.' Ibid., pp. 17-18.

Ponzio argues for a Critique of the Dialogic Reason against the Dialectic Reason that sees identity still as the final focus, as so still a totalizing and monologic narrative. The critique of the Dialogic reason is ‘the critique of the category of identity as the dominant category today of the logos and praxis of the West.’⁵⁵⁴ Both the Ballardian man and Patrick Bateman identify themselves with the identity imposed by Society, by that logic that according to Bauman forces us to choose an identity. The subject is the author of the narrative of the I where identity is the plan from the beginning.⁵⁵⁵

From an ethical point of view, in the relation with the Other, Ponzio, following Bakhtin, distinguishes two forms of responsibility : ‘special responsibility’ and ‘moral’ or ‘absolute responsibility.’⁵⁵⁶ The former concerns the role or function one has in Society and as such it respects and follows the Law: it is a limited responsibility, defined, and ‘referred to the repeatable identity of the objective and interchangeable individual.’⁵⁵⁷ This is exemplified by the professions in Ballard or Ellis, where all the characters are interchangeable and, for this reason, they have alibis: their responsibility is limited by the role that Society has assigned to them and, as such, they are not responsible as human beings: Bateman’s alibi is that he is only a synecdoche.

Absolute responsibility has no alibis, no limits and makes of every action not a repetition (as in Ballard, Ellis, Palahniuk), but a unique event which the individual

⁵⁵⁴ ‘critica della categoria dell’identità in quanto categoria oggi dominante del pensiero e della prassi occidentale.’ Ibid., p. 302.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 306.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 25-26.

⁵⁵⁷ ‘riferita all’identità ripetibile di individuo oggettivo e intercambiabile.’ Ibid., p. 25.

cannot derogate to someone else.⁵⁵⁸ This is the ethic of the individual anticipated by Lukàcs, which finds accomplishment in a form of ethics in which the individual is responsible as human being. He responsibly accepts the irreducible alterity of her own language and of the existence of the Other. Ecocentrism is based on a similar perspective according to which the life of the Other is not dependent on us, in which not only the language of the other is not dominated by my metaphor machine but, on the contrary, my will-to-say must correspond to a will-to-listen the Voice of the Other in my voice.

Another text that will help me consider the question of the Other is *Le temps et l'autre* (1979) by Emmanuel Levinas. Whereas Bakhtin and Ponzio start with the inevitable alterity of my own language and my own identity Levinas starts with the inevitable solitude of the individual. This solitude derives by the is the individual's very existence, because my existence cannot be someone else's: 'Everything can be exchanged between beings but existence. In this sense, being, means being isolated by existence.'⁵⁵⁹ This condition is not communicable and it is the condition of my very existence,⁵⁶⁰ something very akin to the concept of the Voice.

The subject when she says I says it in the present, there is no time in solitude. For this very reason though, the subject is somehow in control of her subjectivity. Death, however, changes this condition because it is the one event of which the individual

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 26.

⁵⁵⁹ 'On peut tout échanger entre êtres sauf l'exister. Dans ce sens, être, c'est s'isoler par l'exister.' Emmanuel Levinas, *Le temps et l'autre*, Paris : Presse Universitaire de France, 2007, p. 21. All the translations from this text are mine.

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

cannot control and for which, he is always alone. This event is a mystery⁵⁶¹ because it does not live in the present but it is an event in the future that cannot be anticipated, and thus controlled. This event that arrives to the subject but over which the subject has no power corresponds to the relationship with the Other or, better, with the face of the Other. It is this face to face with the Other that situates the individual in time.⁵⁶² It is now easier to grasp why the absolute past of Bakhtin is a monologic narrative: it is a dead time and closed narrative because there is no room for the Other, for the future and the presence of the Other in it.

The Other, of course is in the same position as the individual: ‘The one is for the other that which the other is for the one; the subject has no exceptional place.’⁵⁶³ There is no hierarchy of existence no dominant individual, or there should not be. The Other is as important as we are because she is in our same condition of solitude and in the same relationship with death. It is impossible to control the Other or melt with the Other because the relationship with the Other is based on the ‘absence of the Other,’⁵⁶⁴ absence that is the unknowable of the future and thus, of time.

In death and time, the individual is not herself anymore because she cannot control her own death. In death somehow, we lose our individuality, in what we have characterized more than once in this work as the death cry of the animal or Voice. But in the relationship with the Other: ‘this absence of the other is precisely her

⁵⁶¹ Ibid., p. 65.

⁵⁶² Ibid., p. 69.

⁵⁶³ ‘L’un est pour l’autre ce que l’autre est pour lui; il n’y a pas pour le sujet de place exceptionnelle.’ Ibid., p. 74.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 83.

presence as other.⁵⁶⁵ The Other is presence, immanence as Other, even if her absence and irremediable otherness makes the Other transcendental to the individual. Otherness is both transcendence and immanence then and it is the place where the individual can express her ethical life among other individuals like her. Her will-to-say must correspond to a will-to-listen because, put very simply, the Other has a will-to-say too. Up to this point in my work in fact I have mostly been concerned with the question of the individual metaphor machine and the individual's will-to-say. But an ethics of contemporary narrative irremediably necessitates of a writer capable of narrating a will-to-listen.

How does a writer like China Miéville deal with the question of the Other? How do I justify him as a writer of ecocentrism, without alibi, and attentive to the will-to-say of the Other? Miéville gives voice to strange beings that sometimes are only barely human, such as for instance 'Familiar' in the collection *Looking for Jake and Other Stories* (2005). In this short story, a witch (a man) creates a familiar with his own flesh. The familiar is a creature able to assimilate and 'learn' the materials around it: 'his familiar manipulated things, was a channel for manipulation; it lived to change, use, and know.'⁵⁶⁶ The last three verbs aptly describe the familiar, what moves it, what it does. A natural, extreme desire to know pushes to change and use the objects around it so that everything becomes a tool and the familiar itself changes and sheds many shapes. Knowledge and use are one and the same so that its mental processes are quite basic and not exactly human, but Miéville is able to make of the familiar a character, a different point of view, we feel its presence as Other.

