

MA Thesis

The Role of Popular Mythology and Popular Culture in Post-war America, as represented by four novels - *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* by John Barth, *White Noise* by Don DeLillo, and *Vineland* by Thomas Pynchon

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Abstract of Thesis

The Role of Popular Mythology and Popular Culture in Post-war America, as represented by four novels - *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, by John Barth, *White Noise*, by Don DeLillo, and *Vineland*, by Thomas Pynchon.

The four novels - *The Floating Opera*, *The End of the Road*, *White Noise*, and *Vineland* - are representative of the cultural shift away from traditional moral concepts after World War II. Popular culture has increasingly become the guiding force for the continuation of American society, and in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, popular culture and its creation of myth (according to the author's representation of America) has become embedded in the system and life of contemporary America.

John Barth's novel *The End of the Road* and its predecessor *The Floating Opera* are important in any discussion of the role of popular culture and popular mythology in post-war America. They both appear to signal an end to sincere intellectual thought or debate, and the notion of imposing a rational moral world upon the social landscape surrounding the individual. *The Floating Opera* explores the common tendency of society to avoid difficult intellectual struggles, and the central character and first-person narrator ultimately realises that questions about the nature of existence are of no objective value. In *The End of the Road* the character Jacob Horner adopts a superficial reflection of pre-existing rules and social conventions. Together these novels reflect much of what is at present understood as the post-modern aesthetic, and are indicative of many of the changes in America that were about to occur. *The Floating Opera* was published in 1956 and *The End of the Road* was published in 1958, but they are still highly relevant beyond the period in which they were written.

White Noise (1984) portrays a system founded on the Hollywood mythology, and the superficial reflection of pre-existing rules and social conventions found in *The End of the Road*. The novel revolves around the experiences of the narrator, Jack Gladney, a university lecturer who teaches Hitler studies at Blacksmith College, and his wife Babette. The course which he teaches on Hitler is influenced by Hollywood myth, and the novel portrays a consumer-based society that has lost much of the firm moral basis which traditional religious concepts formerly supplied. The role of television, Hollywood, and the idea of simulation are all explored throughout the novel and are important forces in any examination of post-war American society.

Finally, in *Vineland* (1990) the social upheavals which occurred during the late '60s and early '70s are explored from the perspective of the 1980s. The novel refers to a vast array of images and icons from popular culture, and the brief youth rebellion, in the late '60s, which failed to inspire any final social revolution. The result of this failed social revolution is a landscape of popular culture in modern America, where Godzilla leaves footprints in Japan and popular mythology from television or pulp novels coincides with everyday life. There are references in typical Pynchonesque fashion to those who must necessarily be orchestrating these social and cultural alterations, but they, as specific individuals, remain anonymous or hidden from the scope of the author (although, as in *White Noise*, there are deliberate references to the CIA and other agencies or departments within the U.S. Federal Government). *Vineland* is important, therefore, both as an account of the social changes which occurred in America between the late '60s and '80s, and the increasing role of popular culture in America.

These four novels form the basis of an exploration of the role of popular mythology and popular culture in post-war America. They form a clear progression, and allow a detailed analysis of the social and cultural changes which contemporary America has undergone since the end of World War II.

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Preface

The title of this thesis is “The Role of Popular Mythology and Popular Culture in Post-war America, as represented by four novels – *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* by John Barth, *White Noise* by Don DeLillo, and *Vineland* by Thomas Pynchon.” The topic requires a succinct definition of both “Popular Mythology” and “Popular Culture,” and some historical documentation in relation to relevant developments in post-war American history. I have deliberately placed this information in the preface, because, prior to an analysis of the four post-war American Literary texts as they relate to the topic, it is first necessary to clarify the topic and illustrate the relevance of these texts with regard to actual events.

I have decided to extend the function of the preface to incorporate this information, principally because I wish to maintain a clear structure to the thesis and I do not wish to explain every historical reference or related event (to the texts) in the body of the thesis. In the introduction and conclusion I concentrate on providing Literary context to the topic and some post-modern theory, while the body of the thesis is strictly an analysis of the four chosen texts in so far as they represent¹ the role of popular mythology and popular culture in post-war America.

“Popular Culture” is evident within all forms of media (including print), and is by its nature directed toward the broadest possible audience. “Popular Culture” may be quite simply defined as “Mass Culture” or the “mass media,” and this is how I interpret the term throughout the thesis. The term “mass medium” is defined, by *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, as “a medium of communication (such as radio, television, newspapers) that reaches a large number of people; usu. in *pl.*, such

media collectively.”² Popular culture similarly exists within these means of communication (or media) - predominantly film and television and to a lesser extent radio, novels, newspapers and magazines - and popular culture also appeals to the broadest possible audience.

Popular culture is, therefore, the “forms of art, music, or other culture which appeal to or are favoured by many people; intended primarily to please, amuse, or entertain.”³ In contrast, serious “music, literature, etc.” is “not intended simply to amuse, please, or entertain.”⁴ The novels chosen for this thesis are examples of serious literature, not simply due to form or aesthetic design (it was not for this reason that they were chosen), but rather because they all comment, through the use of various narrative styles and techniques, on (modern American) society and approach an objective truth or understanding about existence.

According to Dominic Strinati in *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture*, it “seems difficult to define popular culture independently of the theory which is designed to explain it,”⁵ and for this reason I have provided only a basic, dictionary definition of this term and shall avoid any irrelevant theory. According to Strinati, “for the Frankfurt School, popular culture is that mass culture, produced by the culture industry, which secures the stability and continuity of capitalism,”⁶ and I for the most part agree with this definition of popular culture. Although popular culture is largely created by the “culture industry” of America and fundamentally assists in the continuation of this capitalist system, it does perform a legitimate role in

¹ The term “represent” was chosen in the topic because the texts are not historical sources although they relate to a certain period and certain actual events. As a metaphor the texts (“signifier”) both reflect and define the subject of concern (or the “signified”).

² *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Volume 1: A-M) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 1708.

³ *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 2292.

⁴ *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 2785.

⁵ Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to Theories of Popular Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. xvii.

the society of America and the world. This should be asserted before any evaluation of the role of popular culture and popular mythology in post-war America.

The creation of myth within forms of popular culture - for the most part film and television - explains the use of the term “Popular Mythology” in the title of this thesis. The term “myth” is defined by *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as:

1 A traditional story, either wholly or partially fictitious, providing an explanation for or embodying a popular idea concerning some natural or social phenomenon or some religious belief or ritual; *spec.* one involving supernatural persons, actions, or events; a similar newly created story. M19. **2** A widely-held (esp. untrue or discredited popular) story or belief; a misconception; a misrepresentation of the truth; an exaggerated or idealized conception of a person, institution, etc.; a person, institution, etc., widely idealized or misrepresented. M19. **3** Myths collectively or as a genre; the technique or habit of creating myths. M19.⁷

Myth includes figures or events from traditional stories, but is foremost (in this thesis) “a misrepresentation of the truth” or involves an “exaggerated or idealized conception of a person, institution, etc.,” where “popular mythology” is, most obviously in the post-war period, consciously created and encouraged by the American culture industry.

“Popular Mythology” entails a falsification of reality,⁸ according to popular misconceptions, which occurs in various forms of the media and conforms largely to the “Mythotherapy” endorsed by the Doctor in *The End of the Road*. The “Mythotherapy” of the Doctor in *The End of the Road*, which is discussed in detail in the body of this thesis, is designed to avoid reality, avoid self-reflection, and promote action without notions of morality or traditional ideas about correct behaviour.

⁶ Strinati, p. xviii.

⁷ *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, p. 1874.

⁸ This falsification of reality involves a departure from historical truth or accuracy and a departure from the recognition of traditional power sources, where “myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made.” Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), p. 142.

The practical realisation of ‘Mythotherapy’ occurs within popular culture, and in *White Noise* the various therapies of the Doctor are witnessed within this representation of contemporary American society. *Vineland* includes various references to popular culture and demonstrates the loss of any clear distinction between popular myth and reality. The four texts relate clearly to the role of popular mythology and popular culture in post-war America, and were chosen because of their influence upon and relevance to the period and also their relevance to the topic. The four texts exist outside the myth evident in modern film and television and offer a valid perspective on post-war America. As a “serious” literary metaphor, each text comments on (American) society and aspires toward a reality which approaches an objective understanding, and each text deserves, for this reason, both academic attention and greater public recognition.

It is necessary to give historical evidence with regard to the post-war period in America, and in particular relevant issues and references raised in the four chosen texts and in this thesis. The origins of mass media in America occur prior to the post-war period, when “the growth of the idea of mass culture [... is] notably evident from the 1920s and 1930s.”⁹ It is however necessary to examine these origins, because:

The social significance of popular culture in the modern era can be charted by the way it has been identified by the idea of mass culture. The coming of the mass media and the increasing commercialisation of culture and leisure gave rise to issues, interests and debates which are still with us today.¹⁰

In a discussion of the role of popular mythology and popular culture in post-war America, the early forms of mass-produced culture may inform an understanding of the contemporary culture industry in America, where, apart from the film industry and

⁹ Strinati, p. 2.

¹⁰ Strinati, p. 2.

Hollywood, the song-writers of “Tin Pan Alley” are the most notable evidence of early mass culture in America.

In *The Floating Opera* there is a reference to early Vaudeville and travelling troupes, which are forms of popular culture and popular entertainment notably evident in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. After 1828,

White performers right across the country were imitating black music and dance, and presenting it to white audiences, [... where the] slapstick comedy of Mr Interlocutor, Mr Tambo and Mr Bones made up the first part of the minstrel show.¹¹

The performance of Tambo and Bones and Mr. Interlocutor in *The Floating Opera* also existed within real life, historical America, and was an early form of popular culture catering to public, preconceived notions about reality.

The origins of the contemporary American music industry are to some extent found in “Tin Pan Alley,” which “was the beginning of the ‘pop’ music industry as we know it today.”¹² In 1900 song-writers

Worked in many of the offices near [New York’s] Union Square [... where] their job was to write songs which would sell to the public in great numbers, and so make a lot of money for the publishers who printed them.¹³

These songs were written in great numbers or mass-produced, in response to the market, where

Tin Pan Alley was in business to write songs in much the same way that Coca-Cola were in business to produce their soft drink. The faster the songs or the Coke could be produced, the more money there was to be made.¹⁴

Capitalism is the motivating force behind mass culture and “Tin Pan Alley” itself, since it is purely the willingness of the available market to buy or listen to the songs

¹¹ John Shepherd, *Tin Pan Alley* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 19.

¹² Shepherd, p. 2.

¹³ Shepherd, p. 1.

¹⁴ Shepherd, p. 6.

of “Tin Pan Alley” which dictates the rate of production in this early form of mass entertainment.

Industry and culture are clearly interrelated in the United States (in the modern era), and even in the mid-1940s “the dependence of the most powerful broadcasting company on the electrical industry, or of the motion picture industry on the banks, is characteristic of the whole sphere, whose individual branches are themselves economically interwoven.”¹⁵ This relationship between capitalism and popular culture is not only evident within “Tin Pan Alley,” but has become institutionalised in almost all forms of modern American mass media. Big business and the Federal Government largely control modern mass culture in America, where even youth rebellion and youth culture is a valuable market resource (among many other target groups or target areas).

In *Vineland*, the character, Mucho Maas, typifies the movement of the music industry between the ‘60s and ‘80s from a radical youth culture to a capitalist-structured industry, “as revolution went blending into commerce.”¹⁶ This novel also contains an overwhelming number of references to popular culture, illustrating both the rate of production and the importance of mass culture in modern American society. According to the representations of 1980s America in both *White Noise* and *Vineland*, television, film and the mass media have infiltrated all aspects of modern life to such an extent that the mass media has become a significant and ongoing influence on individual and social behaviour.

The formula which “Tin Pan Alley” adopted remains within the contemporary music industry:

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (University of Sydney Library Electronic Item), p. 4.

¹⁶ Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland* (London: Minerva, 1991), p. 308

Fashions change and singers change, but the formula remains the same: a well-written song, appealing to the general public's emotions, sung by an artist who can put over the song's message with conviction.¹⁷

Naturally market research and marketing have become significantly more sophisticated since the early to mid twentieth century (and the rise of "Tin Pan Alley"). However, the formula remains the same, where the role of the writer is still central to the production of mass culture.

In the contemporary American culture industry, the role of the writer (or writers) has simply become hidden from the audience. Films, similar to popular song, are mass-produced, where

Within the structure of Hollywood, writers are essential but undervalued. This problem of diminished value is reinforced by their virtual invisibility to the general public.¹⁸

In television writers or teams of writers create the majority of programs, where, for example, in 1971 writers (and not a carefully marketed celebrity) "wrote all the network television dramatic, comedy, and variety programs produced in the country [America]."¹⁹ The importance of television writers has not diminished in the period since 1971, yet writers do not seem to be publicly acknowledged in the present as they may have been in the past (especially within the celebrity-orientated modern environment of the U.S. culture industry).

Writers do not maintain final control over their work, and these works are frequently censored or suffer alteration in the process of public presentation:

There is room for different interpretations of exactly how tens of thousands of writers, journalists, broadcasters, editors, and producers of videos and films

¹⁷ Shepherd, p. 138.

¹⁸ Jorja Prover, *No One Knows Their Names: Screenwriters in Hollywood* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1994), p. 10.

¹⁹ Herbert I. Schiller, *Corporate, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 8n.

are made to accede, or voluntarily shape their creations, to the taste of the Established Order.²⁰

This “Established Order” includes the corporate powers, where

During the 1950s major corporations like U.S. Steel, Goodyear, Kraft, and Philco literally owned whole shows, which gave them substantial control over production and, by extension, over content.²¹

This interference in the culture industry by corporate powers and industrial magnates existed around the time of World War II. According to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who wrote the essay *Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception* in the mid-1940s, “there is the agreement – or at least the determination – of all executive authorities not to produce or sanction anything that in any way differs from their own rules, their own ideas about consumers, or above all themselves.”²² This “ruthless unity in the culture industry is,” as Adorno and Horkheimer predicted in the mid-1940s, “evidence of what will happen in politics.”²³ This statement pre-empted many of the future developments in both public and hidden American politics, and refers most importantly to the centralisation of U.S. Government power during and after WWII.

More important (with regard to this thesis) than the role of corporate powers and industrial magnates is the role of the American Government or “big government” in the culture industry of America. The influence of the various government agencies has developed and significantly increased in the post-war period. Besides the obvious military expansion during and after World War II, police, investigatory, and intelligence functions have grown considerably in recent decades.²⁴ And, in particular,

²⁰ Schiller, p. 8.

²¹ Ella Taylor, *Prime-Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 19-20.

²² Adorno and Horkheimer, p. 4.

²³ Adorno and Horkheimer, p. 4.

²⁴ Schiller, p. 161.

the intelligence agencies exert influence over corporate America and the culture industry, where

The strong state, as a regulating instrument of potential economic crisis and political disorder, has powerful friends and defenders, some of whom are in the transnational corporate community itself.²⁵

The influence of the government agencies in the mass media is perhaps best witnessed in the content of television programs and film. During the 1981 season the programs “*The CIA and Today’s FBI*”²⁶ were aired, where the subject and titles of these programs display the willingness of the government to become involved in the mythology of the mass culture industry. The CIA and FBI are constantly reinventing themselves through the various available forms of media, but, in this example, no attempt is made to conceal the subject and political nature of the programming. Similarly, in *Vineland* an obvious link is formed between the television and the government (in this case the military) as Hector’s television program is interrupted by an “Anglo in fatigues,” who states that he is “commanding officer of state defense forces in this area.”²⁷

The culture industry may be controlled through various means. For example, in *Sabbatical: A Romance* by John Barth, indirect influence is applied through a “New York literary agent.” Fenwick is advised to write a spy novel by Margot Scourby because officially “the public seems not to tire of spy novels.”²⁸ Fenwick summarises the true position of the literary agent by stating: “you’ll sell what they want. Ciao, Fenn, says Margot Scourby: that’s C-I-A – Addio, Margot.”²⁹ Fenwick deliberately refers to the CIA and understands the real source of the literary agent’s interest in

²⁵ Schiller, p. 161.

²⁶ Taylor, p. 156.

²⁷ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 339.

²⁸ John Barth, *Sabbatical: A Romance* (New York: Putnam, c1982), p. 276.

²⁹ Barth, *Sabbatical: A Romance*, p. 277.

popular spy novels. The use of an intermediary is an effective form of coercion from the perspective of the CIA (or the American Government) because it leaves no tangible evidence and in this case allows for the excuse of catering to the interests of the public (rather than the admitting to the public that the interests of the American Government are involved).

The involvement of the CIA (or the American Government) and the culture industry did in fact begin with the formulation of the Central Intelligence Agency Act of 1949. This Act provided the basis for CIA “action programs,” including ventures in international broadcasting and film production and infiltration of organisations of many kinds, at home and abroad.³⁰ The Act allowed unspecified activities abroad, which included involvement in international broadcasting on a world-wide scale.

But the CIA did not confine its activities exclusively to foreign countries and various front organisations were established in America. Control and influence over the culture industry domestically and abroad did not occur immediately or as a single process. It was a process which began with radio (the first of several early broadcasting projects was Radio Free Europe) and was then followed by the other forms of mass media, including film, television and even newsreels. The typical method to promote and control foreign and domestic ventures was the use of an intermediary to provide funds, and in the Dulles era (the period in which Allen Dulles was the director of the CIA) secret CIA subsidies were used to infiltrate labour unions, youth groups, foundations, and to influence the content of books and magazines.³¹

The influence of the CIA and the secrets of the intelligence community, of which the relationship between the CIA and the culture industry is one such secret,

³⁰ Erik Barnouw, *The Image Empire: A History of Broadcasting in the United States* (Vol. 3) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 349n1.

are referred to in *White Noise* in connection with Dana Breedlove. After stating: “Perhaps I was beginning to understand my ex-wives and their ties to intelligence,” Jack asks himself: “Are secrets a tunnel to a dreamworld where you control events?”³² This is a reference to the hidden power of the U.S. intelligence community and in particular the CIA (which is the employer of Jack’s ex-wife Dana Breedlove). This dream-like world of hidden control will be discussed and revealed in this thesis as it relates to both the texts and the topic. The centralisation of power and the importance of the CIA in the determination of the policy of the American Government are important in an understanding of the term “American Government,” as it is used in this thesis, and understanding the deliberate references to the CIA (and other agencies and departments of the American Federal Government) in the two later novels.

There are references to the CIA in both *White Noise* and *Vineland*, and references to the FBI in *Vineland* (obviously the two Barth novels were written shortly after the creation of the CIA, and the CIA does not feature in these novels, but in Barth’s later novel *Sabbatical: A Romance* there are extensive references to the CIA and I refer to this novel in both the preface and the introduction). It is these government agencies which are most relevant to this thesis, and I shall provide some relevant historical information about foremost the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), a certain amount regarding the FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation), and also about the NSA (National Security Agency). There are no direct references to the NSA in the four chosen texts of the thesis, but this agency is relevant with regard to the sorting and storing of both domestic and global surveillance (where surveillance in various forms and the computer databases of the American Government are mentioned foremost in *Vineland*).

³¹ Barnouw, p. 100.

³² Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (London: Picador, 1986), p. 275.

The CIA and NSA were both initially intended to gather intelligence on foreign countries, but both have covertly, and even illegally, operated within America. These domestic operations are of the most importance with regard to the topic, but I shall not confine this discussion purely to events occurring within the borders of the United States. It is necessary to illustrate the extent to which the American intelligence agencies have influenced and exert control over the actions and policy of the American Government (both domestic and foreign), and the manner in which some of the post-war domestic and foreign operations of the U.S. Government relate to references in the texts.

In illustration of America's increasingly expansionist role in the post-war period, there have been various covert and overt military operations.³³ I shall not attempt to explain the cause and objective of every incursion or operation (whether domestic or foreign), since the preface is only designed to clarify references from the four chosen texts and the important terms used in this thesis. Since I am not a qualified historian, I shall mostly refer to outside sources in this brief history of the American Government and the various Federal Government agencies.

In the introduction I refer to World War II as the moment in which power shifts from Europe to America, which is a "serious" literary version or understanding of history as represented foremost in *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon. This understanding of history is validated by actual events, in particular America's role in world affairs prior to, during and after World War II. Until 1941 the insular United States of America did not possess an external intelligence organisation, and relied upon the FBI for domestic protection and relative stability:

³³ Don DeLillo states in an interview, "the thing that's interesting about living in another country is that it's difficult to forget you're an American. The actions of the American Government won't let you." Robert R. Harris. Interview with Don DeLillo. ("Don DeLillo Biography." <http://perival.com/delillo/ddbio.html> "from Harris, 1982.")

The egocentric and ambitious J. Edgar Hoover expanded his FBI empire in 1924 to protect the country's internal security and expanded it to include Latin America. With G-men policing its back yard, America, like Gulliver, slept content, confident it would not awaken one morning immobilized by the little people. After all, Germany was thousands of miles away, beyond the Atlantic Ocean. Japan was a similar distance across the Pacific from the United States although Hawaii and its anchorage of Pearl Harbor was much closer to the American mainland.³⁴

This policy of isolation began to alter on 11 July 1941, when Roosevelt issued a Presidential Directive to centralise intelligence assessments from abroad. America necessarily became involved in the affairs of the world via this form of intelligence, and then via the armed conflict of World War II.

America's direct involvement in the outcome of world events did not cease with the conclusion of World War II, but instead increased with the newly perceived threat of Communism. Although fears about Communism existed in the United States prior to 1945 - "in 1918, the barons of American capital needed no reason for their war against communism other than the threat to their wealth and privilege,"³⁵ and anti-Communist propaganda existed in America from this moment - the American Government only began after 1945 to actively intervene throughout the world in response to the perceived threat of Communist expansion.

The CIA was created in 1947 within the post-war environment of an emerging cold war between Russia and America. In many respects the CIA developed "in accordance with a maximalist interpretation of the National Security Act [... and even] strayed beyond those limits,"³⁶ where Communism to some extent legitimised the various covert actions of the Central Intelligence Agency. The actions of the CIA include assassination, drug tests, overthrowing and influencing foreign governments

³⁴ Brian Freemantle, *CIA* (London: Michael Joseph/ Rainbird, 1983), p. 15.

³⁵ William Blum, *The CIA: A Forgotten History: US Global Interventions Since World War 2* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books Ltd., 1986) p. 5.

³⁶ Jeffrey T. Richelson and Desmond Ball, *The Ties That Bind* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 108.

and countries, involvement in the trade of illegal narcotics, and surveillance (both domestic and foreign). All of these forms of covert behaviour by the American State are mentioned in *Vineland*, including assassination attempts on Fidel Castro, drug-assisted interrogation, involvement of the CIA in the drug trade, and domestic surveillance (the exact reference and page number I give throughout the preface as each incident or operation is mentioned).

In 1948 the CIA mounted a massive propaganda campaign in Italy, where “millions of dollars were pumped into the Christian Democrats and other non-communist parties.”³⁷ The American Government ignored the fact that the Communists had been the single most active anti-fascist group in Italy during the war and “the Christian Democrat government of 1948 and other electoral opponents on the right were riddled through with collaborators, monarchists and plain unreconstructed fascists.”³⁸ The immediate policy of the United States Government was simply to halt the spread of Communism, and this initiative was successful in Italy and also in France. At the very same time, France, which was also heavily dependent upon American financial aid, ousted all its Communist ministers as well.³⁹ As Freemantle notes: “The defeat of the communists at the polls is historically viewed by the CIA not only as their first but as one of their most outstandingly successful covert operations.”⁴⁰

With the creation of the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) in 1948, the CIA began, ostensibly under the direction of the OPC, to form its own foreign policy and organisation of covert activities. The OPC “though supposed to be part of CIA, and pledged to keep the State Department informed of what it was doing, was soon

³⁷ Freemantle, p. 29.

³⁸ Blum, pp. 23-24.

³⁹ Blum, p. 25n.

⁴⁰ Freemantle, p. 29.

working entirely independently.’⁴¹ The OPC had become under Frank Wisner’s direction a successful intelligence unit on its own, operating on a secret budget with little or no superintendence.⁴² Under the direction of Allen Dulles the OPC was then brought into the Central Intelligence Agency, but remained mostly unaltered:

Wisner was content with that since he was assured that, as deputy director of Plans, he would still be running covert operations and would be in complete charge of the far-flung intelligence service he had built up. He now had what the OPC called ‘back alley’ operations going in Europe and Asia, all of them aimed at curtailing Communist advances. [...] He was working in close cooperation with General Gehlen’s units in Germany. He was operating in Malaya, the Dutch East Indies, and sending agents into China.⁴³

The CIA under Allen Dulles soon gained freedom to infiltrate U.S. embassies, consulates, and the U.S. Information Agency offices in foreign countries and in all parts of the world, and particularly in Germany, South America, and South East Asia, the Agency expanded and infiltrated every arm of U.S. government.⁴⁴

As Mosley notes:

The Act of 1947 had set up the National Security Council to oversee operations in which the Agency’s many arms were now engaged, but in the two years since Allen had been operating as director of the CIA, the Council had had no real control over the activities that he ordered and approved – manifold activities, which were protected from interference by Foster’s brotherly wing.

In 1955, Allen was able to extend the CIA’s kingdom to the stratosphere.⁴⁵

Even Allen Dulles was now not able to supervise and direct every operation undertaken by the CIA.⁴⁶ “The trouble with the Agency was that there was such a

⁴¹ Leonard Mosley, *Dulles: A Biography of Eleanor, Allen, and John Foster Dulles and Their Family Network* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), p. 244.

⁴² Mosley, p. 272.

⁴³ Mosley, p. 272.

⁴⁴ Mosley, p. 364.

⁴⁵ Mosley, pp. 364-365.

⁴⁶ John Barth refers to Allen Dulles and the newly created (1951) “Directorate of Plans in the CIA” in; Barth, *Sabbatical: A Romance*, p. 176.

multiplicity of small activities going on at any time that no one could keep account of them all, except, perhaps, the finance department.”⁴⁷

By 1961 the CIA formed a relatively autonomous body or organisation:

It is probable that the CIA had more staff overseas, under official and unofficial covers, than the State Department, and this in addition to its countless paid agents. Often the CIA Chief of Station had been in a particular country longer than the American Ambassador, had more money at his disposal, and exerted more influence. When it suited their purposes, Agency officers would completely bypass the ambassador and normal protocol to deal directly with the country’s head of state and other high officials.

The CIA had its own military capabilities, including its own air force; for all intents and purposes, its own foreign service with, indeed, its own foreign policy, though never at cross-purposes with fundamental US cold-war, anti-communist ideology and goals.⁴⁸

The CIA governed its own actions and by 1961 exerted influence throughout the world, having infiltrated all the foreign bases and embassies of the American Government.

The CIA was involved in assassination attempts and assassinations around the world. Congressional leaders have been told of Central Intelligence Agency involvement in a plot by French dissidents to assassinate the late French President Charles De Gaulle, which occurred sometime in the mid-1960s – probably in 1965 or 1966.⁴⁹ “A hired assassin, armed with a poison ring, was to be slipped into a crowd of old soldiers of France when General De Gaulle was to be the host at a reception for them.”⁵⁰ The killer would clasp the general’s hand and thereby inject the poison. During the early 1960s in Congo the CIA attempted to assassinate Patrice Lumumba⁵¹ and allegedly completed the operation: “In 1978, former CIA Africa specialist John Stockwell related in his book how a ranking Agency officer had told him of driving

⁴⁷ Mosley, p. 370.

⁴⁸ Blum, p. 165.

⁴⁹ Blum, p. 169.

⁵⁰ Blum, p. 169.

around with Lumumba's body in the trunk of the car, 'trying to decide what to do with it.'"⁵² Although it was never used, the CIA had previously sent one of its scientists, Joseph Schneider, to the Congo carrying "lethal biological material" (a virus) specifically intended for use in Lumumba's assassination.⁵³ The virus was transported by diplomatic pouch.

In *Vineland* a similarly bizarre assassination attempt (as those plotted and carried out against De Gaulle and Lumumba by the CIA) is mentioned as DL (with Howie and Sledge) attempts to find Frenesi and rescue her from Brock Vond. On poles are medallions with faces "looking directly at the viewer with a strangely personal expression, as if just about to speak" and "inscribed at the base of each pole [...] was the story that went with the face."⁵⁴ Among these images and words is a reference to a failed attempt to assassinate Fidel Castro by the fictional "Virgil ('Sparky') Ploce, 1923-1959."⁵⁵ The attempt involved offering Castro "an ingenious bomb of 'Sparky's' own design"⁵⁶ in a cigar, but the plot was uncovered when Castro bit the wrong end and revealed the explosive device.

This would seem to be pure fantasy and offer no valid relationship with actual events, but various assassination plots against Fidel Castro, by the CIA in particular, did actually exist and many even resembled the fictional plan by Virgil Ploce in *Vineland*. These CIA assassination attempts were not only designed to kill Fidel Castro but were also designed to assist in the overthrow of the Communist regime in Cuba (to which the reference to a U.S. assassination attempt on Fidel Castro, in *Vineland*, also implicitly refers).

⁵¹ John Barth refers to the murder of Patrice Lumumba in; Barth, *Sabbatical: A Romance*, p. 118, and the CIA connections to this event.

⁵² Blum, p. 176.

⁵³ Blum, p. 175.

⁵⁴ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 251.

⁵⁵ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 251.

The various assassination attempts against Fidel Castro in Cuba and other incursions into the country, which were conducted foremost by the CIA, most probably initiated the Cuban Missile Crisis. There were various attempts to assassinate Fidel Castro, and the Bay of Pigs invasion was a CIA operation.⁵⁷ Castro

Knew perfectly well what the CIA was doing, and the ongoing American attacks against his rule may well have been an important factor in his decision in the spring of 1962 to allow the Soviet Union to install offensive nuclear weapons in his country.⁵⁸

Apart from rumours of chemical and biological warfare against Cuba, which remain mostly unsubstantiated, there were various

Plans to assassinate or humiliate Fidel Castro. Devised by the CIA or Cuban exiles, with the co-operation of American mafiosi, the plans ranged from poisoning Castro's cigars and food to a chemical designed to make his hair and beard fall off and LSD to be administered just before a public speech. There were also of course the more traditional approaches of gun and bomb, one being an attempt to drop bombs on a baseball stadium while Castro was speaking; the B-26 bomber was driven away by anti-aircraft fire before it could reach the stadium.⁵⁹

During this period, the CIA was mostly acting on its own initiative, since neither President Kennedy nor President Johnson approved of political assassination (and the CIA was thereby exercising its own deliberate government policy independent of the democratically elected leader of America).

President John F. Kennedy stated in November of 1961, "suggestions to that effect keep coming to me, and I believe very strongly the United States should not be a party to political assassination."⁶⁰ Lyndon Johnson allegedly told his former aide Leo Janos, as recounted in a July 1973 *Atlantic* article: "We had been operating a

⁵⁶ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 252.

⁵⁷ Freemantle, p. 38.

⁵⁸ Victor Marchetti and John D. Marks, *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence* (London: Coronet Books, 1976), p. 337. (John Barth refers to this source in; Barth, *Sabbatical: A Romance*, p. 50, and the authors on; pp. 108, 115, 119, 142, 306)

⁵⁹ Blum, pp. 212-213.

damned Murder, Inc. in the Caribbean.”⁶¹ Neither President endorsed political assassination, at a public level or even privately. So it may be assumed that the CIA deliberately operated (and perhaps still might choose to operate) independent of the elected leader of the United States (if indeed these assassination attempts were arranged, planned and executed by the CIA and the statements by the two Presidents are correct).

Indeed there is circumstantial evidence that the CIA was involved in the assassination of John F. Kennedy: “One factor that preyed on [President Johnson’s] mind was his suspicion that the CIA had something to do with the tragic event in Dallas that had made him president.”⁶² And, in *Libra*, Don DeLillo uses the form of the novel to recreate the events surrounding the assassination of John F. Kennedy and refers to the accumulated secrets of the CIA since that moment.

In many respects the CIA has consolidated its influence and power within the American Government since the period of the 1960s, and the assassination of President Kennedy formed part of that process:

At the moment of President Kennedy’s assassination “the first government official to confer with the new President of the United States was McGeorge Bundy, who had been John F. Kennedy’s Special Assistant for National Security Affairs.”⁶³ Under Kennedy, Bundy “took over the job of running the highly secret and often controversial National Security Council.”⁶⁴

The NSC law, by implication, gave the NSC director authority to cut across department lines in coordinating the many arms of the government involved in national security – State, Defense, Commerce, Agriculture, the AEC, CIA,

⁶⁰ Marchetti and Marks, p. 336n.

⁶¹ Marchetti and Marks, p. 337n.

⁶² Rhodri Jeffreys- Jones, *The CIA and American Democracy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 139.

⁶³ Charles Roberts, *LBJ’s Inner Circle* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1965), p. 65.

⁶⁴ Roberts, p. 70.

USIA, and AID, to name a few. Bundy has never hesitated to exercise that mandate.⁶⁵

The American Government was not immobilised by the assassination of President Kennedy, but Bundy and Defense secretary Robert McNamara in particular were highly efficient in maintaining command.

Bundy

Sped to the White House and took charge. While McNamara ordered U.S. armed forces around the world (including ten Polaris submarines under the seas) into a state of readiness, Bundy placed the CIA on a worldwide 'intelligence alert' to watch for any suspicious act by the Communists.⁶⁶

This displays to some extent the influence and command of both the military and the CIA in determining foreign policy, and in particular their control over the actions of the White House.⁶⁷

During the student movement of the late '60s and early '70s, the CIA conducted domestic surveillance in an operation called CHAOS. CHAOS was created in August 1967, and did not involve solely the CIA: "The FBI and the Defence Intelligence Agency were told to investigate, as was the electronic eavesdropping section of American intelligence, the National Security Agency."⁶⁸ Officially, the operation was intended to prove connections between U.S. dissidents and foreign agitators,⁶⁹ but no such connections were ever found. During the operation

The CIA compiled 13,000 files, including 7,200 upon Americans, and needed a computer system, called HYDRA, to index its enquiries into people and organizations. [...] Within CHAOS, subprogrammes MERRIMACK and RESISTANCE were created, to infiltrate peace groups and activist movements and obtain information upon them.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Roberts, p. 71.

⁶⁶ Roberts, p. 65.

⁶⁷ Dugald Taylor states that the CIA is "gearing up for new covert operations in the 1980s whoever wins the November election. It is Dugald's understanding that both the CIA and the Pentagon are reviving chemical-biological warfare research." Barth, *Sabbatical: A Romance*, p. 144.

⁶⁸ Freemantle, p. 123.

⁶⁹ Freemantle, p. 122.

⁷⁰ Freemantle, p. 122.

Subject files were opened on 1000 domestic organizations, including the Students for a Democratic Society, American Indian Movement, Women's Liberation Movement, National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, Grove Press Inc., and the Youth International Party.⁷¹

The CIA acted here outside the limits of the National Security Act, and received assistance from other agencies to increase the effectiveness of the intelligence program. The FBI operation was called COINTELPRO, and acted in conjunction with the efforts of the other intelligence agencies, and in particular acted under the direction of the CIA.

In *Vineland* there is a reference to the "COINTELPRO file" of the "Bureau"⁷² and also domestic surveillance during the description of the '60s student rebellion on the campus of the College of the Surf. Weed Atman has a COINTELPRO file with the FBI, of which he is unaware, and it is stated that this file is "an already lengthy stack of documents that eventually would oblige the Bureau, when they wished to move it about, to hang a WIDE LOAD sign on the back."⁷³ He is receiving hidden interest from the Federal Government prior to his death, and it is a government employee (Brock Vond) who initiates and orchestrates his death. There are also references to surveillance during the student rebellion, where "no hour day or night was exempt from helicopter visits, though this was still back in the infancy of overhead surveillance."⁷⁴ The youth rebellion is allowed to flourish at the College of the Surf, although "by all the laws of uprising, this one should have been squashed in a matter of hours by the invisible forces up on the base."⁷⁵

The student rebellion of the late '60s was foremost orchestrated and overseen by various agencies, departments and bureaus of the Federal Government and in

⁷¹ Richelson and Ball, p. 108.

