



**Anxieties of Commentary:  
Interpretation in Recent Literary, Film and Cultural Criticism**

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## Abstract

This thesis claims that a distinctive anxiety of commentary has entered literary, film and cultural criticism over the last thirty years, gathering particular force in relation to debates around postmodernism and fictocriticism and those debates which are concerned to determine the most appropriate ways of discussing popular cultural texts. I argue that one now regularly encounters the figure of the hesitant, self-doubting cultural critic, a person who wonders whether the critical discourse about to be produced will prove either redundant (since the work will already include its own commentary) or else prove a misdescription of some kind (since the criticism will be unable to convey the essence of, say, the popular cultural object).

In order to understand the emergence of this figure of the self-doubting cultural critic as one who is no longer confident that available forms of critical description are adequate and/or as one who is worried that the critical writing produced will not connect with a readership that might also have formed a constituency, the thesis proposes notions of "critical occasions," "critical assemblages," "critical postures," and "critical alibis." These are presented as a way of indicating that "interpretative occasions" are simultaneously rhetorical and ethical. They are site-specific occasions in the sense that the critic activates a rhetorical-discursive apparatus and are also site-specific in the sense that the critic is using the cultural object (book, film) as an occasion to call him or herself into question as one who requires a further work of self-stylisation (which might take the form of a practice of self-problematisation).

The thesis focusses this general theoretical discussion on a series of case-studies of films (Gillian Leahy's My Life Without Steve, hollywood teen movies, Bob Rafelson's Five Easy Pieces, Nicholas Roeg's Bad Timing) and novels (Don DeLillo's White Noise and Jane DeLynn's Don Juan in the Village). On each occasion the unit of analysis becomes both the text (novel, film) and the public space of critical debate into which it is pulled. Thus the writing that attaches to these texts — both in the form of immediate journalistic reviews and the later academic writing — is regarded, together with the text in question, as forming the overall unit of textual analysis.

The thesis regularly moves between a discussion of meta-theoretical issues (for example, the literary criticism of Ian Hunter, the debate about how to constitute popular cultural texts as objects of academic critical analysis, the debates around postmodernism, fictocriticism and the paraliterary, the positions on film criticism contained in David Bordwell's Making Meaning) and an assembling of its own readings of particular texts. This is done to keep in play a connection between the performance of one's own interpretative occasion and the meditation on what is involved (ethically, rhetorically) in the performance of such a critical occasion.

The idea is worn out by now and no longer usable... Like silver paper, which can never quite be smoothed out again once it has been crumpled. Nearly all my ideas are a bit crumpled.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, Culture and Value

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The thesis is dedicated to my parents, Fred and Shirley King, and to the memory of my grandmother, Adeleine Noal Booth.

**Statement**

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any University. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis. I consent to the thesis being made available for photocopying and loan if applicable if accepted for the award of the degree.

DATE 28/3/94





## Introduction

### Anxieties of Commentary

In an interview published in Diacritics in 1982, Fredric Jameson claimed that we "are indeed far more vitally informed and defined by our anxieties than we like to think: they make up the very texture of our lives."<sup>1</sup> Jameson was speaking in the carefully delimited context of the marxist teaching of literature, but he spoke also of "an anxiety about the loss of gender privileges ... class anxieties, anxieties about the future, the unconscious 'management' of class struggles and so forth" (91). Earlier in the interview he had been asked to respond to a question posed in a New Left Review article on his work by Terry Eagleton.<sup>2</sup> In that piece Eagleton had asked: "how is a Marxist-structuralist analysis of a minor novel of Balzac to help shake the foundations of capitalism?" (65). Jameson took this question to be evidence of a more general "expression of an anxiety which everyone working in the area of Marxist cultural studies must feel" (72).

Fifteen years earlier, in the mid 1960s, the art critic Harold Rosenberg had wondered whether it was still possible to speak of the work of art as an "anxious object."<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg was there thinking of artistic production as constituting one among a number of cultural sectors, and he was also

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<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Interview," Diacritics, 12, 2 (1982), 86. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton, "The Idealism of American Criticism," New Left Review, 127 (1981), 65. Subsequently collected in Eagleton, Against the Grain: Essays 1975-1985 (London: Verso 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Harold Rosenberg, The Anxious Object: Art Today and Its Audience (New York: Horizon Press 1966), 13. Subsequent references included in the text.

referring to the art object in the context of what he took to be the commercial media's appropriation of certain "artistic" devices of formal experimentation. Rosenberg was suggesting that the prospect of having a particular set of art practices plundered and imitated resulted in an art practice which displayed a "constant threat of deformation and loss of identity" (17). This led Rosenberg to say that the notion of the "anxious object" best described the way "the art object persists without a secure identity" (17). These last comments are a very partial reading/rewriting of Rosenberg's way of introducing his book, but they allow me to lead into one of the central claims of this thesis, namely, that it is now the case that the role of cultural criticism "persists without a secure identity." It is not only "marxist cultural studies" (as Jameson referred to it) but cultural studies writing more broadly which construes itself in this way. As Dean MacCannell put it in the introduction to the 1989 edition of his book, The Tourist: "with all the good will in the world, current criticism is a self-conflicted exercise."<sup>4</sup>

Spurred by remarks of this kind, this thesis concentrates on a few different ways of conceiving of cultural criticism (by which I mean the criticisms produced in relation to various literary, film and popular cultural objects) as a particular discursive practice. Broadly, cultural criticism is regarded as an "occasional" activity in the sense that one might talk of "occasional verse" or of an "occasional address." In addition, I speak throughout this thesis of "critical alibis," "critical postures," "critical performances" and "textual assemblages" (both fictional and critical). And at one point cultural criticism is also regarded as a public staging of the self, a piece of critical theatre in which a particular agonistic is performed

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<sup>4</sup> Dean MacCannell, The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), xii.

— namely, the use of a cultural object to call oneself and one's social-cultural role or location into question. That is, the cultural object becomes the occasion for a piece of critical "self-fashioning," to redeploy Stephen Greenblatt's term, or else the critic practises a number of "techniques of the self," to use Michel Foucault's terminology.<sup>5</sup> In this understanding of cultural criticism the text becomes an armature or a device within a performance or staging of an act of self-interrogation. In short, criticism becomes an ethical exercise, an instance of what Foucault calls "the interpretative analysis of the self."<sup>6</sup>

In a brief article born of a visit to China, Roland Barthes says: "when you go to China, you carry in your baggage a thousand urgent questions."<sup>7</sup> Barthes then adds: "we want there to be impenetrable phenomena, so that we can penetrate them: an ideological atavism has made us deciphering creatures, hermeneutic subjects. We believe our intellectual task is always to discover a meaning" (116-17). In relation to China, Barthes says that he tried to "produce a discourse that was neither assertive, nor negative, nor neutral — a commentary whose tone would be no comment" (120). One way of describing the shift in cultural criticism described in this thesis would be to say that the situation described by Barthes now has the additional feature of the critic's "interpretative analysis of the self" in the very process of seeking to interpret "external" cultural objects.

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<sup>5</sup> See Stephen Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), and Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, "About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth," Political Theory 21, 2 (1993), 210.

<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, "Well, and China?," trans. Lee Hildreth, Discourse, 8 (1986/87), 116. Subsequent references included in the text.

It seems to me that these remarks from Jameson, Rosenberg, MacCannell and Barthes, however scattered, typify a distinctive "turn" in literary-cultural criticism. It is a "turn" which has seen the emergence of a particular and persistent figure: that of a hesitant, self-doubting cultural critic no longer certain that the critical act about to be performed will connect with an appropriate readership or prove to be a worthwhile interpretative exercise. And when the object of critical attention comes from the domain of popular culture, the level of self-doubt and political-ethical self-scrutiny rises exponentially. The critic now agonises at the prospect of radically misdescribing the object in question, dreads the possibility of (over)intellectualising the popular, is haunted by the possible loss of an audience that might also have been a constituency. Put crudely, the production of another book on a canonised literary figure does not seem to be accompanied by quite the same intensity of critical self-interrogation.

In this thesis I concentrate on two prominent manifestations of such critical anxiety. The first concerns the moment of postmodernism — understood here as a particular discursive formation — and the extent to which it allegedly presents a situation in which earlier forms of critical commentary, earlier ways of differentiating and placing texts, become untenable. There seem to be two main explanations for this particular critical "turn." First, some cultural artefacts (novels, films, paintings) which otherwise might have provided critical commentary with an alibi or raison d'être are now said to include their own commentary. To the extent that this can be shown to be the case, the fictional work is held to close the gap that usually exists between a text and its interpretation. Critical distance is said to have been narrowed and traditional

"hermeneutic gestures" eluded in some way.<sup>8</sup> The usual critical protocols are said to have been pre-empted or evaded, with the consequence that criticism is forced into an uneasy space somewhere between the anticipated and the redundant.<sup>9</sup> At the same time as critical protocols are said to have been pre-empted so, in a parallel development, some forms of criticism are said to have "fictionalised" themselves. When theoretical writing is found to exhibit some of the devices normally reserved for fictional writing, or vice-versa, then the form of writing so produced is said to be either "fictocritical" or "paraliterary."<sup>10</sup> This constitutes a second way of closing the critical distance between works of fiction and the interpretative commentary they provoke. In the first instance, the literary work is held to include its own critical exertions while in the second, cultural criticism is held to partake of some of the devices of the literary domain.

It should be said at the outset that in the course of presenting various positions on textuality and commentary in the context of some of the debates around postmodernism, fictocriticism and the paraliterary, I will not be attempting to provide a general or synoptic view of that particular set of debates. For example, much of the writing on postmodernism

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<sup>8</sup> See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," New Left Review, 146 (1984): 53-92.

<sup>9</sup> In one sense this is not an especially new circumstance. Defoe's Robinson Crusoe included its own commentary in order to guard against the possibility of a "moral misreading," and the early development of the novel is linked with didacticism of a particular kind. But in the case of the postmodern context, one is more likely to find didactic commentaries on popular cultural artifacts offered within the high-cultural medium of the novel. The disquisition offered by Murray on supermarkets and car crash movies in DeLillo's White Noise would be one such example.

<sup>10</sup> See Rosalind Krauss, "Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary," in The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 291-95. Jameson uses the term "fictocriticism" in his "Interview" with Angela Ward, Impulse, 13, 4 (1987), 9.

feat of combining or reconciling the critical distance and disinterestedness of the academic with the proximity and enthusiasm of the fan.<sup>12</sup>

I approach the first domain of critical anxiety (the context provided by postmodernism, the fictocritical and the paraliterary) in two ways. First, by a broad discussion of some definitions of postmodernism, the fictocritical and the paraliterary, and secondly, by looking in detail at a series of texts which seem to me to pose problems for currently available interpretative manoeuvres in literary-cultural criticism. The specific texts are Don DeLillo's White Noise (1985), Jane DeLynn's Don Juan in the Village (1990), and Gillian Leahy's My Life Without Steve (1986).<sup>13</sup> While it is clear that traditional critical machinery (for example, a humanist literary or film criticism) does go to work on these texts quite happily, generating interpretations of particular kinds, my difference and distance from such interpretative "turns" will consist in arguing that it is not automatically apparent that one should apply such theoretical terminology to texts of this kind. But nor is it necessarily self-evident that one should apply terminology drawn from the field of postmodernism to a novel which includes within its novelistic discourse postmodern terminology and concepts of a kind one might more usually expect to find in journals such as Artforum or Flashart. Consequently, my reading of White Noise, to refer to one of my examples, seeks to show some of the difficulties that particular novel poses for the well-meaning "hermeneutic gestures" of an extrapolative or amplificatory literary-cultural criticism. My argument

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<sup>12</sup> See Constance Penley, "Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Study of Popular Culture," in Cultural Studies, ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, and Paula Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), 479-500, and Henry Jenkins, Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> Don DeLillo, White Noise (London: Picador, 1984), Jane DeLynn, Don Juan in the Village (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), Gillian Leahy, My Life Without Steve (1986).

here is that, to some extent, postmodernism constitutes the "surface" on which the writing and reading of that book occur, provides the "framework" within which critical commentary on the book locates itself.<sup>14</sup>

My second point of attention in this first domain of critical anxiety concerns the "paraliterary" space said by Rosalind Krauss to be evident in some of the writing of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida. My means of focussing this particular debate consists in aligning some aspects of this paraliterary practice of writing with Gillian Leahy's prize-winning independent short film, My Life Without Steve, a film which has been described as postmodern and postfeminist.

In the case of each of the thesis' textual case-studies, particular attention will be paid to the works' critical receptions; that is, to the public spaces of review and debate into which these novels and films are pulled. This will involve some discussion of the review as a distinctive rhetorical-discursive mode. The practices of film and book reviewing are discussed throughout the thesis as an instance of a critical posture or performance of a particular kind and I do this by drawing on Meaghan Morris' account of the practice of reviewing and on David Bordwell's comments on some modes of film reviewing.<sup>15</sup> Owing to the fact that my examples come from the print media I refer to practices of writing but I am happy for that

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<sup>14</sup> Foucault's account of "surface" is discussed in chapters four and five, in relation to some writing from David Bordwell and Ian Hunter. The concept of "framework" comes from Stuart Hall, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," Southern Review, 17 (1984): 3-17, and from Hall, "The Message From the Box," The English Magazine, 5 (1980): 4-8.

<sup>15</sup> See Meaghan Morris, "Indigestion: A Rhetoric of Reviewing," in The Pirate's Fiancée (London: Verso, 1988), 105-121, and David Bordwell, Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric In the Interpretation of Cinema (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 34-39.

notion of writing to include the interpretative procedures one finds operating in particular radio and television arts programmes.

The point I am wanting to make in relation to the practice of reviewing can be grasped by imagining that one were to ask, immediately before reading a particular review: "what alibi does this piece of writing give itself for being in the world — aside from the claim to be talking about a particular novel or film?" What if we were to interrogate the textual status of the review and were to do so by detaching it from the object it purported to be explaining or discussing? To make such a move would be to recognise the extent to which a review is itself a textual assemblage of a particular kind.

In applying such an attitude to film reviews, for example, one finds two main alibis for this particular cultural practice: either it is conceived of as a consumer guide or else it is thought of as the public display of a refined aesthetic sensibility (which might, nonetheless, be delivered in a populist voice); it is a public instruction in how to think about the aesthetics and politics of a particular cultural domain. Thus one finds the American film critic, Hollis Alpert, explaining his social role and activity by saying: "It does seem to me that there is little point to film reviewing unless the readership is fully and fairly informed about the kind of experience it is likely to get if it invests its money in movie tickets."<sup>16</sup> This is the consumer-guide alibi. But if one asks even a few questions of its common-sensical assumptions, and of its terminology, the alibi starts to weaken.

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<sup>16</sup> Hollis Alpert, "Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice: A Critical Situation," in Film 69/70, ed. Joseph Morganstern and Stefan Kanfer (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 48.



The first thing to notice is that Alpert's position is a "realist" position, as Meaghan Morris defines that term in her account of film reviewing.<sup>17</sup> It is a position which assumes that things are self-evidently what they are: a film exists and it can be discussed in a straightforward manner. This attitude tends to play down any notion of the institution of cinema (distribution, exhibition, publicity) and of the practice of reviewing as itself institutional, discursive, rhetorical. Although Alpert refers to a "readership," this term does not constitute a unified, homogenous category in the way that he assumes. One should talk rather about readerships, sometimes overlapping their various sub-cultural constituencies and sometimes separated from them. The category of "film reader," in the sense of one who reads film journals, is not so coherent as the term implies. Film reviews found in Jump Cut, Film Quarterly, Sight and Sound, Cineaste, Cinema Papers, Filmnews, The Face, The Advocate, The New Yorker, Vanity Fair and The Village Voice will differ according to the readership thought to be aligned with each of those magazines or journals. And a gap might well exist between the reader of a particular journal and the potential film viewer. Pauline Kael provides a nice instance of an internal gap existing across the practices of film viewing and the reading of film reviews when she says: "Paint Your Wagon is not the sort of movie that people who read movie criticism are likely to go to."<sup>18</sup> This remark obviously assumes certain things about class and taste but it is also evidence of Morris' concluding comment to the effect that a review is always part of some other representational system: "A review is a signifying element in the discourse of the medium in which it appears. It is not a parasite on the film industry nor an extension of a personality, but

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<sup>17</sup> Meaghan Morris, "Indigestion," 107.

<sup>18</sup> Pauline Kael, "Paint Your Wagon: Somebody Else's Success," in Film 69/70, 111.

a bit of a newspaper, a journal, a radio programme, a television show" ("Indigestion," 121).

When Alpert assumes that his readership can be "fully and fairly informed about the kind of experience it is likely to get if it buys a ticket," this assumes that the same experience awaits that readership just as it assumes that this "experience" pre-exists its critical description. Alpert thus plays down any notion of the extent to which his own critical apparatus or discursive-rhetorical performance produces, in the workings of its prose, the "experience" that is said to wait, even-handedly, the reader of the film review. Thus Alpert assumes that a certain stability attaches to the object — film — and to the viewers' encounters with it. But whenever one compiles a dossier of reviews of a particular film, it rapidly becomes clear that the film does not remain the same object across its different critical descriptions.

For example, shortly after the American release of Thelma and Louise, the film journal Film Quarterly invited eight of its regular contributors (five men, three women) to comment on the film in relation to the controversy it was generating. The collection was called "The Many Faces of Thelma and Louise" and involved a specific set of taxonomic moves.<sup>19</sup>

The reviews/commentaries placed the film in the following ways: in relation to the director (citing Ridley Scott's earlier films); in relation to

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<sup>19</sup> "The Many Faces of Thelma and Louise," Film Quarterly, 45, 2 (1991-92): 20-31. Thelma and Louise was subject to this kind of critical appraisal across a range of critical sites. See Sharon Willis, "Hardware and Hardbodies, What Do Women Want?: A Reading Of Thelma and Louise," in Film Theory Goes To The Movies, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 120-28, and Cathy Griggers, "Thelma and Louise and the Cultural Generation of the New Butch-Femme," in Film Theory Goes to the Movies, 129-41. See also the five contributions which constitute "Should We Go Along For the Ride?: A Critical Symposium on Thelma and Louise," Cineaste, 18, 4 (1991): 28-36.

the stars, Susan Sarandon and Geena Davis and their previous roles; in relation to conceptions of genre and sub-genre (westerns — ranging from John Ford's The Searchers to George Roy Hill's Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid — and citing the sub-genre of the road movie through to the "buddy movies" of the 1970s). The following brief description of the associations and categorisations contained in the eight reviews should make my broader point abundantly clear: namely, that the critical object does not remain the same across its various critical appraisals.