⁵⁶⁵ 'Cette absence de l'autre est précisément sa présence comme autre.' Ibid., p. 83.

⁵⁶⁶ China Miéville, 'Familiar', *Looking for Jake and Other Stories*, (London: Macmillan, 2006), p. 85.

In the story, we can recognize the presence of information, desire and ultimately, language, which the familiar slowly learns after acquiring ears. The presence of language approaches the familiar to man, because the familiar at the same time has developed a brain: ‘it spoke English words in the mind it had built itself.’⁵⁶⁷ The familiar mimics the brain because it has learned brain from animals and it has discovered sounds with its ears. Curiously, it creates its own metaphor machine.

The hunger of the familiar, however, is reflected by the emptying of the witch’s flesh: ‘The man’s body was faded away in random holes. There was no blood. Two handspans of sternum, inches of belly, slivers of arm-meat all faded to nothing, as if the flesh had given up existing. Entropic wounds.’⁵⁶⁸ As it is typical of Miéville the change the familiar is so apt to is actually exchange as the more it fills itself of knowledge and matter the more the witch loses his own matter to nothing. The more the Other becomes a presence the more the witch becomes an absence. Miéville portrays then the relationship of the human and the non-human as based on hunger and privation, as they are made of the same substance: if one grows the other has to shrink or lose bits. This also means that knowledge and growth are purely immanent, made of flesh. In this case, in a paradoxical alteration of the monistic matter suggested by Braidotti, the matter shared by the individual and the Other are one and the same. The witch is not in control of his coming death because it is irremediably other, an event he cannot control.

The writer also confronts their point of views and the final page of the story sees the

⁵⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

witch begging desperately for the familiar to ‘come back’ to him or end his agony: ‘Come *back* or make it *stop*. Do *something* to *finish*.’⁵⁶⁹ The witch started as agent in the story, but by the end is ousted by its creation, which is the only entity able to act. It is not paradoxical that the last act of the familiar is speech and the reflection of it: “‘Sun,” it said. Its droning speech intrigued it.’⁵⁷⁰ With the self-awareness brought by language, the familiar is at the beginning of developing a consciousness and the story can finally end.

It can be said that the story ends anthropocentrically, as the familiar has become the more and more human. However, the human point of view, the possible protagonist of the story, loses his flesh and its place is taken by the object, the creature, who takes its place. The alternation between the point of view of the witch, of his client (for whom he practices the ritual, which gives life to the familiar) and the familiar creates such a balance that no one is really a protagonist. In a double hyperbolic movement, the human projects (projectile?) his flesh outside himself in another creature while, at the same time, the familiar itself is a hyperbolic creature, constantly expanding and challenging the environment around it. The familiar exemplifies the danger of hyperbole when one’s will-to-live and, ultimately –say (“Sun”) crashes over the Other.

Furthermore, from an ethical point of view we understand that the ecological balance between the witch and the familiar is tipped over by the familiar’s hunger, which is totally endocentric. In other words, the familiar becomes the more human the more it thinks of itself as the only creature that matters. It does not display cruelty towards

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

the witch: it is too self-absorbed to really mind his creator. With its hunger for appropriation the familiar is the bodily manifestation of the dominant narrative of capitalism.

The work of China Miéville is full of examples of ecocentric points of view since he is renowned to create strange, alien creatures in his novels, especially in the Bas-Lag trilogy, in a speculative fiction tradition, which goes back to the epics of Homer and *Gulliver's Travels*. The Garuda society is a perfect example of another culture:

They're so egalitarian ... Well... Their society's all based on maximising choice for the individual, which is why they're communistic. Grants the most uninhibited choice to everyone. And as far as I remember the *only* crime they have is depriving another garuda of choice.⁵⁷¹

The novel becomes challenging when the writer invites us to understand Yagharek's crime from the perspective of his culture, which is irremediably Other for us and, for this reason, he challenges our anthropocentrism, face to face with the Other.

Yagharek's rape of another garuda is translated in his culture as 'choice-theft in the second degree, with utter disrespect.'⁵⁷² The way he describes his criminal status in his culture posits him in the problematic of transcendence: 'That is who I am now. I am no longer Concrete Individual and Respected Yagharek. He is gone. I told you my name, and my name-title. I am Too Too Abstract Yagharek Not To Be Respected.'⁵⁷³ The Garuda culture relies on the distinction between concrete and abstract so much so that a criminal is someone that has lost physical presence and

⁵⁷¹ Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*, p. 87.

⁵⁷² *Ibid*, p. 847.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 60.

has somehow disappeared, become too abstract. The abstraction of the criminal is relative to the fact that as an individual he has forgotten, abstracted the other's choice: "To take the choice of another ... to forget their concrete reality, to abstract them, to forget that you are a node in a matrix, that actions have consequences."⁵⁷⁴ He has become too transcendent and has forgotten about the immanence of the Other, he has forsaken his absolute responsibility and lost his immanence as a result. His solitude is the consequence of trying to take control over the Other without alibi.

Murder for the garuda is the worst crime because 'you take not only the choice of whether to live or die that moment ... but *every other choice for all of time* that might be made.'⁵⁷⁵ The crime is not murder but theft of all the possible choices. The murderer deprives her victim of possibility itself, of any form of immanence.