⁷² Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 210.

⁷³ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 210.

⁷⁴ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 209.

particular the CIA. As in *Vineland*, the rebellion began ostensibly on university campus, where, according to historical accounts of the period, there were various pre-established links between the government and the university administration:

At Harvard the interest of the FBI began well before the 1950s, was directed toward an unusually wide range of student activities, curricular and extracurricular, including even the surveillance of student organizations, and depended in large part on the secret cooperation of university administrators.⁷⁶

Established connections between the FBI and most notably Harvard and Yale commenced under the threat of Communism. Similarly the campus at Berkeley (The University of California) had existing links with the government:

By 1964 the world's premier example of a multiversity was the University of California, and the University's crown jewel was its campus at Berkeley. No other campus had such close ties to the government, such a heavy emphasis upon government-sponsored research, or such a neglect of undergraduates.⁷⁷

A student rebellion occurred at the Berkeley campus after the administration acted in an extreme and provocative manner. The President of The University of California (Clark Kerr) in particular was "warlike, he handed his enemies victory after victory through self-destructive bold advances alternating with paralysis and retreat."⁷⁸ The President suddenly became "a man of vacillation, of compromise, and of an inappropriate toughness that spawned new crises,"⁷⁹ who through his actions allegedly both used and sacrificed the Chancellor (Edward W. Strong).

The student revolt began at the Berkeley campus,

In September 1964, when the administration suddenly banned political activists from passing out literature, soliciting funds, or organizing support from card tables set up at the edge of campus. This ban led the activists,

⁷⁵ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 208.

⁷⁶ Sigmund Diamond, *Compromised Campus: The Collaboration of Universities with the Intelligence Community, 1945-1955* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 25.

⁷⁷ W.J. Rorabaugh, *Berkeley at War, the 1960s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 10.

⁷⁸ Rorabaugh, p. 20.

⁷⁹ Rorabaugh, p. 35.

largely civil rights workers, to attack the new rules and, following the administration's reprisals, to demand that all sorts of political activity be permitted throughout the campus.⁸⁰

The students were encouraged to rebel by the actions of the administration at the Berkeley campus, and rallied wide support from alienated students and, after the largest sit-in and mass arrest in California history, gathered overwhelming faculty support.⁸¹

In *Vineland*, the youth rebellion at the College of the Surf, like the historical events at the Berkeley campus, gathers faculty support after events designed to inspire dissident activity (and in chapter three of this thesis I discuss these student activities, the actions of the faculty staff and also the hidden government involvement in the events at the College of the Surf in greater detail).

After the events on the Berkeley campus of The University of California, antiwar protests began to spread on campuses across the country.⁸² During the late '60s there occurred race riots, police riots, and various assassinations. The assassination of Martin Luther King was followed by widespread race riots in over one hundred American cities.⁸³ On the evening of his victory in the California primary, Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated, and during the Democratic National Convention that summer in Chicago, millions of television viewers saw police beating unarmed protesters and innocent bystanders.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Rorabaugh, p. 10.

⁸¹ Rorabaugh, p. 10.

⁸² Joan Morrison and Robert K. Morrison, *From Camelot to Kent State: The Sixties Experience in the Words of Those Who Lived It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. xix.

⁸³ Morrison and Morrison, p. xxi.

⁸⁴ Morrison and Morrison, p. xxii.

Weed Atman, in *Vineland*, similarly witnesses, during the campus unrest at the College of the Surf, “three policemen, falling upon one unarmed student, were beating him with their riot sticks.”⁸⁵

It was during this turbulent period that the CIA conducted the CHAOS operation, and in 1970 the student rebellion was brought to a conclusion:

At Kent State University in Ohio, after a weekend of turmoil, National Guard soldiers shot four undergraduates dead on a grassy meadow. Ten days later, two black student demonstrators were killed at Jackson State College in Mississippi. Stunned students left campuses all over the country. More than 400 colleges and universities closed early. Nearly 100,000 demonstrators converged on Washington. Then they went home to think and mourn.⁸⁶

The student deaths concluded the student movement of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s, and this incident may be understood as the intervention of the American Government (whether originating from within the CIA or Pentagon, and if indeed the National Guard soldiers were acting under direct orders).

In *Vineland* as Prairie and DL watch images filmed by Frenesi of the ‘60s student rebellion, it is stated that there were no reported deaths, because “in those days it was still unthinkable that any North American agency would kill its own citizens and then lie about it.”⁸⁷ “Any North American agency” is an implied reference to the Central Intelligence Agency and this quotation from the novel illustrates the change in public perception of the CIA after the various inquiries principally during the 1970s (which did not result in any form of prosecution but revealed some of the CIA operations to the public).

The CIA and the Department of Defense continued their involvement with universities and in particular involvement in university research, despite the events on campus of the late ‘60s and ‘70s. After the “Vietnam era had died down [...] it was no

⁸⁵ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 206.

⁸⁶ Morrison and Morrison, p. xxiii.

longer imprudent for Agency recruiters to enter university precincts or place job advertisements in academic journals.”⁸⁸ The CIA successfully altered its image in the ‘80s, and recruitment numbers noticeably increased. A record 9,200 men and women applied for 1,458 CIA jobs in 1980; by the mid-1980s, the Agency was receiving about 150 thousand inquiries annually.⁸⁹ This rise may be, in part, attributed to the CIA’s direct involvement in the education system:

By 1985 there were fifty-four courses wholly devoted to intelligence, and the subject formed a component of many others. Serving officers turned up at academic conferences, wearing ‘CIA’ badges, to deliver learned papers. A spate of publications also appeared on the CIA and allied subjects.⁹⁰

The Department of Defense similarly has been and is actively involved in establishing and maintaining links between the military and scientific research on campus. During World War II, scientists and engineers established a partnership with the military for the development of better defensive weapons systems, but “the scientists and engineers preferred the pre-war freedom of their academic and other laboratories, and left military facilities in droves”:

To maintain the partnership with the technical community during the postwar period, the Department of Defense instituted broad research and development activities that went beyond the development of particular weapons systems. Through this support, over the past five decades, the DOD [Department of Defense] has fostered the partnership and significantly affected agendas for research at universities and in industry.⁹¹

Both the CIA and the Department of Defense thereby exert direct influence over the education system, and in particular the university system. The CIA gains in recruitment numbers from this involvement, and the Department of Defense receives

⁸⁷ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 248.

⁸⁸ Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones, *The CIA and American Democracy* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 230.

⁸⁹ Jeffreys-Jones, p. 230.

⁹⁰ Jeffreys-Jones, p. 230.

technological advances in the development of not purely weapons systems but all areas of scientific research.

An element of scientific research conducted secretly by the CIA, and to a lesser extent the army, was drug tests. The CIA involved U.S. universities, pharmaceutical houses, hospitals, state and federal institutions and private research bodies in their search for control of the mind⁹² (similarly Brock Vond initiates a “Political Re-Education Program, or PREP” in *Vineland*, where “the law, *his* law, would provide that detainees in civil disturbances could be taken to certain Justice Department reserves and there examined for snitch potential”⁹³). The CIA experiments “had to remain absolutely secret,”⁹⁴ and were to some extent a continuation of Nazi experiments. Immediately after the war special U.S. investigating teams were sifting through the experimental records at Dachau for information of military value and military authorities sent the records, including a description of the mescaline and hypnosis experiments, back to the United States.⁹⁵

The CIA adopted various code-names for its mind control experiments, where the first project, in 1950, was called BLUEBIRD, then came ARTICHOKE. The most durable cryptonym was MKULTRA.⁹⁶ Under project ARTICHOKE experiments were conducted on subjects, who were unaware of the nature of their situation. These experiments were labelled “terminal experiments” because they were “carried through to completion,”⁹⁷ which on occasion included the death of the subject.

⁹¹ Arthur L. Norberg and Judy E. O’Neill, *Transforming Computer Technology: Information Processing for the Pentagon, 1962-1986* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 1.

⁹² Freemantle, p. 81.

⁹³ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 268.

⁹⁴ John Marks, *The Search for the ‘Manchurian Candidate’: The CIA and Mind Control* (London: Allen Lane, 1979), p. 11.

⁹⁵ Marks, p. 11.

⁹⁶ Freemantle, pp. 80-81.

⁹⁷ Marks, p. 32.

The CIA experiments, and to a lesser extent army experiments into the use of LSD and “germ warfare weapons,”⁹⁸ were legitimised by rumours that the Russian State was conducting similar tests. “One enthusiastic experimenter was Dr Ewen Cameron,” who conducted, among various experiments for the CIA, tests into “depatterning”:

Cameron’s experiments were in ‘depatterning,’ that is wiping completely clean the minds of his patients with intensive electroshocks and prolonged use of drugs. Patients were given combinations of the drugs Thorazine, Nembutal, Seconal, Veronal and Phenergan and usually slept throughout most of a fifteen- to thirty-day period. This was combined with two or three daily electroshock treatments. The purpose of the Agency-inspired treatment was to establish whether, once having erased a person’s mind, it could then be ‘repatterned.’⁹⁹

The CIA did not limit themselves to experiments with LSD and other drugs in America,¹⁰⁰ but conducted experiments abroad. The use was during interrogation of people suspected of being foreign agents spying upon Americans and U.S. installations or native Americans suspected of being traitors.¹⁰¹

In *Vineland* Brock Vond conducts a drug-assisted interrogation, within America and on an American citizen, in a government building. The building was originally intended “to reassure, to discourage too many questions, to turn to use whatever residue of nation-love might be hidden among the tens of thousands of traumatized nuclear refugees it was designed to impress.”¹⁰² It is in this building where DL discovers and retrieves Frenesi. Frenesi then tells DL of her experience in this “administration building,”¹⁰³ which was part of “the Cold War dream.” In this facility “they’d started her on 5mg Stelazine plus 50 of Thorazine, injected in ever-

⁹⁸ Freemantle, p. 84.

⁹⁹ Freemantle, pp. 82-83.

¹⁰⁰ Freemantle, p. 90.

¹⁰¹ Freemantle, p. 90.

¹⁰² Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 255.

¹⁰³ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 255.

increasing doses till they thought she was calmed down enough to take them orally.”¹⁰⁴

She refers to both “shrinks” (psychiatrists) and “orderlies” who assisted in the administering of the drugs, where, in many respects, this interrogation resembles the techniques adopted by the CIA in their drug experiments and in particular the use of available facilities to conduct these operations. This action by Brock Vond in *Vineland* is nonetheless a government endorsed and government funded operation (since Brock Vond is a government employee and could not have gained access to the building and its staff without some level of authorisation and backing). Brock Vond has, by this time, already received authorisation “to destabilize and subvert PR³ with funding from one of the DOJ discretionary lines.”¹⁰⁵

The CIA is allegedly involved in the trade of illegal narcotics (and this involvement is referred to in *Vineland*). There is historical evidence of CIA involvement with narcotics (in particular heroin) in South East Asia. In 1960 it was rumoured:

In Washington, that the CIA in Southeast Asia was actually *running heroin* and using it as a currency for paying for covert operations in Saigon, Pnom Phen, and Vientiane [...]. It was only too true. The CIA was spreading drugs and corruption through Asia.¹⁰⁶

The origins of CIA involvement with opium and heroin most probably occurred in the 1950s while training Chinese Nationalists in Burma:

In between raids on China, the ‘Chinats’ (as distinguished from the ‘Chicoms’) found time to [...] become the opium barons of The Golden Triangle, that slice of land encompassing parts of Burma, Laos and Thailand which was the world’s largest source of opium and heroin. CIA pilots flew the stuff all over, to secure the co-operation of those in Thailand who were important to the military operation, as a favour to their Nationalist clients,

¹⁰⁴ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 260.

¹⁰⁵ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 212.

¹⁰⁶ Mosley, pp. 457-458.

perhaps even for the money, and, ironically, to serve as cover for their more illicit activities.¹⁰⁷

The involvement of the CIA in the trade of illegal narcotics has allegedly continued into the present. According to Michael Levine (author of the 1993 book *The Big White Lie*), the CIA is “primarily responsible for the burgeoning drug activity from Central and South America into the United States, and that the biggest drug dealers were CIA assets.” Levine allegedly “found that federal judges and Justice Department prosecutors dramatically dropped the amount of bail for high-level drug traffickers who were CIA assets, and who had been accidentally charged.”¹⁰⁸

There are many bizarre aspects of the epidemic drug trafficking into the United States by the CIA and its co-conspirators. One is the billions of dollars spent each year to ‘fight’ drug trafficking, using the same government agencies to ‘fight’ the battle as are themselves implicated in the drug trafficking. The American public is paying the salaries and government-related costs associated with the drug smuggling, and drug interdiction.¹⁰⁹

According to Levine, the American public ironically pays for both the cost of the importation of narcotics into America by government agencies, and the law enforcement involved in preventing these same activities. Hence it is stated in *Vineland* that “wheresoever the CIA putteth its meathooks upon the world, there also are to be found those substances which God may have created but the U.S. Code hath decided to control.”¹¹⁰

The U.S. Government has a distinct and ongoing foreign policy. In the Third World the American Government has employed a deliberate strategy to maintain a suitable environment for the development of American multinational corporations.

¹⁰⁷ Blum, p. 19.

¹⁰⁸ Rodney Stich, *Defrauding America: Encyclopedia of Secret Operations by the CIA, DEA, and Other Covert Agencies* (Expanded 3rd Ed.) (Alamo, CA.: Diablo Western Press, 1998), p. 345.

¹⁰⁹ Stich, p. 344.

¹¹⁰ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 354.

It is as true now as ever, that American multinationals derive significant economic advantages from Third World countries due to their being under-industrialized, under-diversified, capitalist-orientated, and relatively powerless.

It is equally true that the consequence of American interventions has frequently been to keep Third World countries in just such an underdeveloped, impotent state.¹¹¹

This involvement in the Third World may be viewed as a form of American monopoly of both power and resources in many of these least developed countries.

This did not occur by chance and is the consequence of a clear policy by the U.S.

Government to maintain and profit from an unequal relationship.

In the post-war period, various American corporations have subsequently developed capacities in foreign countries:

The chief difference today between the contemporary economic order and its prewar condition is the pervasive internationalization of capital. This is coincidental with an enormously increased command of resources and financial assets. The dominant corporations now are transnational in their operations and their physical locales. The leading companies (industrial and service) carry on their business in dozens of countries. IBM, for example, is active in more than 100 countries.¹¹²

This involvement in foreign countries is encouraged and supported by American government agencies such as the CIA, where the CIA has been involved both directly and indirectly in the development of corporate America: According to Denis Freney in *The CIA's Australian Connection*, there is a long list of CIA men associated with the big U.S. corporations and of corporation men associated with the CIA. The multinational corporations help the CIA find cover for its agents and recruit part-time agents, and many of the biggest U.S. corporations are big contractors to the CIA and other intelligence agencies.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Blum, p. 5.

¹¹² Schiller, p. 160.

¹¹³ Denis Freney, *The CIA's Australian Connection* (Sydney: Denis Freney, 1977), p. 5.

The United States Government has sought assistance from the United Nations in the internationalisation of American culture and capital, where it suits their foreign policy. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization),

At the urging of the United States, also endorsed a principle that underlay and ennobled the expansion of the American cultural industries. This was the doctrine of the ‘free flow of information.’ Unexceptional and even highly desirable as an abstract standard, in practice the free-flow idea gave a green light for the global penetration of the products of U.S. media-cultural conglomerates like CBS, Time, Inc., J. Walter Thomson, 20th Century Fox and others. Any nation’s effort to regulate that flow was sternly rejected as tantamount to totalitarianism.¹¹⁴

The United States Government then began to attack the UN, and, in this particular example, UNESCO, when its interests were not being served:

Internationally, the persistent U.S. government attacks on the United Nations and its educational-scientific-cultural organization (UNESCO) deserve immediate repudiation. For years, the federal government has withheld a portion of its dues, severely obstructing the UN’s activities. Additionally, the United States withdrew from UNESCO in 1984. Past dues should be paid in full, re-entry into UNESCO effected, and the proper respect to international efforts that seek cultural and informational sovereignty given.¹¹⁵

The U.S. Government has a deliberate policy with regard to the expansion of American cultural influence and capital, and this is illustrated with regard to the American Government’s relationship with the UN.

The foreign policy directly relates to the domestic policy, including the emphasis on mass culture, a capitalist and consumer-based society, technology and the encouragement of “mammoth corporations”¹¹⁶ referred to in *White Noise*. Popular culture and the mass media may provide a means to maintain the power structure of modern America and can also be used to divert attention away from what is actually occurring both overseas and even within the borders of America.

¹¹⁴ Schiller, pp. 141-142.

¹¹⁵ Schiller, p. 172.

¹¹⁶ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 83.

The deliberate policy by the American Government to promote American interests within the global environment is not confined to U.S. capital and mass culture, where another form of American dominance over the rest of the world is in the development of global surveillance in the field of Signals Intelligence. An international intelligence network was formed in the post-war period in continuation of the World War II alliance between the United Kingdom and the United States, which was developed primarily to counteract the threat of Communism.

Under the secret UKUSA Agreement (formulated and accepted in 1947) between Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and the United States, the U.S. was the dominant partner and hence determined much of the direction of this intelligence union, where this dominance has only continued and increased into the present:

The primary aspect of the Agreement was the division of SIGINT [Signals Intelligence] collection responsibilities among the First Party (the United States) and the Second Parties (Australia, Britain, Canada and New Zealand). The world was divided into areas of responsibility, with each nation having the primary responsibility for SIGINT collection in a particular area.¹¹⁷

An international network was formed in the Agreement, which could intercept various forms of communications and which was formed with America at the centre of the operation.

The reason for the dominance of the United States is due primarily to their intelligence capacity, where a shift in power occurred between Britain and the U.S. most notably during World War II:

The reversal in the SIGINT relationship is well-illustrated by the change from British to US control of security procedures. In early 1941 the British strictly limited the number of Americans with ULTRA clearances and the names of all those indoctrinated were required to be reported to the Government Code and Cipher School. Today, it is the United States that controls the clearances and determines indoctrination requirements.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ Richelson and Ball, *The Ties That Bind* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 5.

¹¹⁸ Richelson and Ball, p. 7.

The United States also subsidises, to a great extent, both British and Australian signals intelligence activities and, presumably, those of Canada and New Zealand as well.

The U.S. in the post-war period has maintained military dominance among Western nations and therefore exerts significant influence in determining collection priorities:¹¹⁹

The US thus sits at the node of the information distribution process. According to one former NSA officer, '[all] information comes to the United States, but the United States does not totally reciprocate in passing all the information to the other powers.'¹²⁰

The intelligence agencies of the United States are at the centre of an international intelligence network, which involves various foreign agencies, stations and a combined satellite network.

The CIA has played a major role in the development of overhead reconnaissance systems, such as the U-2 aircraft and KH-11¹²¹ and RHYOLITE satellites.¹²² Although the National Security Agency is mostly responsible for Signals Intelligence and the National Reconnaissance Office manages satellite reconnaissance programs for the entire U.S. intelligence community,¹²³ the CIA oversees and directs these intelligence operations. The Director of the CIA is also the Director of Central Intelligence and is responsible for managing the activities of the entire intelligence community.¹²⁴

The CIA therefore controls the various SIGINT satellites, where

¹¹⁹ Richelson and Ball, p. 8.

¹²⁰ Richelson and Ball, p. 8.

¹²¹ John Barth refers to the "KH-11 satellite surveillance system," Barth, *Sabbatical: A Romance*, p. 88.

¹²² Richelson and Ball, p. 107

¹²³ Richelson and Ball, p. 97.

¹²⁴ Richelson and Ball, pp. 107-108.

Since 1970 [until approximately 1988], the United States has successfully launched some 12 geostationary SIGINT satellites – six Rhyolite/ Aquacade satellites, one Argus, four Chalet/ Vortex satellites, and one Magnum satellite. These satellites have grown progressively larger and more capable. About three-quarters of them have been controlled from Pine Gap [Australia]. The Menwith Hill facility in Yorkshire has been responsible for controlling the Argus satellite and those Chalets which have been used primarily for COMINT [Communications Intelligence] collection, but Pine Gap remains by far the most important ground station in the US geostationary SIGINT satellite program.¹²⁵

Australia is strategically important country in the U.S. global surveillance satellite network, where the operation at Pine Gap is central to the U.S. signals intelligence operation.

As confirmed in 1983 by CIA Director William Casey, the CIA administers Pine Gap,¹²⁶ where currently at Pine Gap, Australia,

There are senior US personnel from the National Security Agency, the leading signals interception body, the National Reconnaissance Office, which operates intelligence satellites, and the CIA.

It has 26 antennas, 14 of them with white domes, and accompanying the huge technological upgrade has been a big increase to more than 850 Australian and US personnel. [...]

Pine Gap already receives intelligence information from three geostationary satellites over the Indian Ocean, and another satellite above Indonesia is to be linked to the ground station this year.

It can intercept a range of microwave communications – including mobile telephone, telex and the Internet – and is now tapping into the transmission of information related to Iraqi military planning.

The sophisticated new antennas mean that Pine Gap is also able to locate mobile radio and radar transmitters.¹²⁷

Australia performs a vital role in the international signals interception network of the United States,¹²⁸ where the facility at Pine Gap has currently been shifted to intelligence gathering in Iraq, including target identification, ahead of a threatened

¹²⁵ Desmond Ball, *Pine Gap: Australia and the US geostationary signals intelligence satellite program* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988), pp. 27-28.

¹²⁶ Ball, p. 1.

¹²⁷ Craig Skehan (Defence Correspondent), "Pine Gap prepares for war." *Sydney Morning Herald* (30 September 2002, No. 51499), p. 6.

¹²⁸ In the conclusion I refer to Australia's role in the future and Australian Literature (Patrick White).

U.S.-led first strike.¹²⁹ The range of the signals interception and intelligence gathering capability is here highlighted, where the target, at Pine Gap, is Iraq.

The NSA has via computer an enormous capacity to store and sort intelligence. According to James Bamford, in *The Puzzle Palace/ A Report on America's Most Secret Agency* (c.1982), the NSA has a “vacuum cleaner approach to intelligence collection – whereby it sucks into its system the maximum amount of telecommunications and then filters it through an enormous screen of ‘trigger words.’”¹³⁰ Often “innocent” Americans (and also foreign citizens) enter this system:

This happens with considerable frequency because of the way in which names and phrases are jam-packed into the computers. Even though NSA's specialized supercomputers have enormous storage capacities, the tremendous number of targets forces the Agency to squeeze the watch lists together as tightly as possible.¹³¹

Similarly, in *Vineland*, there is a particular reference to the computer databases of the U.S. Federal Government, as Roy states “you’ve been bumped off the computer to make way for the next generation, all ‘em deeply personal li'l ones and zeros got changed to somebody else’s.”¹³² This form of sophisticated computer database and co-ordination of all intelligence is an indirect reference to the NSA, and unites the earlier references in the novel to surveillance technology and the COINTELPRO files of the FBI.

This database reference is only one aspect of the function of the state in *Vineland*, which is frequently viewed as menacing and an intrusion into the lives of ordinary citizens. Brock Vond represents the potential for misuse of power by the American Government and frequently oversteps the boundaries of the law. He is only

¹²⁹ Craig Skehan (Defence Correspondent), “Pine Gap gears for war with eye on Iraq.” *Sydney Morning Herald* (30 September 2002, No. 51499), p. 1.

¹³⁰ James Bamford, *The Puzzle Palace: A Report on America's Most Secret Agency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982), p. 250.

¹³¹ Bamford, p. 364.

a low-level representative of the state, but through him the American Government has a clear presence throughout the novel. Despite this, we are never allowed to enter the world of secret power, referred to in the narrative as “the Real Ones,”¹³³ outside of witnessing the obvious consequences of decisions, policies and other executive orders made by the senior levels of command within the U.S. Government and to lesser extent corporate magnates.

The reference to “all ‘em deeply personal li’l ones and zeroes,” typifies the capability of the U.S. Federal Government to both acquire and access information on both foreign nationals and American citizens and the progress and application of computer technology in storing this seemingly limitless amount of data. Similarly, *White Noise* also refers to a comprehensive computer database on U.S. citizens, which includes “your genetics, your personals, your medicals, your psychologicals, your police-and-hospitals” (DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 141). This database is accessed by a state-employed SIMUVAC technician (ostensibly on behalf of the narrator), although the computer system is presumably not available to the general public in any complete or undiluted form.

Unlike the FBI or even the CIA, there is no legislation which limits the NSA’s activities or which demands public accountability for the actions of this government agency:

Despite its size and power, [...] no law has ever been enacted prohibiting the NSA from engaging in any activity. There are only laws to prohibit the release of any information about the Agency.¹³⁴

The NSA is, however, influenced and directed by the Central Intelligence Agency, and in particular the Director of Central Intelligence. Indeed the Director of Central

¹³² Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 352.

¹³³ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 276.

¹³⁴ Bamford, p. 4.

Intelligence, Walter Bedell Smith,¹³⁵ in 1951 was involved in the formation of the new agency (created on 24 October 1952), and recommended in a memo to the National Security Council the chain of command.

The various UKUSA nations each have an equivalent agency to the NSA in America: the Australian, Defence Signals Directorate (DSD); the British, Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ); the Canadian, Communications Security Establishment (CSE); and the New Zealand, Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB). These various agencies are encouraged and to some extent sponsored by the NSA. The NSA has

Subsidised the allies by providing the sophisticated computer programmes used in the system, it undertakes the bulk of the interception operations and, in return, it can be assumed to have full access to all the allies' capabilities.¹³⁶

A computer system codenamed Platform is the system that then links all the major UKUSA station computers in the ECHELON system.¹³⁷ The ECHELON system is the NSA's system, which now links all the Dictionary computers of all the participating countries:¹³⁸

Each station in the ECHELON network has computers that automatically search through the millions of intercepted messages for ones containing pre-programmed keywords or fax, telex and e-mail addresses. For the frequencies and channels selected at a station, every word of every message is automatically searched (they do not need your specific telephone number or Internet address on the list).¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Richelson and Ball, p. 100.

¹³⁶ Nicky Hager, *Secret Power* (Nelson, New Zealand: Craig Potton Publishing, 1996), p. 41.

¹³⁷ Hager, p. 40.

¹³⁸ Hager, p. 41.

¹³⁹ Hager, p. 29.

The NSA is in command of this global system: “There is only one agency which, by virtue of its size and role within the alliance, will have access to the full potential of the ECHELON system: the agency that set it up – the NSA.”¹⁴⁰

The American Government has great influence and power around the world, most notably in the post-war period. With great power there is also great responsibility, and, according to certain historical documents and also the novels referred to throughout this thesis, the American Government has not always acted with the best interests of society and the individual in mind. In this thesis I concentrate on the chosen texts and on the topic, where popular culture has increasingly become institutionalised by the power structure and culture industry of post-war America. This is revealed foremost in the four chosen texts, where this preface is designed to provide historical evidence which complements the argument throughout the rest of the thesis.

The Literary texts discussed in this thesis have relevance to actual events. For this reason I have given reference to relevant historical events in the preface, where the intention is to complement the textual analysis in the body of the thesis and clarify terms used and references made in both the thesis and the novels. I have deliberately maintained separation between this historical information and the thesis, although (as I have demonstrated) this information relates to events and agencies or institutions mentioned in the texts.

The four chosen texts directly relate to developments which occurred and are still occurring in post-war America. In particular these developments take place in the increasingly institutionalised role of popular culture and popular mythology in post-

¹⁴⁰ Hager, p. 51.

war America. A system is formed which is founded on popular culture and popular myth, and the texts either define (the two novels by Barth) or illustrate this development (the two novels by DeLillo and Pynchon). In the introduction and conclusion I provide some Literary context for the four chosen texts and the period, and refer to relevant post-modern theory. Finally, in the preface, introduction, body, and conclusion all outside sources are stated and clearly delineated, where the rest of the work is my own original contribution.

Introduction

The four texts - *The Floating Opera*, *The End of the Road*, *White Noise*, and *Vineland* - both define and form a clear portrayal of developments undergone in America since World War II. Popular culture and popular mythology have increasingly become the foundation of the contemporary American social system, and this is progressively reflected in the four texts, which span the years 1956 to 1990. This period may be broadly termed as contemporary America, since the novels by Barth are more than a reflection of the period in which they were written, but relate directly to the two later novels.

Indeed *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* pre-empt many of the characteristics which have since been labelled post-modern. And for this reason it is necessary, in the introduction to this thesis, to discuss post-modern theory as it relates to the four chosen novels and in particular as it relates to some of the key terms used in this thesis - popular culture, the mass media, post-war America, and the American Government (after defining the term "American Government" as it is used in this thesis). But I shall first offer some "serious" literary context to the chosen novels (with regard to the topic), and in particular the role of America prior to, during and after World War II.

In the post-war period a shift occurs from European centralised power towards power based in America, and this is reflected in Literature and serious art. In particular *Gravity's Rainbow* by Thomas Pynchon charts the implosion of European power during World War II and the increasing influence of American popular culture in the continuation of modern society. Although *Gravity's Rainbow* is not a historical

source, it refers nonetheless to a certain period, place and reality, and is the product of the accumulated knowledge and experience of the author:

Thomas Pynchon, we're told, [...] did his work in chemistry [...] and is able to turn that to splendid account, not by writing about the experiences of chemists, but simply by going about the business of the structure of the novel from a point of view, or in a spirit, that makes use of what he happens to know about the structures of long-chain polymers.¹⁴¹

Although first published in 1973, *Gravity's Rainbow* refers to the period of late World War II, and demonstrates the broad education and understanding of Thomas Pynchon. This novel, as well as others by any author, uses some part of the accumulated knowledge of the author, whether it has arrived from a formal education process, research for the novel or from life experiences.

This novel offers a valid representation of not only this particular moment in history (World War II) but also the larger concern of movements in international power and culture. *Gravity's Rainbow* (and *The End of the Road*) provides an insight into the post-modern condition, and is definitive in many respects of both the war-time and the post-war period. In particular *Gravity's Rainbow* details the so-called "end of history" (which is a fundamental concept in post-modern theory) and the plasticisation of the real (whereby simulation largely replaces and even becomes reality).

The end of history is evident to some extent in both *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, and the plasticisation of the real is evident (via the distortion of reality by the mass media) in both *White Noise* and *Vineland*. *Gravity's Rainbow*, for this reason, is a vital introduction to any discussion of the role of popular culture and popular mythology in post-war America and an analysis of the four texts by John

¹⁴¹ Tom Vitale (host). Interview with John Barth. ("John Barth reads an excerpt from *Sabbatical* and talks about the CIA, academia, and storytelling [sound recording].") [United States, s.n, 19--]

Barth, Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon in so far as they represent or relate to the topic of this thesis.

In *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985* Jean-François Lyotard refers to “the severe re-examination postmodernity addresses to the thought of Enlightenment, to the idea of a uniform end of history and the idea of the subject.”¹⁴² This end to the “idea of a universal history of humanity”¹⁴³ is charted in *Gravity’s Rainbow* and importantly occurs during late World War II. The end of history implies an end of causality or an end to the clear delineation between cause and effect, and, in post-modern theory, the term signifies an end of absolute values and the meta-narratives of the past.

But, of most importance to this thesis and as *Gravity’s Rainbow* reveals in depth, this moment toward the end of World War II signifies the clear movement of power from Europe to America and the end of the European notion of a movement toward a higher state of order.

The European belief in a progression toward an increasingly ordered state is best reflected by Edward Gibbon in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. He refers to “the system of arts and laws and manners which so advantageously distinguish, above the rest of mankind, the Europeans and their colonies. The savage nations of the globe are the common enemies of civilized society.”¹⁴⁴ In *Gravity’s Rainbow* the increasingly closed system of Europe implodes into a vacuum of power as the V-2 rockets launched in Germany land on London. It is in this moment when an end of history occurs, where entropy or the movement of a closed system towards

¹⁴² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1992) p. 13.

¹⁴³ Lyotard, p. 35.

¹⁴⁴ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), p. 624.

disorder triumphs over absolute control and where power shifts directly from Europe to America.

The “end of history”¹⁴⁵ referred to in *Gravity’s Rainbow* signals the end of European “Analysis and Death” (p. 722), where there is no allowance offered for chance or probability. It is the failure of the attempt to prove “the stone determinacy of everything, of every soul. There will be precious little room for any hope at all” (p.86), and this inability to maintain objective control by a government (or any individual in a position of power) is symbolically illustrated as the German rockets randomly fall on London. There is a statistical “difference between distribution, in angel’s-eye-view, over the map of England, and their own chances, as seen from down here” (p. 54), where it is not possible to predict the flight of each rocket from the subjective perspective of an individual in London during WWII.

Although the distribution of the rockets conforms to an objective equation, which is labelled the “Poisson equation” (p. 54) (a famous mathematical equation), individually “each hit is independent of all the others” (p. 56), where “no matter how many have fallen inside a particular square, the odds remain the same as they always were” (p. 56). It is due to this realisation (that man cannot control every element of his surrounding environment) that Roger asks himself whether “in his play he wrecks the elegant rooms of history, threatens the idea of cause and effect itself [...] Will postwar be nothing but ‘events’ newly created one moment to the next? No links? Is it the end of history?” (p. 56).

Cause and effect does continue to exist after World War II, despite the claim by Roger Mexico, but it is not possible from a human perspective to understand and control all of causality, where the events portrayed in *Gravity’s Rainbow* make this

¹⁴⁵ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 56. All subsequent page references in the text belong to this work, except where otherwise specified.

clear to the reader. There must always be an element of chance in human events and outcomes, whether they are government related or purely related to everyday tasks on an individual level, and the end of history is merely a formal statement of this fact. Due to chance, there are limits to mankind's ability to control events (and there are also limits to mankind's ability to maintain absolute values).

Everyone is subject to chance and this is most obvious during the rocket attacks on London towards the end of World War II. Despite the hierarchy and structure of society in the pre-war period everyone is subject to chance and the laws of nature in wartime, where "everyone's equal. Same chances of getting hit. Equal in the eyes of the rocket" (p. 57). The war signals the demise of the European social system, where before the war it was, according to Roger Mexico, "overwhelmingly silly. Nothing happened [...] One despised the upper classes but tried desperately to behave like them..." (p. 59). Europe had become, by the time of the Second World War, a closed system, where most people were trying to behave like the aristocracy, and therefore the social structure did not successfully allow for or adapt to change.

The closed system of European society may be successfully applied to the second law of thermodynamics, where in a closed system entropy ("In general, entropy can be thought of as a measure of the disorder of a system"¹⁴⁶) shall never decrease but shall increase wherever possible:

For an irreversible process in an isolated system the entropy always increases. All practical changes are, to some extent, irreversible and any spontaneous change occurring in a closed system is accompanied by an increase in entropy.¹⁴⁷

This applies to the closed system of Europe, where entropy, the second law of thermodynamics and their relationships to society are fundamental concerns of *Gravity's Rainbow* (and also *The Crying of Lot 49*). Due to entropy, the attempt to

create and maintain order over time only results, and resulted, in further disorder, or the complete collapse of society in World War II Germany. This breakdown of social order in Europe, and in particular Germany, by the end of World War II is charted in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

Because responsibility is constantly deferred to a higher source, especially in fascist Germany, “living inside the System is like riding across the country in a bus driven by a maniac bent on suicide” (p. 412). The consequence of a society structured to unquestioningly obey orders from above is a loss of reliable information, and it could reasonably be argued that this lack of information and lack of an open society contributed to the arrival of the First and Second World Wars. However, despite any sense of equality arising from world warfare, “how can we, any of us, be separate” (p.142) when confronted by our “common mortality” (p. 139), the European social structure is in the post-war period merely replaced by the American (government-centred) system founded on popular culture. The American system founded on popular culture only offers the appearance of an open society, and is increasingly becoming a closed system (in the manner of Europe and Nazi Germany prior to and around the time of World War II) as the dependence upon the government increases over time.