The first review refers to Robert Altman, Blake Edwards, "Bush's America," Working Girl, Pretty Woman, and finds Thelma and Louise to exhibit an "exuberant polysemy."<sup>20</sup> The second review poses questions of genre (specifically the road movie/buddy movie sub-genres), wondering whether certain genres are inherently masculine or only conventionally so, thereby posing the prospect of a practice of gender-crossing in film genre (referring to The Silence of the Lambs, Mortal Thoughts, Sleeping with the Enemy).<sup>21</sup> The third review characterises the film as a "picaresque tragicomedy" and a "vivid portrait of contemporary America." It also stresses the issue of women and individualism and refers to an earlier Sarandon film, White Palace.<sup>22</sup> The fourth review invokes the genres of screwball comedy, the outlaw film (Gun Crazy, Bonnie and Clyde, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid) in order to place Thelma and Louise as a mix of the road movie and screwball comedy, one which plays with the generic convention of the marriage at the end of screwball comedy via Thelma and Louise's final kiss and handclasping.<sup>23</sup> The fifth

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<sup>20</sup> Harvey R. Greenberg, "Thelma and Louise's Exuberant Polysemy," 20-21.

<sup>21</sup> Carol J. Clover, "Crossing Over," 22.

<sup>22</sup> Albert Johnson, "Bacchantes at Large," 22-23.

<sup>23</sup> Peter N. Chumo II, "Thelma and Louise as Screwball Comedy," 23-24.

review analyses the film in terms of its narrative organisation, noting the absence of flash-back, flash-forward, voice-over, and noting also that there is no use of the frequentive in the film's narrative.<sup>24</sup> The title of the sixth review, "What Makes a Woman Wander?," alludes to the lyrics of the opening song (heard over the credits and into the film's beginning) in John Ford's The Searchers, and the article's use of "sivilisation" throughout alludes to Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.<sup>25</sup> The seventh review places the film in relation to the western, to Edward Hopper's paintings, the couples found in film noir, the mythologised locale constituted by Monument Valley, and also finds the film's freeze-frame conclusion to be an allusion to the end of Francois Truffaut's 400 Blows, one of the films that launched the French New Wave cinema of the late 50s and early 60s.<sup>26</sup> The final review places the film in relation to Alain Tanner's Messidor, a 70s Swiss road movie in which women go on the road.<sup>27</sup> (Only one review mentions the characters' full names — Thelma Dickinson and Louise Sawyer — and no doubt a future commentary will link these names to Emily Dickinson's poetry and to Twain's Tom Sawyer , but you heard it first here.)

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<sup>24</sup> Brian Henderson, "Narrative Organisation," 25-27.

<sup>25</sup> Linda Williams, "What Makes a Woman Wander?," 27-28. The reference to "sivilisation" recalls the famous conclusion to Twain's novel when Huck announces: "But I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before." See Mark Twain, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (London: Penguin, 1987 [1884]), 369.

<sup>26</sup> Leo Braudy, "Satire Into Myth," 28-29. There is an internal logic or system to Braudy's referencings. The characters do drive through Monument Valley and that piece of landscape is irrevocably associated with the cinema of John Ford. Equally, the French New Wave (Truffaut and Godard in particular) influenced Penn's Bonnie and Clyde, a film that most reviews link with Thelma and Louise.

<sup>27</sup> Marsha Kinder, "Thelma and Louise and Messidor as Feminist Road Movies," 30-31.

That detour across Film Quarterly's dossier on Thelma and Louise indicates what I mean by saying that a film does not remain the same object across its different critical descriptions. Any critical act rewrites the object it purports to be talking about in a disinterested manner. As a critical assemblage of a particular kind, the film review is an instance of "commentary as a cultural artifact."<sup>28</sup> It is the productive consequence of the activation of a particular critical apparatus in relation to a particular film; it recruits the film to a specific critical milieu. The various accounts of Thelma and Louise which link it with everything from the history of the western (and within that, to John Ford's westerns), to film noir, screwball comedy, road movies and French New Wave cinema, display the abundance of heuristic devices it is possible to deploy or activate in relation to a particular film.

My discussion of practices of reviewing will focus on the reviews of My Life Without Steve, White Noise and Don Juan In The Village as well as on the more academically inflected critical writing that has attached to those texts. My intention is not to say that the academic writing, with the leisure it has at its disposal to be more "considered" in relation to its object, is necessarily "better" than these other forms of writing. Rather I want to set up a critical context in which my object of analysis becomes the book or film and its broad critical processings. And I do this to a point where I deviate from Morris' distinction between reviewing and criticism ("Indigestion," 116-21), preferring to say that each of these practices of writing comprises a critical assemblage which I attach to the book or film in order to constitute my object of analysis: the book/film and the commentary which it has attracted.

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<sup>28</sup> Lee Patterson, "Introduction," South Atlantic Quarterly, 91, 4 (1992), 787.

The second domain of critical anxiety, as I indicated earlier, concerns some accounts of how best to theorise popular culture. This general theoretical issue is focussed by way of a brief case-study which examines the extent to which the phenomenon of the "teenpic" is said by some critics to pose particular problems for dominant forms of film criticism. Two instances of film writing are examined in detail in order to unpick the assumptions that lie at the centre of the claim that certain kinds of popular cultural object cannot be done critical justice within currently available forms of (film) critical discourse. My argument here is that these challenges to current forms of film critical writing are best understood as the performance or staging of a particular "scene" of criticism. Certain critical acts are conducted as polemical challenges to prevailing forms of criticism which are alleged to be too stolid, solemn, and academic to grasp the essential pulsations and energies of the popular cultural text. Against this position I argue that such critical challenges are themselves quite routine exercises in a post-Romantic critical tradition predicated on the public display of the critic's taste, and on the trope of the critic's using the (popular) cultural artefact as an occasion to call him or herself into question as one who needs to perform a further work of ethical self-stylisation. This part of the thesis draws on Ian Hunter's description of criticism as an "occasional" activity, a quite localised performance obeying particular critical-ethical protocols.<sup>29</sup> Hunter's position (in part generated by his reading of Wittgenstein and Foucault) is then placed alongside David Bordwell's mini-history and typology of film criticism, provided in his book Making Meaning, and also alongside some of Wittgenstein's remarks on interpretation, and some of Ian Hacking's notions of

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<sup>29</sup> Ian Hunter, "The Occasion of Criticism," Poetics, 17 (1990): 159-84.

historically specific “styles of reasoning” and “orders of thought.”<sup>30</sup> The reason for producing this set of critical alignments is that it enables me to push certain theoretical positions to their limits and thereby to discover the extent to which I want to pursue them in their entirety (and their purity), or instead combine elements of each of them in order to generate a critical discourse that seems to me better able to handle a number of different “texts and text-like situations.”<sup>31</sup>

Overall, and unapologetically, the thesis hesitates between stressing Hunter’s point — that critical activity constitutes an “aesthetic occasion” intimately bound up with ethical practices of self-stylisation and self-distinction — when it is busy discussing other critical performances (that is, during the thesis’s “metacritical” moments), and retreating from this theoretical position at those moments where particular fictional works are read. When performing its own “occasional” interpretative acts, the thesis exhibits precisely those features of anxiety and self-doubt it identifies as being (unnecessarily) evident elsewhere. At such moments the thesis wonders aloud and at length precisely about the adequacy of commentary. For example, if I want to say that certain reflex interpretative manoeuvres are not the most appropriate way to proceed with White Noise, then what am I to say would count as an “appropriate” way of discussing that novel? And given that Don Juan in the Village has been described as a lesbian cruising novel, what reading is produced by a straight male critic? Do I read as some kind of voyeuristic equivalent of a “fag hag,” as what Pat

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<sup>30</sup> Ian Hacking, Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Natural Science (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>31</sup> The phrase comes from Jonathan Culler, “Preface,” Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), vii.

Califia has dubbed a “dyke daddy”?<sup>32</sup> And what is to be made of DeLynn’s comment that she doesn’t believe in the category of “gay fiction”?<sup>33</sup> Given that “gay fiction” has a prominent niche-marketing publishing status, sometimes referred to in the book trade as the “pink dollar,” I take DeLynn’s point to be that she does not believe in the ontological literary status of “gay fiction.” Accordingly, my discussion of Don Juan in the Village focusses on that book’s critical reception in the “straight” and “gay” press in America and the United Kingdom.

So on the one hand the thesis makes a number of “authoritative” statements concerning the status of particular acts of critical commentary, and seeks to show in reasonable detail the contingent, site-specific nature of their rhetorical gestures. Thus the figure of the hesitant, self-doubting critic is shown to be just that: a figure or topos. And equally, the anxiety at the prospect of misdescribing the popular is said to be generated by a particular understanding or conception of the performance and function of cultural criticism.

But on the other hand, when obliging myself to perform a specific interpretative act (for example, when I want to interest my reader in my reading of White Noise), particular self-doubts and uncertainties enter my critical discourse. In the case of my reading of White Noise, I argue that it is a book which troubles the usual forms of extrapolative commentary prior to performing a version of precisely such a commentary. To say as much here is not to suggest that such a contradictory situation could be banished by a prefatory moment of confession and auto-critique. Rather,

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<sup>32</sup> Pat Califia, “Gay Men, Lesbians and Sex: Doing it Together,” The Advocate, 7 July 1983, 25.

<sup>33</sup> Jane DeLynn, “Lesbian and Gay Literature,” Lambda Book Report, 2, 12 (1991), 7.



such moments of critical equivocation might better be understood as my attempt to devise a particular relation to the act of performing criticism within the genre of the doctoral thesis. Perhaps this equivocal or equivocating context is generated by what David Bordwell has described, throughout Making Meaning, as an institutional, professionalising drive towards the public performance of innovative acts of critical exegesis. Or perhaps it is a more subdued version of Michel Foucault's description of his desire to "think something other than what one has thought before."<sup>34</sup> Perhaps, as a consequence of teaching and publishing criticism, one suffers a form of academic burn-out, to the extent that one tires of talking about the same texts or of talking in the same way about texts. This would be consistent with a desire to "change the object itself," in Roland Barthes' famous phrase, which of course involves changing the critical protocols activated in relation to the object.<sup>35</sup>

Whatever the explanation for the broad context of critical hesitancy and anxiety discussed in this thesis, there can be no question of thinking that this thesis will "prove" one conception of textuality and commentary "correct." Rather, it should suffice to show the "occasional" nature of a number of critical performances, indicating something of the nature of a range of critical alibis and critical postures, while also performing some acts of interpretative commentary of one's own. Sometimes these will be conducted on other criticisms, sometimes on films and novels. In moving regularly from metacommentary to a practice of critical-exegetical commentary on particular cultural artefacts, the thesis will keep in tension

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<sup>34</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Concern for Truth," trans. Alan Sheridan, in Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 256.

<sup>35</sup> Roland Barthes, "Change the Object Itself," in Image-Music-Text, trans. and ed. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1978), 165-69.

one of its central theoretical issues: namely, the way the cultural critic poses questions to him or herself regarding the adequacy and appropriateness of the cultural analysis being conducted. Writing a doctoral thesis cannot solve these specific critical dilemmas but the writing of it does provide an "occasion" to think through some of the central critical terms associated with these debates. Furthermore, it provides an "occasion" to identify the contours of this particular "anxiety of commentary," while also providing a way of noticing what one has to do to oneself in order to produce such things as problems in the first place.

## Chapter One

### Postmodernism, FictoCriticism and the Paraliterary

What are we calling post-modernity? I'm not up to date.  
Michel Foucault<sup>1</sup>

A meaning of a word is a kind of employment of it.  
Ludwig Wittgenstein<sup>2</sup>

The critical debate surrounding postmodernism has managed to make the word almost inescapable as a critical term and yet extremely difficult to use with any convincing specificity or force. Consequently the category of the postmodern presents the paradox of a looming but elusive cultural presence. Controversies surround its use as a periodising concept, and dispute centres on whether it is best thought of as a cultural logic or as a set of representational practices. The debate on "postmodernism" has become so conflicted that the term eventually might prove closer to the vagaries of terms such as "romanticism" than to what is allegedly its conceptual-etymological antecedent, "modernism."

But even if there were agreement on periodisation, the difficulty would remain of deciding how useful the term was for grasping the specificity of different cultural practices across different media forms. What "works" for architecture, dance, painting or literature might not "work" for film, television or video. And even knowing that one should never overunify

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<sup>1</sup> Gerard Raulet, "Structuralism and Post-Structuralism: An Interview with Michel Foucault," trans. Jeremy Harding, *Telos*, 55 (1983), 204.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 61; 10e.

or overhomogenise a complicated theoretical field, knowing that one should be careful to add an "s" here as readily as one would to other important, divided, contested terms (realisms, marxisms, feminisms) does not seem especially productive. The cultural critic is in real trouble when even pluralising the contentious term does not help.

Given the degree of theoretical dispute that attaches to the use of the term, it seems to me that the most appropriate way of thinking about the whole debate surrounding postmodernism is to regard it in two ways: first as a discursive field or discursive formation whose contours can be mapped, and secondly as the latest name given to the gap which opens between particular practices of cultural criticism and the cultural objects they purport to decribe. Dana Polan, for instance, says that the "power of the concept of postmodernism serves as a machine for generating discourse, and this is the phenomenon most in need of analysis."<sup>3</sup> According to Polan, postmodernism is "a machine that encourages an outpouring of critical discourse" (49). Consequently, we have witnessed a "ferocious emergence of a discourse on the postmodern, an inescapable emergence that demands reaction, the taking up of a stance or a position" (49). Perhaps Polan has in mind the extent to which the emergence of the concept of postmodernism has obliged numerous other "isms," and the various critical projects of particular literary, film, and cultural studies journals, to define their positions in relation to this marauding new "ism." So we encounter the binary oppositions of "poststructuralism and postmodernism," "modernism and postmodernism," "marxism and postmodernism," "feminism and postmodernism," "postmodernism and

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<sup>3</sup> Dana Polan, "Postmodernism and Cultural Analysis Today," in Postmodernism and its Discontents: Theories and Practices, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (London: Verso, 1988), 49. Subsequent references included in the text.

deconstruction," "postmodernism and postcolonialism." At least forty quite diverse English-language journals have all, at one time or another, practised postmodernism, had a special issue on it, or carried a significant piece of writing on the topic.<sup>4</sup> So achieved is the ponderous material presence of the postmodern — via conferences, exhibitions, catalogues, film seasons, books, journals, academic and journalistic writing — that everything from a description of the inner-urban cityscape, to restaurant interiors and gallery spaces, to academic job-descriptions, seems to get produced in some sort of relationship to it. This widespread compulsion to declare one's position in relation to postmodernism prompted Eric Michaels to call his contribution to the debate, "My Essay on Postmodernity."<sup>5</sup> As Polan eventually is moved to ask: "can one speak of postmodernism, take a perspective on it, without being part of the postmodern effect?" (49).

John Frow's response to this question is a resounding "no." In What Was Postmodernism?, Frow says: "rather than try to unravel the 'meaning' of the concept of postmodernism, let me suggest that the word can be taken as designating nothing more and nothing less than a genre of theoretical writing. To speak or write the word is to be caught up in a prescriptive network which loosely specifies a limited number of possible

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<sup>4</sup> The journals are, in no particular order, Screen, Economy and Society, New Left Review, Critical Quarterly, New Formations, Textual Practice, Cultural Studies, Oxford Literary Review, Paragraph, Theory, Culture and Society (twice), New German Critique, Cultural Critique, Differences, Discourse, Wide-Angle, Camera Obscura, October, Flashart, Artforum, Genre, The Minnesota Review, Tri-Quarterly, Drama Review, New Drama Quarterly, Salmagundi, Raritan, The Bucknell Review, South Atlantic Quarterly, New Orleans Review, Diacritics, Sub-Stance, Boundary 2, New Literary History, Cinema Journal, Film Quarterly, Critical Inquiry, Art and Text, Southern Review, Meanjin.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Michaels, "My Essay on Postmodernity," Art and Text, 25 (1987): 86-91.

moves.”<sup>6</sup> For me, Frow’s notion of “possible moves” within “a prescriptive network” recalls Wittgenstein’s notions of language games, uses of words and the possible moves one can make within a particular system,<sup>7</sup> but for the moment I want to turn to John Rajchman and note the way he confirms this view of the emergence and diffusion of a cultural category when he writes:

In a little more than a decade, postmodernism has grown from a tentative and disputed critical category in a few obscure journals of architecture and dance into a field of academic specialization, such as the Renaissance. It has created sales, and carved a theoretical niche for itself in publishing. It has become the topic of a seemingly endless series of symposia and anthologies competing with one another for being international and interdisciplinary. It has acquired wide journalistic self-evidence. Thus it has become a rather familiar discourse. And yet it is not dominated by a single theory or theoretician. It does not comprise a School of Thought.<sup>8</sup>

It has also become, according to Dick Hebdige, a “buzzword” whose presence is indicated by the fact that

it becomes possible for people to describe as “postmodern” the decor of a room, the design of a building, the diegesis of a film, the construction of a record, or a “scratch” video, a tv commercial, or an arts documentary, or the “intertextual” relations existing between them, the layout of a page in a fashion magazine or critical journal, an anti-teleological tendency within epistemology, the attack on the “metaphysics of presence,” a general attenuation of feeling, the collective chagrin and morbid projections of a post-War generation of Baby Boomers confronting disillusioned middle-age, the

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<sup>6</sup> John Frow, What Was Postmodernism? (Sydney: Local Consumption, 1991), 3. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>7</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958). A representative instance is the following: “Our mistake is to look for an explanation where we ought to look at what happens as a ‘proto-phenomenon.’ That is, where we ought to have said: this language game is played” (654; 167e).