Yagharek's crime is rape but Kar'uchai, his victim finds it hard to make Isaac understand that rape does not translate⁵⁷⁶: "I was not *violated* or *ravaged*, Grimneb'lin. I am not *abused* or *defiled* ... or *ravished* or *spoiled*. You would call his actions rape, but I do not: that tells me nothing. He *stole my choice*, and that is why he was ... judged."⁵⁷⁷ Ecocentrism means, first of all, the acceptance that the mythic Law is not the only possible Law and that our personal metaphor machine is met by the Other's metaphor machine. Ecocentrism requires a will-to-listen to the Other.

⁵⁷⁴ China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*, p. 847.

⁵⁷⁵ China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*, p. 848. Italics in the original.

⁵⁷⁶ 'You *cannot* translate, Grimneb'lin.' China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*, p. 849. Italic in the original.

⁵⁷⁷ China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*, p. 849.

The epic of China Miéville then brings together the concepts of crisis, hyperbole and ecocentrism offering an ethics that in time of crisis does degenerate in violence only when the individual is so self-centred that she deprives the Other at the same time of choice and flesh, the potential transcendence and the immanent flesh. The Voice is finally presented as excess, going beyond what the individual can grasp, towards the Other, who is another witness, another possibility that the end is not the end, but only unknown, irremediably Other.

4.2 Of Lying: From Simile to Metaphor as Hyperbole in China Miéville's

Embassytown

Embassytown is a novel about the passage from simile to metaphor, from a language made of pure reference to one made of lying. In this novel about language, metaphor functions as a hyperbole for the infinity possibilities of imagination. To understand these assumptions of mine I will first connect two parallel thematics running through the novel.

Avice, protagonist and narrating voice of the novel, is an Immer, going in a space which is out of the known universe, or better, the known universe is a manifestation, realization of the Immer. ‘The best we can do is say that the immer *underlies* or *overlies, infuses, is a foundation, is langue* of which our actuality is a *parole*.’⁵⁷⁸

Referring to the Saussurian dichotomy langue/parole Miéville remarks that language is the main theme of the novel from the very beginning. To create an equation that reconstructs the quote above we can write: Immer : actuality = langue : parole.

As foundation, both the Immer and la langue do not strictly speaking exist, hence the Immer is outside time, in the always in the same way as langue is the theoretical part of language, its grammar, which does not exist until it is not spoken in reality: they are transcendent dimensions. Here is a description of a battle against the creature of the Immer: ‘It was put down quickly. They hammered it with sometimes-guns, that

⁵⁷⁸ China Miéville, *Embassytown*, London: Macmillan, 2011, p. 31. Italics in the original.

violently assert the manchmal, this stuff, our everyday, against the always of the immer. It was banished or dispatched after minutes of shrieking.⁵⁷⁹ Quotidianity is the weapon to fix the eternal, bind it and subjugate it to the reality of time, of the here and now: sometimes-guns are weapons of immanence.

The sometimes-guns are an evolution of the Possible Sword branded by Uther Doul in *The Scar* (2002). This sword mines the virtual possibilities and strikes in all the possible points its wielder could have swung the sword but at the same time: ‘When the clockwork is running, my arm and the sword mine possibilities. For every factual attack there are a thousand possibilities, nigh-sword ghosts, and all of them strike down together.’⁵⁸⁰ This weapon makes every possibility real, while at the same time, remaining a ghost, a possibility. What if we could say all of the words possible in a determined context in one sentence?

With the Immer, Miéville seems somehow to be thinking of cyberpunk and the transcendental escape of the hackers into the eternity without body of cyberspace. Avice has the temerity of a hacker but she is a woman, which already constitutes a major difference. Furthermore, when the novel moves from the Immer⁵⁸¹, to delve fully into the problem of Language and the alien Ariekei, who speak it, Miéville enacts a reversal of Gibson’s take by making the novel a struggle towards transcendence. Avice indeed escapes to the Immer to free herself from the materiality of her hometown, Embassytown, but also allegorically from the

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵⁸⁰ China Miéville, *The Scar*, London: Macmillan, 2002, p. 544.

⁵⁸¹ And mostly abandons this line of narrative altogether. But, how we will see, the line of the Immer stays alive throughout the novel as a metaphor for the theme of Language.

impossible referentiality of Language. *Embassytown*, in other words, offers an example of what happens on the other extreme of the line, from transcendence to pure referentiality, passing through the ideal that we have seen is immanence, the presence of the transcendent in the material.

Ariekei's Language is spoken by the two-mouthed aliens as purely referential language where each word corresponds to a real object and to reality in general. As a consequence the Ariekei can only speak the truth, reality itself, and find it impossible to lie. They even have a festival of lies where they awkwardly try to speak lies only to constantly fail. Lies assume in the course of the novel a form of freedom and rebellion against a language that is controlling and manipulating them. A second thematic to read the novel then is connected to an ethics of truth where lying expresses the truth of the individual and where imagination offers the possibility for salvation.

The concept of truth will be dealt in the following paragraphs according to the assumption that truth and referentiality can be seen as synonymous for being and lying as non-being. Indeed, the Ariekei can only speak of what exists or has happened unable to conceive the non-being and so deprived of imagination and individuality.

The concept of being thus developed suggests an aesthetic or rhetorical take on the novel. The novel deals with the passage from simile, which still respects reality, to metaphor, which disrupts the real to the level of creating a shortcut in the alien mind. In the unlimited possibilities metaphor offers (like the Possible Sword) to create

worlds it wears the mantle of hyperbole, of continual creation and of a constant movement only apparently away from reality. Metaphor in fact is in the end the way the individual conceives of reality.

These three conceptual problematics of truth/lying, being/non-being and simile-metaphor will cross each other in the course of the following paragraphs because they are inevitably connected to the epic resources of language.