There are limitations to scientific knowledge and the ability to observe with complete accuracy (in accordance with Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle). There are also limitations to the ability of science and also a government to contain life or to predict and control future events. According to Todd Andrews’ (*The Floating Opera*) understanding of the philosopher David Hume, “causation is never more than an inference; and any inference involves at some point the leap from what we can see to

¹⁴⁶ *The Penguin Dictionary of Physics* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 137.

¹⁴⁷ *The Penguin Dictionary of Physics*, p. 136.

what we can't see."¹⁴⁸ There is a limit to an individual's ability to passively observe and be objectively aware, due to the constraints of nature and the limits of human control (within an ever-expanding and increasingly chaotic universe). According to Todd Andrews, life is similar to a continuous floating opera on a river, where the audience "could catch whatever part of the plot happened to unfold as the boat floated past."¹⁴⁹ This may also be understood as a statement of the end of universal history similar to that expressed in *Gravity's Rainbow* and to that mentioned in the post-modern theory of Lyotard.

In *The End of Road* Jacob Horner states:

One can go a long way into a situation thus without finding the word or gesture upon which initial responsibility can handily be fixed - such a long way that suddenly one realizes the change has already been made, is already history, and one rides along then on a sense of an inevitability, a too-lateness, in which he does not really believe, but which for one reason or another he does not see fit to question.¹⁵⁰

This action is a movement outside individual or government-imposed responsibility and cause and effect. It is an illustration of entropy, where life escapes containment (similar to the dog which escapes Pointsman and Roger in *Gravity's Rainbow*). In contrast to Jake in *The End of Road*, Joe believes what an individual "wanted to do, in the end, was what he did. That's important to remember when you're reading history" (p.300). This is a more traditional or European understanding of causality, history and individual responsibility, which both *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The End of the Road* show to have broken down during or shortly after World War II.

According to Rathenau in *Gravity's Rainbow*:

All talk of cause and effect is secular history [...] a diversionary tactic [...] If you want the truth [...] you must look into the technology of these matters

¹⁴⁸ John Barth, *The Floating Opera and The End of the Road* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), p. 218.

¹⁴⁹ Barth, p.7.

¹⁵⁰ Barth, p. 348.

[...] into the hearts of certain molecules [...] First, what is the real nature of synthesis? And then: what is the real nature of control? (p. 167)

This is a reference to the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, and the indeterminacy involved in observing and manipulating particles. It relates directly to the larger concern of government control and the limitations of scientific analysis dictated by nature.

In the post-war period, however, scientific analysis (similar to cause and effect) does not truly end, but is continued via attempts by science to circumvent the laws of nature through allowing for an element of chance and most obviously seeking to improve on nature with such attempts. There are and have been attempts by science and technology to circumvent nature, which are in *Gravity's Rainbow* mostly initiated in Germany and continued post-war in America.

Laszlo Jamf's attempts to "move beyond life, toward the inorganic" (p. 580) shift from war-time Germany to America and "the sinister influence of Lyle Bland" (p. 580). In *Gravity's Rainbow* there are references to the development and history of plastics, where "Plasticity's central canon [is] that chemists were no longer to be at the mercy of Nature" (p. 249). There is a reference to "Imipolex G [...] a new plastic [...] developed in 1939" and "Plasticity's virtuous triad of Strength, Stability and Whiteness [...] how often these were taken for Nazi graffiti" (p. 250). These developments in plastics relate directly to the cultural phenomenon of the plasticisation of the real (the predominance of simulation over reality), which is continued post-war in America and is evident in both *White Noise* and *Vineland*.¹⁵¹

The scientific endeavours to escape the dictates of nature are witnessed in the developments of technology. In *Gravity's Rainbow* there are references to future

¹⁵¹ *Vineland* "describes a diminished world of surfaces, commodities, fetishes, computers, malls, and television screens – a world where the organic has been assimilated into the inorganic." Judith Chambers, *Thomas Pynchon* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), p. 185.

technological advances, including “information machines” (p. 258), which foreshadow America’s cultural and ideological emphasis on the potential of the future. There is a reference to “a kind of squat robot, dark gray plastic with rolling head-lamp eyes” (p. 645), which is similar to the robot mentioned in *Vineland*. In *Vineland* the advances in technology are linked to popular culture and superficial capitalism, where

In rolled a little robot fridge [...] and a smile- shaped speaker for a mouth, out of which now came a synthesized medley of refrigerator tunes, including ‘Winter Wonderland,’ ‘Let It Snow,’ and ‘Cold, Cold Heart.’¹⁵²

Consumer culture allows for the element of chance whereby technology can change, adapt and improve into the future, it also maintains the interest of society in technological advances which may not necessarily ever improve their lives.

The technological desire to escape nature is explored and even exemplified in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, as Slothrop states to his father that “we can live forever, in a clean, honest, purified Electroworld” (p. 699). It is a precursor to downloading of the consciousness onto a computer-simulated reality or matrix as he tells his father:

Maybe there is a Machine to take us away, take us completely, suck us out through the electrodes out of the skull ‘n’ into the Machine and live there forever with all the other souls it’s got stored there [...] *You* hadda come back, every time, into a dying hunk of smelly *meat!* (p. 699)

This is the ultimate desire to escape the laws of nature, and is a precursor to many technological developments, which are relevant both today and in the foreseeable future (such as virtual reality and the interface between man and machine).

According to Murray in *White Noise*, “Pain, death, reality, these are all unnatural. We can’t bear these things as they are [...] So we resort to regression, compromise and disguise” (p. 289). The idea of disguise and an escape from the

concept of death relates to the notion of masks in both *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, and what could be described as the post-modern aesthetic. The post-modern aesthetic is a continuation of the ideas expressed in the two novels by Barth, and has become institutionalized by the American, post-war, capitalist structure of society, with the cultural influence (of superficial capitalism) evident throughout both contemporary American society and the world.

As Patricia Waugh states:

Postmodernism is now used to express the sense of a new cultural epoch in which distinctions between critical and functional knowledge break down as capitalism, in its latest consumerist phase, invades everything including the aesthetic, the post-colonial world and the unconscious, leaving no remaining oppositional space.¹⁵³

There is little chance for individual opposition to the American system founded on capitalism, popular culture and the mass media, and hence the direction of technological developments. There is also an ever-increasing dependence upon the American Government within America, as society is structured to avoid self-reflection (and this is evident in both *White Noise* and *Vineland*).

In the introduction to this thesis, it is now necessary to define the term “American Government” as it is used in this thesis. And then examine the roles of the government, the mass media and popular culture as represented by some examples from Literature and serious art (rather than historical sources) and as understood by some post-modern theory. Literature, art and even post-modern theory offer representations of reality, which can sometimes offer greater insight than detailed historical information. But, since it is always beneficial to first have an historical perspective, I included historical information, regarding the chosen texts and the topic, in the preface.

¹⁵² Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 193.

In *Sabbatical: A Romance*, by John Barth, Fenwick provides a definition of the American Government:

Fenn's own heart, as always, lifts at sight of the Supreme Court and the Library of Congress off to his left, the complex of museums along the Mall, the memorials to Washington and Jefferson farther on (though his own favorite president is wee Jamie Madison); it sinks, not for aesthetic reasons, at sight of almost all the other federal buildings in view, and positively constricts at thought of those ill-chained dragons across the river in Arlington and Langley: the Pentagon and his former employer.¹⁵⁴

Various U.S. Government agencies were created during or after World War II, and the American Government did not exist in its modern form prior to this war. The Pentagon building was built during the war and the CIA was created in 1947. The American Government does not consist solely of “those ill-chained dragons” in “Arlington and Langley” (the Pentagon and the CIA), and the government existed prior to the official creation of the CIA and the Department of Defense. However it is foremost the CIA and to a lesser extent the Pentagon which are referred to by the term “American Government” in this thesis (because of their dominance over the actions and policy of Washington and foremost because they are referred to in *White Noise* and *Vineland* with regard to secrets of control and an ongoing relationship with the culture industry).

As stated in the preface, the CIA developed its own policy and a centralised structure in the 1950s under the direction of Allen Dulles. Since its creation the CIA has exerted and does exert influence in Washington, which is mostly unavailable to the public and which mostly is not acknowledged by the Agency. Dugald Taylor tells Fenwick in *Sabbatical: A Romance*:

The lads in Langley – and, more and more, the lasses: an important new area of recruitment, as Fenn might have heard – are prospering again, and gearing

¹⁵³ Patricia Waugh (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader* (London: Arnold, 1996), p. 3.

¹⁵⁴ Barth, *Sabbatical: A Romance*, pp. 138-139.

up for new covert operations in the 1980s whoever wins the November elections.¹⁵⁵

He then refers to both the CIA and the Pentagon:

It is Dugald's understanding that both the CIA and the Pentagon are reviving chemical-biological warfare research, almost dormant since the latter 1960s.¹⁵⁶

The CIA is, according to Dugald Taylor, seeking to exert further influence over Washington in the '80s, after "the lowering of Agency morale and the reining in of its covert operations in the middle and latter 1970s."¹⁵⁷ The CIA has here a distinct policy, both foreign and domestic, and when necessary exercises (and has exercised) this hidden policy over the rest of the U.S. Federal Government in Washington. This idea does not belong solely to this novel by John Barth but is also reinforced by historical evidence (which I have provided at length in the preface).

The CIA has a deliberate policy which is enforced from the top down, and it is incorrect to assert (after reading *Libra*) that "there is no center to DeLillo's Central Intelligence"¹⁵⁸ or in fact the historical or even current CIA. The policy of the higher levels within the Agency is merely not available to the public (although it may be deduced from the available evidence), and indeed the CIA is structured in a manner to avoid responsibility. According to Timothy Melley: "this CIA, although called 'The Company' by its agents, does not consist of 'organization men' who sacrifice their individuality for a corporate will; it consists rather of renegades and free agents who are regularly subcontracted and often act on their own."¹⁵⁹

Despite this claim from Melley, the CIA does maintain control over these "renegades and free agents," whether through a subcontract or in a manner designed

¹⁵⁵ Barth, *Sabbatical: A Romance*, p. 144.

¹⁵⁶ Barth, *Sabbatical: A Romance*, p. 144.

¹⁵⁷ Barth, *Sabbatical: A Romance*, p. 143.

¹⁵⁸ Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 157.

¹⁵⁹ Melley, pp. 157-158.

to leave no trace. The policy of the higher levels within the CIA may however be understood (without any direct communication with these levels of command) through a certain amount of speculation based on the evidence of the various available sources.¹⁶⁰

This hidden policy of the American Government includes the control of the culture industry. As Neil Postman mentions in *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, “the most imposing institutions for the control of information are religion and the state,” where they both typically “manage information through the creation of myths and stories that express theories about fundamental questions: why are we here, where have we come from, and where are we headed?”¹⁶¹ Culture is a means for the state to create myths and stories and thereby manage information.

In the modern secular state of the United States the “meta-narrative” of religion no longer applies as a single or absolute value, and increasingly the mythology of the mass media answers any public questions about existence or the future direction of society and technology. The culture industry of America performs the dominant role in determining how people behave in the United States, where similar to *The End of Road* and the Doctor’s “Mythotherapy” (in this novel) the past is a fiction created in the present and questions of morality and integrity of character are mostly avoided in these forms of mass entertainment.

With regard to mass media Marshall McLuhan’s insight is invaluable. Writing in 1964, he displays much of the American Government and corporate attitude toward mass media and automation of the time. He states:

Automation brings in real ‘mass production,’ not in terms of size, but of an instant inclusive embrace. Such is also the character of ‘mass media.’ They are

¹⁶⁰ See preface.

¹⁶¹ Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), p. 77.

an indication, not of the size of their audiences, but of the fact that everybody becomes involved in them at the same time.¹⁶²

This statement is the symptom of the American Government in its infancy, and marks the beginning of a system founded on the mass media and popular culture in contemporary America. It is wrong however to claim that the mass media provides a benevolent sanctuary or “inclusive embrace” for everybody, and this is only a diversion from the common reality that in order to unify and unite a large group of people it is usually necessary to exclude another group or section of society.

Popular culture did exist before the American Government in its modern form, and in particular the CIA (which was only created in 1947), and I briefly refer to this (with some historical sources) in the early pages of the preface. But with regard to Literature and serious art, in *The Waste Land* (1922) T. S. Eliot refers (writing early in the twentieth century) to the imminent demise of Europe and the influence of American popular culture on a stagnant and out-dated European structure of society.

He writes:

Falling Towers
 Jerusalem Athens Alexandria
 Vienna London
 Unreal¹⁶³

O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag -
 It's so elegant
 So intelligent¹⁶⁴

This is a reference to the deterioration and eventual collapse of Europe, prior to the Second World War, and to the all-consuming, hegemonic power of American popular culture (best illustrated in *Gravity's Rainbow*). Shakespeare is here incorporated into the popular music of the period or “ragtime.” Although this is not an historical source,

¹⁶² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. 1994), p. 349.

¹⁶³ T.S.Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 65.

¹⁶⁴ Eliot, p. 55.

Eliot offers a far-reaching insight into the cultural forces operating in the early twentieth century.

Neil Postman in *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* refers, even earlier in history, to the invention of the telegraph as important in the creation of the United States as a unified nation-state:

The telegraph removed space as an inevitable constraint on the movement of information, and, for the first time, transportation and communication were disengaged from each other. In the United States, the telegraph erased state lines, collapsed regions, and, by wrapping the continent in an information grid, created the possibility of a unified nation-state.¹⁶⁵

Postman regards this as the second stage in the information revolution (the first being the invention of the printing press), but it is viewed by him as the critical information-technology invention in the formation of the American nation-state.

However, it is only in the post World War II period that America has become a global superpower and has begun to exert global cultural influence through a highly controlled domestic culture industry (by both corporations and the government). It is also in the post-war period that the American Government has deliberately sought to control foreign culture markets (after the creation of the CIA and the formulation of the Central Intelligence Agency Act of 1949).

Popular culture has increasingly, in the post-war period, become systematised. Despite the appearance of democracy, free speech, and even an open society, there is a continued and increasingly institutionalised monopoly of power by the American State. This desire for power and need for control by the U.S. Government exists and operates within the culture industry (as I detail in the preface), but manifests itself most obviously in defence spending and in particular the accumulation of nuclear weapons. In the 1997 novel *Underworld* by Don DeLillo, it is stated with regard to

¹⁶⁵ Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, p. 67.

the accumulation of nuclear weapons by the American Government, that “*You can never underestimate the willingness of the state [...] To ahkt out its own massif phantasies.*”¹⁶⁶ The fantasies mentioned in *Underworld* are those of power and control, and it would seem that the U.S. State, referred to in this seemingly minor reference by Eric, is in reality willing to act out these fantasies in an extreme and increasingly unnecessary manner.

The realisation of these fantasies (of which the massive accumulation of nuclear weapons is a symptom) involves an ever-increasing need for control within the senior levels of power. The appeal of control may become addictive and, in *Naked Lunch* (1959) by William Burroughs, it is even equated with heroin addiction: “*You see control can never be a means to any practical end . . . It can never be a means to anything but more control. . . . Like junk . . .*”¹⁶⁷ This need for control may be viewed as dangerous to humanity, especially in a government form, where the ultimate goal of power is to treat and transcend “The Human Virus”¹⁶⁸ and where this need may become, similar to heroin addiction, self-destructive as well.

An important moment in the development of contemporary America and most importantly the American Government (especially the CIA) is the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The events surrounding the assassination of the president are portrayed in *Libra* by Don DeLillo, and in this novel there is a reference to the CIA, where

[Branch] was not generally impressed by the accomplishments of men in the clandestine service, the spy handlers, the covert-action staff. He thought they'd built a vast Theology, a formal coded body of knowledge that was basically play material, secret-keeping, one of the keener pleasures and

¹⁶⁶ Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1997), p. 421.

¹⁶⁷ William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (London: Flamingo, 1993), p. 133.

¹⁶⁸ Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*, p. 136.

conflicts of childhood. Now he wonders if the Agency is protecting something very much like its identity - protecting its own truth, its theology of secrets.¹⁶⁹

The CIA or American Government has increasingly gained influence in the continuation of contemporary American society via the implementation of a distinct and mostly covert policy or “theology of secrets.” But the cultural, ideological (and even historical) secrets of the Agency are for the most part suggested in the texts of Barth, DeLillo and Pynchon, and are revealed in an in-depth analysis of these texts.

As defined by the two novels of Barth (*The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*), and illustrated in *White Noise* and *Vineland*, America is structured toward superficiality. As Neil Postman, with direct regard to the television, states:

All events on TV come completely devoid of historical continuity or any other context, and in such fragmented and rapid succession that they wash over our minds in an undifferentiated stream.¹⁷⁰

This does illustrate the end of history explored in both *Gravity's Rainbow* and the two novels by Barth, where causes are lost and replaced purely by the effects, but more importantly it implies the power of television (and other forms of the mass media) to influence and control thoughts and actions. In particular television is directed here against self-reflection, where there is a direct (and mostly concealed) relationship between all forms of the mass culture and the systematic regulation of power in post-war America.

The “undifferentiated stream” of events on television, referred to by Neil Postman, applies to most forms of the American mass media and is a continual process. As Alfonse states in *White Noise*, “the flow is constant [...] Words, pictures, numbers, facts, graphics, statistics, specks, waves, particles, notes. Only a catastrophe

¹⁶⁹ Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 442.

¹⁷⁰ Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 105.

gets our attention.”¹⁷¹ The flow of information, without any substantial historical depth or any real intent to inform, exists within almost every form of the modern American mass media, and in all the auditory and visual forms mentioned by Alfonse.

In *White Noise* there are references to radio, tabloids, magazines, advertisement, as well as television and film, while in *Vineland* the references are mostly to film and television. Nonetheless the frequent lack of historical depth or any real intent to inform exists within all these forms of mass media, where the mass media (and not simply television) is increasingly becoming an “undifferentiated stream.” The combined effect of the American mass media is a state of superficial acceptance of all information as entertainment or even an eventual and universal disinterest or “brain fade.”¹⁷²

According to Neil Postman in *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* “information appears indiscriminately, directed at no one in particular, in enormous volume and at high speeds, and disconnected from theory, meaning, or purpose.”¹⁷³ Technology has increasingly allowed information to circulate around an entire country or the world at an increasingly high speed, but this information is not always of objective, or even subjective, importance. According to Neil Postman, “information has become a form of garbage, not only incapable of answering the most fundamental human questions but barely useful in providing coherent direction to the solution of even mundane questions.”¹⁷⁴ This form of informational saturation does not however occur in a vacuum (Neil Postman appears to describe technology purely as its own motivation or guiding force in *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*), but is the result of government policy and specifically the policy of the

¹⁷¹ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 66.

¹⁷² DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 67.

¹⁷³ Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, p. 70.

¹⁷⁴ Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, pp. 69-70.

American Government to, in the first place, maintain the dominance of corporations over everyday lives.

Jean Baudrillard writes that “we live in a world, where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning.”¹⁷⁵ This may be understood as the practical application of “Informational Therapy” in the manner of *The End of the Road*. This “disinformation” results from the deliberate structure (whether directly implemented by corporations or the government) of contemporary America to avoid self-reflection among consumers and citizens of the country, by, in this example, dispersing meaning. This is necessarily realised and enforced by the American Government, where this “disinformation” or “Informational Therapy” exists in most forms of the American mass media, including film, television, radio, tabloids, magazines, advertisement and even the news itself.

Baudrillard further states:

America ducks the question of origins; it cultivates no origin or mythical authenticity; it has no past and no founding truth. Having known no primitive accumulation of time it lives in a perpetual present. Having seen no slow, centuries-long accumulation of a principle of truth, it lives in perpetual simulation, in a perpetual present of signs.¹⁷⁶

The simulation or sign takes precedence over reality or the signified respectively in modern America.¹⁷⁷ This is illustrated in both *White Noise* and *Vineland*, where, in accordance with the novels by Barth, the past becomes a fiction created in the present. The mass media does in effect distort and falsify reality, and there occurs the plasticisation of the real detailed foremost in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

¹⁷⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 79.

¹⁷⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (New York: Verso, 1988), p. 76.

¹⁷⁷ “DeLillo has captured in his fiction crystallizing examples of what Baudrillard identifies as the hyperreal and the simulacrum. Like Baudrillard, DeLillo often sees the model preceding the real, as in *White Noise*, where SIMUVAC, an emergency preparedness organization, uses a real chemical spill to rehearse their upcoming simulation.” John N. Duvall, “Introduction: From Valparaiso to Jerusalem: DeLillo and the Moment of Canonization” (*Modern Fiction Studies*, 1999 [electronic journal]), p. 563.

The phenomenon of the plasticisation of the real is not final or unavoidable, but is deliberately created and realised (in its cultural form) by real people and institutions (foremost in America). Popular culture and popular mythology are not always beneficial to society, if they are allowed to completely obscure reality (and thereby hide social inequality and injustice), and their combined role should be questioned within the education system and even by the media itself. An objective understanding may be found in Literature (as well as theory and historical sources), and the mass media should not be allowed to undermine the function of serious art and Literature within society.

There is a viable alternative for society, most obviously offered in the texts of *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Voss* to which I refer in the conclusion. Australia is also the most likely country to realise and encourage an alternative perspective to that of the American mass media, and, although the immediate focus of the thesis is post-war America, it is beneficial, to an understanding of the topic and the entire thesis, to provide a broad perspective and context to the four chosen texts in the preface, introduction and conclusion.

In chapter one I concentrate on the two texts, *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, because of their importance in defining the period (after which they were written) and in providing a philosophical and an (in its practically realised form) ideological framework for post-war America. Together these novels provide the framework for a system founded on popular mythology and popular culture, where the government is no longer attempting to maintain a rational moral world (in the manner of Joe Morgan in *The End of the Road*). The practical application of the “Mythotherapy” performed by the Doctor in *The End of the Road* is witnessed in *White Noise* and *Vineland*. The role of the Doctor becomes equivalent to the role of

the U.S. Federal Government in contemporary American society, in particular the CIA and to a lesser extent the Department of Defense (within the U.S. Federal Government) as suggested in the two later novels by DeLillo and Pynchon.

These novels display a government-defined emphasis on the mass media and the culturally enforced predominance of simulation over reality (or the plasticisation of the real). The two novels by Barth are relevant beyond the period in which they were written, and relate directly to the role of popular mythology and popular culture in post-war America. An in depth analysis of the four texts must necessarily commence with *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, not merely due to chronological order, but because these two novels are in many respects definitive of the post-war period and indeed the cultural direction of post-war American society.

Chapter 1

The Floating Opera and *The End of the Road*

The Floating Opera (1956) and *The End of the Road* (1958) by John Barth both appear to signal an end to sincere intellectual thought or debate, and the notion of imposing a rational moral world upon the social landscape surrounding the individual. Written in a period of relatively strict family values and moral codes, the novels are most importantly indicative of changes which were about to occur, rather than being merely a reflection of the period in which they were written. In particular *The End of the Road* offers a clear contrast between the rational moral world created by Joe Morgan within the microcosm of his marriage, and the “Mythotherapy” practised by Jacob Horner with the aid of the barely legitimate Doctor.

Ultimately the belief system which Jake practises is best able to function under the pressure of the situation surrounding Rennie’s unexpected pregnancy. It is also implied to be the belief system most suited to the environment of post-war America.¹⁷⁸ However, in order to understand the emphasis in *The End of the Road*, and indeed post-war America, upon popular myth as a means for the individual to function within society, it is necessary to first analyse the ideas expressed in the earlier companion novel - *The Floating Opera*.

¹⁷⁸ The relationship of Literature to the world to which the novel refers should not be undermined or unnecessarily diminished. Thomas Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin, 1991), refers to a “divorce of art and politics” (Schaub, p. 179) which is “a motive buried within” *The End of the Road*. *The End of the Road* relates to politics by providing an ideological framework for post-war American society, and any separation between art and the realm of politics undermines the relevance of this text (and similarly *White Noise* and *Vineland*). A text may “transcend historical circumstance” (Schaub, p. 22) because it is fiction and typically aspires toward an objective understanding or significance, but as a metaphor it also refers to a particular historical and sociological reality (the “signified”) and this relationship should not be abandoned.

In both of these early novels John Barth uses characters, both major and minor, to embody and live out philosophical ideas, and for this reason I shall concentrate, in this chapter, on the philosophical arguments as they are revealed through the characters in both texts. Indeed it is not possible to completely understand and explore characters and social relationships in these novels without confronting the philosophical arguments that they each represent. Todd Andrews in *The Floating Opera* carries nihilism to an inevitable conclusion, as events and outside characters guide his understanding. While in *The End of the Road* the belief system of the Doctor and Jake is tested by the alternative belief system of Joe and Rennie.

At times Barth does test the limits of character plausibility, in *The End of the Road* and to a lesser extent *The Floating Opera*, as he pursues the philosophical argument and conflict to its conclusion. John Stark argues this in *The Literature of Exhaustion: Borges, Nabokov, and Barth*,¹⁷⁹ where this presumably undesired outcome, from the author's perspective, is principally because no essential character truths are revealed in either novel (because it is clearly stated by both narrators that there is no essential self). However both novels remain realistic and accurate to the period and social environment in which they are set (the period of the mid-twentieth century on the "Eastern Shore of Maryland"¹⁸⁰).

The two novels by John Barth adopt varied narrative styles and techniques, although they both use a first-person narrator who would seem to be quite close to the author in thought process and to a lesser extent behaviour. Narrative style and techniques are important because they influence an appreciation of a text and the reader's understanding of its significance. In *The Floating Opera* the narrator begins

¹⁷⁹ He states: "Aside from his self-consciousness as a narrator, Todd Andrews is realistic, as are the other characters in *Floating Opera*" but "in *End of the Road* the characters begin to lose some of their aura of reality as Barth manipulates them to make intellectual points." John O. Stark. *The Literature of Exhaustion: Borges, Nabokov, and Barth* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1974), p. 158.

with a meandering style, as he recognises and notes immediately in the narrative, and states that he is an inexperienced writer “whose literary activities have been confined since 1920 mainly to legal briefs and *Inquiry* writing.”¹⁸¹ Despite his inexperience and claim; “how does one write a novel!” (p. 2), he does always arrive at the important issue when it is required and he successfully communicates his experiences and philosophical Inquiries.

The meandering style of the narrative also mirrors the fundamental metaphor in the novel - the floating opera:

As the viewers sit upon the banks snatching at pieces of the plot and dialogue and relying for the rest on their imagination or on that of their more attentive neighbors, the boat moves back and forth before their single limited perspective. Since this is how much of life works, that's how Todd's vagrant narrative, a 'philosophical minstrel show,' will work as well.¹⁸²

Through the act of this metaphor, or the metaphor of the novel (*The Floating Opera*), both the narrator, Todd, and the author, Barth, are able to objectively communicate experience. The philosophical arguments in the novel are not purely opinion or of subjective value, but approach an objective significance in the act of narration.

In terms of authorial technique, John Barth successfully uses the isolated perspective of the narrator to comment on and report the events in the novel as required for the development of the philosophical argument. The narrator's thought processes seem similar to those of the author (judging from his other novels and interviews), and this allows the complicated nature of the argument to unfold believably (even though the events in the novel are fictional and manufactured by the

¹⁸⁰ Stark, p. 128.

¹⁸¹ Barth, p. 1. All subsequent page references in the text belong to this work, except where otherwise specified.

¹⁸² Gerhard Joseph, *John Barth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1970), p. 10.

author). According to Heide Ziegler, Todd Andrews “as author he himself at the same time assumes the role of father toward the reader, who has to understand *his* story.”¹⁸³

This does not seem to be evident in the text itself. Todd does not adopt an authoritative manner as he attempts to communicate his experiences, and treats the reader mostly as an equal. The narrator maintains a slightly uncomfortable relationship with the reader, because he does not want to impose his ideas on the reader and because his Inquiries reach only nihilist conclusions. However, the ideas are valuable in understanding developments in post-war America, and particularly in combination with *The End of the Road* the two novels illustrate the increasing emphasis on popular mythology and popular simplifications of reality as a means to function in everyday situations.

John Barth’s first published novel, *The Floating Opera*, demonstrates a clear movement away from difficult intellectual struggles, both with regard to society in general and the narrator’s realisation “that nothing makes any difference, including that truth. Hamlet’s question is, absolutely, meaningless” (p. 251). The narrative centres on the Inquiry into the nature of existence by the narrator, Todd Andrews.¹⁸⁴ This Inquiry commences with a decision to commit suicide, and concludes, after his failed attempt to blow up the floating opera, with the admission that there is no reason for living or for suicide.

The narrator does allow that “in the real absence of absolutes, values less than absolute mightn’t be regarded as in no way inferior and even be lived by” (p. 252), but there is no sense of this being an affirmation of life. This final admission is merely

¹⁸³ Heide Ziegler, *John Barth* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 22.

¹⁸⁴ John Barth in *Sabbatical: A Romance* refers to “narrative points of view” (Barth, *Sabbatical: A Romance*, p. 232). *The Floating Opera* adopts the “first person” (Todd Andrews) as both “observer” and “protagonist” who is “reliable” to the extent that language allows an accurate communication of experience. *The End of the Road* offers a similar narrative perspective (with Jacob Horner as narrator).

“another inquiry, and another story” (p. 252).¹⁸⁵ *The Floating Opera* is in many respects a pessimistic novel, largely due to its nihilist concerns and open ending, but it is necessary to an examination of the role of popular mythology and popular culture in post-war America. It is also a necessary introduction to its companion novel - *The End of the Road*.

The Floating Opera demonstrates a clear movement away from difficult intellectual struggles and traditional notions of correct behaviour, noble sentiment, and higher learning. The common tendency of society to avoid the difficult questions regarding the nature of existence is illustrated most dramatically in the novel through the crowd’s reaction to T. Wallace Whittaker’s recitations of lines from various Shakespeare plays. The Shakespearian actor receives at first “polite applause, especially from the ladies” (p. 234) and “a sneering remark” (p. 235) from “one of the rowdies” (p. 235). In the end, however, he must complete his lines harassed by the audience who throw pennies at him, and the increasingly angry Captain of the floating opera.

Despite being fired from his job and no longer able to be heard by the crowd, he remains defiant and screams (though to little effect): “*Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought!*” (p. 237). As a final gesture T. Wallace Whittaker “scooped a handful of pennies from the stage, flung them back at [the audience], and disappeared behind the curtain” (p. 237). The crowd remains, despite the defiance of the actor, unanimously opposed to his act, and continues to throw pennies after he has departed from the stage.

¹⁸⁵ According to Joseph Waldmeir, Todd “considers the possibility that relative values may be sufficient, but his ability to depend upon such values is tentatively stated instead of delivered as a final pronouncement.” Joseph J. Waldmeir, *Critical Essays on John Barth* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1980), p. 88. The idea of living by relative values is the point of origin for *The End of the Road*.

The quoted lines from various plays of Shakespeare relate mostly to Todd Andrew's personal struggle, although in contrast to Todd Andrews, T. Wallace Whittaker confronts the crowd directly. The actor does therefore recite "the famous speech of the duke Jacques, from Act Two of *As You Like It*" (p. 234). However it is only the two lines - "*All the world's a stage [...] and all the men and women players: they have their exits and their entrances: and one man in his time plays many parts...*" (p. 235), and "*...Last scene of all...mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans every thing!*" (p. 235) - which are referred to in the narrative, and these gain a greater significance when viewed within the context of the novel. The former relates easily to Todd's understanding of roles or masks, and the latter relates quite obviously to Todd's preoccupation with death. Similarly the famous line from Hamlet's soliloquy - "*To be, or not to be: that is the question...*" (p. 236) - relates to Todd's contemplation on suicide.

The other quotations which Whittaker recites for the benefit of the unappreciative audience relate mostly to the act of defying adversity. It is however with regard to this notion of lone defiance, where Todd and T. Wallace Whittaker notably contrast. Whittaker announces the various lines - "*Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears...*" (p. 235), "*Mischief, thou art afoot, take what thou wilt!*" (p. 235), "*For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, the oppressor's wrong...*" (p. 236), "*...the proud man's contumely, the pangs of despised love, the law's delay...*" (p. 236) - and receives increasing displays of discontent from the crowd. Despite overwhelming adversity the actor continues his oration, and becomes the lone figure defying an unappreciative audience for the sake of his principles. He receives little sympathy from Todd Andrews. Despite admitting a certain amount of admiration for the actor who was "determined that [the crowd] should have our

culture” (p. 236), Todd admits to “flinging all my change at him” (p. 237) along with the rest of the audience.

Todd importantly does not adopt the role of the lone figure defying the unappreciative masses, although in many respects his own notions of existence reflect or are identical to those found in the various orations performed by T. Wallace Whittaker (especially the notion of masks, preoccupation with death and the basis for suicide). He does in fact join and even enjoy being a member of the rebellious crowd opposed to the display of culture. The members of the crowd “were all laughing and comparing notes, a little sheepish, but exhilarated for all that - none more so than I, for it is sometimes pleasant to stone a martyr, no matter how much we may admire him” (p. 237).

As explanation of his behaviour, Todd states:

For my part, as I believe I’ve mentioned elsewhere in this book, I’m seldom reluctant to assist in my small way in the persecution of people who defy the crowd with their principles, especially when I’m in favor of the principles. After all, the test of one’s principles is his willingness to suffer for them, and the test of this willingness - the only test - is actual suffering. What was I doing, then, but assisting T. Wallace Whittaker in the realization of his principles? For now, surely, having been hooted from the stage and fired from his job in the cause of Shakespeare, he would either abandon his principles, in which case they weren’t integrated very strongly into his personality, or else cling to them more strongly than ever, in which case he had us to thank for giving him the means to strength. (p. 237)

Although it is difficult (with regard to the inconsistent nature of the narrator) to determine whether such an attitude is a momentary or a longer lasting display of aesthetic values, this decision by Todd not to oppose the actions of the crowd is nonetheless an important shift away from traditional notions of individual responsibility and consistency. The narrator displays an unwillingness to oppose the tendency of society to simplify the world, and even assumes the role of an ordinary audience member, despite the preceding narrative content apparently being to the

contrary. It is this attitude, not to oppose popular notions and simplifications of reality, which also becomes in the companion novel to *The Floating Opera*, *The End of the Road*, a means for Jacob Horner to function within society. However, this later novel is, as Todd states, “another inquiry, and another story” (p. 252).

After T. Wallace Whittaker has unceremoniously departed the stage of the floating opera, the audience is heartened by the announcement of the following act, “for this was what we'd come to see” (p. 238). In contrast to the earlier recitations of quotations from Shakespeare,

[The audience] were led by the nose through rudimentary jokes, clubbed with long-anticipated punch lines, titillated - despite the minstrels' alleged chastity - by an occasional *double-entendre* as ponderous as it was mild. Negroes were shiftless and ignorant, foreigners suspect; the WPA was a refuge for loafers; mothers-in-law were shrewish; women poor drivers; drunkenness was an amusing but unquestioned vice; churchgoing a soporific but unquestioned virtue. Tambo and Bones deserved their poverty, but their rascality won our hearts, and we nodded to one another as their native wit led the overeducated interlocutor into one trap after another. Tambo and Bones vindicated our ordinariness; made us secure in the face of mere book learning; their every triumph over Mr. Interlocutor was a pat on our backs. Indeed, a double pat: for were not Tambo and Bones but irresponsible Negroes? (p. 239)

The audience is not challenged by Tambo and Bones, but rather allowed to feel secure in their role of audience by the harmless antics and the “express-train tempo” (p. 238) music. Whereas the audience had responded in unison to T. Wallace Whittaker with ill-sentiment, the audience (including the narrator) respond in unison to Tambo and Bones with contented passivity.