<sup>8</sup> John Rajchman, “Postmodernism in a Nominalist Frame,” in Philosophical Events: Essays of the 80s (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 118. Subsequent references included in the text.

“predicament” of reflexivity, a group of rhetorical tropes, a proliferation of surfaces, a new phase in commodity fetishism, a fascination for “images,” codes and styles, a process of cultural, political or existential fragmentation and/or crisis, the “de-centering” of the subject, an “incredulity towards metanarratives,” the replacement of unitary power axes by a pluralism of power/discourse formations, the “implosion of meaning,” the collapse of cultural hierarchies, the dread engendered by the threat of nuclear self-destruction, the decline of the university, the functioning and effects of the new miniaturised technologies, broad societal and economic shifts into a “media”, “consumer” or “multinational” phase, a sense (depending on whom you read) of “placelessness” or the abandonment of placelessness (“critical regionalism”) or (even) a generalised substitution of spatial for temporal co-ordinates.<sup>9</sup>

This elasticity of definition and its accompanying motley of exemplification prompt Hebdige to remark that it

becomes more and more difficult as the 80s wear on to specify exactly what it is that “postmodernism” is supposed to refer to as the term gets stretched in all directions across different debates, different disciplinary and discursive boundaries, as different factions seek to make it their own, using it to designate a plethora of incommensurable objects, tendencies, emergencies (78).

For his part, Paul Patton says that “postmodern theory itself is no unified, homogenous body, but rather a site of conflicting forces and divergent tendencies,” and Stuart Hall provides some sense of the extent of this divergence when he refers to “an aesthetic postmodernism, an architectural postmodernism, postmodernist theory, postmodernist filmmaking etc.”<sup>10</sup> It is Hall’s contention that postmodern culture has

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<sup>9</sup> Dick Hebdige, “Postmodernism and the ‘Other Side’,” Journal of Communication Inquiry, 10, 2 (1986), 78. Subsequent references included in the text. This essay is collected in his Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things (London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Patton, “Giving up the Ghost: Postmodernism and Anti-nihilism,” in It’s a Sin: Essays on Postmodernism, Politics and Culture, ed. Tony Fry, Ann Curthoys, and Paul Patton (Sydney: Power Publications, 1988), 89; Stuart Hall, “On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall,” ed. Lawrence Grossberg, Journal of Communication Inquiry, 10, 2 (1986), 51. Subsequent references included in the text.

become “a set of disassociated specialisms” (51), and the dispersed nature of the category prompts Rajchman to say that “the success of the category does not derive from its coherence” (118).

Eventually one cannot even be certain whether or not the term has a hyphen. Umberto Eco gives the word a hyphen while calling it “a term bon à tout faire.”<sup>11</sup> Eco points out that the term “is applied ... to anything the user of the term happens to like,” and adds that “there seems to be an attempt to make it increasingly retroactive” (65). The fact that the term is used to describe everything from artistic practices occurring in the last twenty years back to artistic practices of the nineteenth century, prompts Eco to predict that “soon the postmodern category will include Homer” (66). Eco then suggests that postmodernism “is not a trend to be chronologically defined, but, rather, an ideal category — or, better still, a Kunstwollen, a way of operating” (66).

At the end of What Was Postmodernism? Frow says that he has tried to provide “a sketch of the conceptual machinery that runs the genre of theoretical writing which is postmodernism, and that underpins an industry now become exorbitant. As such it is, in one sense, impervious to any merely intellectual critique — or rather it absorbs critique as raw material, nourishing itself on praise and blame alike” (41). Frow’s comment here prompts me to recall an anecdote told by an American academic of his attendance at his first John Cage performance.<sup>12</sup> Initially irritated and eventually infuriated by Cage’s performance, the academic began shouting, “this is shit, this is rubbish.” Cage continued his

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<sup>11</sup> Umberto Eco, Reflections on the Name of the Rose, trans. William Weaver (London: Secker and Warburg, 1985), 65. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>12</sup> This anecdote was told to me by Professor Ray Carney of Boston University.



performance but now added occasional staccato utterances which repeated verbatim the abuse hurled at him by the academic would-be interlocutor. Realising there was no way to prevent Cage's avant-garde performance from recuperating (by including) whatever attempted critical interventions he might make, the academic chose to leave the performance altogether. Given that Cage is routinely referred to as postmodernist, it seems appropriate to have this anecdote stand as further evidence of Frow's comments on the capacity of postmodernism to absorb, recuperate and recycle critique. Frow also cites Gerald Graff's comment that "once a certain number of people believe that a concept like the Post-Modern marks a real change in the cultural climate, the change becomes a reality to be reckoned with, even if the reality is not exactly what most users of the term think it is" (41). Another way of phrasing Graff's remark is to say that once people inhabit the discursive domain of the postmodern, then it becomes impossible to regard postmodernism as a conceptual, political or philosophical "error" that could be "corrected" by "thinking differently."

If we were to recall Wittgenstein's point (implied in my epigraphic quotation from him) that knowing the meaning of a word could mean knowing how to use it in an appropriate context as much as being able to provide a dictionary definition of it, then "knowing about postmodernism" could mean knowing how to talk about a building, urban planning, a painting, play, video, film, novel or song in the appropriate social-discursive spaces. This would correspond to Eco's suggestion that postmodernism is best thought of as a "way of operating." But as Frow indicates, there is a play or tension between operating with the term in some sort of agreed way, and showing up the conceptual incoherence of the term. While it is true that one "can only produce a

knowledge of the concept by operating within the rules of the game" (9), it is also true that:

If I think postmodernism means Olson and Heissenbittel and Pynchon and catastrophe theory, and you think it means MTV, fashion advertisements, political sound-bites and the excremental vision, and someone else thinks it's hyperrealism, trompe-l'oeil facades, Dynasty and Glass's Satyagraha, then we're probably talking right past each other, since the definition of the concept shifts with the objects taken to exemplify it (9-10).

Frow is here pointing to a first instance of incoherence in relation to definitions of postmodernism, an incoherence at the basic level of exemplification. If we think of the practice of citing a concrete example as the rhetorical moment at which a more abstract debate suddenly seeks to ground itself in specificity, it is apparent that no such moment of clarification by specification occurs in debates concerning postmodernism. As Frow explains: "the concept can't be taken to represent a given field of cultural production, or a tendency within this field; it is rather the embattled attempt to construct the unity of such a field of tendency" (10). But at the same time: "some minimal agreement on an identifiable field of reference, however shifting and multi-layered, is surely a precondition for a productive use of the concept." According to Frow, what replaces any really "rigorous practice of exemplification is the list, which is characterized by arbitrariness and eclecticism" (10). Both Dick Hebdige's and Todd Gitlin's writings present impressive instances of the functioning of just such a list, and sometimes lists are produced to counterpoint one another, most persistently in those lists which lay out the alleged characteristics of modernism and postmodernism.<sup>13</sup> Frow

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<sup>13</sup> For Gitlin's list, see Todd Gitlin, "Hip-Deep in Post-Modernism," New York Times Book Review 6 November 1988, 35. Gitlin justifies his strategy by saying: "One post-modernist trope is the list, as if culture were a garage

quite properly points to the theoretical machine which generates these counterpoint lists, by referring to the productivity of the trope of the binary opposition:

Binarism works as a mode of historical explanation. The generative activity of the operator is independent of whether or not you accept the reality of the postmodern. Indeed, it is quite characteristic of the genre of the postmodern to deny any reality-value to the concept, or at least to find it highly problematic; and the only thing that is anomalous about this is that the denial goes on being made in an ever-swelling flood of essays and books (4-5).

This situation recalls the remark made by the Roland Barthes persona in Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes concerning a rapturous relation to binarism: "For a certain time he went into raptures over binarism; binarism became for him a kind of erotic object. This idea seemed to him inexhaustible, he could never exploit it enough."<sup>14</sup> Barthes also says: "Such oppositions are artifacts... the opposition is struck (like a coinage)... Quite simply, it serves to say something" (92). Plainly, the case of the ever-swelling discourses on postmodernism constitutes another instance of a rapturous play of binarism, and Frow argues that insofar as there are "several very diffuse senses of the word," the concept of the postmodern "freely gives rise to quite contradictory and, because of its constitutive vagueness, to quite disparate descriptions" (7). As Eco had warned us, it is indeed a term bon à tout faire.

The second area of incoherence in relation to postmodernism, according to Frow, "concerns the problem of periodization" (11). Eco's way of evading the issue of historical periodisation had been to say that "every

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sale, so it is appropriate to evoke post-modernism by offering a list of examples, for better and for worse."

<sup>14</sup> See Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 51. Subsequent references included in the text.

period has its own postmodernism, just as every period would have its own mannerism" (66). For Frow, any attempt to think of modernism and postmodernism as specific epochal structures is accompanied by "the temptation to derive the cultural from the logic of an epochal system" (14). The notion of there being a set of cultural practices which "manifests" or "reflects" the logic of another (usually political-economic) domain is a problem insofar as it "sets up a mechanically causal relation between a primary and an epiphenomenal realm, and thereby leaves no room for discontinuity or any more complex causality" (14). Frow describes the production of a "cultural" concept of postmodernism, a concept constructed precisely by the deployment of the model of the binary opposition. This involves "the use of dichotomy as a machine for the infinite generation of quasi-historical transitions" (18). It is a situation which leads Frow to argue that

the concept of the postmodern obeys a discursive rather than a descriptive necessity: its function is that of a logical operator, establishing categorical polarities which then allow — in a tautologous and self-justifying circuit — the construction of fictions of periodization and value, fictions which have no content other than the structure of binary opposition itself (19).

Frow had said earlier that the "effect of any such charting of oppositions is to construct an idealist representation of a historical time which proceeds by the epochal succession of spiritual totalities" (4). Frow concentrates much of his attention on the particular problems involved with thinking the relation of modernism to postmodernism. If we recall his allusion to the way the list functions as a strategic device both of exemplification and of temporalisation/periodisation, we can see that the problem is not simply the fact that some names (Joyce, Beckett) can occur in both lists, nor is it simply a case of insisting on the productivity of the tropes

deployed within the discursive field in which the concept of postmodernism emerges. For if, as Frow says, the concept of postmodernism obeys "a discursive rather than a descriptive necessity," it still remains the case that "this discursive necessity has a precise historical location" (19). For Frow it is a specific response

to the inner contradictions of a modernism which has gone on too long. The temporality of modernism requires its own obsolescence: a modernism that failed to age, that didn't demand to be superseded, would be a contradiction in terms. Hence the necessity of a successor to modernism, but hence also its definition solely in a chronological form ('post') which refuses all indications of content. The paradoxical result of this is that, since this 'post' must be a real alternative to modernism, it must be based upon a different historical rhythm: not that of novation but that of stasis. It must be the end of history (hence the postmodern preoccupation with the apocalypse). In its determination to succeed modernism, however, it corresponds entirely to a modernist logic (19).

Observations of this kind could prompt one to think of postmodernism as a contemporary cultural version of the Cretan paradox. For it leads to a paradoxical situation in which postmodernism can be thought as the "novelty of the next style" (in Habermas' phrase).<sup>15</sup> Once this occurs, postmodernism becomes a moment of the modern, one whose "founding gesture is a modernist destruction of the modern, a destruction which is logically entailed by the modernist programme itself" (What was Postmodernism?, 19). The point to stress here is that the materiality of the various understandings and self-understandings of the category of the modern would in significant part produce the account of the category of the postmodern with which one operated. Frow argues that the much commented-on constitutive vagueness or eclectic elusiveness of the category of postmodernism means that "once you have granted the

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<sup>15</sup> Jurgen Habermas, "Modernity — An Incomplete Project," trans. Seyla Ben-Habib, in The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 4. Quoted in Frow, 19.

existence, or the problematic existence, or the pseudo-existence of the concept ... the genre allows you to associate it with any political position whatsoever" (7).

But even in the face of the comprehensive conceptual incoherence of the category, it is not appropriate to elect, as a strategy, to avoid the concept. This is because any dismissal of the concept "as a non-concept, imprecise, incoherent, contradictory, lacking any real historical reference" would be to see it as "a quintessentially ideological concept, not designating but attempting to fabricate a reality." And this very opposition of the "truth of reference and falsity of representation" is called into question by a postmodern logic. Consequently any strategy of avoidance, far from being a means of distancing oneself from the terms of the debate, becomes "a move within the genre of the postmodern," perhaps even being "the most characteristic move," one "disarmed in advance by the paradoxical fact that it works to strengthen the concept's contemporary resonance (any publicity is good publicity)." As Frow says: "the very persistence of the word... seems to indicate that something is at stake, something that can't be brushed aside as theoretical fashion..." (8). This is more or less the position Hebdige reached after listing all the objects (quoted earlier) to which the "buzzword" of postmodernism could be said to apply:

This is not to claim that because it is being used to designate so much the term is meaningless ... Rather I would prefer to believe, as Raymond Williams indicates in Keywords, that the more complexly and contradictorily nuanced a word is, the more likely it is to have formed the focus for historically significant debates, to have occupied a semantic ground in which something precious and important was felt to be embedded. I take then, as my (possibly ingenuous) starting point that the degree of semantic complexity and overload surrounding the term "postmodernism" at the moment signals that a significant number of people with conflicting interests and opinions feel that there is something sufficiently important at stake

here to be worth struggling and arguing over ("Postmodernism and the 'Other Side,'" 78).

Consequently, one option — one that seems to me to be implied in and demonstrated by the writing of Hebdige, Polan and Frow — is what might be called a "mapping" of the discursive monumentality of the concept of postmodernism. As Steven Connor says: "it becomes possible to read postmodernism as a discursive function, whose integrity derives from the regularity of its contexts and effects in different discursive operations, rather than from the consistency of the ideas within it."<sup>16</sup> This strategy constitutes a practical application of Foucault's remark that one should "treat past discourse not as a theme for a commentary which would revive it, but as a monument to be described in its character-disposition."<sup>17</sup> Foucault's claim there is that one should refer discourse to "the practical field in which it is deployed" (15), and insofar as this section of the chapter constitutes a discursive mapping of some of the central accounts of the postmodern, that is what I have been seeking to do. An alternative description of the move I am trying to make here would be to paraphrase Wittgenstein's remark that "meaning is what one finds in explanations of meaning" and say that "postmodernism is what one finds

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<sup>16</sup> Steven Connor, Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 10. Connor goes on to say: "Instead of wondering how accurately postmodern criticism reflects real conditions obtaining in the cultural and social sphere, we need to consider the ways in which the debate comes out of the redefined relationship between the critical and the social-cultural spheres. Instead of asking, what is postmodernism?, we should ask, where, how and why does the discourse of postmodernism flourish?, what is at stake in its debates?, who do they address and how? This series of questions shifts attention from the meaning or content of the debate to its form and function, so that, to borrow Stanley Fish's formula, we ask, not, what does postmodernism mean?, but what does it do?"

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, "Politics and the Study of Discourse," trans. Colin Gordon, I & C, 3 (1978), 15. Subsequent references included in the text.

in explanations of postmodernism.”<sup>18</sup> Another of Wittgenstein’s remarks seems appropriate here: “At some point one has to pass from explanation to mere description.”<sup>19</sup>

In the face of the abundant definitional dilemmas attaching to discussions of the postmodern, I want to argue that an appropriate description of the postmodern is to say that it is the latest name given to an enduring problem in cultural commentary. Stuart Hall, for example, says that “postmodernism is the current name we give to how these old certainties began to run into trouble from the 1900s onwards” (“On Postmodernism and Articulation,” 47). As I have already indicated, I think it is appropriate to see “postmodernism” as designating the latest appearance of the familiar gap which opens between certain kinds of critical discourse and the objects they purport to describe or explain. And since so much of the Anglo-American discussion of postmodernism positions itself in relation to Fredric Jameson’s New Left Review article, subsequently collected in his book on postmodernism, it seems appropriate to recall some of the descriptions offered in that piece.<sup>20</sup>

By suggesting that “one of the constitutive features of the postmodern” is “a new depthlessness” (58), Jameson presents an understanding of the postmodern as a cultural moment which brings with it a loss of faith in the traditional status of commentary and critique conceived as acts of a

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<sup>18</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations: “‘The meaning of a word is what is explained by the explanation of the meaning.’ I.e.: if you want to understand the use of the word ‘meaning’, look for what are called ‘explanations of meaning’” (560; 149e).

<sup>19</sup> Wittgenstein, On Certainty, 18; 26e.

<sup>20</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” New Left Review, 146 (1984): 59-92. Subsequently collected in his Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990). See also Douglas Kellner, ed., Jameson/Postmodernism/Critique (Washington: Mouton Press, 1989).



hermeneutic seeing-through of one level to another level, the timeless recovery of hidden socio-textual meanings. We enter the "new depthlessness" by way of losing a number of "fundamental depth models" (61). Gone is the hermeneutic model of inside and outside, the dialectical model of essence and appearance, the existential model of authenticity/inauthenticity or alienation/disalienation and last but far from least, the twin-set of signifier/signified. Thus the postmodern moment robs the interpreter of the comforts previously provided by marxism, psychoanalysis, existentialism and semiotics. To be denied the balm of so many interpretative schemas might seem an occasion to scream but we are also post-Münchian in being postmodern.