To speak something that has never happened, the Ariekei have to make the event happen: “Everything in Language is a truth claim. So they need the similes to compare things to, to make true things that aren’t there yet, that they need to say.”⁵⁸²

What is more important, the sentence has to be true in the mind of the speaker, who infuses it with her very soul:

the Ariekei... when they speak they *do* hear the soul in each voice. That’s how the meaning lives there. The words have got...” he shook his head, hesitating, then just using that religious term. “Got the soul in them. And it has to be there, the meaning. Has to be true to be Language. That’s why they make similes.”⁵⁸³

Similes are the means by which the Ariekei can create new Language but for their concept to be true, Language itself, it has to happen. Hence, they create living similes by which they can enact their speech and make it meaningful. Avice becomes part of a simile and becomes part of a language and a figure of speech:

‘You were in a simile?’ they said.
‘I *am* a simile,’ I said.

⁵⁸² China Miéville, *Embassytown*, p. 56.

⁵⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

‘You’re a story?’⁵⁸⁴

The Ariekei do not use other Ariekei to create similes but only humans, as if they were objects of Language. This is significant because in the very simile involving Avice, she has to endure pain.⁵⁸⁵ The Ariekei do not consider humans to be at their level (their technology reaches godlike dimensions for the human mind), but make them part of stories. Now, for these aliens these stories are real, not fiction, that is why they need a performance that in their case, is paradoxically interpreted as real and not as fiction. If an act or event has happened this means that it is real so there is no difference between performance and real event, between acting and action.

The Ariekei can speak the truth of their soul through language but treat humans as characters and entrap them in Language. To be more correct, Avice is not even a character, but a simile, a figure of speech, that can be ultimately repeated ad infinitum without any need to tell the story: in other words she becomes a commonplace. The truth of a commonplace comes from the experience of the generations before but can an act performed for the sake of Language really function as experience? The only person to experience pain in the end is Avice, a part of Language itself, a simile.

Avice then suffers violence on different levels: according to the concept of truth, she suffers in order to make speech real and thus possible; according to rhetoric, she is a simile, trapped in language, not even a subject. For all their materiality, the Ariekei are superficial on the pain they inflict, in the same way as we abstract on the

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵⁸⁵ Which is interestingly enough, not really described in the novel, as if she feels shame about it.

sufferance the animals we eat may endure.

From the quotation above another equation can be induced between language and thought since if the speaker's mind has to believe what she is saying, then Language can only speak thoughts and thoughts equal reality. Language is intent, the presence of a conscious, willing mind: pure Logos and monologic Language. 'A Host could understand nothing not spoken in Language, by a speaker, with intent, with a mind behind the words.'⁵⁸⁶ The voice is the voice of the individual with his soul and intent, the Voice, the will-to-say, but the words it speaks are pure totalizing Language: Language, in this case, is a mythic force. For this reason, the Ariekei cannot understand writing or a computer, since they cannot read in them any mind:

An Ariekei couldn't type into an artmind, of course: writing was incomprehensible to them. Oral input was no better: as far as any exopsych specialists could discern, the Hosts couldn't ken interacting with a machine. The computer would speak back to them in what we heard as flawless vernacular, but to the Ariekei, with no sentience behind them, those words were just noises.⁵⁸⁷

The Ariekei seem to refuse any form of mediation or transposition of Language in another medium. In a way, it is as if the voice corresponded to the will of the speaker, the voice of the soul. And yet, it is through science that humans can speak Language, after being genetically modified and connected to another human in order to speak the double-mouthed words of the alien language. Even though technologically advanced, the Ariekei do not communicate through and with technology. For them it would be unthinkable to imagine the presence of the Loa of the Sprawl Trilogy because an informational god would be invisible to them: the

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Ariekei are unable to transcend. Anything that does not have Language spoken with a mind is not sentient for them: objects, animals, humans are all alike. Killing a human is not murder because regular men do not speak Language and Language is the only characteristic trait of a sentient being.

The full power of Logos then is what distinguishes between beings and non-beings. Language does not make beings social by itself, as Aristotle would have said, but intelligible. Despite a kind humanistic/positivist vision the Ariekei do not advocate for reason but for will, will as power as seen in McCarthy. Language is monologic, one-dimensional and endocentric: it does not conceive of beings that speaks another language, a periphery language. Ultimately, what distinguishes Ariekei and humans is the realisation that the former do not have a metaphor machine as a brain but a referential one. This means that Language equals reality and anything outside Language does not exist.

Humans then are objects of Language, which suggests a different definition of what a subject is. The subject with two voices or the human Ambassadors, couplets of lookalike people genetically engineered to speak language recalls Alain Badiou's theory of the subject. The subject in Badiou is at least double: when two lovers fall in love, there are no two subjects but only one as both of them constitute the subject of the event of love as without the both of them there would be no event: 'The lovers enter like this in the composition of *a* subject of love, who exceed the one and the other.'⁵⁸⁸ The Two, the double subject in Badiou, is a subject of difference not

⁵⁸⁸ 'Les amants entrent comme tels dans la composition d'un sujet d'amour, qui les excède l'un et l'autre.' Alain Badiou, *L'éthique, essai sur la conscience du mal*, Caen: Nous, 2003, p. 71. Emphasis in the original. All translations from Badiou are

identity: 'What is the world like when it is experimented according to the two and not by the one? What is the world like, examined, practiced and lived according to difference and not according to identity?'⁵⁸⁹ Badiou is talking about love here, but the example is useful to understand the different possibilities of the two.

The Arieke's double mouthed system belongs to a same body whereas the Ambassadors have two identical bodies but different minds. The Ambassador Ezra has two different bodies and personalities, which will create an impossible Language. Language is made then not only of an identity with reality but with the perfect identity of the two speakers, even if there are two individuals, the subject of Languages is one, in contrast with Badiou's ethics of the two.