A clear contrast is formed between these two separate performances in both their nature and the response from the audience. The tendency of society to avoid difficult questions regarding existence is here clearly illustrated, and finally, the narrator does not adopt the role of defying this tendency from a position of lone martyrdom at the conclusion of the novel. Todd does attempt to blow up the floating

opera, and in a more constructive fashion the novel may be viewed as a defiance of the common tendency away from difficult intellectual struggles.¹⁸⁶ Todd does not however confront those around him in the elevated fashion of T. Wallace Whittaker nor does he in any physical sense align himself with the various speeches orated by the actor.

In the figures of Mr Haeker and Capt. Osborne there is a similar contrast between traditional notions of higher learning and popular responses to existence to that of T. Wallace Whittaker and Tambo and Bones. A movement away from traditional notions of behaviour or etiquette occurs in the novel and this movement is clearly evident in a comparison between the contrasting attitudes of these two characters towards death. Where Capt. Osborn complains in a light-hearted manner about the state of his health and the finite nature of existence, Mister Haeker quotes Cicero and states that since “wise men have never run down death” (p. 14) neither should he. Of the two attitudes, Todd, in his detached manner, apparently favours that of Capt. Osborn.

Although Todd does not truly belong to either disposition, he states that whereas Mr Haeker

Must spend all his energies shoring up his delusion, and do it, moreover, alone, for his intensity and prudishness found him no friends; Osborn, on the contrary, sniffed and wheezed and creaked and spat, and cursed and complained, and never knew a gloomy day in his life. (pp. 47-48)

Of the two characters Capt. Osborn is apparently the most contented, and hence, in Todd’s opinion, is better able to face his own mortality. According to the

¹⁸⁶ “But of course Todd is only the narrator of his novel, and behind that narrator stands the artist, Barth himself,” Frank D. McConnell, *Four Postwar American Novelists: Bellow, Mailer, Barth and Pynchon* (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 125. According to Frank McConnell: “We are to see, that is, the point of fiction, mythmaking itself, as a way not simply of preventing suicide, but of preserving the feel of values even in a world which denies the existence and validity of those values.” (McConnell, p. 125)

narrative, death for Capt. Osborn “would be the hyphenated break in a rambling, illiterate monologue” (p. 47), which is “a good way to be if you’re most people” (p.47).

The narrator favours the attitude of Captain Osborn over Mr Haeker, and Mister Haeker’s attempted suicide and later successful suicide symbolise, in the novel, an end of traditional notions of behaviour. In a discussion between Todd and Mister Haeker, Todd suggests to him that “if death is the end, then it’s neutral. Which is better, to be unhappy or to be neutral?” (p. 168). The fact that he does later attempt to kill himself would suggest that he was indeed unhappy, despite claiming to be otherwise. According to Todd, “it’s silly to talk about what a man’s attitude *should* be, toward a thing like old age and death. Even if you start with *If he wants to die content*, you’d find that different people are content with different things” (p. 164).

The suicide of Mr Haeker does not signify an end to such generalisations, since there are simplifications of reality or generalisations existing in both the views of Mr Haeker and Capt. Osborn towards life and death. Nonetheless there is a notable movement in the novel away from traditional notions of behaviour, etiquette and discipline. It is an ill-fated coincidence therefore that Mr Haeker is mentioned before Todd goes to the floating opera with Capt. Osborn, and attempts suicide in his room, while the various performances of the floating opera are being staged.

The discipline of Todd’s father with regard to work and personal appearance is an example of personal discipline and codes of behaviour being carried to an absurd extreme. He is discovered by Todd,

One day in 1930 [...], one end of his belt spiked to the floor joist and the other fastened around his neck, there was not a smudge of dirt anywhere on him, though the cellar was quite dusty. His clothes were perfectly creased and free of wrinkles, and although his face was black and his eyes were popped, his hair was neatly and correctly combed. (p. 71)

Although Todd agrees with his father “that doing manual labor in one’s office clothes teaches one to work carefully and neatly” (p. 71), he does not follow the practice as rigidly as his father did. Todd suspects that his father “attributed to the habit some terminal value; it was, I think, related to some vague philosophy of his” (pp. 71-72), and firmly states that for himself this “is not the case” (p. 72). This incident initiates Todd’s Inquiry into the reasons for his father’s suicide, which he does not complete by the end of the novel. Todd can never completely understand why his father committed suicide. It is however the most probable reason why Todd does not favour traditional notions of discipline and “correct” behaviour.

In a comic episode involving Colonel Morton, the owner of “% *Morton’s Marvelous Tomatoes, Inc.*” (p. 185), Todd does later break codes of behaviour for their own sake, and demonstrates both the inherent absurdity of such conventions and of the value which people may place on them. After his father’s death, Todd inherits five thousand dollars. “Demoralized by Dad’s death, I was paralyzed by the five thousand dollars and note” (p. 184), and he decides to send the money to “the richest man in Cambridge” (p. 185). In response to Todd’s gesture of charity, the Colonel demands that he “take it back, and no more foolishness!” (p. 185). The Colonel cannot accept that the money is a gift, while Todd will not take the money back. Eventually, after “having drunk four double highballs in my room after supper” (p.191), Todd “decided to drop in on the Colonel’s party, thinking it consistent with my policy of incomplete consistency” (p. 191).

At the party chaos ensues with “the Colonel smiling redly, benignly, nodding his great head, flashing his gold teeth, his gold-headed cane” (p. 194): “At midnight the place went to hell, as though every guest - there must have been two hundred then, or else all were in the basement - had decided simply to throw back his head and

holler at the top of his lungs for several hours” (p. 193). After throwing glasses at the orchestra, dancing the tango with Evilyn Morton and forming “a cancan line” (p. 194) with “a floor show of drunken wives of vice-presidents” (p. 194), there was “a tendency to take cold showers in several of the upstairs bathrooms” (p. 194).

Todd dances “a magnificent *parly-voo*” (p. 194) with the drunk Mrs Morton in the shower, until the understandable intervention of the Colonel. “Then, parting, with what seemed to me a nice conjunction of wit and *savoir-faire*,” he tells the Colonel: ““One might call her Morton’s Most Marvelous Tomato, mightn’t one? Good night, sir”” (p.195). Todd further states, “one was, in fact, tempted to add that it was a pity to see such a fresh tomato stewed, as it were, if not altogether canned - but one knew the line beyond which the prick of wit becomes the sting of insult, and so held one’s tongue and exited gracefully” (p. 195).

The incident is mostly harmless, but illustrates social convention being taken to an absurd extreme in Colonel Morton’s unwillingness to accept the money as a gift, and, in contrast to Colonel Morton’s inflexible principles, the ease with which convention may break down, as the party descends into anarchy. The colonel, due to his unwillingness to be obliged to any man, allows himself to be placed in a situation of extreme embarrassment. After the party, “on the rare occasions when I met Col. Morton on Race Street and tipped my hat in greeting, he flushed red, bared his gold teeth, and ignored me with the grim smile of one who is obligated in no way to any man” (p. 195).

Although the inflexibility of the Colonel’s principles do not end in personal injury and loss of life (in the manner of Todd’s father), he is nonetheless placed in an uncomfortable situation and easily exposed by the less consistent actions of Todd Andrews. Similarly, the social conventions of polite society are exposed and ridiculed

by the comic nature of the revelry and the ease with which the decorum of the party deteriorates.

The novel demonstrates a clear movement away from traditional notions of behaviour and consistency, illustrated in both the attitude of the narrator and the various incidents which he describes. This departure is illustrated foremost in Todd's reaction to the speeches of T. Wallace Whittaker, the comparison between Mr Haeker and Capt. Osborne, the manner of his father's death, and the episode regarding a gift of money to the wealthy Colonel Morton. There is also, in the inquiries of Todd Andrews into the causes of his father's suicide and philosophical support for his own suicide, a symbolic end of reason or logic, and absolute values. This notion of an end of absolute values is important in understanding the nihilist conclusion of *The Floating Opera*, but also the adoption of relative values as a means to function within society in *The End of the Road*.¹⁸⁷

In *The Floating Opera* Todd's Inquiry into existence begins ostensibly with a decision to commit suicide.¹⁸⁸ According to Todd, he has in his life assumed "four or five" (p. 16) stances or masks, and his decision to commit suicide is the final "solution of a problem, or a mastery of a fact" (p. 16), which relates directly to these attitudes, stances or masks. The "fact" which he is attempting to master is the possibility of imminent death, due to his weak heart, and each of these masks was assumed not "to hide my face, but to hide my heart from my mind, and my mind from my heart" (p. 223).

Suicide is therefore his proposed solution to this problem of masks and the imminent possibility of his own death. According to Todd, "there was no mastering

¹⁸⁷ The relative values adopted in *The End of the Road* include popular simplifications of reality and popular myth.

¹⁸⁸ "Albert Camus observes, at the beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that the first, only, and inescapable question of philosophy is whether or not to commit suicide." McConnell, pp. 119-120.

the fact with which I lived; but I could master the fact of my living with it by destroying myself, and the result was the same - I was the master” (p. 227). This decision to commit suicide then initiates an Inquiry into the nature of existence and the “reasons” for suicide.

Todd, in his Inquiry, reasons initially that “*I. Nothing has intrinsic value*” (p.217) and then “*II. The reasons for which people attribute value to things are always ultimately irrational. [...] III. There is, therefore, no ultimate ‘reason’ for valuing anything*” (p. 223). All these “rationalizings” (p. 223) and Todd’s “masks were each first assumed, then justified” (p. 223), and therefore are also of no “*intrinsic value*” (p. 223) if the logic is followed further. The three ideas or “rationalizings” (p. 223), which Todd writes on a piece of paper, are “*post facto* justification, on logical grounds, of what had been an entirely personal, unlogical resolve” (p. 223), and are also of no objective value. Todd does not realise this at this moment and follows the Inquiry later to its natural conclusion.

The second premise relates to another Inquiry, “*An Inquiry into the Circumstances Surrounding the Self-Destruction of Thomas T. Andrews, of Cambridge, Maryland, on Ground-Hog Day, 1930 (More Especially into the Causes Therefor)*” (pp. 217-218), or Todd’s “attempt to learn why my father hanged himself” (p. 218). This Inquiry cannot ever be successfully completed:

Todd’s *Inquiry* into the possible reasons for his father’s suicide, which has required years of meticulous research and is supplemented by the even more laborious inquiry into the circumstances of his father’s life, can never be successful now, since Todd is left to infer that what he knows can never be proved.¹⁸⁹

This Inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the death of Todd’s father is an impossible task, “for as Hume pointed out, causation is never more than an inference;

¹⁸⁹ Ziegler, p. 22.

and any inference involves at some point the leap from what we see to what we can't see" (p. 218). Despite two years of research, Todd admits that there is no way to understand "so clearly that to question is out of the question, the *cause* of a human act" (p. 218), and therefore that he will never understand without doubt the cause or causes of his father's suicide.

The reasons for which people attribute value to things, according to Todd's "rationalizings" (p. 223), are always ultimately irrational, and Todd's Inquiry into his father's suicide demonstrates this premise. After "two years of questioning, searching, reading, and staring" (p. 218) Todd discovers "that there is no will-o'-the-wisp so elusive as the cause of any human act" (p. 218), and attempts briefly to explain why his inquiry must remain unfinished. Todd declares therefore, "*Imperfect communication: that's the problem*" (p. 220), while discussing the endless nature of the task.

Although he does not elaborate, "for to go into greater detail would enmesh us beyond hope of ever returning to the story" (p. 220), imperfect communication disallows the possibility that he shall understand "the workings of [his father's] mind" (p. 220). In order to understand completely why his father decided to commit suicide, Todd must study the history of his father's life from the moment he was born until his death. He also realises that "to understand an imperfect communication requires perfect knowledge of the party at each end" (p. 222), which further distances him from the event.

In a similarly irrational act to his father's decision to commit suicide, Todd nonetheless claims that he will continue to try to uncover the cause or causes of his father's suicide, despite the realisation that this task is endless. Although he provides an explanation for this decision, it does also illustrate to some extent the second of his

premises. Todd's decision to continue the Inquiry is not rational, since the Inquiry cannot uncover the objective truth about his father's suicide. But this decision does equally prove that a task must not necessarily be of objective value to provide subjective fulfilment or be regarded as of subjective value.¹⁹⁰ (It is from this premise and in the absence of absolute values that *The End of the Road* commences).

The third premise, "*III. There is, therefore, no ultimate 'reason' for valuing anything*" (p. 227), is derived from the second. Since the reasons for which people attribute value to things are always ultimately irrational, there is no objective "reason" for valuing anything. Todd then concludes his philosophical support for suicide with the final two premises, "*IV. Living is action. There's no final reason for action*" (p.228) and "*V. There's no final reason for living*" (p. 228). It is a logical consequence of this argument that, if there is no objective reason for living, there is also no objective reason for suicide.

Todd therefore adds "a parenthesis to the fifth proposition" after his failed attempt to blow up the floating opera, which reads "*V. There's no final reason for living (or for suicide)*" (p. 250). Todd forms this final amendment both from an earlier realisation that his suicide may be misunderstood, in particular that his "suicide would be interpreted by the Macks as evidence that their move had crushed" (p. 213) him, and the ultimate realisation that "nothing makes any difference, including that truth" (p. 251). According to Todd's "rationalizings" (p.223), therefore, the question of whether or not to commit suicide is objectively of no importance.

Todd's Inquiry into suicide and the nature of existence illustrates an end of reason or logic, and absolute values (or the so-called "End of History" mentioned in

¹⁹⁰ "Todd would like to believe that causation does not exist objectively, yet there is no reason why it should not provide a subjectively valid, applicable hypothesis for explaining one's actions." Ziegler, p. 22. Joe argues this in *The End of the Road*, although his subjective values approach objective values as he forces them on those around him (in an attempt to maintain a clear conception of cause and effect).

the introduction). Like Jeannine beside the showboat, as she adopts “the ‘Why?’ routine” (p. 199), Todd in his Inquiries cannot sustain a logical argument for or against a human action. There is, in both Jeannine’s innocent questions and Todd’s Inquiry into suicide, a clear “admission that logic cannot be applied to human values, particularly to the question of suicide, without some previous, rationally indefensible assumptions (such as, if one wants to stay alive, then...).”¹⁹¹ However, while Jeannine is comfortable to reply simply, when asked why, that “I want one” (p. 203) ice-cream cone, Todd at the end of the novel is not as able to act instinctively:

“It occurred to me, for example, that faced with an infinitude of possible directions and having no ultimate reason to choose one over another, I would *in all probability*, though not at all necessarily, go on behaving much as I had thitherto, as a rabbit shot on the run keeps running in the same direction until death overtakes him” (p. 251). Being similarly “faced with an infinitude of possible directions and having no ultimate reason to choose one over another” (p. 251), it is understandable therefore that the character, Jake, in John Barth’s next novel, *The End of the Road*, finds himself in a state of immobilisation.

The Floating Opera importantly signals both a movement away from traditional notions of behaviour in favour of popular simplifications of reality, and the symbolic end of reason or logic and absolute values. This novel illustrates a common tendency of society to avoid difficult questions regarding existence, and this is most evident in the responses of the audience to the varied performances of the floating opera. The crowd does clearly oppose the elevated lines of T. Wallace Whittaker and prefer the performance of Tambo and Bones. Todd meanwhile does not oppose the

¹⁹¹ Waldmeir, p. 83.

actions of the crowd, and this demonstration is important in an understanding of *The End of the Road*:

The Floating Opera provides a necessary introduction to the companion novel, *The End of the Road*, which further develops many of the premises raised in the earlier novel in the confrontation of two nihilist belief systems. Both belief systems commence from the assumption that no values are absolute.

In *The End of the Road* a clear conflict of ideas occurs between the rational, moral world of Joe and Rennie, and the popular simplifications of reality adopted by Jake (with the aid of the Doctor) to function in everyday life. The positions of Joe Morgan and the Doctor are superior in their respective relationships to Rennie and Jake, and Joe and the Doctor may even be substituted for the role of a government presiding over its citizens, Rennie and Jake. The approaches of the Doctor and Joe are clearly contrasting - where Joe expects consistency from Rennie, the Doctor favours almost complete inconsistency in both his approach to his patients and the belief system he advises Jake to adopt.

Ultimately the belief system which Jake adopts is best able to function in the situation of Rennie's pregnancy and hence, through implication, also the environment of post-war America. The practical application of the Doctor's value system is witnessed in both *White Noise* and *Vineland*, where there is illustrated a government-defined emphasis on popular myth and popular culture within the environment of contemporary America. This social system is largely founded on the premises expressed in the two novels by Barth and, in particular, the belief system of the Doctor in *The End of the Road*.

There are inherent flaws in both Joe's and the Doctor's separate belief systems, which become apparent in a comparison.¹⁹² These flaws only become apparent in the act of narration (with Jake as the narrator) and as the events unfold in the novel (with Barth as the author). Heide Ziegler states that "Jake finds the essence of experience only when he writes, that is, paradoxically, when he *betrays* experience."¹⁹³ Although Jake is a reliable narrator, in the sense that he does not intentionally mislead the reader, it is not possible to communicate experience with complete accuracy. But in the ideas that the characters represent it is paradoxically possible to find and test an "essence of experience" or a means to conduct existence into the future. "The essence of experience for him as an author, therefore, seems to be the ability to cope with situations as stories,"¹⁹⁴ and in these stories (and the metaphor of the novel itself) it is possible to approach an objective significance via the ideas (or belief systems) that are expressed and tested to their conclusion.

With regard to narrative style and technique, the narrator in *The End of the Road*, Jacob Horner, is more direct than Todd Andrews in *The Floating Opera* in reporting and commenting on events (possibly because he is much younger at the time of the narration than Todd). "Structurally the tightest and technically the least flamboyant of Barth's novels,"¹⁹⁵ the immediacy of style in *The End of the Road* reflects the influence of the Doctor on the narrator's life. He has been taught not to be caught between alternatives and to treat certain subjective truths as absolute.

The narrator at the beginning of *The Floating Opera* is relatively indirect and meandering, although he does always arrive at the heart of the matter and his "life is

¹⁹² "The Morgan-Rennie relationship" cannot simply be described as "a parodical version of the Doctor-Horner alliance" (Waldmeier, p. 104), because flaws are discovered in both of the separate and contrasting value systems (as they are tested via Jake and Rennie).

¹⁹³ Ziegler, p. 26.

¹⁹⁴ Ziegler, p. 26.

¹⁹⁵ Joseph, p. 15.

never less logical simply for its being unorthodox. Also, I get things done, as a rule” (p. 1). Jacob Horner does not meander and even the first line of the novel arrives at a vital truth. He is “in a sense” (p. 255) Jacob Horner because he has experienced the nothingness within himself, by the time of the narration of events, and has experienced the resulting paralysis or inability to choose. He also does not have a consistent self or essence. Despite this, he records events accurately, or as accurately as words will allow.

Jake immediately sums up Joe after having only recently met him and states: “Apparently Joe Morgan was the sort who heads directly for his destination, implying by his example that paths should be laid where people walk, instead of walking where the paths happen to be laid” (p. 272). As events later reveal, this immediate estimation of Joe’s character and personal values is quite accurate, and thereby the narrator (and the author John Barth) does not waste time or language arriving at the fundamental conflict of ideas in the novel. Jake maintains the description of events reliably and without dramatic embellishment throughout the novel, although he does not only serve as the narrator in *The End of the Road*. John Barth also uses the narrator (with the other main characters in the novel) to successfully test the opposing nihilist arguments.

According to Gerhard Joseph, “we witness a dialectical clash between conflicting value systems embodied in two characters”¹⁹⁶ (although the conflict does not occur simply between the two characters, Joe and Jake, but in fact occurs between the value systems of Joe and the Doctor which are embodied in Rennie and Jake respectively). As in *The Floating Opera* the philosophical arguments largely transcend subjective experience and approach an objective significance in the act of

¹⁹⁶ Joseph, p. 16.

metaphor, whether it be the metaphor of the floating opera in the first novel, the philosophical ideas expressed in both texts or even the novels themselves. Although the novels do refer to a specific location and period of time, they are relevant beyond the period in which they were written and in particular *The End of the Road* serves as a “metafiction” for American society and the representation of modern American society in *White Noise*.

In *The End of the Road*, although the approach of the Doctor is favoured at the conclusion of the novel, questions are nonetheless raised regarding the successful application of “Mythotherapy” and the various other therapies he endorses. Indeed, in *Vineland* there is a reference to “a government-defined history without consequences,”¹⁹⁷ which is further described as

Some snoozy fantasy about kindly character actors in FBI suits staked out all night long watching over every poor scraggly sheep in the herd it was their job to run, the destined losers whose only redemption would have to come through their usefulness to the State law-enforcement apparatus, which was calling itself ‘America,’ although somebody must have known better.¹⁹⁸

This may be viewed as a direct criticism of the Doctor’s belief system in *The End of the Road* and its application within the context of contemporary America.

However before discussing the flaws inherent in both separate positions it is necessary to first examine the conflict of ideas in *The End of the Road*. The conflict of ideas occurs principally between the characters of Jake and Rennie, who are themselves representative of the two nihilist belief systems that are tested in the novel.

In continuation of the statement from Todd Andrews at the conclusion of *The Floating Opera*, that “in the real absence of absolutes, values less than absolute mightn’t be regarded as in no way inferior and even be lived by” (p. 252), *The End of the Road* explores, in a conflict of ideas, the notion of living by relative values. It is

therefore essential, since the novel concerns the absence of absolute values, that Rennie and Jake both realise the nothingness within themselves before they are respectively aligned with Joe and the Doctor. While Jake is literally paralysed by “the malady *cosmopsis*, the cosmic view” (p. 323) as he “simply ran out of motives as a car runs out of gas” (p. 323), Rennie had also “peered deep into herself and had found *nothing*” (p. 316). In this respect Rennie and Jake are similar, and the conflict in ideas naturally occurs, most obviously, between Jake and Rennie, who are the separate embodiments of the philosophical positions of the Doctor and Joe. Indeed the Doctor and Joe never confront one another throughout the duration of the novel.

Jake first encounters the Doctor while in a state of paralysis, and it is the Doctor who helps him escape the condition. At the Pennsylvania train station Jake is unable to decide between a series of destinations, since there was ultimately “no reason to go to Cincinnati, Ohio. There was no reason to go to Crestline, Ohio. Or Dayton, Ohio; or Lima, Ohio. There was no reason, either, to go back to the apartment hotel, or for that matter to go anywhere” (p. 323).¹⁹⁹ With eyes “sightless, gazing on eternity, fixed on ultimacy” (p. 323), it is only the intervention and practical instruction of the Doctor, which wakes him from this condition. The Doctor clicks his fingers in front of Jake’s nose, addresses him in a self-assured manner, and tells Jake to buy “two cups of coffee” (p. 325).

¹⁹⁷ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 354.

¹⁹⁸ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 354.

¹⁹⁹ This condition is to a lesser degree encountered by Søren Kierkegaard in 1843, and is therefore not entirely new within philosophical argument and discourse. He states: “I generally have so many reasons, and most often such mutually contradictory reasons, that for this reason it is impossible for me to give reasons.” Although Kierkegaard does not encounter the paralysis of Jake, he finds it difficult to find objective reasons for actions, and also refers to the problem of clearly establishing cause and effect, where “there seems to be something wrong with cause and effect also, that they do not rightly hang together. Tremendous and powerful causes sometimes produce small and unimpressive effects, sometimes none at all; then again it happens that a brisk little cause produces a colossal effect.” Søren Kierkegaard, *Either / Or* (Volume 1) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), p. 20.

The Doctor simplifies Jake's world, and advises him to "move fast, or you might get stuck again. Don't think of anything but the coffee I've asked you to get" (p. 325). The Doctor emphasises movement and action, without thought or the constraints of reason or logic, and his advice is successful in the particular circumstance of Jake's paralysis.

With the aid of the Doctor, Jake adopts various techniques to aid and simplify choice, and so create a sense of self, and is ultimately introduced to the belief system called "Mythotherapy." The Doctor emphasises "choice and action" (p. 331), where "choosing is existence: to the extent that you don't choose, you don't exist" (p. 331), and where "it doesn't matter to the case whether your character is admirable or not, so long as you think you have one" (p. 331). Questions of morality and integrity of character are avoided in favour of the ability to act, as the Doctor adopts an inconsistent approach of applying various treatments for his various patients. Jake subsequently learns

There were special diets and, for many patients, special drugs. I learned of Nutritional Therapy, Medicinal Therapy, Surgical Therapy, Dynamic Therapy, Informational Therapy, Conversational Therapy, Sexual Therapy, Devotional Therapy, Occupational and Preoccupational Therapy, Virtue and Vice Therapy, Theotherapy and Atheotherapy - and, later, Mythotherapy, Philosophical Therapy, Scriptotherapy, and many, many other therapies practiced in various combinations and sequences by the patients. Everything to the Doctor, is either therapeutic, anti-therapeutic, or irrelevant. He is a kind of super-pragmatist. (p. 333)

In contrast to Joe, the Doctor is concerned neither with consistency nor causes in his treatment of his patients, but applies his various therapies according to the perceived necessity of the situation. According to the Doctor, "*the world is everything that is the case*, and what the case is is not a matter of logic" (p. 330). His approach to his patients attempts to reflect the inconsistency of the world.

The Doctor therefore attempts to treat “paralyzed Jacob Horner” (p. 329) rather than a general notion of paralysis, and ultimately decides that “Mythotherapy” is most suited to his situation. Prior to “Mythotherapy,” the Doctor prescribes for Jake “Informational Therapy” (reading “the *World Almanac* for 1951” p. 330), French existentialism,²⁰⁰ “a day job, preferably factory work” (p. 333), and “the principles of Sinistrality, Antecedence and Alphabetical Priority” (p. 334). Jake follows his advice, although he “had difficulty deciding how to apply [Sartre] to specific situations. (How did existentialism help one decide whether to carry one’s lunch to work or buy it in the factory cafeteria?)” (p. 335).

The Doctor then introduces him to “Mythotherapy,” which is based on two existentialist premises: “that human existence precedes human essence, if either of the two terms really signifies anything; and that a man is free not only to choose his own essence but to change it at will” (p. 336). “Mythotherapy” however develops these premises beyond the constraints of existentialist doctrine, and is a form of role playing, where an individual may assign roles or essences to themselves and others to suit the situation.

In *The Floating Opera* Todd Andrews introduces the notion of masks, and states that in his life he has assumed “four or five” (p. 16) stances or masks. In *The End of the Road* the notion of the self as a mask is actively embraced by Jacob Horner and endorsed by the Doctor in “Mythotherapy.” However, unlike Todd who is incompletely consistent, Jake is advised to “change [...] scripts as often as necessary” (p. 338) and thereby approach complete inconsistency. He is advised “to assume these

²⁰⁰ “Although the Doctor prescribes this form of existentialism for Horner, he himself is not an existentialist. He is instead what Horner describes him as: a super-pragmatist.” David Morrell. *John Barth: An Introduction* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), p. 23. According to Jake existentialism doesn’t relate easily to everyday tasks, whereas the pragmatic approach of the Doctor does relate to simple actions and decisions in everyday situations.

masks wholeheartedly” (p. 339), since “*ego* means I, and I means *ego*, and the ego by definition is a mask. Where there’s no ego - this is you on the bench - there’s no I” (p.339). There is however no consistent self, if the self is a mask and it is readily changed to suit the various crises of life.

It is to counteract this tendency towards complete inconsistency that Jake is also advised to adopt pre-existing rules as though they were absolute values. In the opening chapter of the novel he is advised by the Doctor to “teach the truth about grammar” (p. 259). The rules of grammar are being treated as though they were absolute values, as a form of therapy. According to the Doctor “there must be a body of laws” (p. 259) and “no optional situations” (p. 259) in his choice of occupation, since it is an “Occupational Therapy” rather than merely an occupation.

In contrast however to the various therapies of the Doctor is the position of Joe Morgan and Rennie:

The Morgans are rationalists. Joe, who dominates the marriage and has molded his wife into a replica of his own idea of himself, insists upon total – sometimes brutal – honesty between them and upon a singleminded, unrelenting acting-out of the premises upon which they have based their relationship.²⁰¹

In a similar manner to Jake, Rennie searches herself and finds nothing, prior to her indoctrination into Joe’s belief system. In college, after Joe tells her that she “could probably be wonderful, but that I was shallow as hell as I was” (p. 307), Rennie begins to view herself and her acquaintances in a critical manner. She realises “for the first time what a complete blank I was” (p. 308) and, in her recently acquired opinion, that “everything [people] said was silly” (p. 308). It is this revelation which causes her to return to Joe and ultimately to abandon her own personality in favour of the “Morgan philosophy” (p. 298).

²⁰¹McConnell, pp. 128-129.

She arrives at Joe's room in a dishevelled state, and becomes acquainted with Joe's beliefs and his notion of a permanent relationship. However, despite Joe's original claim that "anything we did together we had to do on the same level, understanding it in the same way, for the same purpose, nobody making allowances for anybody else" (p. 310), she does in effect become a lesser version of Joe.

The relationship between Rennie and Joe is not equal, since (similar to the Doctor with Jake) Joe assumes through chance and personal strength the superior position in the relationship. Joe and Rennie agree that "on every single subject, no matter how small or apparently trivial, we'd compare our ideas absolutely impersonally and examine them as sharply as we could" (p. 310). However Joe warns her that until she "learned *how* to do that - most of the more reasonable-sounding would be his. We would just try to forget about my ideas" (p. 310). There is therefore a dictatorial element to Joe's approach, since he attempts to fashion Rennie in his image, rather than encourage her individuality. In a world "full of tons and tons of horseshit" (p. 310), "only a few things could ever be valuable to me" (p. 310), and this does not include Rennie's personality.

Rennie therefore threw "out every opinion I owned, because I couldn't defend them [, and...] completely erased myself [...] right down to nothing, so I could start over" (p. 311). Joe becomes a God-like figure for Rennie, as she is fashioned in his image. Joe incorporates Rennie into his moral and ethical world, but does not concede to her previously held opinions (or even allow independent opinions or decisions to exist). It is for this reason that Jake immediately describes Rennie as a "bitch of an Eagle Scout's *Hausfrau*" (p. 274), and thereby alludes to Joe as a fascist.

Joe attempts to create a rational, moral world within the microcosm of his marriage and family life, and in many respects reflects the values of the period in

which the novel was written. He displays an emphasis on discipline, morality and family values, in both his personal beliefs and the expectations he places upon his wife and children. Although his values are subjective, he attempts, through will-power and personal strength, to create objective values from his understanding of the term “essence” (p. 297) or a set of “psychological *givens*” (p. 296).²⁰² He therefore “popped her one on the jaw” (p. 297) for apologising “to other people for not having their point of view” (p. 297).

Since Joe does not believe “in apologizing, because nothing is ultimately defensible” (p. 297) and Rennie nominally agreed to such values in their marriage, Joe forces Rennie to act in accordance with his own expectations of behaviour. According to Joe, “when you say good-bye to objective values, you really have to flex your muscles and keep your eyes open [...]. It takes *Energy*: not just personal energy, but cultural energy, or you’re lost” (p. 298), and this disciplinary punch illustrates Joe’s understanding of “energy.” It is with regard to “energy” that Joe (and to a lesser extent the Doctor) distances himself from French existentialist theory, and he even elaborates that “energy’s what makes the difference between American pragmatism and French existentialism” (p. 298).

The rational moral world, which Joe attempts to create within the microcosm of his marriage, is founded on his interpretation of the past as a logical sequence of events leading to the present. According to Joe, “when you’re speaking of past time: what a man did is what he wanted to do” (p. 300). He views the past as a logical sequence of cause and effect. Since his attempt to create objective truth or reason from subjective or individual values is founded on his notion of consistency, it is

²⁰² “Joe insists that man can create his own essence by transforming a single relative value into the ‘subjective equivalent of an absolute.’” (Joseph, p. 17.) This naturally requires a God-like belief in self, where any opposing argument must be subjugated and then either rejected or assimilated into the value system of Joe.

important to Joe that a “man can act coherently; he can act in ways that he can explain” (p. 297).

He expects consistency of action and coherent articulation of motives from Rennie, and does not confine his values to himself. In this attempt to assimilate his wife and children into his value system, he is seeking to create objective values from relative values, and the success of this attempt depends upon his ability to maintain a clear conception of cause and effect. It is therefore appropriate, since unlike Joe the Doctor is not concerned with “causes” (p. 326), that the two separate belief systems of Joe and the Doctor clearly conflict and contrast with regard to cause and effect and the notion of responsibility.

The test of the two separate belief systems constructed principally by Joe and the Doctor occurs between Rennie and Jake, since they literally embody the two separate philosophical positions. In this conflict of ideas the flaws and advantages of both become obvious. Jake is, therefore, invited by Rennie, during a “dinner of shrimp, rice, beer, and values” (p. 301) with the Morgans, to undertake riding lessons, and this invitation is enthusiastically reiterated by Joe. Joe immediately realises the possibilities involved in this confrontation of ideas, and has in fact previously been seeking to recruit a companion for Rennie.

Although Rennie’s invitation was not premeditated, Jake later learns that “Joe’s project hadn’t occurred to him on the spur of the moment” (p. 302) and is in fact an opportunity for Joe, in the manner of God, to test his creation. Jake, who is almost completely inconsistent and has abandoned traditional notions of responsibility, easily performs the role of “devil’s advocate” (p.313) to the ordered world that Joe for the most part has constructed and which Rennie embodies.

Jake notices “a clumsy force” (p. 303) in Rennie, and in the absence of Joe he is able to communicate freely with her. In the absence of rules for behaviour, Rennie displays an inability to “handle her body” (p. 304), and Jake is able to communicate with this part of Rennie that does not belong in Joe’s philosophy. As Joe must have realised, when he proposed the “project” (p. 299), Jake criticises the Morgan philosophy. He therefore tells Rennie: “Joe’s funny as hell” (p. 304), “Where did you and Joe get the notion that things should be scrapped just because they’re absurd? [...] What could be sillier than this whole aim of living coherently” (p. 305), and “frankly I’m appalled that he expects anybody else to go along with him” (p. 305).

Jake readily performs the role of devil’s advocate, and with somewhat detached curiosity observes Rennie’s reaction. After he refers to Joe’s disciplinary punch “for apologizing” (p.305), Rennie then “burst into tears”(p. 306) and revealed the history of her union with Joe. Jake, through his criticism of Joe, reveals an aspect of Rennie which is not borrowed directly from Joe and of which Joe would not approve.

Rennie is not able to maintain Joe’s expectations of behaviour, discipline and consistency, and these conversations with Jake display her hidden insecurities and fears. Unlike Joe, who simply “laughed [...] and took [Jake] to pieces” (p. 315) when confronted by his varied opposing arguments, Rennie struggles to maintain the position imposed upon her by Joe. “What was a game for Joe was a terrible fight for” (p. 317) Rennie, as she is tested by Jake and attempts to maintain the delusion that she will “grow to be just as strong as [Joe] is, and stronger than someone who isn’t even real” (p. 317).

Rennie views Joe as though he were God, but in his absence she struggles to maintain with similar conviction and coherence the set of values or “essence,” which

were for the most part imposed upon her. She fears that she will never “really get to be what Joe wants - I’ll always be uncertain, and he’ll always be able to explain his positions better than I can” (p. 311), and that she therefore isn’t strong enough to defeat the newly discovered adversity, of which Jake is representative.

Rennie is further alienated from Joe’s position when she and Jake observe Joe in a moment of weakness. Joe is seen to be

Fully dressed, smartly executing military commands [...] Passing a little mirror on the wall, Joe caught his own eye. What? What? Ahoy there! He stepped close, curtsied to himself, and thrust his face to within two inches of the glass. Mr. Morgan, is it? Howdy do, Mr. Morgan. Blah bloo blah. Oo-o-o-o blubble thlwurp. He mugged antic faces at himself, sklurching up his eye corners, zbloogling his mouth about, glubbling his cheeks. Mither Morgle. Nyoing nyang nyumpie. Vglibble vglobble vglup. Vgliggybloo! Thlucky thlucky, thir. (pp. 319-320)

And finally he is seen “masturbating and picking his nose at the same time. I believe he also hummed a sprightly tune in rhythm with his work” (p. 320). Joe’s position is parodied by his own private behaviour, and in this moment of weakness he reveals to Rennie, whether intentionally or not, that he is not God. Joe is not God, but a human being, and is, as he reveals, capable of weakness and inconsistency.