Replacing these various depth models is "a conception of practices, discourses and textual play" (61). And this new depthlessness is not "merely metaphorical" — the province of an intellectual yuppie anguish — but rather is to be felt quite forcibly in new organisations of social spaces, especially in the transformation of the inner-urban built environment. Just as "lived space" is disorientatingly transformed by the triumph of "surface," so is a particularly cherished theoretical orientation; namely, "the idea that the object was fascinating because of the density of its secrets which are then to be uncovered by interpretation."<sup>21</sup>

Other commentators have seized on this notion of "surface" as a definitively postmodern category, although not everyone uses the term in the same way. Dick Hebdige spoke of "a proliferation of surfaces," and two American film critics, Justin Wyatt and R. L. Rutsky, writing on contemporary American cinema, say:

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<sup>21</sup> Anders Stephanson, "Regarding Postmodernism — A Conversation with Fredric Jameson," in Universal Abandon?: The Politics of Postmodernism, ed. Andrew Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), 4.

High concept, simulation, postmodernity: these are notions which are extremely troubling to academic analysis, perhaps because, if taken seriously, they disrupt the foundation on which such analysis rests. Analysis presumes an ability to penetrate a fetishized "surface" or image or to expose the "truth" or the "real conditions" behind it. Although there are a number of areas where a critique of analysis might begin — e.g., elitism, phallocentrism, the taking up of a position of knowledge/authority/power — we would like to suggest here that the penetration of "appearances" and exposure of the "truth" is a problematic act, particularly in an age where "surfaces" and images are so predominant.<sup>22</sup>

And Stuart Hall has remarked that in "so-called postmodern society, we feel overwhelmed by the diversity, the plurality of surfaces which it is possible to produce, and we have to recognize the rich technological bases of modern cultural production which enable us endlessly to simulate, reproduce, reiterate and recapitulate" ("On Postmodernism and Articulation," 49). Dick Hebdige pursues some of the implications of the alleged disappearance of the depth model and the triumph of surface when he says:

If the "depth model" disappears, then so too does the intellectual as seer, the intellectual as informed but dispassionate observer/custodian of a "field of enquiry," armed with "penetrating insights" and "authoritative overviews," enemy of sophistry, artifice and superficial detail. Once such oppositions dissolve a lot of other things go too: there can be no more rectification of popular errors, no more trawling for hidden truths, no more going beyond appearances or "against the grain" of the visible and the obvious. In short no more (Book of) Revelations. Instead what is left, to use another postmodernist key word, is a "fascination" with mirrors, icons, surfaces (85).

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<sup>22</sup> Justin Rutsky and R.L. Wyatt, "High Concept: Abstracting the Postmodern," *Wide-Angle*, 1, .4 (1988), 49. Another use of this notion is to be found in J.P. Telotte, "The Terminator, Terminator 2, & The Exposed Body," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 20, 2 (1992): 26-34. The essay opens by saying that one should not be misled by the title: "Hardly 'deep,' this essay looks just at surfaces, particularly at how The Terminator films play with appearances" (26).

The particular challenge of this notion of "surface" can be glossed in the following way. Gone is the traditional notion that cultural texts provided unique insight into otherwise obscured social facts and gone also is the notion that critical writing on such texts could see through their fictional surfaces to obscured, unrecognised textual truths. The question then becomes the following: as this notion of "surface" predominates, how can cultural criticism establish a distinctive discursive space for itself, how can it work critical acts of differentiation in the face of the apparent collapse of hitherto available forms of differentiation? Jameson's way of demonstrating the critical dilemma, the dilemma for criticism, posed by the postmodern moment, is to contrast Van Gogh's Peasant Shoes to Andy Warhol's Diamond Dust Shoes. In the case of the Van Gogh painting, a hermeneutic reading is held to be possible; that is, an interpretation in which "the work in its inert, objectal form, is taken as a clue or symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth" (59). But in the case of the Warhol painting, Jameson claims, there is "no way to complete the hermeneutic gesture" (60). Leaving aside the fact that Jameson performs an impressive "depth-reading" of the Warhol painting in order to prove his point concerning the triumph of "surfaces," the notion of there being a degree of difficulty in attempting certain kinds of "hermeneutic gesture" does seem to me increasingly to describe the nature of critical encounters between fictions and theories at a time when the postmodern and the fictocritical more and more come to constitute the terrain on which the reading and writing of many social texts takes place.

It is one of Jameson's central points that the moment of postmodernism caused earlier notions of critical distance to become superseded. He explains this change by saying that "Lukács could declass himself, remove himself from culture and for whatever socio-political reasons, denounce

it. Postmodernism simply implies that the critical distance is greatly narrowed. New kinds of thinking about this critical distance must be done."<sup>23</sup> Whatever else is involved in Jameson's reference to Lukács' historical position as a cultural critic, it does seem to imply that the context of the postmodern has made critical interpretative intervention in everyday cultural practices a more difficult activity: the relation of the academy to the broader social sphere (or, in some formulations, to the "public sphere") is held to be a fraught one. One glimpses in such remarks the beginning of a formulation which would see "postmodern criticism" as apolitical. Such a position becomes nostalgic for a time when social-cultural intervention of a more palpable kind was possible.<sup>24</sup>

In making his remark about the problems of determining "critical distance," Jameson might have in mind the work of Barthes and Derrida, each of whom, in different ways, problematises the status of critical commentary. Barthes' final writing occupies an indeterminate discursive space somewhere in among/between criticism, autobiography and fiction. It is not decisively any one thing but nor is it clearly not any one thing. And after reading the first two hundred and fifty pages of Derrida's The Post Card ("Envoi") what exactly is it that we have read? This is a Derrida whose playfulness seems quite close to Barthes' later writing. What is

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<sup>23</sup> Andrea Ward, "Interview with Fredric Jameson," Impulse, 13, 4 (1987), 8.

<sup>24</sup> Jameson's formulation goes on to say that current forms of political calculation are more likely to be bound up with issues of gender and race rather than class. And Jonathan Arac, in his "Introduction" to Postmodernism and Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), claims that "in the two decades since it first consciously began to define itself, postmodern criticism has chosen to be worldly," conceiving of itself as part of a "struggle against received forms of reading, writing, and public discourse" (ix). Arac's view of the postmodern is a straightforward one of historical periodisation: "Since we come late enough not to confuse ourselves with the modernists, we can accept our condition as postmodern" (xxxix).

clear is that in each case it is a practice of writing which deliberately blurs the distinction between literature and literary-critical commentary. To the extent that this hybrid form of writing has come to prominence, it is a form of writing termed either paraliterary or fictocritical. The former term has been used by Rosalind Krauss and the latter by Jameson, and the next section of this chapter explores some of the critical adventures of these two terms.<sup>25</sup>

### The Paraliterary and the Fictocritical

Three years before the publication of Jameson's New Left Review article, Rosalind Krauss had noticed that a new form of critical writing was being produced which "simply cannot be called criticism but it cannot, for that matter, be called not-criticism either" ("Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary," 292). Krauss claimed that people like Barthes and Derrida were "the writers, not the critics, that students now read" and she described this writing as finding itself "caught in a dramatic web of many voices, citations, asides, divagations. And what is created, as is the case of much of Derrida, is a kind of paraliterature" (292). A paraliterary space emerges which is "the space of debate, quotation, partisanship, betrayal, reconciliation; but it is not the space of unity, coherence or resolution that we think of as constituting the work of literature" (292). Krauss claimed that the paraliterary presented a theoretical perspective which ran "exactly counter to the notion that there is a work, x, behind which there stands a

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<sup>25</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary," in The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 291-95. Jameson uses the term "fictocriticism" in his "Interview" with Angela Ward, Impulse, 13, 4 (1987), 9. Subsequent references included in the text.

group of meanings, a, b, c, which the hermeneutic task of the critic unpacks, reveals, by breaking through, peeling back the literal surface of the work" (293). Krauss' description of the paraliterary seems to me to bear a close relation to Jameson's speculations on the fictocritical. But in each case the description is no more than a vague gesturing towards something in the culture that has changed.<sup>26</sup> The speculations from Jameson and Krauss point to a shift in a particular cultural practice. Their comments do not constitute an attempt to provide a neat, sharp, dictionary definition. Both concepts, the fictocritical and the paraliterary, are in the process of being defined and refined, with the result that an unavoidable degree of provisionality attaches to any attempts at elaborating what the terms eventually might be made to mean. They are still in a process of becoming.

Jameson's description of fictocriticism comes when he says that it "is very clear that there has been a flowing together of theory and criticism. It seems that theory can't exist without telling little narrative stories and then, at this point of criticism, criticism seems very close to simply telling stories. It is an advanced and energetic form of conceptual criticism" ("Interview with Angela Ward," 9). But Jameson has also said, "I would also like to observe that ... I don't share the widely spread and self-serving attitude that today criticism and theory are as 'creative' as creative writing used to be."<sup>27</sup> Derrida too has indicated an ambivalence in this regard, which is intriguing given that his practice of writing is part of what has prompted critics to cast around for other forms of critical description. Derrida says: "I don't feel at ease either with a rigorous

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<sup>26</sup> On the nature of such a practice of a vague gesturing, as a way of trying to grasp, in critical discourse, a "sea-change" in cultural practice, see Paul Willemen and Noel King, "The Cultural Discourse of Cinéphilia: An Exchange," in Willemen, *Looks and Frictions* (London: BFI, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> Jameson, "Interview," *Diacritics*, 12, 2 (1982), 88.

distinction between 'literature' and 'literary criticism' or with a confusion of the two."<sup>28</sup> He then adds: "we must invent (a name) for those 'critical' inventions which belong to literature while deforming its limits" (52), and later refers to a practice of "poetico-literary performativity" (55).

When fictocriticism arrives, what departs? Presumably the stable and separated bodies of "fiction" and "criticism," replaced by compounds, mergings, mutations and mistakes. So, in writing A Lover's Discourse, Barthes became a kind of novelist much as his earlier Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes had floated across the boundaries of fiction, criticism and autobiography.<sup>29</sup> And it is worth recalling that after the publication of A Lover's Discourse, the novelist Marie Cardinal mistook an invitation from Nouvelles Littéraires to write on Prime Minister Raymond Barre, writing instead on Roland Barthes.<sup>30</sup> Thus a critic is mistaken by/for a novelist, a Prime Minister for a critic/novelist: a crisis of category, name and identity of a kind which could well signal the arrival of the postmodern.

In the next section of this chapter I discuss some aspects of Barthes' A Lover's Discourse and Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes by aligning them with a reading of Gillian Leahy's film, My Life Without Steve. By bringing these different texts into contact I hope to be able to explore in more detail some of the features of the paraliterary and the fictocritical.

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<sup>28</sup> Derek Attridge, "'This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in Derrida: Acts of Literature, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge 1992), 52. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>29</sup> Roland Barthes, A Lover's Discourse: Fragments, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978). Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>30</sup> See Stephen Heath, "Barthes on Love," Sub-Stance, 37/38 (1983): 100-106. Subsequent references included in the text.

The Loneliness of the Postmodern Lover

[L]ove never dwells in us without burning us. To speak about it, even after the fact, is probably possible only on the basis of that burning.

Let us then follow, through time, but also immoderation, and under the hold of personal predilection as love demands, some of the major ideas about love that have made up our culture; some of the major myths that have fascinated it; some of the manners of speech that have twisted even into language signs the spellbinding power of that necessary madness.

Julia Kristeva<sup>31</sup>

I struggle with an image, which is both the image of the desired, lost other, and my own image, desiring and abandoned.

Roland Barthes<sup>32</sup>

At one point in Gillian Leahy's My Life Without Steve we are shown a close shot of a cluttered desk. On it lies a piece of paper on which a quotation from Roland Barthes' A Lover's Discourse (a section on "waiting") has been copied out.<sup>33</sup> Later in the film the camera pans slowly along a bookshelf, revealing the self-same book by Barthes, and at another point the narrator, Liz, says: "'The lover's discourse today is of an extreme solitude,' says Roland Barthes." So the reference to Barthes's book is "justified" diegetically by being a part of the life of the film's central character, and narrating voice, Liz. And it soon becomes clear to the viewer that Liz's speaking position is that of the abandonique, her

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<sup>31</sup> Julia Kristeva, Tales of Love, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 4, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Roland Barthes, "The Romantic Song," in Barthes, The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 290.

<sup>33</sup> See Barthes, A Lover's Discourse, 37-40.



narration displaying all the neuroses of abandonment.<sup>34</sup> Liz's voice-over begins by saying: "After you left I moved in here for a year, hoping that the view would pull me out of the misery. Maybe it did. And there was nowhere else to live, except alone, and lonely. Without you." So the film begins by situating its viewer in relation to Liz, her room with a view, and her meditation on her life across the year after her lover, Steve, has left her.

The view to which Liz refers is over Black Wattle Bay, an inner-city harbour bay of Sydney. The film opens on a long lens shot, focussing on details of the water, and slowly comes up to a bridge, before pulling back, widening and tracking back into the room. This opening camera movement produces a sense of the layering of the image, beginning on the water and gradually complicating the image by increasing the detail of the sights and levels contained in it. We see cars washing past and the camera glides around to a jetty on the foreshore in the front of the flat, where some men are working, throwing logs. Then the camera moves through the window into Liz's room and we see a photograph of the view the camera has just shown us. At this point the same machine noise heard earlier is brought up on the soundtrack. The graceful movement of the cinema camera slowly leads the viewer to a (stilled) photographic representation of a scene it has just represented cinematically. This sound-image repetition or "rhyme" playfully signals the extent to which the film will explore modes of representation and discursive systems as

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<sup>34</sup> See J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, The Language of Psychoanalysis, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: Karuac Books, 1988), 270. At certain points in A Lover's Discourse the lover-narrator refers to himself as an abandonique.

they relate to the particular emotional state with which Liz is trying to deal.<sup>35</sup>

The film unfolds by having Liz narrate a story in which a romantic past is set against a present state of mourning the loss of Steve, the loss of romantic love. Eventually the film becomes, in Susan Dermody's evocative phrase, "a single, sustained aria of subjectivity."<sup>36</sup> But this is "subjectivity" understood as Barthes understood it in his writing of A Lover's Discourse. In that book we are told that the "one who says 'I' ... is the I of writing."<sup>37</sup> Barthes' vision of the lover's discourse

is essentially fragmented, discontinuous, fluttering. These are episodes of language swirling around in the mind of the enamoured, impassioned subject, episodes suddenly interrupted by some circumstance or other, jealousy, a rendezvous that doesn't work out, some unbearable anxiety, at which moment these tag ends of monologues are broken up, and we go to another figure ("Interview with Jacques Henric," The Grain, 285-86).

Since the lover Barthes places on stage "is a subject from today's culture," it is a subject assembled by references to Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther, Plato's Symposium, Nietzsche, Zen, mysticism, psychoanalysis, German lieder, conversations with friends and finally, autobiographical fragments. Barthes characterises this textual assemblage by saying that the "result is thus the discourse of a subject who says I, who is thus individualised on the level of the utterance, but the discourse is

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<sup>35</sup> On the notion of "rhyming" and "repetition" in classical narrative film systems, see Raymond Bellour, "To Analyse, to Segment," Quarterly Review of Film Studies, 1, 3 (1976): 331-43.

<sup>36</sup> Susan Dermody, in her "Introduction" to the Australian theatrical premiere of the film at the Chauvel Cinema, Sydney, on 1 October 1986.

<sup>37</sup> Roland Barthes, "Interview with Jacques Henric on A Lover's Discourse," in Barthes, The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-80, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 285. Subsequent references included in the text.

nevertheless a composed, feigned, or, if you prefer, a 'pieced-together' discourse (the result of montage)" (The Grain, 285). Through its systematic exploitation of the form of the fragment, Barthes' book becomes "a discontinuous text that protests somewhat against the love story"; the series of alphabetically ordered "fragments of a lover's discourse" do not add up to the coherent telos-driven order of a love story but rather signify the "radical discontinuity of this linguistic torment unfolding in the lover's head" (The Grain, 286).

Gillian Leahy's My Life Without Steve seems to me to enact a drama, or scene of language, similar to the one staged in A Lover's Discourse to the extent that Liz, in struggling to understand and articulate the particularity of her situation, does so by assembling a number of other, already uttered, culturally circulating discourses. In Liz's case, the assemblage derives from the writings and performances of Colette, Marge Piercy, Juliet Mitchell, Dylan, Hank Williams, Laurie Anderson, the Rolling Stones, Melanie Klein, Freud, Mills and Boon, Gaslight and, of course, Roland Barthes. Both Barthes' and Leahy's texts place the "one-offness" or singularity of the person and the personal against the necessary sociality of discourse, the inescapably public nature of language. The abandonique plunders or rummages through various culturally available discourses in order to give voice to an "individual" grief. Given this shared textual activity of rummaging through the already-said of various cultural discourses, the relation between representation and cliché becomes an issue for both texts. At one point Liz says despairingly of her circumstance, "the clichés are all true," and Barbara Creed, in her account of the film, amplifies this comment to suggest that the film can be seen as an "exploration of the

modern mind as the repository of cliché.”<sup>38</sup> If this is the case, it must be cliché understood as a pervasive and productive form of discourse. It does not constitute a failure to attain an appropriate level of originality of intellection but rather indicates an inescapable and highly palpable form of thought. Far from signalling a debased form of thinking and composing, clichés constitute one of the more insistent representational forms to be found in contemporary culture. As Deleuze laconically puts it in his book on the Irish painter, Francis Bacon: “the struggle against clichés is a terrible thing.”<sup>39</sup> Deleuze suggests that, as a consequence of the multiplication of images of all sorts, around about us and inside our heads, even the struggle against clichés has led to an engendering of clichés.<sup>40</sup> Priority of representation, with an attendant prospect of the clichéic, is now a condition of representation. Or, as Barthes says of A Lover’s Discourse (when discussing the extent to which the book’s discoursing subject struggles with various images — of love, of abandonment): “one is never in love with anything but an image” (The Grain, 293).

The intersection of love, cliché and postmodernism is captured nicely in Umberto Eco’s remark:

I think of the postmodern attitude as that of a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, “I love you madly,” because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara

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<sup>38</sup> Barbara Creed, “The Post-modern Blues or My Life Without Steve,” in Don’t Shoot Darling!: Women’s Independent Filmmaking in Australia, ed. Annette Blonski, Barbara Creed, and Frieda Frieberg (Richmond: Greenhouse Publications, 1987), 356.