There are more parallels between Badiou's *sujet* and the Ariekei's language. In the same way as man becomes a Subject only at the moment of the event and the acceptance of its truth⁵⁹⁰, so an Arieke is such only when he speaks Language. Event and Language give life to the Subject, not the other way around, as Badiou writes: 'It could be said that a *subject*, who surpasses the animal (but the animal is its only support), requires that something happens...'⁵⁹¹ This something is the event, which actually makes the animal of everyday life into something more, a subject. In

mine.

⁵⁸⁹ 'Qu'est-ce que c'est le monde quand on l'expérimente à partir du deux et non pas de l'un? Qu'est-ce que c'est que le monde, examiné, pratiqué et vécu à partir de la différence et non à partir de l'identité?' Alain Badiou avec Nicolas Truong, *Éloge de l'amour*, Paris: Flammarion, 2009, p. 30.

⁵⁹⁰ 'Il n'y a qu'un animal particulier, convoqué par des circonstances à *devenir* sujet. Ou plutôt à entrer dans la composition d'un sujet. Ce qui veut dire que tout ce qu'il est, son corps, ses capacités, se trouve, à un moment donné, requis pour qu'une vérité fasse son chemin. Alain Badiou, *L'éthique*, p. 67.

⁵⁹¹ 'Disons qu'un *sujet*, qui outrepassé l'animal (mais l'animal en est le seul support), exige qu'il se soit passé quelque chose...' Alain Badiou, *L'éthique*, p. 68. Emphasis in the original.

the case of Language⁵⁹², the subject is such through the event of Language but, she becomes slowly a victim when Language itself becomes a manipulative drug and turns the very subject back into an animal. This happens when the Ariekei's *fidélité* towards Language is disrupted by the new Ambassador EzRa, who speaks an impossible Language, with the two speakers talking Language at the same time, but having very different bodies and brains. For the Ariekei this difference in the subject is striking in the way they speak, as if they were invested by the sublime, by the impossible: it is as if EzRa were able to speak the Voice of our language.

Ez and Ra are not identical at all in appearance and character and are not genetically engineered but naturally synchronized. The Ariekei understand them but there is a break in the way EzRa talks, a unity, which is not unity:

“Ambassadors speak with empathic unity. That’s our job. What if that unity’s there and not-there?” He waited. “It’s impossible, is what. Right there in its form. And that is intoxicating. And they *mainline* it. It’s like a hallucination, a there-not-there. a contradiction that gets them high.”⁵⁹³

The Language of EzRa is a there-not-there, the impossibility of presence and absence at the same time. This impossible gap is what inebriates the Hosts⁵⁹⁴, turning EzRa’s Language into a drug. ““Ambassadors are orators, and those to whom their oration happens are oratees. Oratees are addicts. Strung out on an Ambassador’s Language.””⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹² It is worth reminding that Badiou uses language only because it is the only means to communicate but he does not believe it is a foundation for philosophy.

⁵⁹³ Miéville, *Embassytown*, p. 169.

⁵⁹⁴ Another name for the Ariekei, who host the humans on their planet Arieika.

⁵⁹⁵ Miéville, *Embassytown*, p. 169.

The event provoked by the appearance of EzRa opens the possibility for being and not being to co-exist, which could also be translated as the possibility that there could be something that has no referent, which is not really there. When Language was just a saying of the world it was merely a repetition: ‘Language had always been redundant: it had only ever been the world. Now the Ariekei were learning to speak, and to think, and it hurt.’⁵⁹⁶ Whereas Language is part of the routine for the Ariekei, the event in Badiou brings a revolution, something new. The impossibility of EzRa represents this rupture of the event, which will revolutionize Language itself and make it evolve towards metaphor.

This rupture represents the real event in the novel, which will make the Ariekei real subjects, not mere victims of Language. Having to come out of their Language, learning a new language, the Ariekei feel pain, they feel the difficulty of thinking in another way. This pain which shakes and in some cases shatters the very structures of their brains, this breach in the relationship between thought and reality has a devastating effect on the Hosts, who react with senseless violence, because thinking of another language also means thinking of the language of the Other.

The only rhetorical tool Language permits is simile because, in the same way as the Ariekei refuse technology as a medium of communication so they refuse any rhetorical artificiality in Language, that is, anything that can detach referential thought from reality. When they speak the Ariekei do not try to convince, entertain or manipulate their listener but simile is used to prove a point or express something that has not been expressed before. The ‘like’ of the simile allows to compare

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

thought and event (because even when performed the event actually happens), without stating that they are one and the same. In this way, abstract thought is anchored to reality and for this reason actuable:

Scile, linguist and Avice's husband (in a way), offers a more accurate, linguistic analysis of Language. He reflects on the impossibility of a language in which words equal existents: "Does it ever occur to you that this language is impossible, Avice--?" he said. "*Im, poss, ih, bul.* It makes no sense. They don't have polysemy. Words don't signify: they *are* their referents. How can they be sentient and not have symbolic language? How do their *numbers* work? It makes no sense."⁵⁹⁷

Interestingly enough, Scile equates sentience and symbolism, where the latter allows for words to mean something other than their obvious referential level, offering different meanings. Fiction would not be possible without symbolism and certainly genre such as science fiction, fantasy or weird fiction (to which the novel belongs) would not be literally thinkable. At this level, not even religion would be possible since it is essentially based on the presence of the divine in everyday reality and in the transcendental promises of words.

Scile's point of view is the opposite of the Ariekei whose sentience he is here questioning. Whereas the typical Ariekees can understand only if there is sentience in the speaker, Scile questions this assumption because he equals thought and symbol, in other words, he thinks that the brain works as a metaphor. As we have seen with Porush and the discoveries of neuroscience⁵⁹⁸, the mind actually thinks in metaphors, in short-circuits, it necessarily judges. The Ariekei's brain than is not a human brain, it does not need symbols, metaphors to perceive reality. How can

⁵⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁵⁹⁸ Miéville cites Lakoff for instance among Scile's lectures: Miéville, *Embassytown*, p. 141

individuality be possible when there is no room for metaphor in Language?