Shortly after Jake and Rennie had “played peeping Tom on Joe” (p. 346), Rennie and Jake commit adultery, and it is this act of indiscretion which tests Joe’s ability to maintain a rational world. Once Joe learns of this act, he adopts an autocratic position superior to both Rennie and Jake, since the rational moral world he has constructed is constructed around himself. Jake must necessarily be assimilated into the moral world that the Morgans have created, because of the nature of the indiscretion, and must, if Joe’s position is to be maintained, be assigned a position that is compatible with the value system that Joe, for the most part, has constructed. Therefore, since the belief system which Joe has constructed depends upon a clear

delineation of cause and effect, Joe cannot assign responsibility until he has “heard the whole story” (p. 359) regarding the adultery. He must hear “all the facts and all the interpretations of the facts” (p. 359) before he can, in the manner of God, or a judicial inquiry, assign responsibility.

Joe attempts, in the guise of reason and rational thought, to adopt an objective position, and hence “by his very nature had no tactic” (p. 360). Since Joe is unwilling to simplify or falsify the situation, he forces Rennie and also to a lesser extent Jake to re-enact the event, both literally and metaphorically, until a suitable conclusion is reached.²⁰³ He is not satisfied with Rennie’s initial emphasis upon Jake as the cause of the adultery, since in his opinion “her memory’s not perfect, and like anybody else’s it’s selective” (p. 359), and must learn to what extent Jake’s “actions influenced her actions” (p. 363).

Joe’s position ultimately fails, however, because neither Jake nor Rennie is able to maintain a consistent position with regard to the cause of the mutual act of indiscretion. Jake does not “know what unconscious motives I might have had [...] but whatever they were, they were unconscious” (p. 358) and Rennie cannot consistently blame Jake for a mutual act, since “it’s too easy, and it doesn’t really solve anything” (p. 369).

In Joe’s philosophy, what a man did is what he wanted to do, and Joe therefore sends Rennie to Jake’s apartment to recreate the event, ostensibly forcing her to act on their “real beliefs” (p. 372). According to Joe, Rennie ended up in bed with Jake “because when all’s said and done she *wanted* to, no matter how repugnant the idea is now” (p. 372), and therefore she believes “it’s all right for me to make love to other

²⁰³ Although Joe “directs the whole show,” he nonetheless “insists the actors innovate as they play so that the action be resolved by free choice of ethical agents” (Waldmeier, p. 102). This involves an inherent contradiction because Joe is not God, and for this reason he cannot successfully allow free choice while controlling events in an impartial manner.

men, at least to you, whether I want to admit it to myself or not, since I did it” (p.372). In the rational world, which Joe and Rennie constructed in their marriage, extramarital relationships were not part of their value system, and were in particular not part of Rennie’s “ethical program” (p. 362). According to both Joe and Rennie’s conception of herself, she could not have committed adultery, “and yet it happened” (p. 363). Therefore, in order to maintain the rational moral world of their marriage, Joe forces her to alter her conception of herself to suit this unexplained event.

Rennie does, however, move increasingly toward inconsistency rather than toward uncovering the truth of the past, and therefore further away from Joe. She approaches a condition of paralysis, rather than uncovering any essence or fundamental self, and ultimately dies because of her indecision. While

Joe, after all, was behaving pretty consistently with his position, [...] Rennie no longer had a position to act consistently with, not even the position of acting inconsistently, and yet, unlike [Jake], her personality was such that it seemed to require a position in order to preserve itself. (p. 377)

In Jake’s apartment, Rennie does momentarily adopt an attitude which may possibly be viewed as her own, but is, however, not strong enough to maintain or elaborate upon this position. The absurdity of the situation does occur to her, where “Joe seemed like a teen-ager trying to make a tragedy out of nothing, and you just seemed completely ineffectual” (p. 378), and where people “talk ourselves into all kinds of messes that would disappear if everybody shut up about them” (p. 379). In continuation of this argument, she informs Jake that “no piece of nonsense like this could break Joe and me up” (p. 380). She is, however, silenced by Jake’s reference to Joe’s “left hook” (p. 380) and the ensuing taunts regarding Joe’s reaction. Like Jake with the Doctor, Rennie is not strong enough simply to “refuse [Joe’s] policy decisions” (p. 373) and create her own.

Rennie is trapped between the consistency of Joe and the almost complete inconsistency of Jake. She is unable to maintain a consistent position, and dies because of the inflexibility of Joe's approach and the Morgan value system. In the events surrounding her suspected pregnancy, and the escalation of the conflict of ideas, it becomes apparent that Rennie is less able than Jake to cope with the increasingly complex and critical situation. While Joe attempts to assign responsibility and force Jake and Rennie into a consistent position, and Jake attempts practically to find an immediate solution without such questions, Rennie does not offer any practical solutions and neither does she align herself with Jake or Joe.

When Jake offers her the option of an abortion by a legitimate doctor, Rennie firmly refuses this option for moral reasons and acts in accordance with Joe's value system. But she later tends toward inconsistency and agrees to have an abortion with a doctor about whom she knows nothing. Ultimately Rennie dies because of her indecision, and symbolically suffocates, in continuation of Jake's earlier references to Joe as a fascist, on a traditional German meal of "hot dogs and sauerkraut" (p. 431). Her death is tragic and even unnecessary, but it is moreover, since she is the embodiment of Joe's position, the symbolic end of the value system which Joe constructed. It is therefore allegorically appropriate²⁰⁴ that she dies during an operation performed by the Doctor.

The position of the Doctor, and to a lesser extent Jake, is favoured in the conclusion of the novel, but similar to Rennie's struggle, the Doctor's value system is tested by the contrasting position of Joe and Rennie. Whereas Joe's position fails because people, ultimately, are not consistent, and objective laws shall inevitably be

²⁰⁴ I have concentrated on an allegorical reading of character relations in the novels by Barth. The texts define the direction of post-war America via the philosophical arguments represented by the characters, and an allegorical reading of character relations conforms for this reason to the constraints of the topic.

broken, there is in contrast a tendency toward responsibility and consistency displayed in the figure of Jake. Jake, who is the embodiment of the Doctor's position, displays a desire to accept and assume responsibility both with regard to Rennie's pregnancy and even to his relationship with Peggy Rankin:

For Jake life does not happen according to the seeming principles of history, as a chain of facts linked together in the manner of cause and effect [...] It comes about as we live it: just as thoughts become speech, facts grow out of actions before we can consciously conceive of them. If Todd Andrews was obsessed with the 'before,' Jacob Horner can only recognize the 'after,' and he is thus always confronted with guilt over responsibilities shunned.²⁰⁵

Although Jake is better able to act within the circumstances of Rennie's pregnancy, he is unable, despite an open desire to do so, to accept and assume responsibility for his own actions.

Jake's tendency toward responsibility and consistency occurs for the most part in response to Rennie's contrasting tendency towards inconsistency. It is in the interaction between Jake and Rennie, where the conflict between the philosophical positions most noticeably occurs, and where Jake is forced to interact on more than a superficial level. According to Jake, "the more one learns about a given person, the more difficult it becomes to assign a character to him that will allow one to deal with him effectively in an emotional situation" (p. 376), and, particularly in his relationship with Rennie, Jake is forced to confront various emotions and questions of morality and responsibility:

Existence not only precedes essence: in the case of human beings it rather defies essence. And as soon as one knows a person well enough to hold contradictory opinions about him, Mythotherapy goes out the window, except at times when one is no more than half awake. (p. 376)

²⁰⁵ Ziegler, p. 27.

Unlike his brief and relatively successful encounters with Peggy Rankin, Jake increasingly discovers that he cannot assign Rennie a role or essence and casually ignore the complexities of her character or the severity of the situation.²⁰⁶

In his initial encounter with Peggy Rankin, Jake assigns her the role of “Forty-Year-Old Pickup” (p. 279) because he is interested in the sexual encounter rather than the complexities of her character. Although Peggy does not assign him a similarly vacuous role and thereby detracts from the situation, Jake is nonetheless able to remain emotionally detached after a relatively successful application of “Mythotherapy” or role-assigning. In his relationship with Rennie and the Morgans, however, he finds it increasingly difficult to employ such techniques and so simplify his situation as he becomes emotionally involved. He reverts to symbols to simplify his relationship with Rennie, where “Joe was The Reason, or Being (I was using Rennie’s cosmos); I was The Unreason, or Not-Being; and the two of us were fighting without quarter for possession of Rennie, like God and Satan for the soul of Man” (p.377).

This is a form of “Mythotherapy” or role-assigning, which

Would certainly stand no close examination, but it had the triple virtue of excusing me from having to assign to Rennie any essence more specific than The Human Personality, further of allowing me to fornicate with a Mephistophelian relish, and finally of making it possible for me not to question my motives, since what I was doing was of the essence of my essence. Does one look for introspection from Satan? (p. 377)

This form of role assigning is immediately successful, because it allows Jake to “fornicate with a Mephistophelian relish” (p. 377), but does not prepare him for the emotional effects of this interaction, and the resulting moral dilemmas. Jake is not

²⁰⁶ “Mythotherapy” doesn’t always function in real and often complex social situations, because it advocates inaccuracy and inventing fictional situations solely to promote action. “If the world resists rational prediction, the recognition of things as they actually are also undermines Mythotherapy.” Warren French (ed.), *John Barth* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), p. 37.

able to maintain this simplification of reality as the crisis in the relationship develops, since he is also being tested in a manner similar to Rennie and he is not completely inconsistent, nor is Joe completely consistent.

When Rennie becomes light-hearted and irreverent toward the situation, and toward the positions of Joe and Jake, Jake ultimately views it as a victory for “human perversity” (p. 382) or inconsistency. He has assigned himself the role of “Unreason, or Not-Being” (p. 377), and therefore ignores the alterations he has undergone in mood and attitude. In reflection of Rennie’s “high spirits” (p. 378), he becomes increasingly “glum” (p. 378) and serious. He tells Rennie “of course nothing’s significant in itself, but anything’s serious that you want to take seriously. There’s no reason to make fun of another man’s seriousness” (p. 379) and then reminds Rennie of Joe’s “left hook” (p. 380). Jake does in effect become increasingly serious and morally involved in order to test Rennie, and moves away from the Doctor’s position of “mythotherapy” and role-playing towards Joe’s position. It is only after Rennie “assumed my glumness, I was free of it - took up her gaiety, in fact, and poured myself another glass of muscatel” (pp. 380-381).

Jake is forced by Joe to analyse the past, where he encounters questions of responsibility and to a certain extent morality.

Not only are the Doctor’s prescriptions of dubious utility in the long run, but they are also potentially dangerous and destructive. Divorced from any values, based upon the assumption that any action is preferable to inaction, and failing to provide any meaningful checks on behaviour, his programs give almost complete license to individuals who, like Jake, have ‘no feeling one way or the other’ for ‘humankind in general’ and may or may not be concerned about ‘the plight of some specific people.’²⁰⁷

Like Rennie he is tested, and even approaches a consistent role and understanding of the past, which would satisfy the Morgan value system. Jake informs

²⁰⁷ French, p. 38.

Joe that he “might be in love with her” (p. 392), and, since Jake’s remark displays a willingness to adopt a consistent position, Joe responds with excessive enthusiasm. Although Jake does not claim this emotion as the cause of the adultery, and is uncertain whether Rennie feels the same, he displays an opinion which “accounts for the most facts by the fewest assumptions” (p. 386).

In this moment Jake approaches assimilation into the rational world which Joe and to a lesser extent Rennie constructed. Joe therefore suggests to Jake “some kind of permanent sexual relationship between you and her? I mean a triangle without conflicts or secrecy or jealousy” (p. 393). Jake does not agree to this union, and “at the very mention of marriage and permanent sexual attachments [...grows] tired of the idea of Rennie” (p. 393). However, Jake’s suggestion is a display of emotional involvement and commitment outside the therapies endorsed by the Doctor.

Contrary to the Doctor’s position, “most of the time [Jake is] a moral animal” (p. 359), and he does attempt to amend regrettable situations after they have occurred. He attempts to save Rennie due to a sense of responsibility which is not easily explained in terms of Joe’s notion of reason and consistency, but which nonetheless motivates him to consider to some extent the situation of those around him and the effects of his actions. Prior to Rennie’s death, Jake also considers marrying “Peggy Rankin; take her surname; father a child on her” (p. 431), and has “in fact, no intention of keeping my pledge to go to Pennsylvania with the Doctor” (p. 431).

He desires to “live in the world” (p. 430), where “in a new town, with new friends, even under a new name - perhaps one could *pretend* enough unity to be a person” (p. 431). He desires an element of security, consistency and even morality, which is not offered in the value system constructed by the doctor. Although he does not maintain a consistent position in accordance with the rational world of the

Morgans, Jake does “crave [...] responsibility” (p. 438) and is confronted with various emotions that imply involvement and a tendency toward moral codes of behaviour.

Jake is therefore willing to assume responsibility, but ultimately is unable to adopt “a position and stick to it” (p. 398), and can only feel guilt and remorse after the event or attempt to find the most direct solution to a problem. While for Joe the act is more important than the result, Jake, who doesn't have a clear conception of cause and effect, can only recollect or act upon conclusions. In Jake's world,

One can go a long way into a situation thus without finding the word or gesture upon which initial responsibility can handily be fixed - such a long way that suddenly one realizes the change has already been made, is already history, and one rides along then on the sense of an inevitability, a too lateness, in which he does not really believe, but which for one reason or another he does not see fit to question. (p. 348)

Since Jake is unable to locate the cause of his liaison with Rennie, or recollect “any overt act, no word or deed that unambiguously indicated desire on the part of either of” (p. 347) them, he cannot easily maintain a consistent position within the rational world of the Morgans. When confronted by Joe he does feel guilt, remorse and even self-contempt, but any attempt to rationalise the past is ultimately, for Jake, a falsification, since he cannot clearly locate the cause of the mutual act of indiscretion.

Prior to the death of Rennie, Jake is uncertain whether he would follow the Doctor, and even states directly that “sometimes I assent to [the Morgan ethics] anyway and sometimes not” (p. 390). There are flaws in the system of the Doctor as there are in Joe's, and these become apparent in the interaction between Rennie and Jake. In this sense there is not a unanimous victory for the position of the Doctor over that of Joe. However, Jake is clearly better able to act in the circumstance of Rennie's pregnancy (than Rennie), and her death removes any final doubt. Unlike Rennie, who

under Joe's instruction must search herself for the truth about the past, for Jake "the salvage job was the first order of business" (p. 359). Since he is not constrained by ethical values and the notion of consistency, Jake is able to offer a viable solution to an increasingly critical situation in a manner which Rennie cannot.

While Joe and Rennie must take the situation "apart from every point of view we could think of" (p. 386) to understand the truth about the past, for Jake the "past [...] exists only in the minds of those who are thinking about it in the present, and therefore in the interpretations which are put upon it" (p. 359). Rennie is trapped between the consistency of Joe and the inconsistency of Jake, where "sometimes I think I've never understood anything as thoroughly in my life as I do this, and other times - like after I was up [at Jake's apartment] last time, and now - I realize I don't understand any more than I ever did" (p. 386). She naturally tends toward a condition of paralysis, where "it's all still a mystery. It tears me up even when I don't see anything to be torn up about" (p. 386). For Jake, however, "it is never too late to *do* something about the past" (p. 359). He is able immediately to search for a solution to any situation, without questions of consistency or moral integrity.

Jake adopts, in the manner prescribed by the Doctor, pre-existing rules, conventions, or codes of behaviour to achieve a particular end or result. To provide an abortion for Rennie, he moves outside traditional notions of correct behaviour and even the existing requirements of the law. He not only invents "an elaborate fiction" (p. 407) to persuade a doctor to administer "Ergotrate" (p. 405), but also impersonates a psychiatrist and forges an "affadavit" (p. 408) that his fictional wife requires an immediate abortion. He utilises the conventions of psychiatry to provide an abortion for Rennie, and although Rennie refuses to accept this offer for moral reasons, Jake is

successful to the extent that he is able to persuade a legitimate doctor to administer “Ergotrate” (p. 413).

In a later attempt to provide an abortion for Rennie, although he is less successful, Jake does once again attempt to find the correct action for the situation or adopts existing codes of behaviour to achieve a desired result. Jake confronts Peggy Rankin and attempts to adapt his behaviour toward his understanding of her future reaction. He is however limited by an overly fertile imagination, where “no matter how intimate my knowledge of [human beings], I was always able to imagine and justify contradictory reactions from them to almost anything” (p. 421). Despite his ultimate lack of success in this confrontation with Peggy Rankin, it is nonetheless an attempt to use the rules of behaviour to achieve a desired result.

Jake is better able than Rennie to act in the circumstance of her unexpected pregnancy, and her death removes any doubt. Due to her death and Jake’s final decision to follow the Doctor, a clear movement occurs away from Joe’s position toward that of the Doctor. Although Jake does, against the advice of the Doctor, become involved in the situation of the Morgans, the novel does conclude in favour of the value system constructed by the Doctor. After Rennie’s death Jake is “denied [...] the chance to take public responsibility” (p. 441) for her demise, and is unable to rationalise the situation due to “the raggedness of it; the incompleteness” (p. 441).

Contrary to Joe’s position, Jake is unable to “remain sufficiently simple-minded long enough to lay blame - on the Doctor, myself or anyone” (p. 441), and cannot maintain a consistent position. In a final rebuttal of Joe’s position and the rational world he constructed, Jake tells him “God, Joe - I don’t know where to start or what to do!” (p. 442). Symbolically Jake is then “without weather” (p. 442) as he

then climbs into a taxi, says “Terminal” (p. 442) and completes the novel by aligning himself completely with the Doctor.²⁰⁸

Both *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road* demonstrate a clear movement away from the notion of imposing a rational moral world upon society, toward a system founded on popular myth (or simplifications of reality) and, as it is revealed in *White Noise* and *Vineland*, popular culture. *The Floating Opera* explores the common tendency of society to avoid difficult intellectual struggles, and the narrator ultimately concludes that questions about the nature of existence are of no intrinsic value. In *The End of the Road* Jacob Horner adopts various masks which are mostly superficial reflections of pre-existing rules and social conventions, and utilises popular simplifications of reality or myth to function in society.

Together these novels reflect much of what is at present understood as the post-modern aesthetic (appearance without moral or ethical substance), and are indicative of many changes in America that were about to occur. *The Floating Opera* was published in 1956 and *The End of the Road* was published in 1958, but they are both still highly relevant beyond the period in which they were written. Indeed *The End of the Road* in particular provides a philosophical and, with the practical application of the Doctor’s belief system, an ideological framework which can clearly be recognised (and deconstructed) in the accurate portrait of American society offered by *White Noise*.

²⁰⁸ Jake’s “decision to go to the terminal (the novel’s last word) to keep his bargain after all” does not indicate “a final retreat from life” (Joseph, p. 22), but has symbolic importance for the final outcome of the philosophical conflict in the novel.

Chapter 2

White Noise

The two novels by John Barth relate to the later novels - *White Noise* and *Vineland*. *White Noise* portrays a system founded on Hollywood mythology, and the superficial reflection of pre-existing rules and social conventions found in *The End of the Road*. The novel centres upon the experiences of the narrator, Jack Gladney,²⁰⁹ a university lecturer who teaches Hitler studies at Blacksmith College, and his wife Babette. The course which he teaches on Hitler is influenced by Hollywood myth, and the novel portrays a consumer-based society that has lost much of the firm moral basis which religion formerly supplied.

In *Vineland* (Chapter 3) the social upheavals which occurred during the late '60s and early '70s are explored from the perspective of the 1980s. The novel refers to a vast range of images and icons from popular culture, and the brief youth rebellion which failed to inspire any final, social revolution. The result is a landscape of popular culture, where Godzilla leaves footprints in Japan and popular mythology from the television coincide with everyday life. *Vineland* is important both as an account of the social changes, which occurred in America between the late '60s and '80s, and the increasing role of popular culture in America.

Both of these novels illustrate the application of the novels by Barth, with their fundamental premises and systems of belief, in post-war American society, but in *White Noise* it is possible to analyse this novel in terms of the various therapies of the Doctor in *The End of the Road*. This process offers insight into the role of popular culture, the culture industry and the government in modern American society, where

White Noise also offers insight into the increasing dependence upon technology and science to solve difficulties experienced in life and the predominance of simulation over reality in a society founded on cultural mythology.

The first-person narrator of *White Noise* is Jack Gladney, who describes and comments on events from the perspective of a person deeply influenced by his cultural environment. The author and Gladney are not the same, where the author has a greater level of awareness than the narrator and exists (from the position of author) to an extent outside the society represented in the novel. DeLillo does not often interfere or comment on characters or events in the novel, and adopts a traditional style throughout *White Noise*, where the narrative offers a detailed and realistic portrait of American society in the early 1980s.

As from the beginning of his writing career, “DeLillo has been interested in bending traditional forms to his will and to the life of his culture.”²¹⁰ This is evident in *White Noise*, where the style of writing is easily accessible for any reader and the use of a relatively familiar and approachable first-person narrator (who is involved in the events in the novel) is a standard or traditional narrative technique. He does use traditional techniques to offer and communicate an in-depth insight into contemporary American society, where the novel is both detailed and thorough in its representation of America in a specific time (early 1980s) and stated place (Blacksmith, America).

DeLillo does not rely sole on Jack, as the narrator, to comment on American society, but uses other characters to provide more provocative or insightful comments than Jack is capable or willing to mention. Murray in particular performs this role

²⁰⁹ Jack Gladney is first-person narrator, as both observer and protagonist, who is reliable but deeply influenced or affected by his cultural environment (both consciously and subconsciously).

²¹⁰ Frank Lentricchia, *New Essays on White Noise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 8.

throughout the novel, and he frequently guides the understanding of the narrator. When confronted by a difficult or unusual question Jack will often refer to Murray or state “remind me to ask Murray” (p. 209) to those around him. Although it is mostly Murray who raises questions about American culture or society, technology or the role of “collective perception” (p. 12), Jack does occasionally provide a surprising insight. At the end of the novel he mentions that “everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks” (p. 326), and alludes to the role of popular culture in modern American society.

Jack does, however, remain mostly unaware of or possibly disinterested in the power sources in modern America, where DeLillo uses the narrator to highlight the influence of the cultural environment in modern America rather than achieve a greater level of understanding by the end of the novel. The author remains for the most part separate from the events in the novel as they are reported by Jack, although the reader is nonetheless offered a detailed representation of modern America and in particular America in the early 1980s.

White Noise portrays a system founded on myth and consumer messages, which may be broadly analysed in terms of the various therapies of the Doctor in *The End of the Road*.²¹¹ With culture dominated by advertisement, consumer messages and Hollywood myth, American society as portrayed in *White Noise* is structured to avoid self-reflection, in a manner similar to Jake in *The End of the Road*.

Jake adopts an advertising jingle as a mantra to maintain a purely aesthetic state: “when walking alone I would find myself repeating over and over in a judicious, unmetrical voice, ‘Pepsi-Cola hits the spot; twelve full ounces: that’s a

²¹¹ Joe Moran describes John Barth as a “metafictionist” in; Joe Moran, *Star Authors: Literary Celebrity in America* (London and Sterling, Virginia: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 111, and although I do not use this term *The End of the Road* functions easily as a “metafiction” for *White Noise* and *Vineland* and their representations of American society.

lot.”²¹² He accompanies “the movement of my lips with a wrinkled brow, distracted twitches of the corner of my mouth, and an occasional quick gesture of my right hand. Passers-by often took me for a man lost in serious problems.”²¹³

While Jake adopts a Pepsi slogan to avoid thought, Murray in *White Noise* refers to television and “the coded messages and endless repetitions, like chants, like mantras. ‘Coke is it, Coke is it. Coke is it.’”²¹⁴ In the saturation of media information and images, which is referred to in the title, *White Noise*, and throughout the narrative both directly and indirectly, Don DeLillo’s depiction of American society displays a cultural emphasis upon superficiality. And hence a deliberate movement away from any sincere examination of the nature of the surrounding social environment or, in particular, any negative implications surrounding the fact of human mortality (as directed by the culture industry of America).

The Doctor in *The End of the Road* practises various therapies “in various combinations and sequences”²¹⁵ with his patients, but “Informational therapy, Conversational Therapy, [...] Occupational and Preoccupational Therapy, [...] and Mythotherapy”²¹⁶ are most obviously applicable to the cultural environment portrayed in *White Noise*. To a lesser extent “Nutritional Therapy, Medicinal Therapy, Surgical Therapy, Dynamic Therapy, [...] Sexual Therapy, Devotional Therapy, [...] Virtue and Vice Therapy, Theotherapy and Atheotherapy, [...] Philosophical Therapy, [and] Scriptotherapy”²¹⁷ also apply indirectly to the social landscape depicted in *White Noise*.

²¹² Barth, p. 290. The use of this jingle in *The End of the Road* does not display any “subliminal fear of mass culture” (Schaub, p. 176), but is simply used by Jake to clear his mind of thought.

²¹³ Barth, p. 290.

²¹⁴ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 51. All subsequent page references in the text belong to this work, except where otherwise specified.

²¹⁵ Barth, p. 333.

²¹⁶ Barth, p. 333.

²¹⁷ Barth, p. 333.

The role of the Doctor is equivalent to that of the American Government, where these various “therapies” are both practised and realised principally through the culture industry. The U.S. Government, and in particular the CIA, is performing the role of the Doctor in modern American society, and this becomes apparent both in an analysis of *White Noise* and *Vineland* and also after researching historical sources (in the preface). The relationship between the CIA and the culture industry arises in the novel through the work of Jack’s ex-wife reviewing novels for the CIA, and the reference to a secret world of control before Jack states “perhaps I was beginning to understand my ex-wives and their ties to intelligence” (p. 275). The various therapies of the Doctor are evident throughout *White Noise* and can be easily deconstructed in a comparison between the two novels.

According to the narrative voice (Jack Gladney) in this contemporary American novel:

Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead. (p.326)

These are all forms of collective therapy in terms of the belief system of the Doctor in *The End of the Road*, principally: “Mythotherapy” – “The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial” and “The cults of the famous and the dead”; “Nutritional Therapy” – “The miracle vitamins”; and “Medicinal Therapy” or even “Surgical Therapy” – “the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity.”

On both an individual and collective level, the notion of “Mythotherapy” and the creation of myth relate to the characters and structure of society depicted in *White Noise*. It is possible to deconstruct *White Noise*, and the representation of modern American society offered by this novel, in terms of the therapies of the Doctor in *The*

End of the Road, and this process offers a deep insight into modern American society, its culture and the forces at work behind the culture industry.

Interspersed throughout the narrative of *White Noise* are random messages from various forms of media: “Radio and television broadcasts frequently interrupt the conversations or narrative of *White Noise*, sometimes infiltrating the characters’ consciousness without their awareness.”²¹⁸ The messages usually arrive in the form of a brief statement regarding an irrelevant piece of information from a distant space in the house or environment of the central characters in the novel. Mostly the characters in *White Noise* do not notice or do not respond to these messages, which appear in the form of a subconscious voice spoken during conversations between family members or the everyday functions of the Gladney household.²¹⁹

As Lentricchia notes:

In *White Noise*, DeLillo deploys that popular literary form of the private life, but only in order to have his way with it, showing what large and nearly invisible things invade our kitchens, the various coercive environments within which the so-called private life is led.²²⁰

During a conversation between Bob Pardee, Babette and Denise, an unspecified “British voice” (p. 56) states from “upstairs” (p. 56): “There are forms of vertigo that do not include spinning” (p. 56). It is not clarified whether the voice emanates from the television or the radio. Nonetheless it is an indirect intrusion of the mass media in the life of the household, which has become such an intrinsic element of the family environment that it is not noticed. The conversation between Bob Pardee and Denise continues without distraction, where prior to the outside media voice, Bob Pardee “was bent over a putt. Babette leaned on the refrigerator door with her arms

²¹⁸ Tom LeClair, *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 217.

²¹⁹ These interrupted media voices are a stylistic device implying constant background noise.

²²⁰ Lentricchia, p. 7.

folded, watching him” (p. 56), and afterwards Denise asks Bob “Funds for what?” in continuation of her previous questioning of her father.

The excess amounts of irrelevant information emanating from various media sources influences, at both a conscious and a subconscious level, the nature of conversations within society in general and amongst the Gladney household. This phenomenon may be understood in terms of the Doctor’s belief system in *The End of the Road* as “Informational therapy” and “Conversational therapy,” and is most clearly illustrated in *White Noise* in the exchanges of meaningless information between the members of Jack’s family.

The family naturally reverts to such memory stores of mostly meaningless and disconnected trivia during a journey to the “Mid-Village Mall” (p. 81) and later during the apparent crisis situation of the “airborne toxic event” (p. 117). With “all six of us jammed into the car on our way to the Mid-Village Mall” (p. 80), the family are able to comfortably pass time with a series of misinformed questions and answers, as Denise’s initially serious question regarding Babette and “Dylar” (p. 80) immediately loses its original significance in the ensuing dialogue.

Denise asks Babette, “What do you know about Dylar?” (p. 80), and various other family members reply:

‘Is that the black girl who’s staying with the Stovers?’

‘That’s Dakar,’ Steffie said.

‘Dakar isn’t her name, it’s where she’s from,’ Denise said. ‘It’s a country on the ivory coast of Africa.’ [...]

‘*The Perfect Wave*,’ Heinrich said. ‘I saw it on TV.’

‘But what’s the girl’s name?’ Steffie said.

‘I don’t know,’ Babette said, ‘but the movie wasn’t called *The Perfect Wave*. The perfect wave is what they were looking for.’ [...]

‘If she’s an African,’ Steffie said, ‘I wonder if she ever rode a camel.’

‘Try an Audi Turbo.’

‘Try a Toyota Supra.’ [...]

‘I’ll give anyone in this car five dollars,’ Heinrich said, ‘if they can name the population of Bolivia.’

‘Bolivians.’ (pp. 80-81)

This is a harmless conversation between the members of the Gladney family, which manages also to indicate larger concerns regarding American mass culture and in particular the influence of media information and images.

This conversation between the six members of the Gladney household clearly displays the direct and indirect influence of television, consumer jargon, and media saturation of information. A film viewed on television is mentioned, which is (according to Heinrich) titled “*The Perfect Wave*” (p. 80), the brand names of the two makes of cars, “Audi Turbo” (p. 81) and “Toyota Supra” (p. 81), enter the conversation, and the rest is meaningless information borrowed from various media or education sources.

Like the excerpts from media sources, which frequent the narrative, there is no sense of purpose to the information that arises in the conversation. There is no intent to seriously analyse each question and provide a definitive answer, instead the conversation rapidly moves from one disjointed fact to another. In a similar manner to the voice of television, which earlier states mid-narrative and without further explanation: “And other trends that could dramatically impact your portfolio” (p. 61), there is no particular intent to inform. Jack does in narration state after the conversation in the car, that “the family is the cradle of the world’s misinformation” (p. 81), but this insight is however relevant beyond the realm of merely the family and through implication may be applied to American society and mass culture in general.

The “incessant bombardment of information” (p. 66), which is implied in the irregular use of disjointed media messages dispersed throughout the narrative, is discussed directly by Jack with Murray, Alfonse, Lasher and Grappa. With regard to the fascination of disaster footage on television, Alfonse blames the saturation of

media information for the “brain fade” (p. 66) of the average viewer. He states, in a superficial manner that “the flow is constant [...] Words, pictures, numbers, facts, graphics, statistics, specks, waves, particles, notes. Only a catastrophe gets our attention” (p. 66).

Although the manner of the conversation is perhaps derived from this aspect of American culture, and Alfonse displays no serious intent to alter or deeply examine the cause of this cultural phenomenon, the connection between mass culture and its influence upon the thought processes of the individual is nonetheless raised in conversation by Alfonse. The fact that the conversation then naturally returns to the less significant topics of brushing “your teeth with your finger” (p. 67) and “where were you when James Dean died?” (p. 68) displays the influence of mass culture and in particular its apparent function within American society to provide a superficial topic of discussion. The larger concerns of culture and its relationship to the individual are, in this brief conversation, both stated directly and later implied in the nature of the continuing dialogue between Murray, Alfonse, Lasher and Grappa.

In *The End of the Road* Jake adopts a commercial jingle as a mantra to avoid self-reflection, and in contemporary America, as portrayed in *White Noise*, the “incessant bombardment of information” (p. 66) and consumer messages perform a similar function. While the saturation of media information and its influence upon conversation may readily be compared to the “Informational Therapy” and “Conversational Therapy” of the Doctor, advertisement or indeed consumerism may similarly be understood as a form of therapy in the manner of the belief system constructed by the Doctor in *The End of the Road*. Both advertisement and consumerism are an intrinsic element of contemporary American life and culture, and this is reflected in the lives of the characters portrayed in *White Noise*.

In *White Noise* the language of advertisement does not merely enter the conversation of the characters, but influences the processes of thought to such an extent that “computer-generated” (p. 155) names of consumer items are muttered during sleep. Jack hears Steffie mutter in her sleep two “words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant” (p. 155), and the words are “*Toyota Celica*” (p. 155). The language of advertisement and consumerism is an essential element in the fabric and continuation of contemporary American society, and performs to some extent a similar function to the Pepsi jingle adopted by Jake in *The End of the Road*.

The act of shopping, which relates directly to advertisement and the overwhelming occurrence of consumer messages, is therefore portrayed as a means to avoid an existential crisis or any form of confrontation with the unpleasant moments, truths and situations in life. After Jack is described as a “big, harmless, aging, indistinct sort of guy” (p. 83) by Eric Massingale, he does not examine the nature of this comment or even confront Eric with a sincere reply. Despite his claim to the contrary, he is offended by these words, and as a direct result “the encounter put me in a mood to shop” (p. 83). He is able to displace his emotional response to this unpleasant encounter and compensate for any loss of self-esteem in the act of spending money with his family. In this manner shopping or the act of spending money is portrayed as a “form of existential credit” (p. 84). It is an immediate substitute for the emotional pain that commonly arises from the everyday conflicts which occur in the social interaction between people.

For Jack, therefore,

The more money I spent, the less important it seemed. I was bigger than these sums. These sums poured off my skin like so much rain. These sums in fact came back to me in the form of existential credit. I felt expansive, inclined to

be sweepingly generous, and told the kids to pick out their Christmas gifts here and now. (p. 84)

In the act of spending money and dispensing money on his family he recovers any pride lost from the earlier encounter, and is able to avoid any uncomfortable self-examination resulting from Eric Massingale's comments.

As Thomas Ferraro states in *New Essays on White Noise*, "the sense of fulfillment seems to lie in the spending of money, not the actual acquisition of goods."²²¹ The fulfilment which Jack feels is derived from participating in the collective act of spending money, as it is encouraged by the mass media, and not through acquiring goods with any true, selfless generosity of spirit or any traditional, social or religious notion of giving to others. The collective act of shopping at the Mid-Village Mall is an opportunity to behave in a manner endorsed by the apparatus of capitalism, and, through this public act, rediscover the domestic unity of the family at the Mid-Village Mall.

To the extent that this is superficially a communal act, it is true that "in *White Noise*, DeLillo examines not so much the individuating force of consumer culture as its communalizing power."²²² The individual is clearly encouraged to feel a part of a larger group by consumer culture and the "aura of connectedness"²²³ created by the mass media. However, it would seem that this sense of community is mostly an illusion and simply a collective application of the Doctor's "Mythotherapy" in modern American society. There is no real substance beyond the appearance of community, as the events in *White Noise* fundamentally suggest, where, even in this example, shopping is not a long lasting compensation for any loss of self-esteem and

²²¹ Thomas J. Ferraro, "Whole Families Shopping at Night," *New Essays on White Noise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 21.