<sup>39</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Francis Bacon: logique de la sensation (Paris: Editions de la sensation, 1981), 58: “La lutte contre les clichés est une chose terrible.”

<sup>40</sup> Deleuze writes: “Cliché, clichés! On ne peut pas dire que la situation se soit arrangée depuis Cézanne. Non seulement il y a eu multiplication d’images de toutes sortes, autour de nous et dans nos têtes, mais même les réactions contre les clichés engendrent des clichés” (58).

Cartland. Still, there is a solution. He can say, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly." At this point, having avoided false innocence, having said clearly that it is no longer possible to speak innocently, he will nevertheless have said what he wanted to say to the woman: that he loves her, but he loves her in an age of lost innocence. If the woman goes along with this, she will have received a declaration of love all the same. Neither of the two speakers will feel innocent, both will have accepted the challenge of the past, of the already said, which cannot be eliminated; both will consciously and with pleasure play the game of irony .... But both will have succeeded, once again, in speaking of love (Afterthoughts, 67-68).

Eco's neat summary of this discursive situation is simply: "irony, metalinguistic play, enunciation squared" (68). Something similar to Eco's imagined scenario occurs when the loneliness or desolation of the postmodern lover is at issue: the abandonique is obliged to play similar games, only in the case of My Life, Liz plays these sorts of games with herself, and through that strategy, with the viewer.

One powerful and persistent image, or discursive figure, which is pursued in both My Life and A Lover's Discourse, concerns "the couple," the dream of its possible formation, the grief at its failure to form, or to stay formed. Barthes says that the point of view of A Lover's Discourse is "that of a lover who is not loved. But he constantly thinks about being loved, of course, and thus about being part of a couple. I would even say that he wants nothing else." Consequently, "the couple is always on the horizon" (The Grain, 300). In the case of a cinematic text, and largely as a result of the work of Raymond Bellour, the trope of "the formation of the couple" has come to be seen as central to the organisation of hollywood fictions.<sup>41</sup> Particular genres work with and around this trope differently.

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<sup>41</sup> Raymond Bellour says that the creation of the couple or "the problematic of marriage" is a pattern that "organizes — indeed, constitutes — the classical American cinema as a whole." Bellour in Janet Bergstrom, "Alternation, Segmentation, Hypnosis: Interview with Raymond Bellour," Camera Obscura, 3/4 (1979), 88. See also Virginia Wright

In screwball comedy, the viewer waits for the bickering couple to recognise that they belong together; in film noir, the couple separates destructively; in melodramas of renunciation and self-sacrifice, the couple cannot form (Now, Voyager) whereas in other melodramas the couple does form successfully (Falling in Love). Bellour's point was that whatever the particular genre or the ostensible storyline, classical hollywood fictions were always predicated on the formation of the couple (The Big Sleep, Gilda). If one sets Bellour's observations about the workings of classical hollywood cinema alongside Barthes' observations in A Lover's Discourse on the extent to which popular cultural texts (books, t.v., radio, magazines, films) focus so much on the problems of the amorous subject — or perhaps more accurately, on why these media forms so insist on producing the amorous subject as a problematic figure — we get a sharper sense of some of the representational systems within which Liz is trying to come to terms with her dilemma. We also get a sharper sense of the extent to which she is trying to determine whether her situation is the consequence of a set of volitional actions, or whether she is produced (socially, discursively) as this sort of “dysfunctional” subject.

Given the overlap in the two texts' uses of strategies of intertextuality, it is not surprising to find that Stephen Heath's description of A Lover's Discourse also serves as a description of My Life Without Steve (“Barthes on Love”). In each case the text presents “a repertoire of....discursive figures in which the lover is placed,” until eventually “the loving subject is put together, assembled from an intertext” (“Barthes on Love,” 103). At one level the situation of the abandoned and/or unrequited lover is experienced as irreducibly personal, intensely unique — no-one else can

have had precisely this pain in and from love — but on another level the lover's pain is quite public, culturally shared to a point of agonising non-singularity. It is for this reason that the "I" of A Lover's Discourse is not so much a unified, coherent point of internal origin for a painful discourse of loss, rejection, emotional immiseration, as it is the speaking place for a "subject in production" ("Barthes on Love," 101), an external site of speech that the lover is able to occupy only to the extent that s/he knows how to assemble and articulate the discourse of a lover. Barthes's book begins: "So it is a lover who speaks and who says..."(9), and Heath describes the significance of this move by saying that it means "the 'I am' is a produced instance, not some initial and exhaustive determination: a subject is a process, multiple and unfinished" ("Barthes on Love," 101-102). The lover is simultaneously an effect of, and an instance of, discourse; the exhibition of a consistency in discourse. As Kristeva says in her Tales of Love, the "amorous experience" (17), together with its "amorous dynamics" (16) must be spoken, and this speaking often comes from a "state of hardy fragility, serene strength, emerging out of love's torrent" (4). The reader/viewer of the texts of Barthes and Leahy (and Kristeva) necessarily will be exposed to Kristeva's description of "the complex gamut" of an "untenable passion, paradise and hell included. Neither denying the ideal, nor forgetting its cost" (17).

My Life Without Steve has been called "postmodernist" and "postfeminist," with neither of these "posts" being regarded by the writers in question as a particularly good place to occupy or be.<sup>42</sup> According to Kathy Bail, My Life is a defeatist film in which Liz, to the last, "remains defined by Steve" (46). Hence the punning title of Bail's review, "His

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<sup>42</sup> Kathy Bail, "His Story," Cinema Papers, 60 (1986), 46, and Barbara Creed, "The Post-modern Blues or My Life Without Steve." Subsequent references included in the text.

Story." For Bail, one of the many problematic features of My Life derives from the fact that questions are "skimmed" rather than "confronted." Whatever else it does, Bail's review certainly shows the extent to which different critical discourses can provide negative and positive valorisations of the same formal feature of a text. For whereas I find the use of "the fragment" in My Life at once suggestive and alluring, Bail finds it an unsatisfactory textual element: "While the images combine to produce this very exact picture of her domestic space, the fragments of theory do not cohere into any pattern. The theoretical quotations are a catalogue of (fashionable) disillusionment and function only to make random (not strategic) critical points" (46).

But these two terms, "random" and "strategic," need not necessarily be opposed to one another, and one of the main reasons for utilising the fragment form is precisely the way it enables the writer to resist some habitual conceptions of coherence and pattern. In Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, Barthes regularly returns to a discussion of the particular allure the textual form of the fragment holds for him. He refers to a "propensity for division: fragments, miniatures, partitions, glittering details" (70). The fragment is said to approximate the art, graphic, and photographic practices of collage, the cinematic and video practice of montage, and the musical form of the song cycle, in which "each piece is self-sufficient, and yet ... is never anything but the interstice of its neighbours: the work consists of no more than an inset" (94). To deploy the fragment is to produce "a text with uncertain quotation marks, with floating parentheses" (106). By electing not to close the parentheses one is able to drift and thereby to avoid "the tedium of foreseeable discourse" (149). The fragment is a highly condensed form which presents "a pure series of interruptions" (94). By being on the side of beginnings, the



fragment represents an attempt to avoid “rhetorical clause,” the compulsion involved in “not being able to resist the last word” (94). Barthes claims that the fragment enables him to write “more openly, more unprotectedly,” without the guarding and comfort provided by marxism, semiology or some other “great system” (102).

The fragment is a form of writing that has been exploited by cultural critics as diverse as Adorno, Benjamin and Brecht. Barthes’ use of the fragment in his last books, A Lover’s Discourse, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, and Camera Lucida,<sup>43</sup> alludes to the writing of these earlier practitioners at the same time as it looks toward those other fragmentary forms known as the “essay” and the “journal.” For Barthes (along with Derrida) spoke of the transformative experience of encountering Gide’s writing in his Journals —and one of Barthes’ last pieces of writing, Incidents, was an exercise in the genre of the diaristic journal.<sup>44</sup>

Barthes’ exploitation of the essay form produces it as an ambiguous genre in which analysis vies with writing. It becomes a practice of writing in which the “the academic” jostles with “the novelistic” in order to create a new discursive space. Thus the reader of Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes who might be expecting a fairly straightforward autobiographical narrative soon loses that expectation by discovering that this book “must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel” (np). Later in the book a rider is attached to this formulation to say “or rather by several characters” (119). And the reader also encounters references to “his” and “he” as often as to “I.” To encounter an “I” that refers to itself quite

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<sup>43</sup> Roland Barthes, Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

<sup>44</sup> Roland Barthes, Incidents, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992).

regularly as “he” is to have one’s reading position unsettled from the outset. Furthermore, the reader of A Lover’s Discourse who expects a “straight” academic study of Goethe’s The Sorrows of Young Werther, with traditional academic practices of citation, quotation, referencing, soon realises that the principal formal difference of A Lover’s Discourse consists in the extent to which it refuses to deploy a critical metalanguage whose conventional function is to quote a “fragment” of a text and then submit that quoted fragment to a process of critical elaboration and amplification. Similarly, the book does not present its personal and intellectual debts in the spaces usually assigned to and for this form of acknowledgement — the foreword in which the writer thanks spouse, children, institutions — but rather disperses these acknowledgements through the margins of the main body of the text. Rather than produce an academic dissertation on amorous discourse, Barthes elects to write or enact the discourse of a lover, to “stage” a set of utterances across the unfolding of the alphabetically ordered fragments. Stylistic and textual choices of this kind seem to me to characterise the emergence of those forms of paraliterature and fictocriticism alluded to by Krauss and Jameson.

In Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, the narrating presence speaks of a fondness for “amphibology,” an exploration and utilisation of “double-words,” words capable of meaning two quite different things. The narrator declares a preference for not choosing between two possible meanings, not producing a singular, grounded meaning. Rather: “each time he encounters one of these double words, R.B. ... insists on keeping both meanings, as if the word’s meaning were in that wink, so that one and the same word, in one and the same sentence, means at one and the same time, two different things, and so that one delights, semantically, in the one by the other” (72). This micro-textual level of preference for

“amphibology” broadens to the larger textual level of mixing genres (biography, autobiography, novel) and, so far as Barthes is concerned, finds an appropriately elusive and ambiguous form in the fragment. The fragment constitutes the initial building-block textual level which allows this desired form of hesitancy across possible meanings. One cannot really hurry through a fragment on a linear burst to some ultimate narrative coherence and catharsis. Instead, one has the option of staying with the fragment for a while, and later seeing how it builds into a larger discursive structure. (It can be regarded as the equivalent in book reading of the film viewer who encounters the editing practice found in some Ozu and Fassbinder films whereby the camera stays for a while on a scene, resting for a beat or two after its ostensible narrative action has ended, before moving on to the next scene.) In the case of Barthes’ writing, the “amphibology” found at the larger textual level describes not only the mixing of genres but also the degree to which the fragment can both stand on its own — as a lucid or gnomic epigrammatic observation — and connect with all the other fragments in the text. So there is a hesitance, and an ambiguity, at the larger level of textual architectonics as well as “within” the particular fragment.

Given that My Life Without Steve mixes the genres of fiction, diary, autobiography, I think it too can be placed among the practices of the paraliterary and the fictocritical. As it happens, Leahy’s film has come to be classified as an example of the “essay film,” and the film’s commercial circulation in Australia was on a double-bill with Ross Gibson’s essay film, Camera Natura. In film theory, the category of the essay film usually refers to the work of such people as Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Raoul Ruiz, Chris Marker, Amos Gitai, Helen Grace. The essay-film can take the form of a theoretical critique conducted within the medium of

film (Godard-Gorin's Letter to Jane) or a more meditative, poeticised essayistic form (Marker's Sunless). But it is also possible, and possibly useful, to force a slightly different meaning onto the existing film-theory category of the essay-film, by recalling the extent to which Barthes' rendered the essay form into a hybrid genre in which academic-critical discourse is aligned with a fictional-novelistic discourse. Accordingly the next section of this chapter explores the relation of My Life to the areas of postmodernism, the fictocritical and the essayistic.

Barbara Creed's article on My Life without Steve places the film in the context of postmodern textual forms, concentrating particularly on the notion of intertextuality. The possibility of seeing My Life as a postmodern intertextual collage is indicated by Creed's unusual suggestion that Leahy's film be regarded as a re-make of Max Ophuls' Letter From an Unknown Woman:

Like Letter from an Unknown Woman, Leahy's film is also a 'journey into the dark night of the romantic soul' but whereas the former film presented the heroine's tragedy with irony, wit and detachment, My Life without Steve deliberately eschews all distancing devices, preferring to plunge the viewer into the heart and soul of the female protagonist, Liz, who is also 'unknown' — we do not see her except for her image in a photograph (350).

But another way of talking about a film's decision to present only still images of its female protagonist (plus two reflected shots of the "live" person) would be to see it as a strategy calculated to introduce some degree of distantiation into its representational form. And it is worth emphasising the rhetorical strategy at the centre of Creed's article: that is, the way it presents a highly particular reading of Letter as a self-evident, consensually agreed, account of that film in order then to indicate My Life's similarity to and/or difference from a film (Letter) that most

immediately exists in the form of that initial interpretative rewriting presented by Creed as a self-evident state of affairs. Furthermore, "irony, wit and detachment" seem to me more consistent in the 1950s Hollywood melodramas of Douglas Sirk than they do in Ophuls' 1940s Hollywood films, and it is difficult to be persuaded by the alleged relation of Letter to My Life. For although My Life clearly is related to classical hollywood melodramas, and to the sub-genre of the "female gothic" (as is made clear by the Gaslight allusion), Leahy's film does not seem to me to be about the pain and tragedy of non-recognition in the way that Ophuls' film so insistently is. My Life has no real equivalent of the aching poignance of Lisa in Letter saying: "if only you could have recognised what was always yours, could have found what was never lost."<sup>45</sup> The Liz of My Life is not the Lisa of Letter, and Steve does not transmute from a dissolute, repetition-compulsion roué into a Sydney Carton figure in quite the way that Stefan does. Acts of redemption and self-redemption are not particularly evident in My Life. On the contrary, Leahy's film seems much more a film about coming to terms with a knowing act of abandonment and rejection than a film concerned with a tragic failure to recognise in sufficient time "what was always yours, ... what was never lost."

Another of Creed's claims is that Leahy's film "deliberately rejects" the possibility of catharsis: "there is no indication that the heroine is 'cured' at the end" (351). But this does not correspond at all to what I take to be the significance of the tidied-up flat at the film's conclusion, nor does it seem to take sufficient account of Liz's statement near the end of the film that "history never repeats." This is a quotation of the actual Split Enz song

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<sup>45</sup> See Virginia Wright Wexman, with Karen Hollinger, ed., Letter from an Unknown Woman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 131.

lyrics which earlier had been ironised by Liz into "history always repeats/I tell myself before I go to sleep." It seems relatively uncontroversial to say that the presence of such things in the film indicates that some version of the talking cure has occurred, however limited or tenuous its outcome might be. In asking so relentlessly, "what was this pain about?," in rummaging everywhere for an adequate explanation for her grieving, love-lost state, Liz had been going against Wittgenstein's remark: "Every explanation is an hypothesis. But for someone broken up by love an explanatory hypothesis won't help much. — It will not bring peace."<sup>46</sup> In her role as a love-lost epistemophiliac, Liz craves explanation, and one way of seeing the trajectory of the film is to say that it represents Liz's gradual assemblage of a way to understand her situation. While not exactly presenting a momentarily cathartic conclusion, the film's ending still manages to convey some sense of Liz's having done some productive work of emotional mourning, some work on the self, and thereby having brought herself to a better emotional place than she was in at the film's outset.

Other accounts of the film produce more positive interpretations than do the responses of Bail and Creed. For example, when the film was shown at the Tyneside Film Festival, Jane Root found it to be "a passionate, bitter meditation on desire and loss," while Peter Kemp's review in Filmnews called it "the Australian movie of the year."<sup>47</sup> Kemp's reading of the film runs directly counter to the readings generated

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<sup>46</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's 'Golden Bough'," The Human World, 2 (1971), 30. My thanks to Dr Helen Pringle for locating this reference.

<sup>47</sup> Peter Kemp, "Featuring the Non-Features," Filmnews, 16, 3 (1986), 11. Subsequent references included in the text. Jane Root's comments were made in her introduction to the film's screening at the 1987 Tyneside Film Festival.

by Bail and Creed. Far from seeing a non-cathartic imprisoning of a central female character within the terms of a male-defined universe, Kemp claims that the film does not “indulge an abandoned ego so much as it cleansingly analyses and resiliently, triumphantly, resurrects the rediscovering self” (11). Kemp also lauded the way the film was able to present an “ebb and flow of exquisitely articulated amorous longing and pining solitude” (11). Although it is tempting to see the Creed/Bail vs Kemp responses as yet another instance of a local cultural rivalry, St Petersburg vs Tinseltown, played out across the terrain of Leahy’s film, and although the film does include a gag line about the inevitability of being miserable in Melbourne, the fact that the film is open to such different interpretative uptakes might well indicate that certain levels of ambiguity and ambivalence are present within it. If readings such as Bail’s and Creed’s can give themselves persuasive textual warrants, then perhaps My Life is not so settled and decided as I have been implying. Alternatively, the very extent to which the film is composed as an intertextual collage, bringing together fragments of available cultural discourses, might mean that the montaging of these various fragments can never hope to flatten their various individualities into the coherence and pattern desired by Bail’s reading. But far from indicating a conceptual problem in and with the film, the invitation towards this sort of hermeneutic “drifting” can be seen to be the inevitable consequence of working “essayistically,” in Barthes’ sense, or “fictocritically,” in the sense that I have given that term throughout this chapter.