In another example, Scile actually separates the old concept of Logos, which implies judgement, from the thought of the Ariekei. Simile is said to be truth without judgement:

“Simile spells an argument out: it’s ongoing, explicit, truth-making. You don’t need ... *logos*, they used to call it. Judgement. You don’t need to ... to link incommensurables. Unlike if you claim: ‘This *is* that.’ When it patently is not. That’s what *we* do. That’s what we call ‘reason’, that exchange, metaphor. That *lying*. The world becomes a lie. That’s what Surl Teshecher wants. To bring in a lie.” He spoke very calmly. “it wants to usher in evil.”⁵⁹⁹

Simile speaks truth without mediation, whereas metaphor, ‘this is that,’ is a lying, which is not necessarily a lie. Simile says that something is *like* something else whereas metaphor says that something *is* something else. This being of metaphor is a lying, because something cannot be something else in reality, but it is not a lie because its purpose is not to tell a false reality; on the contrary, it tries to tell a truth that simile cannot tell. For our purpose it is worth to reiterate that only through metaphor we can tell the inexpressible in human language, that line between the transcendence in the human thought and the immanence of the body and the world. Simile implies a referential independent of thought but the brain needs a metaphor to relate or create an outside reality that otherwise would not exist. This space is what the Ariekei do not even have a conscience for, the basis for a conscience, meta-thinking, which is what really makes humans, at least in the novel, humans. Spanish Dancer at the end of the novel calls metaphor ‘lie.that.truths’ or ‘truthing.lie.’⁶⁰⁰

⁵⁹⁹ Miéville, *Embassytown*, p. 141. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 337.

What are the epic possibilities offered by metaphor as hyperbole? Mièville lists a few: ‘Anything was anything, now. Their minds sudden merchants: metaphor, like money, equalised the incommensurable. They could be mythologers now: they’d never had monsters, but now the world was all chimeras, each metaphor a splicing.’⁶⁰¹ What is more epic than thinking that anything can be anything else? But this is what metaphor can do: we can imagine anything as anything else. Such power is apparently limitless and as such it can end up into total transcendence as in cyberpunk. Cyberpunk completely erases the need not only for reality but for the body as well and the next stage of human devolution through technology is becoming a ghost in the machine.

The revolution brought by EzRa is often violent, some of the Hosts self-harming by ripping off their auditory wings and becoming deaf and primitively violent. Before the revolution the Ariekei have followed a distorted form of Heidegger’s diktat that language speaks us: ‘Language spoke us, the words that wanted to be city and machines had us speak them so they could be.’⁶⁰² Because they are victims of Language as well as the humans some of their number rebel by learning to lie: ‘their longtime striving for lies, to make Language mean what they wanted.’⁶⁰³ In order to take possession of Language, the Hosts have to learn to abstract, make their Language lie, or better, symbolize.

It goes without saying that this is true up to the point that language becomes and instrument to manipulate other people. Taking into account this danger, freedom

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

⁶⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 335.

⁶⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

from referentiality offers the possibility of changing the world and the challenge is worthier than living a life of slavery. ““The Ariekei in this room want to lie. That means thinking the world differently. Not referring: signifying.”⁶⁰⁴ Thinking the world differently means to change it because the only way we can conceive of the world critically is through our shared metaphors.

This lying, which is the possibility of fiction to challenge our conception of reality, is the only place left for an ethics of truth: ““If similes do their job well enough, they turn into something else. We tell the truth best by becoming lies.”⁶⁰⁵ In a rare impetus of commitment Alice even comes to proclaim: ““I don’t want to be a simile anymore,” I said. “I want to be a metaphor.””⁶⁰⁶ But what is this truth? The truth is exactly that Language can be a drug or our master if we do not learn to control it, to first make it other than reality and then to realize that language is not reality, there is no equivalence between the two. This means to accept that we conceive of reality through fiction and that only fiction can say of the Voice that connects the transcendence of our metaphor machine to the immanence of our lives.

The question ultimately arises: ‘*Can they think? If they can’t speak, can they think?*’ Language for the Ariekei was speech and thought at once. *Wasn’t it?*⁶⁰⁷ Can they think indeed? Is it for this reason that they start to behave as animal and kill other Ariekei and humans? Or in another reflection on the same theme: ‘Language, for the Ariekei, was truth: without it, what were they? An unsociety of psychopaths.’⁶⁰⁸

⁶⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

⁶⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

They are an unsociety because they cannot communicate. How do they interact then? 'Each trapped in itself. God knew how many of them, a strike-force of the lonely and lost. How did they move together? How did they coordinate their assaults? I thought again that they must be gusted by instinct and some deep-grammar of chaos: they could not plan.'⁶⁰⁹ This mythic Language traps us in our solitude when we do not face the other as Other. Unfortunately, Miéville only hints at this deep-grammar of chaos because it would have been interesting to imagine life outside of language but what we are left for now is that violence is the alternative form of communication with the Other when language is lost. *Embassytown* is an epic of metaphor that shows us that an ethical life is possible thanks to our metaphor machine when we accept that it is individual and that the Other also possesses one. The Ariekei mutilate their ears because they cannot conceive the will-to-listen, which is the will-to-say of the Other, her Voice which is always individual and, as such, immanently ethic.

Conclusion

⁶⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

When I started this work I set myself the task to study narratives of the last thirty years or so where violence had a predominant role. I have started from a neuroscience perspective to understand the connections between the way the brain thinks and its representations of violence in fiction. From a perspective that was only superficially scientific I have rapidly moved to more literary and philosophically territories that were more in accordance with my field of studies and interests.