²²² Ferraro, p. 20.

²²³ Ferraro, p. 20.

only serves to momentarily distract Jack's mind from any of his worries or concerns about personal status and credibility.

Similar to information and its effect upon conversation, shopping, consumerism, and advertisement are part of the contemporary American system. A system which is apparently founded, whether coincidentally or deliberately, upon many of the therapies or the belief system of the Doctor in *The End of the Road*. There are of course negative implications regarding this system, which are mostly implied rather than stated directly. And most importantly of these is that the saturation of consumer language and the items of a society founded on capitalism appear to make "escape impossible" (p. 294).

There are faintly masked implications, regarding the inflexibility of this system, in the unexplained appearance in the novel of a notice regarding a "new automated banking card" (p. 294). In conclusion the notice states: "WARNING. Do not write down your code. Do not carry your code on your person [...] Know your code. Reveal your code to no one. Only your code allows you to enter the system" (p.295). The notice refers to the banking system, but there are larger implications regarding the structure and possible future direction of American society (as represented in this novel). Advertisement and the language of consumerism may be viewed as the symptom of a rigidly consumer-based society, although, in relation to *The End of the Road*, it is simply the practical application of the belief system of the Doctor and to a lesser extent Jake.

In a demonstration of the extent to which consumerism and advertisement influence the lives of ordinary Americans, Murray describes the value of social groups directly in terms of their advertising appeal. He does in effect state "the

central, the deadly serious principles of a capitalist society.”²²⁴ Murray tells his students that they are already “becoming less recognizable as a group, less targetable by advertisers and mass-producers of culture” (p. 50). According to his understanding of the hierarchy of the marketing system, he tells them:

Kids are a true universal. But you’re well beyond that, already beginning to drift, to feel estranged from the products you consume. Who are they designed for? What is your place in the marketing scheme? Once you’re out of school, it is only a matter of time before you experience the vast loneliness and dissatisfaction of consumers who have lost their group identity. (p. 50)

As Frow notes, in a capitalist society “the marketing scheme really does work, for most purposes, [...] as the scheme of things; the whole social organization is geared to this equation.”²²⁵ Murray does, therefore, clearly state the fundamental role of advertising and consumerism in contemporary American society, where advertising and marketing not only influence behaviour but even provide to some extent a sense of collective and individual identity.

Advertisement performs an important role in the cultural identity of contemporary America, and this is evident even in the American educational system as it is portrayed in *White Noise*. The educational content at the “College-on-the-hill” (p. 4) includes studies of advertisement and popular culture, since both popular culture and advertisement are undeniably the most influential forces in the continuation of modern American society. According to Murray “there are full professors in this place who read nothing but cereal boxes” (p. 10), and in the “popular culture department, known only as American environments” (p. 9) the teaching staff study “the natural language of the culture [...] an Aristotelianism of bubble gum wrappers and detergent jingles” (p. 9).

²²⁴ John Frow, “The Last Things Before the Last: Notes on *White Noise*,” *Introducing Don DeLillo* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 185.

²²⁵ Frow, p. 185.

These “movie-mad, trivia-crazed” (p. 9) “New York emigrés” (p. 9) do, however, adopt European conventions regarding academic research or “make a formal method of the shiny pleasures they’d known in their Europe-shadowed childhoods” (p. 9) in their examination of contemporary consumer culture. In accordance with the belief system of the Doctor in *The End of the Road*, they necessarily adopt traditional conventions to study “the natural language of the culture” (p. 9), which includes for the most part advertisement, consumer items and the mass media. This mirrors the advice of the Doctor to Jake to embrace certain rules and conventions as though they were absolutes, notably the rules of “prescriptive grammar”²²⁶ in the teaching profession.

The influence of popular culture and the mass media at the “College-on the-hill” (p. 4) is not confined to the popular culture department, but is also evident in the course which Jack Gladney teaches on Hitler. In American society and mass culture “Hitler is figured more as a pop star than as a mass murderer, because of the proliferation of images makes all forms of fame equivalent,”²²⁷ and this is evident in Jack’s “Hitler studies” (p. 4). The course is unintentionally influenced by Hollywood myth, and with regard to the belief system of the Doctor in *The End of the Road* both the manner and content of his chosen occupation illustrate the practical realisation of “Occupational Therapy” and the collective application of “Mythotherapy.”

As Paul Cantor states, in *New Essays on White Noise*, Hitler Studies may be viewed as ‘DeLillo’s measure of the power of the alliance of the media and the academy in the postmodern world to trivialize even the most significant historical

²²⁶ Barth, p. 259.

²²⁷ Mark Osteen, *American Magic and Dread: Don DeLillo’s Dialogue with Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p. 168.

event.”²²⁸ This is accurate (whether or not the alliance is intentional from or involves all the American academia), but as Cantor argues this is only part of the truth. The course, which Cantor does not mention, is also a symptom (and consequence) of the attraction of mass culture, where the description of the lecture conducted by Jack and Murray provides a direct connection between Nazi Germany and modern America’s preoccupation with cultural mythology.

The role which Jack performs at the college displays a superficial adoption of pre-existing conventions and codes of behaviour, which reflects to a large extent the ideas expressed in *The End of the Road*. His position at the college may be described as an “Occupational Therapy” rather than merely an occupation, because he adopts existing conventions (including popular mythology) as though they were absolutes, and whether deliberately or not style and delivery become in his chosen profession more important than content and authenticity. In the combined lecture which Jack and Murray conduct respectively on Hitler and Elvis, a clear comparison is even formed between the crowd displays and pageantry of the Nazi era in Germany, the crowd address at the lecture, and the role of popular mythology in contemporary America.²²⁹

Jack adopts the mannerisms associated with intellectual involvement and the conventions associated with academic research without the substance, which is traditionally understood as a vital element in his chosen profession. From the moment in March of 1968 when Jack “invented Hitler studies” (p. 4), there is a clear and continued emphasis upon appearance rather than content in the “department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill” (p. 4). He is advised “back in 1968” (p. 16), by the

²²⁸ Paul A. Cantor, “Adolf, We Hardly Knew You,” *New Essays on White Noise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 47.

²²⁹ DeLillo is not merely “trying to characterize the contemporary world by showing that such a phenomenon as Hitler studies has become possible in it,” Cantor, p. 41, but is directly commenting on the role of the culture industry in contemporary America and the power structure which directs this industry.

then chancellor who “went on to serve as adviser to Nixon, Ford and Carter before his death on a ski lift in Austria” (p. 4), to alter his “name and appearance if I wanted to be taken seriously as a Hitler innovator” (p. 16).

Jack, on the advice of the chancellor, agrees to “invent an extra initial and call myself J. A. K. Gladney” and is warned against what the chancellor “called my tendency to make a feeble presentation of self” (pp. 16-17). The chancellor suggests that Jack “gain weight” (p. 17), because although Jack “had the advantages of substantial height, big hands, big feet, [...he] badly needed bulk [...] - an air of unhealthy excess, of padding and exaggeration, hulking massiveness” (p. 17). The content of the course is not here discussed, but rather the ability to maintain the impression of authentic academic research or endeavour is clearly emphasised by the chancellor.

In continuation of the chancellor’s remarks in 1968 and his emphasis upon the importance of appearance, Jack does later decide to wear “glasses with thick black heavy frames and dark lenses” (p. 17). And it is with regard to appearance rather than content, where the developments in Hitler studies occur. “Hitler gave [Jack] something to grow into and develop toward” (p. 17), where it is with regard to decisions about physical appearance and image that Jack’s professional abilities as a lecturer may be seen to progress. The glasses are “an alternative to the bushy beard that my wife of the period didn’t want me to grow” (p. 17), and the series of initials “J. A. K.” (p. 17) imply to Babette “dignity, significance and prestige” (p. 17).

Jack’s occupation is therefore mostly a superficial display, and may even be described as an “Occupational Therapy” rather than merely an occupation. In the manner of Jake in *The End of the Road*, who is taken “for a man lost in serious problems” (p. 290) as he accompanies “the movement of my lips with a wrinkled

brow, distracted twitches of the corner of my mouth and an occasional quick gesture of my right hand” (p. 290), there is no factual or analytical substance beyond the appearance of intellectual involvement. Although Jack’s name may intimate “dignity, significance and prestige” (p. 17), he suspects that there is no substantial basis beyond this impression and directly states that he is “the false character that follows the name around” (p. 17).

During a lecture on “Advanced Nazism” (p. 25), Jack adopts various subtle techniques to manipulate the reaction of his audience. Directly after the reference to the propaganda films and crowd scenes of the Nazi regime in Germany, there is a detailed description of the arrival of students into the lecture theatre as Jack prepares to address his audience. In a stylised performance designed to signify authority, he “got to my feet and took up a position at the front of the theater, middle aisle, facing the entranceway” (p. 26). As the students enter the theatre, he

Watched them take their seats, noting the subdued and reverent air, the uncertain anticipation. [...] There were whispers, rustling paper, the knocking sound of seats dropping as one by one the students settled in. I leaned against the front of the apron, waiting for the last few to enter, for someone to seal the doors against our voluptuous summer day.
Soon there was a hush. It was time to deliver the introductory remarks. I let the silence deepen for a moment, then cleared my arms from the folds of the academic gown in order to gesture freely. (p. 26)

The atmosphere of anticipation in the theatre and the subtle techniques which Jack adopts to create an impression of authority and physical presence are indirectly compared with the preceding reference to the ostentatious symbolism and images of crowd euphoria from footage of Nazi “propaganda films” (p. 25).

In the “impressionistic eighty-minute documentary” (p. 25), which Jack edited, “crowd scenes predominated” (p. 25). After images of “mystical epics” (p.25), surging crowds and various banners, wreaths and insignia, there is a final reference to

Ranks of thousands of flagbearers arrayed before columns of frozen light [...] a scene that resembled a geometric longing, the formal notation of some powerful mass desire. There was no narrative voice. Only chants, songs, arias, speeches, cries, cheers, accusations, shrieks. (p. 26)

A clear comparison is formed between this description of footage from crowd scenes at various Nazi rallies and propaganda films, and the description of the lecture theatre prior to Jack's spoken word.

Although Jack's lecture is a far less pronounced display of crowd euphoria and of the techniques designed to influence audience response, style and delivery are in his address nonetheless more important than content. After forming an eloquent response to a question from a student regarding the plot to kill Hitler, Jack does ultimately ask in narration: "Is this true? Why did I say it? What does it mean?" (p.26). He thereby raises questions about his own authenticity, his ability to perform his role beyond appearance, and even the broader concern of culture within the surrounding social environment.

The influence of popular mythology is not only evident within the portrayal in *White Noise* of American society, but also the education system at the "College-on-the-Hill" (p. 4). In a combined lecture on Hitler and Elvis, the Nazi figure-head and the post-war American icon of popular music are compared by Jack and Murray in a manner which is influenced by the social and cultural environment of popular mythology, Hollywood sensationalism and myth of personality. Murray and Jack compare the relationship of Elvis and Hitler to their mothers, the "excess, deterioration, self-destructiveness" (p. 72) and early death of Elvis, and the crowd fascination with Hitler.

The topics which they discuss are designed to entertain the audience rather than inform, and are explored in a relatively sensationalist manner, which reflects

rather than deconstructs the myth and aura surrounding both figures. Jack relies upon Hitler's "professional aura of power, madness and death" (p. 72) as he addresses the audience, and both Jack and Murray adopt stylised gestures and movements as they speak. Murray "walked among them, speaking, his right hand trembling in a stylized way" (p. 70), while Jack "stood against the wall, attempting to loom, my arms folded under the black gown" (p. 70). In *White Noise* the influence of popular culture is evident not only in American society in general but also the college environment at the "College-on-the-Hill" (p. 4) as Jack and Murray provide a stylised version of both figures, which the college audience readily gathers to hear.

After the conclusion of the lecture, the function of popular culture in contemporary American society is directly compared with the crowd euphoria of the Nazi era. After Jack refers to the crowds who "came to be hypnotized by the voice, the party anthems, the torchlight parades" (p. 73) and who "came to form a shield against their own dying" (p. 73), he refers to the crowd formed to hear the lecture. Jack states in narration that "people gathered round, students and staff, and in the mild din of half heard remarks and orbiting voices I realized we were now a crowd" (p.74). Although Jack does not pursue this similarity any further, it is implied that the group of people gathered to hear the lecture on Hitler and Elvis, are similarly gathered to "be transported" (p. 73), "attend tributes to the dead" (p. 73) and to some extent "form a shield against their own dying" (p. 73).

The audience is gathered to attend an "aura" (p. 74) surrounding the icons, Hitler and Elvis, or to participate in a collective perception rather than seriously to inquire into the nature of both historical figures. The comparison between the crowds gathered to hear Hitler speak and the audience gathered to attend the lecture is reiterated as "Murray made his way to my side and escorted me from the room,

parting the crowd with his fluttering hand” (p. 74). The reference to Elvis completes the comparison, where the role which mass culture and mythology perform in contemporary American society is openly satirised both in the combined lecture, which both Murray and Jack perform, and the reference to crowd displays.

In *The End of the Road* Jake adopts “Mythotherapy” as a means to simplify existence and function within everyday situations, and in *White Noise* various characters adopt, as a product of their cultural environment, a similar technique in the interaction with other characters. According to Jake in *The End of the Road* “we are all casting directors a great deal of the time”²³⁰ and with regard to “Mythotherapy” we are free to assign roles or essences to suit and simplify the social situation. These roles or essences are derived from popular simplifications of reality, where

While you know very well that no historical human being was ever *just* an Obliging Filling-Station Attendant or a Handsome Young Poet, you are nevertheless prepared to ignore your man’s charming complexities - *must* ignore them, in fact, if you are to get on with the plot, or get things done according to schedule.²³¹

In a similar manner to Jake in *The End of Road*, Jack, in his marriage to Babette, assigns her an essence or role, which is presumably borrowed from his cultural environment of popular simplifications of reality or roles. According to Jack, Babette “reveals and confides” (p. 192); she “is strong, healthy, outgoing, affirmative. She says yes to things. This is the point of Babette” (p. 220). This is only a superficial understanding of Babette, and may be described as a role because she does not maintain this role or “essence” throughout the novel and at various moments adapts her role or essence to suit different situations. The role which Jack assigns her and which she appears to wholeheartedly perform (when they are together) is a means to

²³⁰ Barth, p. 280.

²³¹ Barth, p. 279.

continue the marriage without the conflict of self-examination or, in Jake's terminology, simply as a means "to get on with the plot."²³²

There are, however, limitations to the practical application of "Mythotherapy" or the assigning of roles, where, as Jake in *The End of the Road* admits, "role-assigning is at best an arbitrary distortion of the actors' personalities."²³³ This is demonstrated in Jack's understanding of Babette, where she does not consistently maintain the role of "strong, healthy, outgoing, affirmative" (p. 220) wife and mother. Jack is therefore surprised when he discovers Babette fears death, because it is not consistent with the role or essence he assigned both himself and Babette in their marriage. He always viewed her as "the happy one" (p. 197), and himself as "the damned fool" (p. 197). In his conception of their relationship, he viewed himself as the protector of his wife, where despite his knowledge of his own mortality she must remain "animated, vital and happy" (p. 197).

He speaks to her, when she reveals her own fear of death,

As one of those reclining professors might address a younger member of the academy, someone whose work is promising and fitfully brilliant but perhaps too heavily dependent on the scholarship of the senior fellow. (p. 197)

This is the role, which he assigns himself and her during the conversation, and to some extent throughout the history of their marriage.

It is therefore contrary to his conception of their relationship when Babette later adopts the role of protector. When Babette takes his "head in her hands, gently and yet fiercely, and rocked it to and fro on the pillow" (p. 203), it is an act Jack "could not connect to anything she'd ever done, anything she seemed to be" (p. 203). She does not conform to the essence, which Jack has assigned her in their marriage, and instead there is a clear role reversal as she attempts to comfort him. According to

²³² Barth, p. 279.

Jake in *The End of the Road*, “role-assigning is at best an arbitrary distortion of the actors’ personalities,”²³⁴ and this is evident in the character relationship between Jack and Babette in *White Noise*. The essence, which Jack assigns Babette, is also an “arbitrary distortion” of her personality, because she does not maintain this single role or essence throughout her life or even throughout the novel.

When Babette later becomes “sarcastic, [and] mocking” (p. 225), as she attempts to prevent Jack from pursuing “Mr. Gray” (p. 224) and Dylar, she adopts a manner of address which does not belong to Jack’s conception of his wife. She is no longer “the happy one” (p. 197) in their relationship, but has developed some relatively sinister qualities as she tries to protect Jack from his own weakness. Finally Babette manages to alter her role completely when she is in the company of her father.

As she speaks with her father,

The cadences of her speech changed, took on a rural tang. The words changed, the references. This was a girl who’d helped her father sand and finish old oak, heave radiators up from the floorboards. (p. 248)

She adopts an entirely different role, or essence, when confronted by her father, where she is no longer the happy and affirmative family woman but has returned to an innocent childhood role of daughter.

The success of “role-assigning,”²³⁵ depends upon the ability of the other person or people to adopt a similar or corresponding role. In *The End of the Road* Jake’s sexual encounter with Peggy Rankin is undermined because she does not adopt a role, or essence, corresponding to or compatible with his own. While he assigns her the role of “Forty-Year-Old Pickup,” she does not in response,

²³³ Barth, p. 280.

²³⁴ Barth, p. 280.

²³⁵ Barth, p. 280.

Assuming she was after the same thing I was after, [...] assign me a role gratifying to her vanity-say, The Fresh But Unintelligent Young Man Whose Body One Uses For One's Pleasure Without Otherwise Taking Him Seriously.²³⁶

She does instead confront Jake with “her protest,” and thereby digs the “truth out of me.”²³⁷ The result is that her feelings are hurt and Jake is placed in an uncomfortable position.

In a similar manner to this encounter between Jake and Peggy Rankin, Jack in *White Noise* does not conform to the role which Tweedy Browner assigns him during a conversation. He does not respond correctly to her line: “God, Tuck, we were good together” (p. 88), which is a cultural pastiche indirectly borrowed from her cultural heritage of either film, or popular novels. Jack is expected to appreciate the significance of this line, and “look at me in a fond and nostalgic way, smiling ruefully” (p. 88). Instead he replies “Good at what?” (p. 88), and undermines the effect she was attempting to create. Instead of performing a corresponding role to her own, he responds sincerely and thereby detracts from the possible shared moment of simulated nostalgia for their past.

In *White Noise* the creation of myth and “the cults of the living and the dead” (p. 326), which are illustrated to some extent in the combined lecture on Hitler and Elvis, and in cultural references to film and television, may be regarded as the collective application of “Mythotherapy.” The various roles and behavioural traits which “Mythotherapy” requires to function on an individual level are borrowed, not in the process of social interaction between individuals or social groups, but are importantly borrowed from the cultural environment. This includes of course film and television.

²³⁶ Barth, p. 279.

²³⁷ Barth, p. 278.

When Lasher asks Grappa: “who was the greatest influence on your life?” he offers therefore the name of an actor in a film rather than a relative, friend or acquaintance. He states that “Richard Widmark in *Kiss of Death*” (p. 214) was the greatest influence on his life:

When Richard Widmark pushed that old lady in that wheelchair down that flight of stairs, it was like a personal breakthrough for me. It resolved a number of conflicts. I copied Richard Widmark’s sadistic laugh and used it for ten years. It got me through some tough emotional periods. (p. 214)

He borrowed Richard Widmark’s “creepy laugh” (p. 214), and states that “it clarified a number of things in my life. Helped me become a person” (p. 215).

Grappa thereby adopts the mannerisms of the film actor to function within everyday situations. “Cinematic reality helps this character ‘get through’ ordinary reality, as if the two were indistinguishable,”²³⁸ and in this reference to film as a behavioural influence the larger concern of culture is raised. Film may be understood to perform the collective function of providing a role for the individual to adopt within moments of social interaction.

“Mythotherapy,” or the creation of myth, is evident not only in film and television, but also in the tabloid magazines and newspapers. Instead of providing roles or cultural stereotypes for behaviour, the tabloid articles referred to in *White Noise* display a more blatant realisation of “myth-making.”²³⁹ While entertaining a group of evacuees from the “airborne toxic event” (p. 117), Babette reads “from a small and brightly colored stack of supermarket tabloids” (p. 142) about “previous-life experiences as pyramid-builders, exchange students and extraterrestrials” (p. 142), and the predictions of “the country’s leading psychics [...] for the coming year” (p. 145).

²³⁸ Eugene Goodheart, “Some Speculations on Don DeLillo and the Cinematic Real.” *Introducing Don DeLillo*, p. 127.

These stories include references to the “famed personalities Howard Hughes, Marilyn Monroe” (p. 143), the spirit of the former president “Lyndon B. Johnson” (p. 145), “Beatle assassin Mark David Chapman” (p. 145), “John Wayne” (p. 146), “Ronald Reagan” (p. 146) and the “sixties superkiller Charles Manson” (p. 146). These are the tabloid “tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial” (p. 326) and the “cults of the famous and the dead” (p. 326), which are apparently common in the lives of the characters in *White Noise*.

The group gathered to hear Babbette read various tabloid articles is not “amazed” (p. 144) by the story of “Patti Weaver” (p. 143) or even skeptical:

There was no interest shown in discussion. The story occupied some recess of passive belief. There it was, familiar and comforting in its own strange way, a set of statements no less real than our daily quota of observable household fact. (pp. 144-145)

The mythology of supernatural experiences, extraterrestrial encounters and the myth surrounding famous personalities are not viewed as false or even subject to question by the majority, but have become a vital part of the collective reality of contemporary America.

The “tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial” (p. 326) found in tabloid magazines and papers do in fact influence the everyday actions of the American citizens represented in *White Noise*. For the Doctor in *The End of the Road* “insincere [is an] impossible word,”²⁴⁰ and similarly in *White Noise* there is little or no distinction between the created mythology and reality. The police at Blacksmith therefore call “in a psychic to help them determine the Treadwells’ whereabouts and fate” (p. 60), while on a separate occasion a policeman “saw a body thrown from a UFO [...] on the outskirts of Glassboro” (p. 234).

²³⁹ Barth, p. 337.

In the local newspaper it is stated, in the report on the disappearance of the Treadwells, that the police had consulted the psychic named Adele T. “on a number of occasions” (p. 60). The psychic “had led them to two bludgeoned bodies, a Syrian in a refrigerator and a cache of marked bills totaling six hundred thousand dollars” (p. 60). The authenticity of the venture is then undermined as “in each instance, the report concluded, the police had been looking for something else” (p. 60). Finally there is the line: “The American mystery deepens”(p. 60), which further undermines the nature and credibility of the police investigation. The line is unmistakably ironic and is directed from the distant point of view of the author, rather than Jack Gladney.²⁴¹

The various hobbies and “tabloid aspiration” (p. 268), which various characters in *White Noise* undertake, display the practical realisation of the “Preoccupational Therapy” of the Doctor in *The End of the Road*. After the death of his mother Howard Dunlop turns “to meteorology for comfort” (p. 55). This hobby, after the traumatic experience of his mother’s death, gives his life meaning, where the choice of the hobby is clearly influenced by the mass media or the cultural environment of television. Similarly, Orest Mercator attempts to create “an imperial self out of some tabloid aspiration” (p. 268).

He is preoccupied with an attempt to live in a cage of poisonous snakes and thereby put his “name in the record book” (p. 266). According to Orest “this is what Orest Mercator is all about” (p. 265), as this hobby or “tabloid aspiration” (p. 268) becomes, in the terminology of Sartrean existentialism, his essence. “He would grow in life-strength as he neared the time” (p. 268), as “he would train relentlessly, speak

²⁴⁰ Barth, p. 339.

²⁴¹ Although *White Noise* is a first-person narrative, and the narrator is Jack Gladney, the irony here derives from the author who has a greater level of awareness than that of the narrator. There exists “a complexity beyond the narrator’s ken: a terrible complicity in the horrors narrated that may be the real point of the writer’s (not Gladney’s) discomfiting perspective” (Frank Lentricchia, “Tales of the Electronic Tube,” *New Essays on White Noise*, p. 93).

of himself in the third person, load up on carbohydrates [...], his friends drawn to the aura of inspired risk” (p. 268). The choice of hobby is, similar to Howard Dunlop’s hobby, influenced by the mass media and his cultural environment, where the direct influence for Orest’s decision to inhabit a cage filled with poisonous snakes is presumably tabloid magazines and papers rather than television.

To a lesser extent the various other therapies - “Nutritional Therapy, Medicinal Therapy, Surgical Therapy, Dynamic Therapy, [...] Sexual Therapy, Devotional Therapy, [...] Virtue and Vice Therapy, Theotherapy and Atheotherapy, [...] Philosophical Therapy, [and] Scriptotherapy”²⁴² - apply to the portrayal of contemporary America in *White Noise*. The tablet named “Dylar” (p. 251), which is designed to “eliminate fear of death” (p. 251), may be viewed as a “Medicinal Therapy.” It is a “Medicinal Therapy” rather than merely a medicine because of the psychological (rather than psychiatric) nature of the illness. According to Jack (in reference to Dylar), “the power of suggestion could be more important than side effects” (p. 251) and he is “eager to be humored, to be fooled” (p. 251) by the reputation of the tablet alone.

“Virtue and vice therapy” is demonstrated in *White Noise*, where “a man’s attempt to redeem himself might prolong the elation he felt when he committed the crime he now sought to make up for” (p. 315). “Theotherapy and Atheotherapy” also appear in the contrast between the religious attitudes of both Jack and Sister Hermann Marie. According to Jack “when we see a nun, it cheers us up, it’s cute and amusing, being reminded that someone still believes in angels, in saints, all the traditional things” (p.317), which is an example of “Atheotherapy.” In contrast the nun states: “If we did not pretend to believe these things, the world would collapse”(p. 318), which

²⁴² Barth, p. 333.

is an example of “Theotherapy.” Both attitudes may be viewed as simulated forms of religious belief or non-belief, and may therefore be described as forms of religious therapy.

The Doctor in *The End of the Road* practices the various therapies “in various combinations and sequences”²⁴³ with his patients, where the patient has “no way of knowing whether anything I’ve said or will say is the truth, or just a part of my general therapy for you.”²⁴⁴ Although it is not stated in *White Noise* who is performing the role of the Doctor or government in contemporary America, there are, however, deliberate references to the Central Intelligence Agency. In particular there is a reference to the “intelligence work” (p. 213) which Jack’s former wife, Dana Breedlove, performed for the CIA. For the most part “she reviewed fiction for the CIA, mainly long serious novels with coded structures” (p. 213) and these reviews, which she wrote, were then “microfilmed and sent to a secret archive” (p. 275).

The purpose of these reviews is not further clarified, but the work is clearly domestic rather than directed against a foreign country. It is therefore ironic that she tells her daughter “she was thinking of coming in from the cold” (p. 275). The irony being that the phrase “coming in from the cold” (p. 275) is usually associated with espionage served in a foreign country, rather than reviewing novels in an individual’s country of origin. It may be further deduced that the reviews she wrote are intended for the plot structure of domestic film rather than television, due to the “coded structure” (p. 213) and the “long serious” (p. 213) nature of the novels.

Jack also refers to “secrets” which are “a tunnel to a dreamworld where you control events” (p. 275), after stating “perhaps I was beginning to understand my ex-wives and their ties to intelligence.” Part of these secrets of control are the hidden ties

²⁴³ Barth, p. 333.

²⁴⁴ Barth, p. 328.

between the culture industry of America and the various agencies of the American Government (foremost the CIA), where the CIA is performing a role similar to that of the Doctor in *The End of the Road*. The various therapies of the Doctor appear throughout *White Noise*, and the novel by Barth clearly offers a framework for modern American society as represented in DeLillo's novel (where the novel by Barth may even have influenced the structure and nature of the actual American culture industry at some time between its original publication and the writing of *White Noise*).

White Noise displays the predominance of the simulated event over the real event and, as a result, a clear emphasis upon science and technology rather than serious art, Literature, or even religion. For the Doctor the past is a fiction created in the present, where “*insincere* [is an] impossible word.”²⁴⁵ He advises Jake to “assume [...] masks wholeheartedly,”²⁴⁶ and under the instruction of the Doctor the simulation or mask, which Jake adopts, does not merely hide the real Jacob Horner, it does to a large extent become the real Jacob Horner. He is advised not to “think there’s anything behind [each mask],”²⁴⁷ and to participate in “role-assigning [or] myth-making”²⁴⁸ to such an extent that it no longer seems a falsification of reality.

Similarly in *White Noise* the simulation does frequently predominate over the real event, and does even become assimilated into the collective reality to such an extent that it no longer appears to be a falsification of reality. At the site of “THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA” (p. 12), Murray tells Jack “no one sees the barn” (p. 12), because “once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn” (p. 12). The sign does to some extent supersede the original nature of the barn, where “the collective perception [...] literally colors our

²⁴⁵ Barth, p. 339.

²⁴⁶ Barth, p. 338.

²⁴⁷ Barth, p. 338.

²⁴⁸ Barth, p. 337.

vision” (p. 12). The tourists are therefore more “taking pictures of taking pictures” (p.13) than viewing the barn as an object in itself.

During the “airborne toxic event” (p. 117), a “SIMUVAC” (p. 139) worker describes the real evacuation as a means to prepare for the simulation. There is here a clear reversal in the traditionally understood priority of a real emergency over a pretend emergency, where the simulation does in fact become more important to the officials and emergency workers than the real event. The “new state program” (p.139) named “SIMUVAC” (p. 139) views the “real event [...as a means] to rehearse the simulation” (p. 139), and the “SIMUVAC” (p. 139) worker describes to Jack the progress of the real evacuation accordingly. He tells Jack that they “don’t have our victims laid out where we’d want them if this was an actual simulation” (p. 139) and that they “have to make allowances for the fact that everything we see [on the night of the evacuation] is real” (p. 139). Furthermore it is then stated, during the actual simulated evacuation, that they “learned a lot during the night of the billowing cloud. But there is no substitute for a planned simulation” (p. 206).

The simulation is clearly viewed as more important than the real event, where according to an official:

If reality intrudes in the form of a car crash or a victim falling off a stretcher, it is important to remember that we are not here to mend broken bones or put out real fires. We are here to simulate. (p. 206)

The real occurrence of an injury or an actual accident, which the simulation is supposedly designed to prevent and treat, is regarded as less important than the uninterrupted management and completion of the simulation or pretend event.

With American culture dominated by advertisement, consumer messages and Hollywood myth, *White Noise* displays an emphasis upon technology and scientific explanations in American society, rather than serious art, Literature or even religion.

During the “airborne toxic event” (p. 117) there is an attempt to “plant microorganisms in the core of the toxic cloud” (p. 160), and the solution to the spill is clearly technology-based. Instead of an attempt to examine the cause of the spill, and prevent or treat the problem with such an inquiry, there is instead an attempt to outdo the problem with a greater technological advance. In a display of “stunning innovation” (p. 160) and “wondrous ingenuity” (p. 160) the microorganisms are designed to “literally consume the billowing cloud, eat it up, break it down, decompose it” (p. 160). There are however consequences, which the “people out there who can conjure such things” (p. 161) did not “[think...] through completely” (p.161).

In an earlier conversation with Jack about “modern death” (p. 150), Murray alludes to a “law of physics [...which states that every] advance in knowledge and technique is matched by a new kind of death, a new strain” (p. 150), and this law (a consequence of entropy) also applies to the attempt to “plant microorganisms in the toxic cloud” (p. 160). The microorganisms do not remove the toxic residue from the atmosphere but merely displace the problem, where there is “a school of thought that says it’s not residue from the cloud that causes the sunsets. It’s residue from the microorganisms that ate the cloud” (p. 227). Similar to the “postmodern sunsets” (p.227), which appear “stunningly beautiful” (p. 227) but are in fact the result of “toxic residue in the atmosphere” (p. 227), there are unforeseen consequences to the apparently advanced technique employed to remove the threat of the cloud.

In *White Noise* the society portrayed is clearly structured against any form of far-reaching self-reflection or an understanding of the power system acting within American society. American culture is clearly dominated by advertisement, media

saturation of images and information, and Hollywood myth,²⁴⁹ where individual and social identity is largely created by and dependent upon the mass media (rather than the family, community, serious art and Literature or even the education system). With regard to identity, therefore, Don DeLillo states in an interview: “If serious reading dwindles to near nothingness, it will probably mean that the thing we’re talking about when we use the word ‘identity’ has reached an end.”²⁵⁰

According to the author of *White Noise*,

[America has] a rich literature. But sometimes it’s a literature too ready to be neutralised, to be incorporated into the ambient noise. This is why we need the writer in opposition, the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation. We’re all one beat away from becoming elevator music.²⁵¹

In a society increasingly structured against self-examination and self-criticism, the “rich literature”²⁵² of both post-war and earlier America has, as this quotation implies, lost much of its influence. The role that serious literature, serious art and even fundamental religious concepts perform in the formation of social or national identity has been for the most part undermined by the emphasis upon mass culture in contemporary American society.²⁵³

Due to the emphasis upon mass culture rather than serious art, Literature or traditional religious concepts, there is no clear ethical or moral foundation evident within the consumer-based society portrayed in *White Noise*. The values displayed in

²⁴⁹ Thomas Schaub refers to “a battle between High Art and Mass Culture” played out “in literary culture,” where “the novel exists as wit and invention, the entire narrative testifying to the private consciousness as a source of cleverness rising above the enervations of mass culture” (Schaub, p. 179).

²⁵⁰ Jonathan Franzen. Interview with Don DeLillo. (“Perchance to Dream.” *Harper’s*, April 1996. <http://www.perival.com/delillo/ddwriting.html> “Don DeLillo on Writing.”)

²⁵¹ Adam Begley. Interview with Don DeLillo. (“Don DeLillo – The Art of Fiction CXXXV.” *Paris Review*, 128. <http://www.perival.com/delillo/ddinterviews.html> “1993 - Adam Begley.”)

²⁵² Begley.

²⁵³ In the conclusion (pp. 130-132) I refer to *Voss* which is not an American novel, but whose relevance may equally be “neutralised” by the “ambient noise” of popular culture. Both *Voss* and *The Crying of Lot 49* offer a viable alternative to the emphasis on mass culture in America (and the rest of the world), if these and other serious literary texts are not allowed to fade into obscurity.

the novel are rarely sincere or fundamental, where individual character is judged for the most part upon appearance and where society is structured toward superficiality. For example, Murray describes Babette as “good with children [...and] the type to take control, show strength and affirmation” (p. 19) in a “family tragedy” (p. 19), because “she has important hair” (p. 19). This assessment of Babette’s character is based purely on her appearance, and is in fact incorrect, since, according to Jack, Babette typically “falls apart” (p. 20) during a “family tragedy” (p. 19).

White Noise displays an emphasis upon surface values in American society, where the society portrayed is clearly structured to avoid any form of self-analysis that might lead to suffering or contemplation on mortality, in a similar manner to the value system constructed by the Doctor in *The End of the Road*. During a crisis situation Jack’s family “mainly [...] looked at people in other cars, trying to work out from their faces how frightened we should be” (p. 120). They thereby base their reaction to a critical situation upon the appearance of those around them, where there is no attempt to examine their situation, outside imitating surrounding evacuees.²⁵⁴

This reaction may, for the most part, be attributed to their cultural environment, where their conversation does naturally revert to the meaningless information borrowed from various media sources, while they are fleeing the “airborne toxic event” (p. 117). In a further illustration of the influence of the cultural environment, the evacuees in “Iron City” (p. 159) do not question the cause and nature of the spill, but instead complain about the lack of “response from the official organs of the media” (p. 162).