In bringing to bear a range of cultural criticisms on Gillian Leahy’s My Life Without Steve, this chapter has threatened to become a version of the book Walter Benjamin allegedly dreamed of writing: a text composed entirely of quotations. But the textual fragments I have assembled and

aligned with Leahy's film are not necessarily what built up that film in the first place, nor are they necessary to a reading of the film. With their descriptions of immiserated love, jealousy and the like they do, however, provide some companionship for Liz, and my assembling of them allows this chapter its own form of "amphibology" or hermeneutic hesitation as it moves between a performative countersigning of Leahy's film and an extrapolative commentary on some of its most insistent features.

In the next two chapters I continue to explore some of the issues raised in this chapter's discussion of the postmodern, the paraliterary, the fictocritical, and the essayistic, and I do so by reading Jane DeLynn's Don Juan in the Village and Don DeLillo's White Noise in terms of some of these issues and debates. As I indicated in the introduction to this thesis, the move from the end of a chapter such as this, in which a meta-theoretical discussion of some highly charged contemporary theoretical terms has taken place in tandem with an interpretative venture in relation to a particular text (My Life Without Steve), to a chapter in which I attempt to interest my reader in my reading of a particular text, is a fraught one. But just as this chapter's discussion of a set of contested conceptual categories has been conducted in a way that attempts more a discursive mapping of a terrain of debate than an olympian theoretical denunciation of particular positions within that debate, so the next two chapters continue a strategy of interpretative ambivalence and theoretical oscillation.



## Chapter Two

### “Everything Drifts and Floats”: Reading White Noise

Obviously the new literary product is never radically new but it is other than what it was; it encroaches, however slightly, upon the excluded space of the inconceivable.

John Frow<sup>1</sup>

Where [the critic] is not aided by practice, his verdict is attended with confusion and hesitation.

David Hume<sup>2</sup>

Remarks existed in a state of permanent flotation. No one thing was either more or less plausible than any other thing.

Don DeLillo<sup>3</sup>

Reading Don DeLillo's White Noise provides a means of focussing the interpretative dilemmas discussed in the previous chapter. To read the novel is to become caught in a domain of hermeneutic hesitation. In seeking to specify the difference of the book, to articulate the extent to which it presents a limit-case for current forms of literary-cultural commentary, one quickly discovers that what seems a quite traditional novel in terms of structure also manages to be one of the sharpest meditations on the postmodern available, a meditation, moreover, which is delivered in such a way as to resist particular kinds of further analytical description or elaboration.

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<sup>1</sup> John Frow, Marxism and Literary History (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 251-52.

<sup>2</sup> David Hume, Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965 [1757]), 17, quoted in Tony Bennett, Outside Literature (London: Methuen, 1991), 156.

<sup>3</sup> Don DeLillo, White Noise (New York: Picador 1985), 129. Subsequent references included in the text.

In one sense, this aspect of my discussion of White Noise connects with Fredric Jameson's remarks on the fiction of E. L. Doctorow. Jameson says of Ragtime: "not only does the novel resist interpretation, it is organised systematically and formally to short-circuit an older type of social and historical interpretation which it perpetually holds out and withdraws."<sup>4</sup> Jameson also says that "theoretical critique and repudiation ... is a fundamental component of poststructuralist theory," and consequently he finds it "difficult not to conclude that Doctorow has somehow deliberately built this very tension, this very contradiction, into the flow of his sentences" (69).

Before commenting briefly on aspects of the narrative structure of White Noise, and before moving on to an extended discussion of the novel's relation to the categories of postmodernism and fictocriticism, it is worth noting that this was the novel which brought DeLillo into literary-cultural prominence. One way of indicating this fact is to observe that in a book published in 1991, and devoted to a series of dictionary entries on prominent cultural figures in the twentieth century, DeLillo receives an entry, with a segment from White Noise quoted as an example of his writing overall.<sup>5</sup> If Cultural Icons had been published in 1983, I doubt that DeLillo would have received an entry, for it is in the period 1984-88 that he attained a broader cultural visibility, principally by way of a series of institutional literary accolades. And in an American literary culture frequently characterised by self-promotion and self-publicity (from Norman Mailer to Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz), DeLillo offers the unusual instance of a quite private writer, one who gives few interviews,

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<sup>4</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," New Left Review, 146 (1984), 69. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>5</sup> James Park, ed., Cultural Icons (London: Bloomsbury, 1991), 106.

and who does not teach writing or give public readings. Consequently it would require institutional literary accolades to move him from the status of a minor, "cult" writer to a position of wider literary-cultural prominence. In 1984 the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters honoured DeLillo's "work to date" — that is, from Americana in 1971 to The Names in 1982. In 1985 White Noise won the American Book Award and was also a Book of the Month Club Alternate selection.<sup>6</sup> In

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<sup>6</sup> Janice Radway's "The Book-of-the-Month-Club and the General Reader: On the Uses of 'Serious' Fiction," Critical Inquiry, 14, 3 (1988), 516-38, comments on the procedures by which a book is selected as a Book of the Month Club selection. White Noise was chosen as a Club Alternate selection in 1985 and Radway discusses the selection of writers such as Pynchon, DeLillo and Kundera in the context of "the uses of 'serious fiction'" in her account of the way Book of the Month Club editors select books for the "general reader." Radway claims that editors want books which "permit readers to map the insights gained from the experience of reading onto the terrain of their own lives" (535). This allows for the notion that "an unconventional novel can still be read as 'equipment for living' in Kenneth Burke's phrase" (534), and this leads Radway to suggest that "the value of 'serious fiction', in fact is a function of its capacity to be used as a map which is, despite its status as representation, a tool for enabling its reader to move about more effectively in the world to which it refers" (537). What Book of the Month Club editors "demand most of writers they are to honour as serious is an ability to make them care," as opposed to writers who exhibit "coldness", "coolness", "distance" and "lack of compassion." As far as these editors are concerned: "The artistic is valuable to them only insofar as it does not declare its utter separation from the world. It must first draw the reader into its world by appearing to erase the boundaries between the book and external reality. Having thus assured communion and participation, it must then provide the occasion for moral and ethical judgements which can be turned reflexively upon the reader and later used as guidelines for behavior" (537).

In speculating on the procedures by which books by DeLillo and Kundera could become Club selections, Radway says: "thus a book can experiment with novelistic form, and it can even foreground a unique and unusual way of using language. But if that language cannot be construed by a reader as the speech of a recognizable personality with something to say about the world he or she shares with the reader, the book will likely be judged by the Book of the Month Club editors as too distant, too boring. Kundera and DeLillo could be "used" because, as Savago remarked in an interview, they "are like the world, your world, as seen by DeLillo and Kundera" (534). Radway goes on to say: "The Book of the Month Club editors seem to believe, finally, that their readers

1988 DeLillo's account of the J.F.K. assassination, Libra, became a best-seller and a Book of the Month Club Main selection. In this series of events, leading up to his receiving an entry in Cultural Icons, it becomes clear that White Noise functions as the equivalent of a "hit" song, play or movie for DeLillo. It is DeLillo's "breakthrough" book, the book with which he "arrived."<sup>7</sup> I want now to make some brief, broad comments on novelistic narration in White Noise, before going on to discuss the novel's relation to the elusive areas of postmodernism and fictocriticism.

In terms of its overall structure, the novel is comprised of three large sections. The first is called "Waves and Radiation" and contains 20 chapters across 105 pages. It begins with the arrival of station wagons at the beginning of the academic year of the College-on-the-Hill. The station wagons are laden with new and returning students, their parents and a vast array of commodities. Section one ends with Wilder "crying softly" in front of a television screen from which the image of his mother, Babette, has vanished, while Murray takes notes (105). By this point in the novel, the reader knows that "waves and radiation" refers to the ambience

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purchase serious fiction because they value verbal facility but also, and perhaps more important, because they are seeking a model for contemporary living and even practical advice about appropriate behaviour in a changing world" (535).

Radway's implication that editors view novels as so many moral-ethical toolkits, or at least as some sort of lifestyle assistance, is confirmed in a number of reviews of White Noise, but for the moment I want to notice the way she situates DeLillo's novel in relation to postmodernism. Radway places it alongside Russell Banks' Continental Drift, Milan Kundera's The Unbearable Lightness of Being and Margaret Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale, saying that "each, in its own way, self-consciously explores the nature of the postmodern universe" (536).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Norman Bryson, "City of Dis: The Fiction of Don DeLillo," Granta, ns, 1, 2 (1980): 145-57. In that article Bryson had said: "It may turn out, of course, that DeLillo's work will remain always about to arrive and never arriving..." (145).

of supermarkets and the mystery of television images, particularly television advertisements.

Section two is composed of one long fifty-four page chapter, and is called "The Airborne Toxic Event." The September that began the academic year has become January, and the chapter begins in the Gladney household, with Heinrich focussing the family's interest on an accident in the trainyards. The chapter ends with the Gladney family — and many others — evacuated to nearby Iron City. There, a fellow evacuee, a man "carrying a tiny TV set" (161), gives a speech deploring the lack of network television coverage of their situation, lamenting also the fact that they are denied the opportunity to banish a marauding, intrusive, media presence ("Leave us alone, we've been through enough, get out of here with your vile instruments of intrusion," 162).

Section three, called "Dylarama" (a reference to the pill Babette is taking to try to assuage her fear of death), has eighteen chapters across 159 pages. It begins and ends with Jack commenting on the state of affairs in the local supermarket, which has been one of the most important locales figured throughout the novel.

Even so brief and loose a sketching of the novel's movement serves to indicate the extent to which it delivers many of the rhythms, repetitions and symmetries which constitute classical-narrative structure. And if the book's overarching structure is quite traditional, then clearly we will have to look elsewhere to find the difference of White Noise. I want to begin that process of looking elsewhere by discussing the relation of White Noise to the category of postmodernism.

### White Noise and the Category of the Postmodern

Much of this chapter poses the following question: what relation can be established between White Noise and the category of the postmodern? And it does so because so much of the critical writing on the novel, from immediate reviews to later academic critical articles, works within the terms of this very question. The fact that the novel has been discussed so intensely in this way allows me to take as my object of analysis the novel and this particular aspect of its critical discussion. For example, is White Noise to be called a postmodern novel because it talks about postmodern sunsets, semiotics and simulacra? Is it postmodern in the sense that the novels of Pynchon, Gaddis and Coover are termed postmodern?<sup>8</sup> Or is it, rather, a slyly modernist meditation on postmodern themes? On the one hand, the novel recalls Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Storyteller," echoing Benjamin's comments on "the loss of an ability to exchange experience," the social isolation of the novelist, the historical change in the public visibility of death, the intimate relation between death and storytelling.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, sections of the book recall Baudrillard on hyperreality and the precession of simulacra. The description of the "airborne toxic event" would be the most obvious example here. Does this then make White Noise the literary equivalent of postmodernism in other cultural domains? — in dance, music, photography, painting,

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<sup>8</sup> These are the novelists DeLillo credits with having set the standards for contemporary American writing. See Robert B. Harris, "A Talk with Don DeLillo," New York Times Book Review, 10 October 1982, 26. In a later interview DeLillo also refers to Norman Mailer's Harlot's Ghost and Cormac McCarthy's Blood Meridian, and cites the writing of Robert Stone and Joan Didion as showing "us that the novel is still spacious enough to encompass enormous areas of experience." In Don DeLillo, "The Art of Fiction CXXXV," The Paris Review, 128 (1993), 290.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in Illuminations, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 83-109.

theatre, cinema, television, video? Do we find here the literary equivalent of American postmodernist painting's flight from palpable texture (the absence of any brushstroke signature) in search of a perfect flatness combined with an intensification of intertextuality? Here one thinks of such things as Peter Halley's "quoting" of colour-field paintings ("Two-Cells with Circulating Conduit"), of Malcolm Morley's repetition of Vermeer, and of Gerhard Richter's quoting of impressionist landscapes in his series of "London paintings." Is White Noise to be aligned with such practices as the avant-garde theatre of the Wooster Group, especially their play LSD, with its dense intertextual relation to The Crucible, the Beats, Kerouac, and a welter of other texts?<sup>10</sup>

This practice of heightening intertextuality to the point of its becoming the pre-eminent condition of textuality is said to be partially the result of new technologies, new capacities for the storage of information and representation. It is alleged to be the consequence of an historically unique situation which enables the requisite po-mo mixture of echoes, appropriations, simulations and replications.<sup>11</sup> And Peter Wollen has referred to the emergence of an electronic, computerised version of Malraux's Imaginary Museum, foreseeing an age of "electronic intertextuality" in which "a data base of stored images in the electronic memory ... opens up the possibility of recycling the contents of a vast image bank, an archive from which images can be taken and recontextualised at will."<sup>12</sup> Wollen envisages films in which Charlie

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<sup>10</sup> See David Savran, Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group (New York: Theater Communications Group, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Peter Wollen, "Ways of Thinking about Music Video (and Post-modernism)," Critical Quarterly, 28, 1/2 (1986): 167-170. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>12</sup> Peter Wollen, Raiding the Icebox: Reflections on Twentieth-Century Culture (London: Verso, 1993), 65.

Chaplin meets Marilyn Monroe — and versions of this occurred with the famous Ali-Marciano “computer fight” of the 1960s, as well as in the recent video-clip which had Natalie Cole sing with her dead father, Nat King Cole, or in some current television/cinema advertisements which place the screen personae of Bogart and Cagney in contemporary environments.

The sort of thing Wollen is talking about seems quite similar to the way Umberto Eco has described elaborate processes of repetition and intertextual dialogue in postmodern aesthetics, and it also connects with John Rajchman’s description of the postmodern strategy of “a flat replication and mixing of previous styles.”<sup>13</sup> Examples of such a process would be the way a Queen videoclip quotes Metropolis, the way Madonna “repeats” the images of Marilyn Monroe and Deborah Harry, and the way the figure of k.d. lang “repeats” Patsy Cline.

In the face of postmodern representational practices as diverse as John Cage, the Wooster Group, the Hysteric-Ontological Theatre, Ant Farm, Cyndi Sherman photographs and Laurie Anderson’s performances, one pressing critical problem concerns the attempt to determine the form critical description of these cultural practices should take. What is the relation between these cultural forms and the critical commentary they provoke? What critical commentary does one perform on texts that already seem to be commenting on themselves? As Jim Collins phrases it: “How do we account for texts that are so hyperconscious about their own history and their own discursive frameworks that the very basis of their

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<sup>13</sup> Umberto Eco, “Innovation and Repetition: Between Modern and Post-Modern Aesthetics,” Daedalus, 114 (1985): 161-84, and John Rajchman, “Postmodernism in a Nominalist Frame,” in Rajchman, Philosophical Events: Essays of the '80s (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 123.



textuality appears grounded not in representation, but in the appropriation of antecedent representation?"<sup>14</sup> In the case of White Noise one hesitates between trying to describe a formal structure, a content-thematic level, and attempting to specify the text's "reading formation."<sup>15</sup> Two sequences from the novel should suffice to indicate the uncertain space the novel opens up for well-meaning literary-critical "hermeneutic gestures," thereby indicating the degree of hermeneutic hesitation which surrounds the book.

Early in the book there is a sequence in which Jack Gladney, Professor of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill, goes with a colleague, Murray Jay Siskind, to visit "a tourist attraction known as the most photographed barn in America." Before Jack and Murray reach the site, they see five signs announcing "THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA." On arrival at the site, they find "forty cars and a tour bus." The two men then walk along a cowpath "to the slightly elevated spot set aside for viewing and photographing. All the people had cameras; some had tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits. A man in a booth sold postcards and slides — pictures of the barn taken from the elevated spot" (12).

At this early point in the book, a certain move of literary criticism is available. One could seek to explain this sequence by referring to a range of other texts, raiding them for the required critical metalanguage. For example one could take segments from Daniel Boorstin's The Image ("We go more and more not to see at all, but only to take pictures"), from

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<sup>14</sup> Jim Collins, "Appropriating like Krazy: From Pop Art to Meta-Pop," in Modernity and Mass Culture, ed. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990), 203-204.

<sup>15</sup> See Tony Bennett, "Texts, Readers, Reading Formations," Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association, 16, 1 (1983): 3-17, and "Texts in History: The Determination of Readings and their Texts," Australian Journal of Communication, 5/6 (1984): 13-20.

Edward Carpenter's Oh What a Blow that Phantom Gave Me, from John Berger's Ways of Seeing (and through that, from Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," noting the extent to which this sequence in the novel contradicts or reverses Benjamin's prediction). We could go to Dean MacCannell's The Tourist, for its discussion of on-site and off-site markers, and then to review articles of that book.<sup>16</sup> In this way we could secure the appropriately authoritative interpretative distance required of and by literary criticism. In short, we could explain or amplify this sequence by discussing the semiotics of tourism and the intensification, rather than the fading, of the Benjaminian auratic image.

Unfortunately for us, Murray Jay Siskind, an ex-sports writer now teaching at the College-on-the-Hill in the "popular culture department, known officially as American environments" (9), pre-empts any such interpretative turn by saying:

No-one sees the barn ... Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn ... We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura... They are taking pictures of taking pictures... What was the barn like before it was photographed? ... What did it look like, how was it different from other barns, how was it similar to other barns? We can't answer these questions because we've read the signs, seen the people snapping the pictures. We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now (12, 13).

Two other preliminary examples reinforce this sense of there being a set of theoretical readings already contained within the novel. What are we to

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<sup>16</sup> See Edward Carpenter, Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me! (London: Paladin, 1976); John Berger, Ways of Seeing (London: Penguin, 1972); David Boorstin, The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America (New York: Harper and Row, 1961); Dean MacCannell, The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class (New York: Schocken Books, 1989); Jonathan Culler, "Semiotics of Tourism," in Framing the Sign, 153-67.

do when we encounter the sentence: "Another postmodern sunset, rich in romantic imagery" (220)? Or when we read the sequence describing family evacuations handled by an organisation named SIMUVAC and containing the following exchange between Jack and a SIMUVAC official?

"That's quite an armband you've got there. What does SIMUVAC mean? Sounds important."

"Short for simulated evacuation. A new state program they're still battling over funds for."