The step from science to metaphysics however has been more natural than expected when neuroscience has suggested that the brain was actually a metaphor machine. This has entailed a study between the transcendence connected to metaphor and metaphysics and the immanence of the applied metaphor. The brain's purpose is to give order and meaning to a chaotic reality, chaotic because ultimately and irremediably outside it.

In order to investigate this connection between transcendence and immanence in the workings of the metaphor machine I have decided to use basic tools of rhetoric to frame my analysis and I have thus come to the realisation of a rhetoric of posthuman fiction which is not really bound to any school of rhetoric. I repeat, my intention was to use the tools of rhetoric to examine posthuman narratives and not to create a theory of the contemporary novel.

I have set the basis of the posthuman on the work of Rosi Braidotti and her theory of monistic matter that works on auto-poiesis for a constant re-creation of the subject in accordance to ever changing relationships she has with the culture, technology and nature around her. One of the main concerns of this work has been the definition of

the posthuman individual taking into account its connection to the narrative of violence.

The need for such a definition of the individual in relation to violence stems from the main theory I have tried to argue for that these narrative of violence find their origin in the frustration of the individual metaphor machine as suppressed by a dominating narrative that, following Walter Benjamin, I have variously called the narrative of the Law, of War, of Society, of the Superego, of Language. The question of the posthuman individual is fundamentally ethic: how does the individual behave when a narrative tries to impose itself and the individual loses her Voice, her will-to-say (both expressions come from the work of Agamben) the unique metaphor machine the individual has inside.

In the first part I have observed the relationship between the subject and language and noticed the various instances the individual uses in order to find her own identity against the predominant narrative. With 'Good Old Neon' I have observed a character, which has lost himself in the language of Society that he is able to reproduce so well that he ends up being a fraud. Frustrated by his inability to express his will-to-say, Neon commits suicide and from the grave is finally able to submit to a narrative that subverts with irony the status quote. The philosophical irony subsumed by Baudelaire and De Man creates a split in the individual in which the individual is able to finally look at her life from outside and thus cast a shadow over the narrative that has been dominating her narrative for so long. Irony then is the rhetorical tool used by Wallace and the ironic philosopher the form the posthuman takes in his work. As a consequence of the split between the metaphor machine and

the reality of the self the subject is revealed, following Bauman, as a liquid entity that wears any masks society offers without however having a choice not to choose. Where Bauman seems to deplore this incapacity of the individual not to choose Wallace considers the choice the individual has to decide which mask to wear instead as free will. Both with Braidotti and Bauman then we can say that the liquid posthuman expresses her individual Voice following the Law of Society but with the detachment of an ironist that takes seriously her relationship with the Other. Neon realises all of this after committing suicide because in death cry of the animal the Voice can finally be heard, and that Voice can also be a laugh.

With McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* I have individuated ellipsis as the main rhetorical tool. The elliptical posthuman represented by the kid survives without a name to the aggressive monologues of Judge Holden and his Law of War. In the silent withdrawal and refuse to act violently Holden sees his archenemy. Against the verbosity of the Judge the kid opposes his silent clemency. The Judge deprives reality of its immanence and changes it into signs in his book. Men are violently turned into empty signs in a reality made so bleak by the godlike figure of the Judge. Holden is a mythical figure that has to instate his power by being the only presence in the novel. The elliptical kid whoever is not reduced to a sign because he already has no name and no history. He not only refuses to wear the mask of the murderer but remains in an impossible state of non-choice where, like Bartelby, he simply decides not to. His absence is so overwhelming that the Judge has to kill him in order to fortify the mythical Law. Where the liquid posthuman had a choice, the elliptical posthuman decides not-to and to the split, ironic narrative opposes the absence in which her will-to-say finds its loudest expression in the sound of silence.

After *Language I* I have observed the presence of desire in the work of James Ballard. The Ballardian posthuman, living in the same Society as Neon, is affected by the peculiar situation of having all of her desire fulfilled. In the boredom of a life without desires she finds in the figure of the intermediary a source for new desire. The responsibilities of these characters are limited to their professions and positions and, consequently, they do not lead an ethical life. Their life on the contrary is mediated by the media of which the mediator is a personification. In the fusion between body and technology we find a perversion of Braidotti's theory but also a complete lack of interest in the fate of the Other. The protagonists of Ballard's novels aim to replace the intermediary in the creation of a psychopathology that invests the entire reality around them. The dominating narratives of these works in fact are created by an individual that is able to create and manipulate desire and then be a vehicle for its diffusion. Extreme metaphor is the tool used by the writer treating his novels and characters as experiments. The Ballardian posthuman is the place of an experiment, of a simulation of the real, in order to understand what goes wrong in a completely mediated reality. As a marionette, this posthuman moves in the stylised forms prescribed by the mythic, liquid Society in an imperfect repetition (Luckhurst) that sees her trying to control her life through the manipulations offered by the media. Murder and rape become activities that can be constantly edited in order for the experiment to reach the expected result. In the vacuum created by the apparent lack of a will-to-say the individual looks for new desires. The Ballardian posthuman can almost be represented by the figure of the bored, mad scientist dangerous for her distorted psychopathologies.