²⁵⁴ “In *White Noise*, DeLillo examines not so much the individuating force of consumer culture as its communalizing power. What he sees is how consumerism produces what we might call an aura of connectedness among individuals: an illusion of kinship, transiently functional but without either sustaining or restraining power” (Thomas J. Ferraro, “Whole Families Shopping at Night!,” *New Essays on White Noise*, p. 20).

Since the society portrayed in *White Noise* is increasingly structured towards action without much consideration of the consequences, there is no longer any clear moral or ethical basis which an individual may use to guide their behaviour. In the novel this lack of any moral foundation is most obviously illustrated in the ease with which Jack is influenced to attempt an act of murder. The decision to murder Willie Mink is not the result of an immediate emotional response, but occurs to Jack after various indirect suggestions from both Babette and Murray.

Both Murray and Babette refer in a similar manner to “homicidal rage” (p.292) and “men and their insane jealousy” (p. 225) respectively, and Murray in detail describes “how exciting it is, in theory, to kill a person in direct confrontation” (p. 290). Whether or not the suggestion is intentional, Jack’s decision to murder Willie Mink is the result of these comments and not the result of an innate sense of jealousy or simply “a reservoir of potential violence in the male psyche” (p. 292). Due to the structure of the social and cultural environment, Jack is easily influenced in his decision to murder Willie Mink. Although, in a manner similar to Jake in *The End of the Road*, Jack is able to achieve this “end” in the most direct fashion, his decision to murder Willie Mink is the result of suggestion,²⁵⁵ rather than an immediate or enduring emotional response to the illicit encounters between Willie Mink and Babette.

Without the moral or ethical basis that religious concepts may have formerly supplied and without an emphasis on serious art and Literature (for an understanding of the human condition or our social environment), the developments in technology remain unanimously unopposed. For this reason Murray refers to the “suicide wish of technology” (p. 217), which he sees marked in the prolific “crash sequences” (p. 217)

²⁵⁵ Popular culture is also a form of suggestion and an influence in Jack’s decision to commit murder, where his “plan smacks of nothing so much as a bad TV movie” (Osteen, p. 186).

of film. He tells his students to “look past the violence [...] There is a wonderful brimming spirit of innocence and fun” (p. 219), and this applies both to the violence in film and the emphasis upon technological solutions and advances within contemporary American society. According to Murray, technology “creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other” (p. 285). In order to achieve immortality it is necessary to escape the boundaries and limits of nature, and since we, as human beings, are part of nature this involves either the destruction or transcendence of both ourselves and even nature itself.

Michael Valdez Moses in his essay “Lust Removed from Nature” states that “the greatest threat of technology is its promise of immortality”²⁵⁶ and that “for DeLillo technology is most dangerous when it presents itself with a ‘human face.’”²⁵⁷ This “human face” of technology hides the real potential for disaster and even mass extinction created by an unquestioned faith in technology. Michael Moses refers to Dylar in his essay and although this futuristic tablet in *White Noise* would not appear to be harmful to humanity (only the individual consuming the tablet) it does serve to highlight the direction of modern American society and the faith in technology to solve any difficulties in human existence:

Dylar promises not to make man immortal, but rather to eliminate the individual’s fear of death. Were it to succeed, it would annihilate that innate characteristic of *Dasein* to which the early Heidegger devoted so much philosophic analysis: *Angst*.²⁵⁸

The tablet is purely a form of escape from the constraints of nature and reality, and does not solve the problem itself - death.

²⁵⁶ Michael Valdez Moses, “Lust Removed From Nature,” *New Essays on White Noise*, p. 75.

²⁵⁷ Moses, p. 75.

²⁵⁸ Moses, p. 75.

The tablet aspires to provide a simulated world where death appears not to exist, but in life the fear of death is necessary to maintain existence (both individual and collective) by helping a person or people to avoid harmful situations:

Dylar is peculiarly suited to a postmodern culture insofar as it makes no claims to treat causes, only to alleviate symptoms. The technocratic and behaviorist approach of Grey Research, the firm in *White Noise* that manufactures Dylar, follows the instrumental reasoning of a purely representational conception of the world; manipulate the signs, deconstruct the symptoms, and the cause or referent in effect disappears.²⁵⁹

Although the tablet is not successful and may even seem far-fetched to some readers, it raises a valid question about simulation, the direction of technology and the future of modern American society.

The novel, *White Noise*, raises some concerns for the younger generation, who must live in this uncertain future of ever-increasing technological advance and who must also live with the real possibility of imminent disaster. When Jack observes Steffie, his nine-year-old daughter, performing the role of victim in a simulated evacuation, he remarks: “how natural she looked, how deeply imbued with the idea of sweeping disaster. Is this the future she envisions?” (p. 205). The possibility of disaster and becoming a victim in such an event is already a common part of her existence.

Finally there is, in the ultimate chapter of the novel, the symbolic image of Wilder crossing “the hurtling consciousness of the highway” (p. 322). The lone child on a tricycle is clearly in contrast to the drivers of “hatchbacks and vans” (p. 322), for whom “in speed there was sense. In signs, in patterns, in split-second lives” (p. 323). Wilder does unwittingly place his own life in extreme danger as he crosses the highway, and in this scene broader issues are raised regarding the younger generation and their role both in the present and the foreseeable future. There is no opposition

within contemporary American society to the advances of technology, and thereby there is the immediate and future possibility of disaster threatening in particular the younger generation.

In its depiction of contemporary American society *White Noise* displays a clear emphasis upon popular mythology and popular culture. This emphasis is government-defined, where the American Government is performing a similar role to the Doctor in *The End of the Road*, and, whether intentionally or not, the society represented in DeLillo's novel clearly mirrors many of the therapies endorsed by the Doctor. The society portrayed in the novel is predominantly consumer-based and structured against any form of self-analysis that might disturb the continuation of the existing power structure.

The characters in the novel encounter the white noise or saturation of sound and images emanating from film, television and consumer messages, which have become an everyday occurrence and are referred to accordingly in the novel.²⁶⁰ In the absence of serious art, Literature and traditional religious concepts, as the firm moral basis for society, there is an emphasis on technology, scientific endeavour and the government. The novel does thereby raise certain fears regarding the present and future direction of contemporary American society, which fears also appear and are further explored in *Vineland*.

²⁵⁹ Moses, p. 76.

²⁶⁰ "Figures are disarmed by the flood of data, cultural debris, and otherwise indigestible stimuli that contribute to the condition that titles the novel. Whereas metaphor depends upon uniqueness and verbal defamiliarization to earn attention, white noise thwarts distinction, for the proliferation of language, typically through such vulgarized forms as advertisement, tabloid headlines, and bureaucratic euphemisms, submerges difference into the usual cultural murmur." Arthur M. Saltzman, "The Figure in the Static: *White Noise*" (*Modern Fiction Studies*, 1994 [electronic journal]), p. 808.

Chapter 3

Vineland

In Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* the social upheavals which occurred during the late '60s and early '70s are explored from the contemporary period of the 1980s. A symbolic conflict²⁶¹ occurs in the 1960s between the socially active university lecturer, Weed Atman, and the government agent,²⁶² Brock Vond, where the state is victorious at this lower level. The battle takes place over Frenesi, who favours Vond and is complicit in the death of Weed Atman.

Due to this symbolic encounter and the broad failure of the brief youth rebellion to inspire any final social revolution, there exists a vast array of references in *Vineland* to images and icons from popular culture. The result of the social alterations which occurred during the late '60s and early '70s is a landscape of popular culture, where Godzilla leaves footprints in Japan and popular mythology from the television or pulp novels coincides with everyday life.

In typical Pynchonesque fashion there are references to those who must necessarily be orchestrating this social alteration, but they remain, as specific individuals, anonymous or hidden from the scope of the author (although there are deliberate references to the CIA and other departments, bureaus and agencies within the U.S. Federal Government throughout this novel). *Vineland* is important therefore both as an account of the social changes which occurred in America between the late '60s and early '70s and the increasing role of mass culture in America of the 1980s.

²⁶¹ Although this conflict is observed via film images recorded by Frenesi and the 24fps, the narrative is written in the "third person objective, omniscient" (Barth, *Sabbatical: A Romance*, p. 232).

²⁶² According to Judith Chambers, Brock Vond is an "FBI agent," (Chambers, p. 188).

The narrative style and techniques used in *Vineland* are different to the other three novels chosen for this thesis. The narrative is not written in the first-person, but in the distant and omniscient third person, and the style is both difficult for the uninitiated Pynchon reader (in contrast to the immediately accessible styles of the other three chosen novels) and merges popular mythology with the narrative reality. According to Hanjo Berressem, *Vineland* is written in “a simpler and more direct style”²⁶³ than his previous novels, but it is nonetheless written in Pynchon’s unorthodox style that can be difficult and an immediate barrier for some readers.

The novel is more concerned with popular mythology and popular culture than his previous novels and for this reason it is “simpler and more direct” than in particular *Gravity’s Rainbow* or even *The Crying of Lot 49*. *Vineland* is not however “a step backward”²⁶⁴ but is a step forward (in time at least) because it refers to 1980s American society and the increasing dependence upon popular culture and popular mythology in America of the 1980s.

The narrative frequently merges the mythology of popular culture with the narrative reality, and also details past events as an explanation and precursor for the events in the narrative present. In Tokyo, Takeshi Fumimota stands “at the edge of a gigantic animal footprint which only the day before had been a laboratory.”²⁶⁵ The mythology of film (Godzilla movies) merges here with reality, where there is no clear distinction between the real and simulated event. The “hyperreal” style in effect highlights the importance of popular culture in influencing reality and social behaviour through an exaggerated use, by the author, of popular mythology from film and television as part of real events in the novel.

²⁶³ Hanjo Berressem, *Pynchon’s Poetics: Interfacing Theory and Text* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 202.

²⁶⁴ Berressem, p. 202.

The author of *Vineland* also interprets recent American history through the mostly fictional characters and events, and offers parallel stories which are all interconnected in this novel and resolved by the end. The structure of the novel is deliberate and well-constructed, and the references to the past refer directly to the narrative present (including references to the government). In particular the events in the 1960s, as viewed on film footage, explain many of the events and character relationships that occur throughout the rest of the novel.

The images of the 1960s and the 24fps dissident group are viewed from the perspective of the 1980s (the narrative present), and the understanding, of those observing these events in the present, depends upon the ability of the camera to report and record events accurately. These images exist to an extent outside the simulation and mythology of the modern mass media, and in consequence their effect is limited and only confined to the few viewers of the film footage (which include Frenesi's daughter, Prairie). The reader's understanding of the relationship between Brock Vond, Frenesi and Weed Atman also depends upon these images, and the person controlling the camera, where "At some point Prairie understood that the person behind the camera most of the time really was her mother" (p. 199).

The images are mostly filmed by Frenesi, but since the images are not censored or altered the camera can be relied upon to report events accurately, even though the direction and focus of the image is clearly influenced by the person holding and operating the camera. The narrative style and description of these scenes from the '60s, despite the use of film footage as a means to uncover the past, are not

²⁶⁵ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 142. All subsequent page references in the text belong to this work, except where otherwise specified.

different to the rest of the novel, and the reader is only reminded of the present when Prairie, DL or Ditzah speaks.²⁶⁶

According to Brock Vond, Frenesi “is the medium Weed and I use to communicate” (p. 214), and although Weed is apparently unaware of the implications or nature of this conflict, their interaction does ostensibly occur over Frenesi. This triangular relationship with Frenesi may be to some extent understood, in a similar manner to the notion expressed in *The End of the Road*, as representative of “this one simple yen of humankind, poor little coitus.”²⁶⁷ For the narrator in *The End of the Road* it is a “therapeutic notion” (p. 314) to “assert that this one simple yen of humankind, poor little coitus, alone gives rise to cities and monasteries [...] trade unions and universities” (p. 341), and Frenesi performs a similarly passive and even inflammatory role in the struggle between the relatively low-level representative of the state and the university lecturer.

In fact Brock Vond and Weed Atman never confront one another directly, even though Vond initiates and plans the death of the university lecturer. The conflict is for the most part symbolic, where Brock Vond is representative of the state at a lower level, Weed Atman is the socially active and increasingly reactionary university lecturer, and Frenesi is the medium over which the struggle occurs. Brock does not completely act on his own initiative, he receives funding from “one of the DOJ discretionary lines” (p. 212) for his plans and is, at the least, acting under advice from his superiors, so he may be viewed as representative of the wishes of a relatively broad section of the state, and Weed Atman represents the potential role of the university lecturer within society, which is cut short and remains unfulfilled in this novel.

²⁶⁶ This highlights the immediacy of the medium, and its ability to either report or distort the truth.

²⁶⁷ Barth, p. 314.

During the 1960s Weed Atman is a university lecturer at the “College of the Surf” (p. 204) in “Trasero County” (p. 206), who is increasingly drawn, via circumstance and his status on campus, into a new role of radical and socially active university lecturer. During scenes of police violence and crowd confusion he unwittingly leads a group of students to safety, and then becomes increasingly involved in the resulting student movement on campus. He is witness to the scene of “three policemen, falling upon one unarmed student, [who] were beating him with their riot sticks” (p. 206) and a “line of cops - helmets, fatigues - carrying some kind of weapons” (p. 207) prior to his hasty departure from the scene with a random group of followers. It is into a “confusion of long crowdwaves, carrying smaller bursts of violence [...] that Weed Atman, preoccupied with the darker implications of a paper on group theory he’d just been reading” (p. 206) arrives “woolgathering and innocent” (p. 206).

It is appropriate that he is preoccupied with “the darker implications [...] of] group theory” (p. 206) as he arrives into this scene, due to the calculated nature of the police violence from the unstated but implied higher levels of command. “Group theory is a powerful formal method for analyzing abstract and physical systems in which symmetry is present,”²⁶⁸ and this mathematical approach may be loosely applied to an understanding of “the darker implications” of Weed’s immediate situation and importantly the hidden structure of power in America at the time. The reader, through this reference to group theory and Weed, is also encouraged to sense and estimate the hidden structure of power operating behind the police violence, since this political structure is a hierarchical and therefore an approximately symmetrical physical system in terms of this field of mathematics.

²⁶⁸ Eric W. Weisstein, “Group Theory – from Mathworld (Wolfram Research, Mathworld. <http://mathworld.wolfram.com/GroupTheory.html>), p. 1.

In a further display of crowd panic and confusion Weed is then chosen, simply due to his height, to lead a group of onlookers to safety. He is forced in this moment to act without thought, “become pure action” (p. 207), and he does successfully lead “them to safety, out the back way, past Greg Noll Lab and The Olympics Auditorium” (p.207). His role at the university undergoes an immediate and ongoing alteration due to the police violence and the resulting atmosphere of change and liberation on campus. These changes in his status on campus and also changes to the campus atmosphere are the direct result of the police violence, and would not have occurred without the pressure from the state.

As a direct result of the police violence there is formed on campus “The People’s Republic of Rock and Roll” (p. 209); “by all the laws of uprising, this one should have been squashed in a matter of hours by the invisible forces up on the base” (p. 208). Although the rebellion is constantly monitored by “helicopter visits” (p. 209) and the available equipment for “overhead surveillance” (p. 209), the students in a somewhat naïve spirit of emancipation decide to “secede from California and become a nation of their own” (p. 209). Weed becomes increasingly involved with this minor rebellion and the “24fps convoy,” which “rolled in the day after the official declaration” (p. 209). The student rebellion and the actions of the 24fps do not involve any retaliatory form of violence (in response to the police violence), but are nonetheless perceived as a threat by Brock Vond and monitored by the hidden elements within the American Government.

Weed Atman does unwittingly become a form of campus celebrity, as the students naturally attend to him “like a sports crowd in another country, the echo just submerged before the next ‘Weed!’” (p. 210). He does not actively pursue this status, but through chance and through the desires of the crowd is elected into this new role.

To some extent he is forced to adopt a new role that is intangible and based on the euphoria of the recently liberated students, rather than a role based in reality, with achievable expectations and clear motives. He does not immediately share the desire of his university colleagues to research their situation, but is absently “absorbed by the beat of rock and roll music beamed by the megawatt in over the border” (p. 208) and the appearance of liberation.

Weed Atman succumbs to the immediate pleasures offered in his newfound situation, and is unaware of various critical developments in both his immediate environment and the broader political environment until it is too late. On campus therefore:

The kids ran thumping around, eating nonstop, the adults drank, took drugs, hugged, wept, had insights, marathoning through the night till breakfast, nothing ever resolved, false reconciliation abounding. All very jolly for Weed, naturally, being the one who got to set up and direct these extravaganzas, to preside beaming as two or more pleasant-looking women, in Weed’s case often wearing provocative attire and getting physical about it, competed for his attention. Mysteriously, the ladies kept going for this every time, and the kids loved it. If this was how adults were allowed to act, their own outlook might not be so bad. (p. 211)

This behaviour displays an innocent spirit of liberation, and a relaxation of traditional moral codes regarding university behaviour and behaviour in general, which belies the reality of their situation.

To some extent Weed and his colleagues do attempt to analyse their political environment and the nature of the rebellion within this broader context. Rex Snuvvle, “a graduate student in the Southeast Asian Studies Department” (p. 207) attempts to free himself from “the government’s version of the war in Vietnam” (p. 207) and becomes “obsessed with the fate of the Bolshevik Leninist Group of Vietnam” (p.207). Weed continues with his interest in mathematics, which is presumably a

continuation of his research into “group theory” (p. 206), and where according to Frenesi a lot of his research concerns “the politics” (p. 211).

Despite these endeavours they are not, however, prepared for the interest and pressure, both violent and non-violent, from various unacknowledged elements of the state.²⁶⁹ As it turned out they “were being set up all the time” (p. 232), and Weed does not appreciate the real nature of his situation until too late. He is, amid the increasing confusion, not able to simply “bail out” (p. 233), as he is at one moment advised to do by Rex, prior to the circumstances surrounding his own death.

In contrast to the socially active university lecturer, Weed Atman, is the low-level representative of the state, Brock Vond, who both plans and executes the destabilisation of “The People’s Republic of Rock and Roll” (p. 209), and views Weed as critical in the successful completion of this task. Whereas Weed Atman, “without hidden plans, with no ambitions beyond surmounting what the day brought each time around, [...] just went lurching on happily into his new identity as a man of action, embracing it as only an abstract thinker would” (p. 216), Brock has a clearly defined method and desired end result.

As an employee of the American Federal Government, he is prepared in his actions regarding PR³. He

Had drafted, sent up, and was about to have authorized a plan to destabilize and subvert PR³ with funding from one of the DOJ discretionary lines [...] His idea was to make enough money available to set them all fighting over who’d get it. It would also, as Brock pitched it, have value as a scale model, to find out how much bringing down the whole country might cost. (p. 212)

With regard to power and control over his situation and the fate of others, Brock Vond, in contrast to Weed Atman, is clearly at an advantage at the outset of the brief

²⁶⁹ “As *Vineland* depicts events, the government represses the unrest at the College of the Surf with surveillance, provocateurs, and concentration camps.” Joseph W. Slade, “Communication, Group

struggle between the state and the radical campus environment of the period. Indeed Weed Atman is unaware of Brock Vond and his own significance within the broader political environment.

While Weed is unaware of Brock Vond, Brock views Weed Atman as the “key to it all, the key log, pull him and you break up the structure [...] With him gone and the others scrambling after the greenbacks in Brock’s safe, PR³ would fall apart” (pp.215-216). He acts upon this realisation, and in a plan which involves Frenesi constructs the nature of Weed Atman’s demise. He becomes increasingly involved in Frenesi’s life, and is particularly interested in her involvement with the 24fps. He is allowed by Frenesi to view the material filmed by the dissident group and even manages to influence the subject matter that is filmed: “After a while he was not only seeing the outtakes, but also making suggestions about what to shoot to begin with, and the deeper she got into that, the deeper Brock came into her life” (p. 209). In this manner Weed Atman and Brock Vond interact, as Frenesi’s involvement with Brock raises tensions within the group, until finally Weed is shot by Rex.

The other members of 24fps are aware of her relationship with Weed Atman, whereby “most of the members of 24fps thought she was into ‘a number,’ as they called it back then, with Weed Atman” (p. 209). However, they are presumably unaware of her relationship with Brock Vond and therefore do not address this issue openly or sense the potentially violent implications until too late. Weed Atman also never suspects Frenesi, where he is only warned once by Rex about a vague threat to his safety (that does not involve any specific knowledge) and never meets Brock Vond before he dies.

Brock coerces Frenesi into betraying Weed Atman. He carefully explains to her the significance of Weed Atman in his plans and offers Frenesi a gun to hold, before initiating indirectly Weed's demise. He realises that Frenesi is "right there literally in bed with [Weed] - perfect placement" (p. 215), and uses his influence upon Frenesi to undermine Weed Atman and also the 24fps. Under the advice of Brock Vond, therefore, Frenesi claims that Weed is an FBI plant to both Rex and Howie. It is Rex who kills Weed Atman due to the suspicions raised earlier by Frenesi in his company. Frenesi is in this moment not purely a "medium" (p. 214), as she is described by Brock, but by her own actions she does, however, favour Brock Vond and is complicit in Weed's death.

A possible reason for Frenesi's behaviour is raised in the novel, when it is stated that she had inherited a "uniform fetish from" (p. 83) Sasha and "a helpless turn toward images of authority" (p. 83). Although it is not stated directly, this "fetish" (p.83) or "helpless turn" (p. 83) contributes to Weed's downfall and the decisions which Frenesi necessarily undertakes to assist in his ultimate murder. Frenesi, by her own actions, favours Brock over Weed, and allows the link between Brock Vond and Weed Atman to continue until the eventual death of Weed. She is not purely a victim of Brock Vond and the pressures of the state, but is involved in the death of the university lecturer and should, in an ideal social system, be held accountable for her actions.

Judith Chambers in *Thomas Pynchon* argues that "on one level, Frenesi appears to be no more than a victim encoded, genetically and socially, to collaborate with the oppressor,"²⁷⁰ but this does not adequately account for her actions and the decisions she makes. As Chambers then states, "on another level, however, Pynchon

²⁷⁰ Chambers, p. 197.

does not absolve her of responsibility,²⁷¹ and the fact that Frenesi never expresses any remorse or fundamentally questions her actions, at any time after the event, heightens her moral culpability. She does not receive any punishment for her involvement in the murder of another person, and indeed the incident is not even investigated (as far as the reader is aware) by the law or the apparatus of the state on any level. This is a symptom of the system founded on popular culture, which was only emerging in America in the 1960s, and the disappearing role of the government in investigating and suitably resolving social injustice and social inequality (increasingly allowed in this emerging social system).

When Weed Atman dies, it is the symbolic end of the socially active university lecturer, and the victory of the state at both the level of Brock Vond and the implied higher levels of command (which are not identified as specific individuals but belong, according to this novel, at some level within the U.S. Federal Government). The result of this victory is the landscape of popular culture evident throughout the novel,²⁷² where the media of television and film have increasingly become the dominant forms of communication.

The importance of film and television in the novel is illustrated via the many references to both film and television programs, from the mainstream media, and also the brief images supplied by the 24fps which were the only brief potential threat to this new system founded upon popular culture. (The 24fps images were only a threat because they reported events as they actually occurred, and neither Weed Atman nor the members of the 24fps were aware of the potential of these images or capable to resist the hidden pressure from the government.)

²⁷¹ Chambers, p. 197.

²⁷² “*Vineland* too, addresses the obvious manifestations of cultural control.” Deborah L. Madsen, *The Postmodernist Allegories of Thomas Pynchon* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), p. 127.

With Weed's death the PR³ rebellion and the 24fps dissident group end and are never reunited throughout the novel. Although Weed does return in a form of rebirth amongst the lost souls of the Thanatoid community, this illustrates the waste and sudden impact of his death, rather than any serious attempt to continue his previous role after his own demise. His return does highlight the injustice surrounding his death, but, although Weed's role in society may be lost, some hope is offered for the next generation, if only slight, as he communicates with Prairie.

Weed Atman's return after death obviously does not belong to any rational conception of the real world and human capabilities for survival. His return after death allows him to communicate with Prairie and highlights his abrupt demise, the morally unresolved events surrounding his death and the loss of potential. Hanjo Berressem in *Pynchon's Poetics* connects his inability to move into death with television, and the ability of the medium to distort reality. According to Berressem: "ultimately, TV becomes the membrane that simultaneously connects and separates the realms of life and death,"²⁷³ and he refers to "the fact that through TV, life is already pervaded with a mediated, fake death."²⁷⁴

In the world of television death has lost much of its significance, where TV "with its history of picking away at the topic with doctor shows, war shows, cop shows, murder shows, had trivialized the big D itself. If mediated lives [...] why not mediated deaths?" (p. 218). Weed's return may belong, through a "mediated death," to the simulated reality offered by television and other forms of media (which are evident throughout the rest of the novel), but his survival does more importantly serve to comment directly on this trivialisation of death by the media and the role of mass media to obscure the truth. His return highlights the various, unrecognised injustices

²⁷³ Berressem, p. 205.

²⁷⁴ Berressem, p. 205.

occurring within the modern American social system (it is for this reason that he returns among the zombie-like Thanatoid community of the dispossessed).

There is a multitude of film and television references in *Vineland* which illustrate the importance of these forms of media in both contemporary America and the depiction of contemporary America in the novel: “From the start, *Vineland* is filled with references to movies and TV series, both real and imaginary – mostly science fiction, horror movies, TV game shows, cop shows, sitcoms and cartoons.”²⁷⁵ The film references (including those which are fictitious) include a vast array of films from various easily identifiable genres and sub-genres of film, and also well-known television programs.

The film references include science fiction: “*Return of the Jedi* (1983)” (p. 7), “*Ghostbusters* (1984)” (p. 190), “*2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)” (pp. 178, 294), horror films: “*Friday the 13th* (1980)” (p. 16), “*Psycho* (1960)” (p. 187), a monster movie: “*Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (1956)” (p. 65), Mafia movies: “*Mondo Cane* (1963) [...] *Flight of the Phoenix* (1966)” (p. 96), movies set in Hawaii: “*Hawaii* (1966), *The Hawaiians* (1970), and *Gidget Goes Hawaiian* (1961)” (p. 62), musicals: “*20,000 Years in Sing Sing* (1933)” (p. 294), “Broadway Show Tunes” and “Andrew Lloyd Webber” (p. 167), (late 1950s) teen movie: “*Gidget* (1959)” (p. 17), television movies: “*The Clara Bow Story*” (p. 14), “*The Frank Gorshin Story*” (p. 48), “*Young Kissinger*” (p. 309), “*The G. Gordon Liddy Story*” (p. 339), “*The Bryant Gumbel Story*” (p. 355), “*The Robert Musil Story*” (p. 370), and “*Magnificent Disaster*” (p.371), which is a “TV movie about the ‘83- ’84 NBA playoffs” (p. 371).

The television references include game shows: “*Jeopardy*” (p. 9), “*Wheel of Fortune*” (p. 12), a cartoon (theme song): “*Meet the Flintstones*” (p. 26), a sitcom:

²⁷⁵ Berressem, p. 236.

“*the Brady Bunch*” (p. 33), and a cop show: “*Hawaii Five-O*” (p. 99). There are also various references to celebrity actors and game show hosts, which also display the importance of popular culture in contemporary American society.

As David Cowart states in his essay in *The Vineland Papers*, the constant references to popular culture illustrate “the relentlessly ahistorical consciousness of contemporary American society,”²⁷⁶ where “the virtual absence of historical depth in this body of allusion makes a devastating statement about the shortness of the American cultural memory.”²⁷⁷ Pynchon does not deliberately favour popular culture over more historical or traditional texts in these constant references, but is reflecting the cultural preoccupation of modern American society with popular culture and emphasising to the reader the change or movement away from other cultural forms.

Although Pynchon “denies himself much of the cultural and historical dimension of the previous novels,”²⁷⁸ this is only because the focus of the novel is contemporary America and not, as in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, late World War II Europe or even the early 1960s America of *The Crying of Lot 49* (although there are references to the recent American past in *Vineland*). In 1980s America, as it is represented in *Vineland*, the culture industry is managing to re-invent reality and avoid historical accuracy through the constant creation of new cultural products (which are specifically designed to appeal to mass audiences and promote behaviour acceptable to the higher levels of power in America). The simulated reality of popular culture and popular mythology does then influence reality, or the real world beyond film, television or any other form of the mass media, and this relationship (between popular culture and reality) is evident throughout *Vineland*.

²⁷⁶ David Cowart, “Attenuated Postmodernism: Pynchon’s *Vineland*,” *The Vineland Papers: Critical Takes on Pynchon’s Novel* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1994), p. 8.

²⁷⁷ Cowart, p. 8.

²⁷⁸ Cowart, p. 8.

As in *White Noise*, in *Vineland* the simulation predominates over the real event and does to some extent become the real event.²⁷⁹ There is often a blurred distinction between the language and imagery of television or film and reality. In an arrangement with Brock Vond, Zoyd Wheeler must act in an insane manner in public to receive money from the government, and for this reason states that “he’s out on government business” (p. 8) before jumping through a window in a dress. This act is a form of simulation, where the distinction between the real and the simulation becomes blurred via the medium of television.

Zoyd immediately asks, “where is the media?” (p. 6), since it is for the benefit of television that he must jump through a window. The “cop vehicles arrive, state and county [...] arrive playing the ‘Jeopardy’ theme on their sirens [with...] mobile units, lights, cable, crews everywhere, even a couple of Bay Area stations” (p. 9) before Zoyd jumps through a stunt glass window. The scene is reminiscent of a film set as the media prepares for the event. The arrival of film equipment and workers illustrate the importance of the medium of television in providing significance and importance to this staged act of jumping through a window.

On the television however the event has the appearance of reality:

On the Tube, Zoyd came blasting out the window, along with the dubbed-in sounds of real glass breaking. Police cruisers and fire equipment contributed cheery chrome elements. Zoyd watched himself hit the hardpan, roll, come up, and charge the camera, screaming and baring his teeth [...]. Next came highlights of his previous attempts, at each step into the past the color and other production values getting worse, and after that a panel including a physics professor, a psychiatrist, and a track-and-field coach live and remote from the Olympics down in L.A. discussing the evolution over the years of Zoyd’s technique, pointing out the useful distinction between the defenestrative personality, which prefers jumping out of windows, and the transfenestrative, which tends to jump through. (p. 15)

²⁷⁹ “A further motif that reemerges in *Vineland* is that of simulation [...] Pynchon describes reality as a ‘tubal fantasy,’ in an implosion of cause and effect, watcher and watched,” (Berressem, pp. 204-205).

The distinction between the real and the simulation is distorted via the medium of television, as Zoyd's public act is scrutinised as though it is authentic, and is discussed in an exaggerated and deliberately stylised manner. In an attempt to create the appearance of reality background noises are introduced in the manner of a film, slow motion images are adopted to create suspense and the comments from a team of experts conclude each jump. These stylistic techniques do however become the real event as it is watched on television.²⁸⁰ Due to the nature of the medium the actual circumstances surrounding the jump are lost or masked by the simulated or final televised event.

The influence of film and the creation of myth are evident throughout *Vineland*, where the simulation of film and television becomes reality:

Besides simply mentioning film and TV, the writing also makes use of the structures of several cinematic genres: the docudrama, when the story of the Hollywood blacklistings is retold; the horror movie, which defines the Thanatoid subplot; the karate movie, which defines the parameters of DL's world; the war movie, which is a model for Vond's raid on Vineland; the Mafia movie, which is related to Ralph Wayvone; and the monster movie, which defines Takeshi's relation to the 'unrelenting forces.' Similarly, the writing uses TV models such as the sitcom, which defines most of the humor of the book.²⁸¹

These "genres" of film and television are not confined to the medium alone, but enter reality (as it is represented in the text) and influence the actions and behaviour of characters.

On a return flight from Hawaii, therefore, Zoyd flies with Kahuna Airlines, where "each 747 in the Kahuna Airlines fleet had been gutted and refitted as a huge Hawaiian restaurant and bar, full of hanging island vegetation, nightclub chairs and tables instead of airplane seats, even a miniature waterfall" (p. 62). The airline caters

²⁸⁰ Not only does "the cool medium" (television) remove "us from experience" (Chambers, p. 194), the representation may equally become the "experience," where the distinction between the simulation and reality is lost.

²⁸¹ Berressem, p. 236.

to the popular understanding of Hawaii from the clichés created by film, television and advertisement. The in-flight movies hence include “*Hawaii* (1966), *The Hawaiians* (1970), and *Gidget Goes Hawaiian* (1961)” (p. 62). The reality of Hawaii is possibly quite different, since it is earlier stated that “Hawaii is where men from California bring their broken hearts, seeking exotic forms of self-injury not so readily available on the mainland” (p. 60). The myth created by film and the reality of a place where many Californians come to commit suicide is here clearly unresolved. In a further display of the influence of popular culture and its distortion of reality, Zoyd plays the “main title theme from *Godzilla, King of the Monsters* (1956)” (p. 65) during a mid-air hijack of the plane.²⁸²

The crime-family figure of Ralph Wayvone is a further display of the influence of popular culture and in particular the mythology surrounding Italian crime families in America. Disguised as “Gino Baglione and the Paisans” (p. 94), Billy Barf and the Vomitones perform “a salsa treatment of ‘More’ from *Mondo Cane* (1963), slowing to $\frac{3}{4}$ with ‘Senza Fine,’ from *Flight of the Phoenix* (1966), and to wrap it an English-language version, in Billy’s nasal tenor, of the favorite ‘Al Di La,’ from any number of television specials” (p. 96). Ralph Wayvone does have connections with the film industry, where “Dominic, ‘the movie executive,’ [...] had flown in the night before from Indonesia, where he was line producer on a monster movie whose budget required readjusting on an hour-to-hour basis” (p. 93). He is however part of the landscape of popular culture rather than existing outside or in a position of great control. He is therefore told by friends, that “you’re not enough of a control freak for the job you’re in,” (p. 93) or that “you’re supposed to allow yourself the illusion that what you do matters, but it don’t look like you really give a shit” (p. 93).

²⁸² Pynchon adopts a style whereby television myth coincides with reality and is treated as real.

The Wayvone family resides in a manner suited to their financial situation and Italian heritage. Although they do not technically have any assets, since the business is strictly corporate owned, the Wayvone family, in keeping with their financial situation, resides on a large estate:

The house, dating from the 1920s, was in Mediterranean Revival style, presenting to the street a face of single-story modesty while behind it and down the hill for eight levels sprawled a giant villa of smooth white stucco, with round-topped windows and red tile roofs, a belvedere, a couple of verandas, gardens and courtyards, a hillside full of fig and olive trees. (p. 92)

The expansive villa is presumably typical of an Italian crime family, who “strictly speaking [...] owned nothing. They received an annual operating budget from the corporation that owned them” (p. 93). From the street the house appears to be modest but is in fact a “giant villa” (p. 92) of eight storeys with an expansive swimming pool. The family conforms to the popular myth surrounding an Italian crime family in the manner of their existence.

There are still those whose lives are not influenced by the myth of film and television, but they are a disappearing minority. After Takeshi Fumimota has encountered “a gigantic animal footprint which only the day before had been a laboratory” (p. 142),²⁸³ he converses with a businessman on a flight to San Francisco. The businessman immediately does “his best to edge away” (p. 158), and states, “There’s a hidden camera somewhere, right? This is a commercial?” (p. 158). Takeshi proceeds “to rattle out the whole story, sparing no medical detail” (p. 159). In response the “suit-wearing juvenile was more than willing to listen to anything, as

²⁸³ This “gigantic animal footprint” is part of the “hyperreal” style which Pynchon adopts in *Vineland*. In *Sabbatical: A Romance* popular myth also coincides with reality (though briefly) as Fenwick and Susan sight a “sea-monster” (Barth, *Sabbatical: A Romance*, p. 343). The style is similar and may even have influenced Pynchon. There is a footnote (p. 343) which mentions a former CIA employee having sighted this creature in 1978, connecting the CIA with encouraging such popular myth.

long as it delayed the moment, easily imagined, when Takeshi would produce a weapon and begin to run amok in the aisles” (p. 159).