"But this evacuation isn't simulated. It's real."

"We know that. But we thought we could use it as a model."

"A form of practice? Are you saying you saw a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation?"

"We took it right into the streets."

"How is it going?" I said.

"The insertion curve isn't as smooth as we would like. There's a probability excess. Plus which we don't have our victims laid out where we'd want them if this was an actual simulation. In other words we're forced to take our victims as we find them. We didn't get a jump on computer traffic. Suddenly it just spilled out, three-dimensionally, all over the landscape. You have to make allowances for the fact that everything we see tonight is real. There's a lot of polishing we still have to do. But that's what this exercise is all about" (139).

After the example of Murray's analytical discoursing at the site of the most photographed barn in America, we need to be wary of using Baudrillard on simulation as a means of amplifying this sequence. One hesitates to use postmodern critical theories on a book which contains postmodern sunsets and real events being used as rehearsals for simulations of real events; it is a form of hermeneutic hesitation which derives from one's sense that such critical elaboration would be redundant, a feeling that the book already includes this "hermeneutic gesture."

Not everyone hesitates to apply such terminology, however. A range of newspaper and journal reviews of the novel, and later academic critical articles, regularly place White Noise within a discussion of postmodernism. Sometimes the word is simply invoked while on other occasions it is accompanied by a more elaborate discussion. Either way, what is inescapable is the regularity of the move to explain White Noise in terms of the discursive context presented by the concept of postmodernism. Four reviews of the book explicitly used the term to frame their discussion of the novel, and every academic article makes mention of the term in a more or less systematic way.<sup>17</sup>

There is a pattern to these accounts. DeLillo is either praised for his engagement with postmodernism (McInerney, Jayne Phillips, Wilcox, Fielder, Frow, Johnston) or dismissed because of it (Disch); applauded for practising a politics of cultural intervention (Lentricchia, Mobilio, Shapiro) or dismissed as a trendy sloganist (Yardley, Disch, Bawer); praised

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<sup>17</sup> See Pico Iyer, "A Connoisseur of Fear," Partisan Review, 53 (1986): 292-97; Albert Mobilio, "Death by Inches," Village Voice, 30, 18, 30 April 1985, 39-40; Stephen Amidon, "Assessment," Literary Review, 159 (1991): 15-16; Diane Johnson, "Conspirators," New York Review of Books, 32, 4, 14 March 1985, 6-7; Jay McInerney, "Midwestern Wasteland," The New Republic, 192, 5, 4 February 1985, 36-39; Richard Eder, "White Noise," Los Angeles Times Book Review, 13 January 1985, 5; Thomas DePietro, "Laughing Through the Malls," Commonweal, 5 April 1985, 219-20; Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, "Books of the Times," New York Times, 7 January 1985, C18; R.Z. Sheppard, "Death 'n' Things," Time, 21 January 1985, 51-52; Thomas M. Disch, "Maximum Exposure," The Nation, 240, 4, 2 February 1985, 120-21; Jayne Anne Phillips, "Crowding Out Death," The New York Times Book Review, 13 January, 1, 30-31; John Frow, "The Last Things Before The Last," South Atlantic Quarterly, 89, 2 (1990): 413-30; Jonathan Yardley, "Don DeLillo's American Nightmare," Washington Post Book World, 13 January 1985, 3, 10; Robert Phillips, "White Noise," America, 153, 1, 6-13 July 1985, 16; Bruce Bawer, "Don DeLillo's America," New Criterion, April 1985, 34-42; John Johnston, "Generic Difficulties in the Novels of Don DeLillo," Critique, 30 (1989): 261-75; Frank Lentricchia, "The American Writer as Bad Citizen: Introducing Don DeLillo," The South Atlantic Quarterly, 89, 2 (1990): 239-44. Unless otherwise indicated subsequent references to this writing will be included in the text.

for producing a humanist account of life in a postmodern context (Jayne Phillips, Le Clair) or charged with an inability to produce sufficiently humanised characters (Yardley, Robert Phillips). The prevalence of this particular interpretative frame provides abundant evidence for John Rajchman's observation, quoted in the previous chapter, that postmodernism is a term that "has acquired wide journalistic self-evidence," and it also allows me to suggest that postmodernism constitutes the dominant interpretative or contextualising framework within which many readings of White Noise occur. And the uncertainty felt by some critics on the matter of how to connect White Noise with the category of the postmodern — while nonetheless being certain that some sort of relation exists — might well be the consequence of the conceptual shift involved in describing postmodernism simultaneously as an epochal phenomenon and as a set of textual practices.

The next section of this chapter ranges across journalistic and academic critical processings of White Noise in an attempt to show the way a certain set of assumptions (often concerning postmodernism, the nature of literary writing, what constitutes "believable character") is to be found across the different discursive and institutional constraints of the book reviews and the later academic criticism. The point is not to show that the later academic critical processing of DeLillo's novel is "better" than the more immediate, journalistic, writing but rather to show what critical assumptions inform both sets of rhetorical strategies. And although my citing of this critical processing might start to seem like my version of the celebrated postmodern trope of the list, and even though DeLillo has said that "lists are a form of cultural hysteria" ("The Art of Fiction," 290), I hope my reader will have the patience to see that my eventual target is a

description of DeLillo's book and its various critical uptakes. If a certain tedium attaches to much of what follows, it is a necessary tedium.

Leonard Wilcox, in an article in Contemporary Literature, says that White Noise and the later Libra,

with their interest in electronic mediation and representation, present a view of life in contemporary America that is uncannily similar to that depicted by Jean Baudrillard. They indicate that the transformations of contemporary society that Baudrillard describes in his theoretical writings on information and media have also gripped the mind and shaped the novels of Don DeLillo.<sup>18</sup>

White Noise is said to chart "a world that is mediated by and constituted in the technologico-semiotic regime" (346), and "in this world common to both Baudrillard and DeLillo, images, signs and codes engulf objective reality and stand in for the world they erase" (346-47). White Noise depicts "a new order in which life is increasingly lived in a world of simulacra, where images and electronic representations replace direct experiences" (346). One of the points of aligning these two writers is that it allows Wilcox to say that DeLillo and Baudrillard share a grim social vision: "For both Baudrillard and DeLillo a media saturated consciousness threatens the concept of meaning itself. For both, this increasingly simulational and nonreferential world brings about radical changes in the very shape of subjectivity" (347).

Wilcox also argues that White Noise charts a shift from a modernist to a postmodernist consciousness and says that the principal means for charting this shift is contained in the figure of Jack Gladney. According to Wilcox, the narrative voice of Jack Gladney

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<sup>18</sup> Leonard Wilcox, "Baudrillard, DeLillo's White Noise, and the End of Heroic Narrative," Contemporary Literature, 32, 3 (1990): 346-65.

often succumbs to a Baudrillardian condition, floating “ecstatically” in a delirium of networks, hyperreal surfaces, and fetishized consumer objects. Gladney’s narrative is interspersed with the entropic chatter and snippets of talk shows that emerge from a television that “migrates” around the Gladney household, moving from room to room, filling the air with jingles and consumer advice (348).

Gladney’s “modernist impulse toward authentic selfhood and his quest for transcendental meaning seem oddly out of place in the postmodern world” (350), and for both Baudrillard and DeLillo:

the dissolution of a modernist subjectivity in the mire of contemporary media and technology is integrally connected to another issue — the passing of the great modernist notions of artistic impulse and representation, the demise of notions of a “heroic” search for alternative, creative forms of consciousness, and the idea of art as specially endowed revelation (347).

Wilcox reads the sequence involving the most-photographed barn in America in terms of Baudrillard’s notions of hyperreality, simulation and free-floating signifiers, while the airborne toxic event is said to depict a situation in which subjective resonances are constructed and validated by the media (351).

Gladney eventually is said by Wilcox to experience “the cognitive equivalent of white noise” (356) and this explains why, for Wilcox, “[Gladney’s] narrative lacks any sense of authority and mastery” (358). I think it would be more accurate to say that Gladney’s narrative lacks any continuous sense of “authority and mastery,” given that it moves so regularly between confidence and self-doubt.<sup>19</sup> The point being made here

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<sup>19</sup> In another reading of the novel, John Fielder finds it to be “a veritable cacophony of postmodern ‘speech genres,’” and claims that, throughout, the novel “foregrounds a cacophony of conflicting discourses, none of which is able to assume the position of unimpeachable truth, or sustain the mask of unquestionable authority” (292). The figure of Jack Gladney is said to be crucial to this structure insofar as it functions as “the perceptive articulator and arranger of postmodern meditations and media” (292).

by Wilcox in his academic discussion of the novel connects with the difficulty a number of reviewers of the novel had in understanding the way narration was delivered in the book.

Wilcox claims that the book implies that "narratives still function to construct and criticise our world, that storytelling is ultimately a historical and political act" (362). This aspect of Wilcox's assessment of DeLillo's writing approximates Frank Lentricchia's notion of DeLillo as one of those writers who possesses politics in the sense of conceiving of their "vocation as an act of cultural criticism; who invent in order to intervene; whose work is a kind of anatomy, an effort to represent their culture in its totality; and who desire to move readers to the view that the shape and fate of their culture dictates the fate and shape of the self."<sup>20</sup> Wilcox similarly argues that DeLillo's novels

engage historical and political issues ... If his works exhibit the postmodern concern with the unstable nature of subjectivity and textuality, with representation and narrative process, his postmodernism retains the legacy of the modernist impulse to explore consciousness and selfhood and to create an imaginative vision that probes and criticizes its subject matter (362).

This is to assert that DeLillo's relation to postmodernism is a critical or sceptical one insofar as his use of postmodern devices (by which I assume Wilcox means the various Baudrillardian terms and concepts adumbrated in his article) deploys them within the medium of the novel, conceived as a generic form capable of making a substantial critical-analytical

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With Gladney thus functioning as the filter of things postmodern, the novel depicts "a postmodern crisis of cultural authority" and the novel's conclusion presents an "indeterminacy [which] befits the unfinished dialogue that reverberates throughout the novel" (302). In John Fielder, "Laughing About it Without Laughing it Off," Southern Review, 23, 3 (1990): 290-303.

<sup>20</sup> Frank Lentricchia, "The American Writer as Bad Citizen: Introducing Don DeLillo," 240.



intervention in contemporary American culture. While Baudrillard's writing implies that there is no space beyond simulation, DeLillo's writing "reveals a belief that fictional narrative can provide critical distance from and a critical perspective on the processes it depicts" (363).

In a reading of the book which links DeLillo with Kafka (specifically the short story, "The Burrow"), Michael Shapiro claims that DeLillo "is aware that the America he is thematizing is a postmodern culture inasmuch as he recognizes the 'radical structural difference' (as Jameson has put it) involved in the change from earlier stages of capitalism to the modern information/ consumer stage. What DeLillo adds to this recognition is a postmodernist style."<sup>21</sup> Shapiro claims that a correspondence exists between what DeLillo depicts and the language in which he depicts it: "DeLillo ... conveys an image of postmodern society with a postmodernist grammar" (132).

For Shapiro, Gladney's encounter with the computerised bank teller is "more than a message for the characters in White Noise; it is the condition against which DeLillo writes" (130). Like a number of the novel's commentators, Shapiro points to the significance of images of the media and simulacra when he says: "And, recognizing that the modern world is populated less by things than by simulacra, DeLillo has the action in White Noise hover ambiguously across television and face-to-face relations as the distinction between the real and representation breaks down" (132). In his exploration of "modern commercial-consumer oriented space" (136), DeLillo depicts "a postmodernist burrow, a maze constructed by the codes — at once informational and regulatory — that emerge from intelligence organisations, media messages and consumer

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Shapiro, "Don DeLillo's Postmodern Burrow," Strategies, 1 (1988), 129. Subsequent references included in the text.

products, banking and commercial systems etc." (130). DeLillo presents "an overlapping set of information systems" (130), a series of "electronically communicated images ... or the noises and advertising slogans that populate people's consciousness" (129). And DeLillo presents this material in a narrative mode where "even though characters narrate, they do not control the flow of discourse ... DeLillo interweaves his characters' musings with the media voices that construct modern meaning systems. To deconstruct such systems one must first represent them" (131).

When one turns to the negative reviews of White Noise, one finds these same themes and topoi given a rather different valorisation. Perhaps the most sustained attack on DeLillo's writing comes in Bruce Bawer's article in The New Criterion.<sup>22</sup> Ostensibly a review of White Noise, Bawer's article examines "Don DeLillo's America" by presenting an argument which claims that White Noise is simply the most recent in DeLillo's series of mean-spirited criticisms of all things American.

Bawer's charges of anti-Americanism are accompanied by an assertion that DeLillo cannot produce plausible novelistic representations of reality. Consequently it is "hard to accept most of his characters as living, breathing human beings" (35). This is a result of his novels' not being "true-to-life tales" but rather "tracts, designed to batter us, again and again with a single idea: that life in America today is boring, benumbing, dehumanised." DeLillo's "overly diagrammatic world" (35) presents a series of "rapidly aging nihilistic cliches" (36), so many "documents in the history of nihilistic chic" (41). Eventually, Bawer's criticisms amount to a

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<sup>22</sup> Bruce Bawer, "Don DeLillo's America," New Criterion, April 1985, 34-42. Subsequent references included in the text.

realist-humanist critique of DeLillo's "failure" to indicate sufficiently the differences of humankind:

There should be profound emotions at work here but White Noise is, like its predecessors, so masterfully contrived a piece of argumentation that believable human feelings and actions are few and far between. There is hardly a natural moment in the whole book. Characters do not think, they cogitate; they do not talk, they engage in dialectic and deliver endless monologues about the novel's major themes. It is often difficult to tell them apart when reading a stretch of dialogue, because they all sound exactly alike ... and when their mouths open, they produce clipped, ironic, self-consciously clever sentences full of offbeat metaphors and quaint descriptive details (37).

Bawer claims that Jack and Babette's conversations sound like "an author's collection of stale cultural barbs, broken up, essentially at random, into lines of dialogue" rather than being an accurate representation of "two married people talking to each other" (36). Bawer specifically targets the exchange between Jack and Babette after Jack has learned of Babette's motel-room liaisons with Mr Gray:

Functionalism, fire-retardant, usage — is this the language of a bitter husband and a contrite wife? Of course not. It's the language of a novelist more intrigued by words than by the feelings they are supposed to represent, more concerned with slipping in a brief, banal set piece on the bland impersonality of American Motel rooms than with trying to understand, and render as faithfully as possible, the feelings his characters would be likely to have in the situation he has put them in (37).

Bawer contends that DeLillo has no interest in the novelistic tradition represented by Flaubert, Tolstoy and Mann, since his descriptions so evidently lack their degree of verisimilitude. For example, Jack's description of the black billowing cloud

does not help the reader to see the cloud, or serve to consolidate its symbolic pre-eminence in the book; it tends rather to diminish it. It

is inconceivable that a man whose family was threatened by a cloud of toxic gas would describe it in such a way. The simile is an utterly contrived one, dictated not by the author's intuitive gift for imagery but by his polemical motives, his obsession with commercialism (39).

This is the centre of an argument implying that DeLillo is a propagandist of glibly jargonistic anti-Americanisms and it explains Bawer's description of the book's conclusion as "mechanical" (39). Bawer finds DeLillo's writing strategies "offensive," the specific offences being that "he refuses to make distinctions" and that he is not "honestly interested in what makes us human" (41). DeLillo's characters "are little more than mouthpieces, all but interchangeable with one another. And what makes human beings fascinating, and worth writing novels about, is their differences" (41). Bawer thus sees White Noise as another instance of DeLillo's "lack of interest in developing his characters and ideas" (42) and further says that "his stubborn adherence to a stylish, schematic view of modern America as a great big xerox machine, continue[s] to cripple DeLillo as an imaginative writer" (42). Bawer's criticisms, as indicated earlier, charge DeLillo with a failure to (re)produce "proper" novelistic mimesis, but this (allegedly "appropriate") representation that DeLillo is being said wilfully to refuse to reproduce, itself derives from certain aesthetic notions of realism, humanism and characterology. And it is precisely this aesthetic system that other commentators say DeLillo is carefully avoiding, partly as a consequence of his particular historical location as a novelist writing in late twentieth-century America, and within particular debates about postmodernism and representation. So rather than charge DeLillo with having wilfully refused to deliver a certain set of representations, we could listen to other critical descriptions of his work, ones which see him involved in a different political-aesthetic endeavour.

Frank Lentricchia, for instance, makes a polemical case against a group he describes as DeLillo's "right-wing media commentators" and "conservative intellectuals" — by which he means Yardley, Bawer and Will — and says that "their censorious reflections on DeLillo's work ... are the best backhanded testimony I've seen in a long time on behalf of the social power of literature ... and an unintended but superb compliment to DeLillo's success in making his writing count beyond the elite circle of connoisseurs of postmodernist criticism and fiction." ("The American Writer as Bad Citizen," 243).<sup>23</sup>

But it is John Frow's writing on White Noise which seems to me to provide the most interesting response to the sorts of criticisms contained

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<sup>23</sup> Lentricchia also mounts a pugnacious attack on the kind of writing produced by Anne Tyler, Reynolds Price, Bobby Ann Mason, Raymond Carver and (by implication) Jay McInerney, referring to them as the "new regionalists of and for the Reagan eighties" (241). He characterises their fiction as "a minor apolitical, domestic fiction of the triumphs and agonies of autonomous private individuals ... the modesty of small, good things: fiction all but labelled 'No expense of intellect required. To be applied in eternal crises of the heart only'" (241). Lentricchia refers to the

soft humanist underbelly of American literature: a realism of domestic setting whose characters play out their little dramas of ordinary event and feeling in an America miraculously free from the environment and disasters of contemporary technology, untouched by racial and gender tensions, and blissfully unaware of political power; a fiction, to be sure, cleverly veneered with place (Tyler's Baltimore), brand names, and other signs of advanced consumer culture (Carver's cube steak, his Jim Beam). In the fashioning of such surfaces lies the entire claim of these writers to realism" (244).