In the detachment created by the media and seeing life through a camera also lives the synecdoche that is Patrick Bateman. Dominated by the narrative of the Superego Bateman is another exchangeable character. He stands for any American white yuppie of the 80's. In the ideology dominating his narrative this corresponds the being human, anything beyond that is non-human. It is tempting not considering Bateman as a posthuman at all because he is at the opposite pole of Braidotti's theory: where Braidotti refuses a unifying theory of the European and Vitruvian man and of the presence of difference in posthumanity, Bateman only recognizes and exchanges identities with his similar. He is full of alibi because anyone could be him but at the same time he is frustrated by the fact that, in such a world, he has no individuality. Bateman's narrative is blank, without individuality while at the same time he searches for his individuality through the violence he commits against the Other that he considers as the non-human. In the factual, information based life of Bateman the Other is an object through which Bateman seeks the recognition of his individuality. His will-to-say is misdirected by the fact that he seeks himself in people he considers as non-human. For this reason he is deaf to their suffering, they have no will-to-say for him because they are not human and as such have no Voice. Bateman wants to scream his Voice, screaming his individual presence but, unfortunately, his metaphor machine is already completely obliterated by the paternal metaphor of the superego. Bateman represents the failure to notice his condition as victim of a dominating narrative.

The oxymoronic man represented by the narrator of Palahniuk's *Fight Club* represents another example of the split in the posthuman. This time however, the narrator is not aware of the split, the paradox being he develops a fictional separate

identity he is unaware of until the very end of the novel. Victim to the same narrative of Society as Neon and Bateman, the narrator is slowly losing his identity whereas his alter ego is ever more real. In this other narrative of information, Tyler Durden is full of it and with it starts a revolution. He hears the suffering of the people around him, the people like the narrator himself, and gives them a way out through violence: in the fight club they can find their individuality once again by beating each other. In the dumbness and boredom created by the narrative of the Superego the fighters can only hear each other by punching their Voice out. The creation of this fighter self however is the result of a contradiction, that is, the fact that it is a fictional identity that aims to take the place of the individual. Instead of developing a mask for the individual to deal with reality, the metaphor machine wants to replace the individual. This is the first instance of the posthuman as fictional being.

In the analysis of cyberpunk I develop a theory of the character that is also a theory of the witness. Following Lyotard and Agamben I try to study the process of subjectification and de-subjectification of the individual in order to create a personal narrative of the event. As only witness of the even, in fact, the individual is the only source we have to validate such an event. The character in cyberpunk abandons the body to lose herself in cyberspace, which is a collective dominating narrative. The postcyberpunk of Stephenson offers an alternative to the posthuman in the detachment of the individual that recognizes the narrative of the Metaverse for what it is: a fiction. With the postcyberpunk of Dantec I have observed the transformation into man of a character in a sort of rewriting of the fable of Pinocchio. If the story of the character started with its continual reference to the individual, in a history that predates the story of literature, Dantec offers a character that not only is aware of

being a fiction, in opposition to Durden, but who becomes a human and dies as a human. The posthuman is a fictional construct who acquires a will-to-say that makes her ultimately human or humane. From Bauman we had already studied the tendency of man to wear masks. The posthuman is the narrative of the stories the individual metaphor machine tells in order to build the individual. The Voice is the will-to-say this narration.

In the last part I have argued for a new form of epic, based on the New Italian Epic suggested by Wu Ming 1, which is able to offer an ethical solution to the problems created by these narrative of violence. The three characteristics of this form of epic are: the state of crisis in which the individual constantly lives between the potential possibilities of identity and its actuation often frustration by society; hyperbole, as figure of speech of this epic, which is the excess of connotation embedded in these narratives. This excess is synonymous with the will-to-say of the individual, which can never be in the form of denotation but only in the surplus of connotation. The posthuman is always beyond herself, in the shout of her Voice that always lives a trace or an echo. The final aspect of New Epic is ecocentrism, which is a consequence of the theory of the posthuman articulated by Braidotti. Ecocentrism comes with the loss not of the individual but of the epic hero. The will-to-say of the individual is placed side by side with the will-to-listen for the Voice of the Other. The epic re-writings of ethic represented by the works of China Miéville finally give a Voice to the Other through the representation of impossible characters and different cultures.

The work of Miéville then is one of the first to offer an ethical position towards these narratives of Violence. He shows the failure of the core narratives in favour of the narratives of periphery. He shows that violence is caused not so much by the frustration of the individual's metaphor machine suffocated by a dominated narrative but the fact that the obsession of the individual metaphor machine has made him deaf to the sound of the Voice of the Other. Both the individual and the Other have personal metaphor machines and the new ethical epic should be founded on the dialogue of many individuals and many Others each and every one with the potential of creating entire fictional worlds and realities. We express our Voice and individuality through our personal metaphor machines and so does the Other. An ethic for the posthuman presupposes first of all a will-to-listen because in the Voice of the Other is also our Voice. This figure of the Posthuman corresponds to the reader who, by the act of starting reading the narration of the Other, has already performed the ecocentric act of listening.

This theory of listening has implications that could be developed in at least three areas.

The first is geographic and involves extending these theories to Voices from the peripheries. Natsuo Kirino or Otsuichi in Japan, Victor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin in Russia, Nnedi Okorafor and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o from Africa, are just examples of narratives from the periphery that offer narratives of violence that need to be explored. World literature is the literature that listens to all the Voices be it from the core or the periphery.

The second area of exploration concerns those narratives that directly deal with violence written between fiction and essay. I refer to *Gomorra* (2006) by Roberto Saviano but also that encyclopedia on violence that is *Rising Up and Rising Down: Some Thoughts on Violence, Freedom and Urgent Means* (2003), written by William T. Vollmann.

Finally it would be worth exploring other media. I am not thinking about films as it is an area already overwhelmed by criticism but comic books such as the works of Warren Ellis and Alan Moore or manga such as *Death Note*. The media of the graphic novel is ever more successful but it has not been explored enough yet, especially considering how graphic violence often is in these works.

I am sure that other areas can be visited because where there is a reader or a viewer or a listener there is the need for an ethics of narrative that explores the way violence is expressed in contemporary art. I am not talking of art that should aim to narratives that explore violence but of criticism that explores the ways in which narratives deal with violence. It is a criticism for the reader and for whoever is concerned with an ethics of the posthuman.

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