Takeshi and the businessman belong to separate realities, where Takeshi’s story and manner of behaviour appears “possibly otherworldly” (p. 159) to the “serious-looking *gaijin* businessman with a hand-held computer game” (p. 158). The businessman is interestingly playing a game “called ‘Nukey,’ which included elements of sex and detonation” (p. 160). For the businessman a game such as this bears no relationship with reality, but Takeshi has begun to enter into a world merged with popular fiction after DL accidentally uses an assassination technique on him. Because of this clear difference between Takeshi and the businessman, the two are unable to communicate on any common level.

The landscape of popular culture includes the martial arts of the orient, which have been to some extent assimilated into the capitalist system of contemporary America: “By 1984 all things remotely sacred have been commercialized or diluted.”²⁸⁴ In California there exists therefore “the mountainside retreat of the Sisterhood of Kunoichi Attentives” (p. 107), who have been “described in *Aggro World* as ‘a sort of Esalen Institute for lady asskickers’” (p. 107):

By the 1960s the kunoichi, looking for some cash flow themselves, had begun to edge into the self-improvement business, not quite begun to boom as it would in a few more years, offering, eventually, fantasy marathons for devotees of the Orient, group rates on Kiddie Ninja Weekends, help for rejected disciples of Zen [...] and other Eastern methods. (p. 107)

A traditional Japanese form of the martial arts has been hereby incorporated into the capitalist structure of contemporary America, simply due to the financial requirements of the “Sisterhood” (p. 107). They offer various classes in the martial arts, due to their

²⁸⁴ Chambers, p. 194.

financial requirements, and are in this manner assimilated into the consumer-based society of contemporary America.

The initial role of the martial arts within post-war America is also in part explored in *Vineland*. In regard to DL's father (Moody):

The peacetime Moody wanted to get more personal now. Though he was already licensed to use life-threatening come-alongs, to crack heads and dislocate shoulders, he didn't really light up till he discovered the judo and jujitsu of the defeated Jap, then enjoying a post war surge of interest. (p. 119)

Moody is clearly more interested in the potential violence of judo and jujitsu than the spiritual nature of both disciplines. This is perhaps indicative of the role of the martial arts in contemporary America, whereby some of the spiritual elements have been lost or altered.

Indeed the propensity for violence in contemporary America is satirised in the novel via the violence theme park envisioned by Isaiah Two Four and the song DL Chastaine sings entitled "Just a floozy with an Uzi" (p. 104). This may be understood as a satiric comment on the role of violence in contemporary America,²⁸⁵ which relates to some extent to the emphasis by Moody on the potential violence of the martial arts rather than its spiritual aspects.

DL studies Ninjitsu and senses that

The original ninja intent had been subverted, made cruel and more worldly, bled of spirit, once eternal techniques now only one-shot and disposable, once greater patterns now only a string of encounters, single and multiple, none with any meaning beyond itself. (p. 127)

Already some of the spiritual nature of the discipline has been lost. In clarification the sensei explains that "this is for all the rest of us down here with the insects" (p. 127). This is for those "who with two tenths of a second fail to get it right" (p. 127), who

²⁸⁵ Television disturbs "the distinction between real and staged violence" (Chambers, p. 193).

“have ancestors and descendants too - our generations... our traditions” (p. 127) and who are not in the positions of real power or influence. When DL talks of being a “hero” (p. 127) she is told by the sensei that she is either “crazy” (p. 127) or has seen “too many movies” (p. 127). The reality of her situation and personal struggle is quite different from the representation of film and television.

To some extent the nature of the various skills she learns is influenced by the myth of television and film regarding martial arts, where, in the novel, the distinction between popular mythology and reality becomes indistinguishable. DL learns

How to give people heart attacks without even touching them, how to get them to fall from high places, how through the Clouds of Guilt technique to make them commit *seppuku* and think it was their idea - plus a grab bag of strategies excluded from the Kumi-Uchi, or official ninja combat system, such as the Enraged Sparrow, the Hidden Foot, the Nosepicking of Death and the truly unspeakable *Gojira no chimpira*. (p. 127)

Although her skills may be influenced by the medium of film and television, there is nonetheless a clear distinction between the reality of her life and the mythology surrounding the martial arts. Her failure to kill Brock Vond and the consequential harming of Takeshi is such a failed event in the course of her life. There is a clear discrepancy between the simulation of film and the reality of existence with regard to this injustice or karmic imbalance.

A community exists in *Vineland* of those who have been wronged in the past and thereby continue to suffer in the present. These people are labelled Thanatoids, which is “actually short for ‘Thanatoid personality.’ ‘Thanatoid’ means ‘like death, only different’” (p. 170). This is a fictional name created in the novel for a group of people, who are part of the popular culture world of the novel (borrowed from horror movies and zombie films) but who also represent those suffering under the injustices of the system. Although in modern American society such a group of alienated people

does not exist in any united form (as in this novel), such dispossessed people nonetheless live within the reality of contemporary America. Similar to the Trystero of *The Crying of Lot 49* and the Herero of *Gravity's Rainbow* (although the Herero, unlike the Thanatoids and the Trystero, did in fact exist as a group of people within history), the thanatoids are the dispossessed who have scarce means to alter their situation.

Due to the nature of the social structure which they inhabit, there is little hope that their situation may change or that past injustices may be corrected. The Thanatoids “were victims [...] of karmic imbalances - unanswered blows, unredeemed suffering, escapes by the guilty [...] who were] not living but persisting, on the skimpiest of hopes” (p. 173). In the system of contemporary America, which is founded on popular culture, the suffering of these people has been overlooked.²⁸⁶ As Ortho Bob explains, “there’ll never be a Thanatoid sitcom [...] ‘cause all they could show’d be scenes of Thanatoids watchin’ the Tube!” (p. 171). It is due to this encounter with the Thanatoid community that DL and Takeshi enter the “karmic adjustment business” (p. 172).

DL and takeshi, while inhabiting the Thanatoid village, hear

Often impossibly complicated tales of dispossession and betrayal. They hear of land titles and water rights, goon squads and vigilantes, landlords, lawyers and developers always described in images of thick fluids in flexible containers, injustices not only from the past but also virulently alive in the present day, like CAMP’s promise of a long future of devoted enforcement from the sky. (p. 172)

In the karmic adjustment business the Thanatoid community is a vast resource of resentment and bitterness about the past and present. The most “common [emotion] by far was resentment, constrained as Thanatoids were by history and by rules of

²⁸⁶ This suffering may be labelled as waste which exists outside the “commodity and surface” of the “postmodern world: America 1984” (Chambers, p. 184). I refer to waste further in the conclusion.

imbalance and restoration to feel little else beyond their needs for revenge” (p. 171). DL and Takeshi hear these tales but are often unable to find an immediate solution or an appropriate restoration of justice or karma.

A connection is formed in *Vineland* between Brock Vond and the drug enforcement missions of CAMP, the suffering of the Thanatoids, and the synthesised music of “wrist watches, timers and personal computers” (p. 324). DL, Takeshi and Prairie discover an “atmosphere of civic crisis” amongst the Thanatoid community as “CAMP search-and-destroy missions by now were coming over on a daily schedule” (p. 334). The Thanatoids having been previously awoken by the “piping, chiming music, synchronized, coming out of wristwatches, timers, and personal computers [...] all playing together now, and in four-part harmony, the opening of J.S. Bach’s ‘Wachet Auf’” (pp. 324-325).

In this moment a clear connection is formed between the actions of Brock Vond and CAMP, the suffering of the Thanatoids, and the sounds generated by modern technology. The actions of Brock Vond and the drug enforcement group are presumably designed to continue the momentum of modern technology through the exercise of power from a higher source. The suffering of the Thanatoids is necessary in the continuation of technological advance, or is at least viewed as such by the higher levels of command. The progress of technology requires the creation of “waste,” where the greater the “waste,” the faster the evolutionary process, and where “waste” includes the suffering of the dispossessed within society (and is an acronym used in *The Crying of Lot 49* to refer to a seemingly endless amount of information existing outside the government controlled monopoly over communication).

There are references to those who must necessarily be controlling the social alterations and this new system founded on popular culture. Although “no one of

those among whom he wished to belong would ever regard him as other than a thug whose services had been hired” (p. 276), Brock Vond does have a brief insight into these higher levels of command. Brock had “caught a fatal glimpse of that level where everybody knew everybody else, where however political fortunes might bloom and die, the same people, the Real Ones, remained year in and year out, keeping what was desirable flowing their way” (p. 276). Similarly, Hector mentions

A certain kind of world that civilians up on the surface, out in the sun thinkin ‘em happy thotz, got no idea it’s even there [...] Nothin like that shit on the Tube, nothin at all... and cold... colder than you ever want to find out about... (p. 31)

He even hears the voice on the television of “an Anglo in fatigues” (p. 339) after the screen went “went blank, bright and prickly” (p. 333) during “Sean Connery in *The G. Gordon Liddy Story*” (p. 339).

Although there are direct references to the CIA²⁸⁷ in *Vineland* - it is stated that “wheresoever the CIA putteth in its meathooks upon the world, there also are to be found those substances which God may have created but the U.S. Code hath decided to control” (p. 354) - the higher levels of command (within the CIA and the United States Government) remain, as specific individuals, beyond the scope of the author.²⁸⁸ Like Weed Atman, who explains posthumously that he “used to think I was climbing, step by step, right? Toward a resolution - first Rex, above him your mother, then Brock Vond, then [...] and that door at the top I thought I saw isn’t there anymore, because the light behind it just went off too” (p. 366), the author is similarly resigned

²⁸⁷ See the preface for historical information on the CIA as it relates to the four texts.

²⁸⁸ The sources of power exist in both contemporary America and the representation in *Vineland*, but they are not readily available to the public or even the author. According to; Berressem, p. 207; “whereas with Foucault power is *everywhere*, with Baudrillard it is *nowhere*,” and (in *Forget Foucault*) Baudrillard argues that power is “dead.” Both these arguments are extreme, where the truth is in the middle in terms of human power (in contrast to divine power or the influence of an inanimate object).

by the end of the novel on this search into the higher levels of command (although this search may be continued and even completed by the reader).

The novel reaches completion without any overwhelming sense of frustration or loss, despite fears raised about the direction of the American Government, the culture industry and technology. With the disappearance of Brock Vond there is even a certain amount of optimism in the conclusion of the novel, as the author finally returns to “home” (p. 385).

Whether correctly or not future responsibility is deferred to the reader, where the author has done all within his authorial power to locate power sources in the United States. Similarly Frenesi’s attempts to film and expose certain injustices with the 24fps are passed on to her daughter (Prairie) and a very different next generation: “Only through her special bond with Frenesi (mother – daughter) can Prairie more or less tune in to what the 24fps archives really signified.”²⁸⁹ The film archives are not in vain because Prairie is able to view these images and absorb or interpret “what, the film implied, they must” (p. 199). Potentially this moment is the initiation of an alternate path into the future and even an alternate role for the media: “Only by reflecting on the mediatic distortion itself can popular film/ television continue to pretend it is connected with reality.”²⁹⁰ The media can easily expose the role of culture, simulation and the forces of hidden power if it is used correctly.

Everything in *Vineland* does ultimately return to the film industry and television, with the scientists at the “Tubaldetox” (p. 335) having proclaimed “a new policy of letting everybody watch as much as they wanted, the aim being Transcendence Through Saturation” (p. 335). This policy of the unrestricted use of television images among the vulnerable is not beneficial to the human psyche. As

²⁸⁹ Ernest Mathijs, “Reel to Real: Film History in Pynchon’s *Vineland*,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 29.1 (2001), p. 66.

Frenesi tells Hector, “between the television set and those New Age psychobabblers back at your Detox, I fear that very little, beyond the minimum needed for basic tasks, remains of your brain” (p. 348). This policy is neither socially responsible nor based on any rational scientific argument. However this policy of cultural saturation, which is evident throughout *Vineland*, is not confined purely to the “Tubaldetox.” Cultural saturation has become an everyday part of modern American society, where it has become difficult to escape the mass media.

Certain fears are raised about the present and future due to the emphasis on film and television in contemporary America. There is therefore the

Perennial question of whether the United States still lingered in a prefascist twilight, or whether that darkness had fallen long stupefied years ago, and the light they thought they saw was coming only from millions of Tubes all showing the same bright-colored shadows. (p. 371)

The role of the government is questioned in the novel due to the reference to the “ever dwindling attention span of an ever more infantilized population” (p. 52) and the importance of the government for this reason:

Vineland too, addresses the obvious manifestations of cultural control. Hapless citizens can only submit to the pressure exerted by the long and gun-toting arm of the federal law, by the mass media, through television, magazines and novels, popular music, movies and the like, by the manufactured ‘mindscape’ of the shopping malls and freeway systems that dominate American space.²⁹¹

The role of the government in modern America is increasing, both in size and capacity to influence individual lives, as the population becomes, at the same time, increasingly controlled and influenced (in their behaviour) by the mass media. In the ‘80s, as represented in *Vineland*, “state control of reality is not only explicit, it has become its own justification.”²⁹² With the increasing market and social influence of

²⁹⁰ Mathijs, pp. 66-67.

²⁹¹ Madsen, p. 127.

²⁹² Madsen, p. 126.

the mass media, the government is able to justify its own growing power and control over its citizens.

In a moment of insight Frenesi realises that

We are digits in God's computer [...] and the only thing we're good for, to be dead or to be living, is the only thing He sees. What we cry, what we contend for, in our world of toil and blood, it all lies beneath the notice of the hacker we call God. (p. 91)

The role of God may be substituted for the government and in the absence of the socially active university lecturer there is little to oppose or counteract the increasing dependence upon the American Government.²⁹³

The American Government (in particular the higher levels of command) is not intervening to provide justice in both *Vineland* and, through implication, the America to which the novel refers. It is instead encouraging violence and superficial values among the population, via the culture industry, while institutionalising injustices within the American system from the top levels down. Due to this, Hector notes the increasing presence of the military in the Vineland region: "all the military traffic on the freeways, more than Hector could ever remember" (p.339), before Hector recalls the appearance of an "Anglo in fatigues" (p. 339) "the other night" on his television. Pynchon even makes a direct statement (through the thoughts of Hector) about the potential for violation of the rights of the individual in a system founded on the government and popular culture, shortly after having made, as a form of light relief, a joke about "drug abuse in the picture business" (p. 338).

Sasha, the mother of Frenesi, realises:

The injustices she had seen in the streets and fields, so many, too many times gone unanswered - she began to see them more directly, not as world history

²⁹³ According to; Berressem, p. 237, "*Vineland*'s main theme is the *complicity* of the subject and power. As in Lacan's four discourses, the subject is caught at the nexus of several force fields, in which it is suspended simultaneously." This does not account for the subject's level of understanding or awareness (and hence the degree of responsibility), and the role of culture in the power relationship.

or anything too theoretical, but as humans, usually male, living here on the planet, often well within reach, committing these crimes, major and petty, one by one against other living humans. (p. 80)

Such injustices remain to a large extent unanswered in the contemporary system of post-war America, where the potential to prevent such occurrences has been for the most part lost. This loss is principally due to the symbolic death of Weed Atman and the victory of the state, which is detailed throughout *Vineland*.

Vineland importantly portrays the social changes undergone in America in between the late '60s and early '70s. There is a symbolic conflict in the novel between the socially active university lecturer, Weed Atman, and the low level representative of the state, Brock Vond. This conflict results in the death of Weed Atman and the victory of the state at both this lower level and the higher levels of command. As a result of this victory there is a landscape of popular mythology and popular culture throughout the novel. The distinction between the simulation and the real event becomes lost as the mythology, of in particular film and television, coincides with everyday life. The increasing role of popular mythology and popular culture is then reflected in *Vineland*, where there is illustrated "a government-defined history without consequence" (p. 354) in the manner of *The End of the Road*.

Conclusion

Due to technological advances in communications, in particular, film, television and radio, the role of the mass media in everyday existence has constantly increased since the turn of the century and more importantly since the end of World War II. America has become the centre of mass entertainment or popular culture and the mass media, and this post-war development is charted by the four texts - *The Floating Opera*, *The End of the Road*, *White Noise* and *Vineland*. These texts detail the establishment of a government-defined system founded on popular culture and popular mythology. They form a clear progression in the development of post-war America, where the novels by Barth define the period and relate directly to the later novels of DeLillo and Pynchon. In conclusion, however, it is appropriate to discuss the cultural direction of contemporary American society and the potential future for the physical and social environment, in particular the creation of waste, and in brief offer an alternative to the post-modern aesthetic and its loss of causality.

In *The Disappearance of Childhood* by Neil Postman, the increasing influence of the mass media (in particular on childhood) is explored in some detail. Postman claims that “the period between 1850 and 1950 represents the high-watermark of childhood,”²⁹⁴ where “the maintenance of childhood depended on the principles of managed information and sequential learning.”²⁹⁵ This clear delineation of childhood is the symptom of a traditional social hierarchy, which then suffers alteration with the introduction of the mass media and communications technology. It is stated that “the

²⁹⁴ Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, p. 67.

²⁹⁵ Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, p. 72.

telegraph began the process of wresting control of information from the home and school,²⁹⁶ and

Between 1850 and 1950 the communication structure of America was dissolved, then reconstituted, by an uninterrupted flow of invention - the rotary press, the camera, the telephone, the phonograph, the movies, the radio, television.²⁹⁷

The introduction of communications technology altered the structure of American society, where the mass media began to influence behaviour outside or in spite of the traditional roles performed by family and school. In the post-war period the influence of the mass media has ever increased, and this cultural development is foreseen and largely defined by *The Floating Opera* and *The End of the Road*, and is illustrated in *White Noise* and *Vineland*.

In *The End of the Road* the Morgan family values involve a clear delineation between adult and child. Joe instructs his children (and Rennie) from a position of unquestioned authority, as he

[Stops] to correct the older boy's way of gripping the football. The kid attended his father's quiet advice as though it were coming from Knute Rockne; Joe watched him throw the ball correctly three times and then turned away.²⁹⁸

Joe Morgan and his family typify a traditional or European social structure, which according to Neil Postman reaches a conclusion or suffers alteration in approximately 1950. Although Joe demands a certain amount of "independence"²⁹⁹ from his children, their development depends almost entirely upon his role as father and mentor. In *The End of the Road* the traditional social hierarchy of family, school and government does to some extent end or suffer alteration with the symbolic victory of

²⁹⁶ Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, p. 72.

²⁹⁷ Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, p. 72.

²⁹⁸ Barth, p. 292.

²⁹⁹ Barth, p. 293.

the Doctor's "Mythotherapy" at the conclusion of the novel. The Doctor and "Mythotherapy" are a precursor to the role of the American Government and mass media respectively in contemporary American society.

In *White Noise* the distinction between adult and childhood roles becomes less clear as the mass media dictates behavioural patterns. Heinrich addresses a crowd in a manner which is clearly influenced by his cultural environment. He speaks in a "new-found voice, his tone of enthusiasm for runaway calamity"³⁰⁰ as he informs a crowd about "Nyodene Derivative" (p. 130). Similar to Jack lecturing students, he adopts mannerisms designed to stimulate audience response, as he in one instance "arched his brows and began to twitch comically, his tongue lolling in a corner of his mouth" (p. 131). Heinrich learns "to make his way in the world" (p. 131), in the moment of addressing the audience of evacuees, without the direction of his father. And due to the influence of the mass media, the children appear more practically knowledgeable than their parents. In a reversal of traditionally understood family roles, Jack sits the infant Wilder "on my lap and started up the car, letting Wilder steer" (p. 79). In *White Noise* Jack does not consistently perform the role of mentor to his children (in the manner of Joe Morgan in *The End of the Road*), but is to some extent infantilised by the mass media.

In *Vineland* Zoyd and Prairie have an equal relationship, which may largely be attributed to their cultural environment. Prairie's behaviour is naturally influenced by her close relatives (in particular Zoyd and Sasha), but the barrier between adult and child is diminished by the mass media. Prairie and her friend, Ché, are described as "among the first mall rats into Fox Hills,"³⁰¹ and this behaviour is not the result of

³⁰⁰ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 130. All subsequent page references in the text belong to this work, except where otherwise specified.

³⁰¹ Pynchon, *Vineland*, p. 325. All subsequent page references in the text belong to this work, except where otherwise specified.

family or the intervention of the education system, but is the combined result of popular culture, mass media and commercialism.

Prairie, similar to Heinrich in *White Noise*, discovers herself through the mass media. Prairie and Ché occasionally communicate in a “star-and-sidekick routine, going back to when they were little, playing Bionic, Police or Wonder Woman” (p.327), and Prairie compares herself with images from television. She relates herself to images “on the Tube” (p. 327) of “junior-high gymnasts in leotards, teenagers in sitcoms, girls in commercials” (p. 327), and knows “that’s who she was supposed to be” (p. 327). Although Prairie does desire a more stable family relationship, in particular the presence of her mother, the relationship between her and Zoyd is relatively equal, where Prairie has (via circumstance and the influence of the mass media) approached an awareness of contemporary adult behaviour beyond her age in years.

The mass media is increasingly fulfilling the role of parent, friend, mentor or teacher, and hence there are fears raised about the cultural direction of contemporary American society. In *Vineland* any attempt to limit access to television, in particular among the vulnerable,³⁰² is abandoned by the scientists at the “Tubaldetox” (p. 335), as they adopt the aim of “Transcendence Through Saturation” (p. 335). The policy is to allow “everybody watch as much as they wanted of whatever they felt like seeing” (p. 335), and this policy applies not merely to the “Tubaldetox” (p. 335) but also to contemporary American society in general. The saturation of information and images by the mass media is a policy instituted largely by the American Government via the cultural industry, where the creation of waste (including loss of life) is, apparently, considered necessary in the continuation of technological advance. There are

³⁰² Television “has not only separated people from experience but also left them open to manipulation.” (Chambers, p. 193).

therefore references in *Vineland* to the presence of the police and state, and the resulting community of dispossessed, who are labelled “Thanatoids.”

The creation of waste is a by-product of entropy, where according to Murray in *White Noise* “every advance in knowledge and technique is matched by a new kind of death, a new strain.”³⁰³ Advances in technology, which are emphasised in American culture, are counteracted by the creation of waste and the threat of self-destruction. The attempt to create technological order is undermined by the emergence of further disorder, which is an illustration of the second law of thermodynamics and in particular entropy. “There is a curious connection between weapons and waste,”³⁰⁴ where

Waste is the secret history, the underhistory, the way archaeologists dig out the history of early cultures, every sort of bone heap and broken tool, literally from under the ground. (p. 791)

The possibility exists that “in our case, in our age. What we excrete comes back to consume us” (p. 791), and that similar to Europe in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, America (and, due to American cultural dominance, the rest of the world) shall “[die] meanly in its own wastes.”³⁰⁵

In Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, it is stated that “garbage dumps” (p. 287) provide an insight into “the civilization they live in” (p. 287), where

Consume or die. That’s the mandate of the culture. And it all ends up in the dump. We make stupendous amounts of garbage, then we react to it, not only technologically but in our hearts and minds. We let it shape us. We let it control our thinking. Garbage comes first, then we build a system to deal with it. (pp. 267-288)

³⁰³ DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 150.

³⁰⁴ Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (New York: Scribner, 1997), p. 791. All subsequent page references in the text belong to this work, except where otherwise specified.

³⁰⁵ Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, p. 616.

Instead of recycling informational (and physical) waste in the manner of Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, America (and in particular the American Government) largely prefers to overcome entropy by creating further waste. There then occurs the ultimate attempt to overcome waste via technological advance, which is "the fusion of two streams of history, weapons and waste. We destroy contaminated waste by means of nuclear explosions" (p. 791). This does of course threaten self-destruction and is a highly dangerous method of dealing with any unwanted substance or even an undesired section of society.

Not merely physical waste or garbage is created in society, but informational and even human suffering and loss of life (which may also be termed "waste"). In contemporary America the American Government apparently still encourages the creation of "waste," whether in the Third World or within the U.S. itself, where institutionalised social injustice seems to be considered necessary in the continuation of technology. There are therefore, in *Underworld*, references to loss of life and social inequality:

In this representation of contemporary America, there is a reference to

Gunfire sang at sunset off the low walls of demolished buildings [...] At the far end was a lone standing structure, a derelict tenement with an exposed wall where another building had once abutted. This wall was where Ismael Muñoz and his crew of graffiti writers spray-painted a memorial angel every time a child died in the neighbourhood. Angels in blue and pink covered roughly half the high slab. The child's name and age were printed under each angel, and as the van drew closer Edgar could see entries for TB, AIDS, beatings, drive-by shootings, measles, asthma, abandonment at birth - left in dumpster, forgot in car, left in Glad Bag stormy night. (p. 239)

This description of human suffering may be described as informational or cultural waste - "the real protagonist of this novel is 'waste'"³⁰⁶ - since it exists, in the manner detailed in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, to some extent outside

the government-controlled monopoly over communication and the mass media. Although America may appear an open and even democratic society, there occur social injustices and forms of waste which are not adequately reported by the media. In particular the role performed by the American Government and the actual consequences of technological developments are often not made available to the general public.

There is a potential alternative to the post-modern aesthetic and its loss of causality, and “the way that writers have recently become ‘part of the background noise – part of the buzz of celebrity and consumerism’”³⁰⁷ (which Don DeLillo refers to in an interview with the BBC).³⁰⁸ This is foremost offered in the two post-war texts, *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon and *Voss* by Patrick White. In Australia there is the potential to achieve a balance between the high art and morality of former Europe and the government defined popular culture of contemporary America. This opportunity exists within the education system, where the serious literary text ³⁰⁹ should be made available to every individual (in every country) instead of merely being lost to the saturation of cultural forms increasingly evident throughout the world’s media.

In particular *The Crying of Lot 49* offers an application of James Clerk Maxwell’s theoretical idea for perpetual motion to the closed system of America. Although the novel is situated in America, the metaphor of the text has objective significance and may be applied to contemporary America, Australia and the world indefinitely into the future. Maxwell’s theoretical attempt to escape entropy is applied

³⁰⁶ Tony Tanner, *The American Mystery: American Literature from Emerson to DeLillo* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2000), p. 214.

³⁰⁷ Moran, p. 117.

³⁰⁸ “*The Word, The Image and the Gun*, BBC1, 27 September 1991.” Moran, p. 175.

³⁰⁹ The serious literary text offers a valid representation of society and its waste, where as an example “*White Noise* inhabits the heart of postmodern culture to weigh its menaces against its marvels, to alert

with the aid of the Demon (and a sensitive) to the closed system of society, where the role of Demon may be understood as either God or a Universal Power and the role of sensitive as the artist.

In *The Crying of Lot 49* an alternative is offered to the finality of the second law of thermodynamics, which states that in a closed system entropy (a measure of disorder) will never decrease and will increase whenever possible. The alternative is offered or proposed via the metaphor of Maxwell's Demon, which is furthered in the novel by Nefastis. In the Nefastis machine the notion of a "sensitive" (within the closed system) to a demon (outside the closed system) is performed by Oedipa Maas. Oedipa Maas becomes witness in *The Crying of Lot 49* to a network of information, which exists outside the government monopoly over communication, and attempts to bring this system, symbolised by the muted post-horn, the acronym W.A.S.T.E. and the word "Trystero," into the open.

Ultimately a system which is not closed may avoid the inevitable decline dictated in the second law of thermodynamics, and this possibility is offered on the individual level, for society in general and even for words themselves. The act of metaphor forms the foundation of *The Crying of Lot 49*, and, as a concrete representation of an abstract notion, the metaphor becomes a thrust towards a final, objective significance.³¹⁰

The metaphor of *The Crying of Lot 49* should be made available to every individual, as the auction at the conclusion of the novel largely implies. Oedipa Maas sits "alone"³¹¹ at the auction and attempts "to guess which one was her target, her

us to its wonder as well as its waste. Yet what it most of all affirms is the power of fiction itself" (Osteen, pp. 190-191).

³¹⁰ Paragraph principally derived from my English IV Honours thesis (1999); Mark Reed. "The Use of Metaphor in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*" (unpublished), p. 46.

³¹¹ Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 127. All subsequent page references in the text belong to this work, except where otherwise specified.

enemy, perhaps her proof” (p. 127). Every individual differs in their response to the metaphor, where the Literary text as metaphor provides continuation and objective truth (or lie depending on the perspective of the observer). As the “auctioneer [clears] his throat” (p. 127), Oedipa can only settle “back, to await the crying of lot 49” (p.127). It is not the sole responsibility of the author, beyond the act of publishing the novel, to make the text available to a broad audience. Oedipa can only await a response from her isolated position of author. The participation of the education system is required, where, if society is to become an open system in the manner of *The Crying of Lot 49*, there must be a compromise formed between government and community.

The Crying of Lot 49 offers an alternative to the post-modern, superficial mode of existence and the government-defined popular culture of contemporary America, and in Australia (as well as any other country) there is the opportunity to arrive at a compromise between government and community (with the participation of the education system). This compromise may be labelled as true democracy (rather than appearance alone), and as a voice of democracy Australia must necessarily become involved in the affairs of the world.

The cultural dominance of America has become increasingly evident in the post-war period, and the world has to some extent become represented through the mass media of America. But, despite the cultural dominance of America in the contemporary world environment, however, there is witnessed in Patrick White’s *Voss* the formation and emergence of an Australian identity.³¹² Although first

³¹² This Australian identity is not a construct of American mythology or dependent on American mass media. In *White Noise* the only reference to Australia is outback Western Australia, which is referred to as primitive because it is without television. Jack describes Eugene (Babette’s child) growing up in Western Australia without television (ironically but nonetheless revealingly) as “a sort of wild child, a savage plucked from the bush, intelligent and literate but deprived of the deeper codes and messages

published in 1957, this identity is separate to some extent from both former Europe and post-war America. There is the potential in Australia for an alternative to sole dependence on American mass culture to provide an identity, and also to counteract the loss of any moral or ethical basis within society, and this alternative is foremost offered in serious art or the serious literary metaphor.

As *Gravity's Rainbow* illustrates, the old world order of an expansionist Europe is over and the former colony of America has filled the void of empire.

According to Blicero in Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*:

In Africa, Asia, Amerindia, Oceania, Europe came and established its order of Analysis and Death. What it could not use, it killed or altered. In time the death-colonies grew strong enough to break away. But the impulse to empire, the mission to propagate death, the structure of it, kept on. Now we are in the last phase. American Death has come to occupy Europe. It has learned empire from its old metropolis. But now we have *only* the structure left us, none of the great rainbow plumes, no fittings of gold, no epic marches over alkali seas. The savages of other continents, corrupted but still resisting in the name of life, have gone on despite everything...³¹³

Similarly, the death of Voss in Patrick White's novel represents either Nazi Germany or the plight of Europe itself, where Australian society continues in the figure of Laura despite the loss. The Nietzschean will of the European explorer to tame the Australian desert is crushed by the desire for freedom and life of a native, as the Aboriginal Jackie decapitates Voss in the Australian desert. Armed with a "bone-handled clasp-knife given him by Mr Voss,"³¹⁴ he "quickly stabbed with his knife and his breath between the windpipe and the muscular part of the throat" (p. 394). The Aboriginal boy decapitates Voss in order to "break the terrible magic that bound him remorselessly, endlessly to the white men" (p. 394). On a symbolic level Voss' death,

that mark his species as unique" (DeLillo, *White Noise*, p. 50). In *Voss* in particular an Australian identity is revealed, which precedes and is not dependent on the mythology of American mass culture.

³¹³ Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p. 722.

³¹⁴ Patrick White, *Voss* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 394. All subsequent page references in the text belong to this work, except where otherwise specified.

and the manner of his demise, could be viewed as equivalent to the depiction of the collapse of Europe in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

There is a psychic attachment between Laura and Voss, where Laura becomes unwell as Voss approaches death in the heart of Australia. At the moment of Voss' death she "was moving feebly in her sick-bed, while calling out with what remained of her strength after the bleedings to which she had been subjected on several occasions" (p. 395), and then cries "It is over. It is over" (p. 395). She suffers but survives the demise of Voss, and in this moment there is the emergence of an Australian identity, which is to some extent separate from the tradition and cultural dominance of former Europe.

In *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973) there is a reference to the emergence of post-war American power and global influence as the question is raised whether "the cycle [is] over now, and a new one ready to begin? Will our new Edge, our new Deathkingdom, be the moon?"³¹⁵ It is increasingly necessary for Australia in the present period to understand the source of American cultural dominance, and also remain and become defined as a nation in a cultural and even political sense.

At the conclusion of *Voss* (1957) it is stated in a conversation between Laura Trevelyan and Mr Ludlow, with regard to Australia:

'Oh, yes, a country with a future. But when does the future become present? That is what puzzles me.'
 'Now.'
 'How- now?' asked Mr Ludlow.
 'Every moment that we live and breathe, and love, and suffer, and die.'
 (p. 448)

In contrast to the contemporary American preoccupation with technology and the future, Australia is here defined as existing within the present. It is in the present that

³¹⁵ Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*, p. 723.

Australia may provide an alternative to the emphasis on aestheticism and popular culture in contemporary America and the rest of the world, and even an alternative to some of the ongoing policies of the American Government.

The social imbalance in contemporary America between the role of the government and the community is, in *Vineland*, brought to a conclusion with the symbolic death of Brock Vond and the rebirth of Weed Atman. The death of the low level representative of the state and the rebirth of the socially active university lecturer offer a path into the future which is not solely dependent on the will of the American power structure.

Brock Vond dies in a mythological landscape under the direction of the socially disenfranchised veterans of the Vietnam War - Vato and Blood. In this final moment Brock notices:

All around in the gloom, bones, human bones, skulls and skeletons. ‘What is it?’ he asked. ‘Please.’
 ‘They’ll take out your bones,’ Vato explained. ‘The bones have to stay on this side. The rest of you goes over [...]’
 ‘So long, Brock,’ said Blood.³¹⁶

Brock Vond appropriately dies in a mythological landscape, due to his own actions and the creation of myth and popular culture of the American Government, behind which he was able to hide throughout his use of violent and coercive methods.

Weed Atman, who dies under the direction of Brock Vond, returns after his death and communicates briefly with Prairie. Although he is unable to continue the role he performed in life, there is offered a potential role in the future for the socially active and, most importantly, socially responsible lecturer. Weed informs Prairie:

Used to think I was climbing, step by step, right? Toward a resolution - first Rex, above him your mother, then Brock Vond, then - but that’s when it

³¹⁶ Pynchon. *Vineland*, p. 380. All subsequent page references in the text belong to this work, except where otherwise specified.

begins to go dark, and that door at the top I thought I saw isn't there anymore, because the light behind it just went off too. (p. 366)

Although Weed is unable to complete any insight into the levels of command which initiated his death, there is nonetheless a sense of loss about the position he fulfilled within society. The socially active university lecturer offers a mediatory role between government and community, and in Australia Weed's role may be continued and his search into the higher levels of command within contemporary American society may be completed.³¹⁷

The four texts - *The Floating Opera*, *The End of the Road*, *White Noise*, and *Vineland* - illustrate the developing role of popular culture and popular mythology in post-war American society. The mass media has begun, under the direction of the culture industry and the American Government, to fulfil the role previously performed by the family and the education system. Without the intervention of an independent university or education system, there is no opposition within America to the state, technological advances and the potential direction of contemporary American society.

An alternative, however, is offered in the two texts - *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Voss* - and within Australia. The education system should necessarily encourage the reading of the serious literary metaphor (including post-war texts such as those referred to in this thesis), and encourage an ongoing process of debate and discussion within Australia (and any other country) about the role of popular culture and the culture industry in America and the rest of the world.

³¹⁷ In John Barth's *Sabbatical: A Romance* "exposing the misdeeds of the CIA" is referred to as a "socially useful thing" (p.158).

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