It is a fiction that is said to be "culturally and historically rootless" and it is the context of this kind of writing and its literary-cultural promotion that the reading of DeLillo's writing becomes "an experience of overwhelming cultural density — these are novels that could not have been written before the mid-60s" (244). In a similar spirit, Hal Crowther said that DeLillo might be recorded "as the last serious novelist denounced by the American media establishment while it still acknowledged the existence of literature." In Hal Crowther, "Clinging to the Rock: A Novelist's Choices in the New Mediocracy," South Atlantic Quarterly, 89, 2 (1990), 321.

in Bawer's comments. However, before going on to Frow's arguments, I want to quote Bawer's concluding assessment:

While those of us who live in the real America carry on with our richly varied, emotionally tumultuous lives, DeLillo (as White Noise amply demonstrates) continues, in effect, to write the same lifeless novel over and over again — a novel constructed upon a simpleminded political cliché, populated by epigram-slinging, epistemology-happy robots, and packed with words that have very little to say to us about our world, our century, or ourselves. If anyone is guilty of turning modern America into xerox copies, it is Don DeLillo.

I want to turn now to some comments from Frow (and Johnston) on DeLillo's writing, as a means of indicating a different way of accounting for his fiction, while also indicating some of the ways in which Bawer's interpretation of the novels can be seen to apply a normalising aesthetic gaze. In particular, Frow's comments on the novelistic tradition of constructing typicality provide a convenient way of contesting some of Bawer's points. Frow says:

For Lukács, typicality is best embodied in the category of particularity (Besonderheit), which stands midway between philosophical generality (Allgemeinheit) and descriptive detail, or singularity (Einzelheit); in a postmodern economy of mediations, however, where representations of generality suffuse every pore of the world, the opposition between the general and the singular collapses as they merge into a single, undialectical unity: the petit fait vrai of the realist novel, the meaningless detail whose sole function is to establish a realism effect, is no longer meaningless. Reconstructing the scene of his wife's adultery, Jack mentions objects like "the fire-retardant carpet" and "the rental car keys on the dresser"; the definite article here marks these — as it does in much of Auden's poetry — not as concrete particulars but as generic indicators; they are not pieces of detail broken off from the contingent real but fragments of a mundane typicality ("The Last Things Before the Last," 417).

If it used to be the case that social typicality preceded its literary representation, Frow's point is that in White Noise, "social taxonomics are

a function not of historical necessity but of style" (416). The type is no longer "a naive given, an embodied universality, but a self-conscious enactment," and thus it is "no longer possible to distinguish meaningfully between a generality embedded in life and a generality embedded in representations of life" (416). The relation between typicality and representation in White Noise is such that what most typifications have in common "is their source in a chain of prior representations" (418). For Frow this new mode of typicality has two features: "it is constructed in representations which are then lived as real; and it is so detailed that it is not opposed to the particular" (418). Accordingly, the "world of White Noise is a world of primary representations which neither precede nor follow the real but are themselves real — although it is true that they always have the appearance both of preceding another reality (as a model to be followed) and of following it (as copy). But this appearance must itself be taken seriously" (421).

If we recall some of the narrative strategies at work in the novel, Frow's general point can be given a more particular force. The opening paragraph of the novel describes, in third-person narration, the mid-day arrival of station wagons, laden with commodities, on the "west campus." The second paragraph then reorients us in relation to this opening description, by moving narration into the first-person: "I've witnessed this spectacle every September for twenty-one years"(3). By the end of the first chapter we know that the narrator is "chairman of the department of Hitler studies at the College-on-the-Hill"(4), we know that "Babette and I and our children by previous marriages live at the end of a quiet street in what was once a wooded area with deep ravines"(4). It is not until chapter two that our narrator receives a name when Babette says: "You know I need reminding Jack"(5). This remark reverberates later in the novel when we

discover that some of the side-effects of the pill Babette is taking to allay her fear of death include memory-weakening and a tendency to confuse similar-sounding terms. It is not until chapter three that we encounter a surname for Jack, when Murray says: "He is now your Hitler, Gladney's Hitler"(11). So the novel takes eight pages and three chapters to deliver up its narrator's name and is equally slow to deliver the names and ages of the various children. Such delaying and dispersing of information represents a particular narrative choice.

The opening chapters also exhibit another distinctive narrative choice and this concerns the way the book plays with forms of novelistic description. Description is not delivered "straight" but rather quotes the way description is delivered in other discursive-generic contexts. Thus dialogue in White Noise regularly quotes other forms of delivering dialogue or information. For example, Babette to Jack on the "day of the station wagons": "It's not the station wagons I wanted to see. What are the people like? Do the women wear plaid skirts, cable knit sweaters? Are the men in hacking jackets? What's a hacking jacket?"(6). Babette's dialogue here introduces the notion of quoting practices of description rather than delivering straight description and it also introduces the topos of a self-interrogating character.

A few pages later Jack asks Murray where he is living and Murray answers:

"In a rooming house ... Seven or eight boarders, more or less permanent except for me. A woman who harbors a terrible secret. A man with a haunted look. A man who never comes out of his room. A woman who stands by the letter box for hours, waiting for something that never seems to arrive. A man with no past. A woman with a past. There is a smell about the place of unhappy lives in the movies that I really respond to."



"Which one are you?" I said.

"I'm the Jew. What else would I be?" (10)

Another example of this strategy, again involving a dialogue exchange between Jack and Murray, occurs when Jack is speaking of his fear of death and says: "I want to live." Murray responds by making Jack's humanist-existential statement refer to a film title: "From the Robert Wise film of the same name, with Susan Hayward as Barbara Graham, a convicted murderess. Aggressive jazz score by Johnny Mandel" (283). Murray's response quotes the kind of description one might find in Leonard Maltin's Guide to Movies on TV. The point to notice is that it is a form of discourse which quotes another form of discourse; a statement is provided by citing an existing, other and elsewhere, way of producing statements. It is a version of the textual strategy alluded to by Rajchman's reference to a "flat replication and mixing of previous styles" (Philosophical Events, 123) and by Eco's reference to a writing context comprised of "irony, metalinguistic play, enunciation squared" (Afterthoughts on the Name of the Rose, 68).

In his account of DeLillo's fiction, John Johnston notes that "most reviewers have been troubled by DeLillo's handling of the novel form" ("Generic Difficulties in the Novels of Don DeLillo," 262). Johnston describes DeLillo as working within "novelistic spaces of suspension and crossover" (262), with the variety of his novels indicating "the range of subject matter engaged in by DeLillo, while also highlighting the ambiguity of his status — is he a highbrow or a popular writer?" (261). Johnston then suggests that a more interesting question would concern whether DeLillo's novels "should be read as modernist fictions stylized for a larger audience or as a series of postmodern fictions that operate as a pastiche of older genres" (261-62). If we recall the debates about

representation and verisimilitude surrounding DeLillo's writing, then it is interesting to see Johnston say that the novels are best explained by Bakhtin's notion "that the novel is less defined by its mimesis than by its incorporation of various forms of speech and social discourse, or what he calls its 'heteroglossia' and linguistic 'stratification'" (265). According to Johnston, DeLillo's appropriation of various novelistic sub-genres (for example, the thriller in Running Dog, science-fiction in Ratner's Star) treats them "not as forms to be subverted through irony or transformed into pastiche" but as "highly recognizable forms of representation that are already given as part of their content" (271). For Johnston:

One highly noticeable effect produced by this combination of materials associated with different subgenres is that normal or conventional expectations are short-circuited and attention directed elsewhere. This might help to explain what seems to be a common experience in reading DeLillo's fiction: that most often what is felt to be of greatest significance occurs on the margins or borders of the properly novelistic or, more simply, is not fully expressed in relation to character and plot (262).

Johnston is particularly acute on the matter of novelistic representation in the face of a postmodern plethora of prior representations:

It is as if DeLillo finds that certain facets of the contemporary world are already so structured by their own representations — most obviously in the worlds of rock music, science, and espionage — that in order to become newly available for novelistic investigation these representations must be opened up, crossed with, and penetrated by new kinds of material, a fictional procedure that introduces new angles of perception by reframing and thus recontextualising what are perceived to be the subgenre's typical content and codes of understanding. By working in the margins of these easily recognizable subgenres; by extending, combining and crossing over into new areas of subject matter from that marginal position, DeLillo creates a new or at least a different sense of fictional space, on the edges and in the folds of these various mixings and crossings, a space that could not be created by the narrative mechanisms that typically guarantee the easy intelligibility of plot and character and hence the "recognizability" of these subgenres (271-72).

When Johnston turns his attention specifically to White Noise, he does so by arguing that DeLillo is a postmodern novelist in much the same way that David Salle is a postmodern painter or that Godard is a postmodern filmmaker.<sup>24</sup> Johnston says that

for the postmodern artist ... experience seems "always already" framed, multiply mediated, and only available through sets of competing and often contradictory images and representations. If the world is a vast store of images, the postmodernists seek to restore the fullness of some of those images by counteracting our innate subtractive tendency to perceive less, and to make our perception equal to the image by questioning and shifting the frame (274).

Johnston's article contains a number of remarks which connect with the more general debate on the nature of DeLillo's writing. White Noise, for instance, is said to present "an omnipresent blurring or dissolution of word and image into a medium of pollution in the contemporary American environment" (272) and in general DeLillo is said to work with "words, images and representations as his primary material — not with people and their individual dramas, which are always defined by and in relation to word and image" (274). These last remarks encapsulate the controversy surrounding DeLillo's novelistic representations. Are they to be read, Bawer-style, as a failure to continue the tradition of Tolstoy, Flaubert, Mann?; are they to be seen as a failure to convey adequately a humanist diversity in contemporary life? This would be to see DeLillo as

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<sup>24</sup> This last is a controversial attribution: an equally persuasive case can be made for Godard, Antonioni et al., despite their obvious political-aesthetic differences, as being modernist workers in the film medium. DeLillo cites the influence of movies in general and Godard in particular on his work: "Probably the movies of Jean-Luc Godard had a more immediate effect on my early work than anything I'd ever read." In Thomas LeClair, "An Interview with Don DeLillo," Contemporary Literature, 23, 1 (1982), 25.

a failed latter-day Balzac, precisely not his society's "proper amanuensis."<sup>25</sup>

But an alternative view — persuasively conveyed in the writing of critics such as Frow and Johnston — would be to say that DeLillo writes from a socio-historical position which does not allow him, as an aesthetic option, the very aesthetic system some critics use to reproach the kind of writing he does produce. Critical assessment of White Noise often seems to enact a literary-critical version of a philosophical "category mistake" or perhaps a sort of reverse anachronism whereby, rather than noticing the wrist watch on the hand of the charioteer in Ben Hur, (the future anachronistically present in the past), DeLillo is criticised for not continuing an aesthetic representational tradition that historical circumstances have made extremely difficult to reproduce in the same form. While not totally exhausted, the novelistic conventions to which Bawer alludes are found by some writers to be difficult to continue to deliver in the same form. The issues involved in these debates on DeLillo's writing are important ones. For even in Pico Iyer's sympathetic account of White Noise in Partisan Review, which described DeLillo as a "private man issuing a strangely private kind of fiction ... the closest thing we have to an Atomic Age Melville" ("A Connoisseur of Fear," 292), one still finds the following comment: "Just as DeLillo's characters are often not people so much as energies or eccentricities with voices, just as his suburbia is a crowded set of signs for a moonlighting Roland Barthes, so his speech is not normal discourse as much as a kind of rhetoric pitched high, a collection of phantom sentences, a chorus of texts without contexts" (293). The references to "phantom sentences" and "texts without

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<sup>25</sup> For cognate comments on Balzac, see Stephen Heath, The Nouveau Roman (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1970), 15-18.

contexts" will be taken up in more detail in a later discussion of the play of free indirect discourse in the novel. For the moment I want simply to note that this is another equivocal or equivocating comment and that coming, as it does, from a critic well-disposed toward DeLillo's fictional projects, it indicates how much more sharply those critics not so well disposed toward DeLillo's writing will assess his work.

A principal area of dispute concerning the novel's achievement involves the representation of the media, particularly television. Disch suggests that "the pervasive presence of the media in White Noise may indeed be its true subject" ("Maximum Exposure," 120), and Mobilio wonders whether the novel might not have over-emphasised the significance of the "electronic din" of television: "While [DeLillo's] grasp of television's fluid grammar and mine of broadcast patter are first-rate, perhaps he's come to regard the box as too sinister, too important" ("Crowding Out Death," 50). DeLillo's own account of this issue is that, in 1982, he began noticing the t.v. news: "Every night you'd have the sports, the weather and the toxic spill."<sup>26</sup> And he has also said that t.v. "seeps into my work the way daylight and moonlight seep into some writers, the way woodsmoke seeps into John Cheever's" ("Literary Heat," 57).

John Frow makes much of the presence of television in this context when he says that "real moments and TV moments interpenetrate each other — and it is, in any case, another [novelistic] representation which offers us this reality and this distinction. The world is so saturated with representations that it becomes increasingly difficult to separate primary actions from imitations of actions" ("Last Things," 421). But Frow is also careful to say that cultural criticism in the form of "the moralistic critique

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<sup>26</sup> DeLillo quoted in Rust Hills, "Literary Heat," Esquire, 110, 1 July 1988, 54. Subsequent references included in the text.

of the mass media that has been the stock in trade of liberal journalism" is not an option, "certainly not for this novel, which is much more interested, in its own ironic but unconditional way, in, for example, Murray's quasi-mystical experience of television" (423). Despite presenting a world of surfaces — with the supermarket "the privileged place for a phenomenology of surfaces" (427) — DeLillo's novel does not exhibit "a sentimental regret for a lost world of depths, a nostalgic opposition of surface to substance. There is a depth to be found in this world (this house, this novel), but it is not a fullness of being; rather it's the other end of the packaging process, a sort of final interiority of the wrapping" (427-28).

Eugene Goodheart points out that the main sites of experience in White Noise are the supermarket and the television screen, suggesting that the supermarket is "a trope for all sites of consumption."<sup>27</sup> And Charles Molesworth claims that

no other contemporary novelist could be said to outstrip DeLillo in his ability to depict that larger social environment we blandly call everyday life. Brand names, current events, fads, the society of the spectacle, and the rampant consumerism that has become our most noticeable, if not our most important, contribution to history, are all plentifully and accurately recorded throughout DeLillo's work.<sup>28</sup>

Much of this praise is in line with some of the things DeLillo has said he was trying to explore in White Noise. For example, he refers to "a sense of the importance of daily life and of ordinary moments ... I tried to find a kind of radiance in dailiness ... a sense of something extraordinary

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<sup>27</sup> Eugene Goodheart, "On DeLillo and the Cinematic Real," South Atlantic Quarterly, 89, 2 (1990), 359-60.

<sup>28</sup> Charles Molesworth, "Don DeLillo's Perfect Starry Night," South Atlantic Quarterly, 89, 2 (1990), 381. Subsequent references included in the text.

hovering just beyond our touch and just beyond our vision."<sup>29</sup> DeLillo claims he was attempting to convey "something that is almost there ... this other sense of transcendence that lies just beyond our touch." It is an "extraordinary wonder of things" that is "somehow related to the extraordinary dread, to the death fear we try to keep beneath the surface of our perceptions" (301). And these issues also seem bound up with DeLillo's depiction of the life of consumer fulfillment that America seems to offer its citizens, a promise DeLillo claims is never finally met in any satisfactory way.

On the matter of the extent to which DeLillo can be regarded as a moralist of contemporary culture, Mobilio had said that DeLillo was set apart "from moralists like Heller or Bellow" by his "understanding of the complicitous bond between individual and institution" ("Death by Inches," 49). DeLillo equally should be set apart from a conservative allegory on the baleful influence of television contained in Jerzy Kozinsky's Being There,<sup>30</sup> his update of Voltaire's Candide. At first glance, the difference between DeLillo and Bellow or Kozinsky might not be so apparent. After all, Bellow's novels are populated with self-doubting, self-interrogating characters (Herzog, Mr Sammler's Planet, Humboldt's Gift). But the difference is that, in Bellow's writing, this figure is presented within an utterly confident, moralising novelistic structure, whereas White Noise does not allow itself the confidence of cultural judgement found in a Bellow novel. (And it is difficult to imagine DeLillo writing the foreword to something like Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind.) And although White Noise contains the question, "were people this

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<sup>29</sup> DeLillo in Anthony DeCurtis, "'An Outsider in This Society': An Interview with Don DeLillo," South Atlantic Quarterly, 89, 2 (1990), 301. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>30</sup> Jerzy Kozinsky, Being There (London: Corgi, 1970).

dumb before television?," it is not a novel that exploits t.v., Kozinski-style, as a metaphor for cultural degradation. Rather it maintains an equivocal, equivocating, relation to the omnipresence of televisual representations.

Clearly the omnipresence of the media and the immanence of consumerism are major themes in the novel, and in her New York Times Book Review article, Jayne Phillips refers to DeLillo's depiction of "the endlessly distorted, religious underside of American consumerism," arguing that overall the book succeeds in "documenting ... epidemic evasiveness and apprehension, lack of connection to the natural world and to technology, ... bewilderment" ("Crowding Out Death," 31). A range of other commentators — from Frow to Johnston — are in agreement with Phillips on this point. Phillips finds the voice guiding the reader through the novel to be "one of the most ironic, intelligent, grimly funny voices yet to comment on life in present-day America" (30), a comment that deservedly found its way onto the back of the Picador paperback. For Phillips, the book's "greatest distinction" is in its "understanding and perception of America's soundtrack" (30).

Putting to one side the review format's institutional tendency to totalise and homogenise — evidenced in this case in the regularity of the use of "our" and "America's" — Phillips' allusion to a kind of sonic landscape or a cultural soundscape goes to the heart of much of the detail in the novel. It also helps explain the difficulties some reviewers have in locating with any certainty a principal narrative source in the novel, any suitably authorising origin for the play of the various discourses. Hence Phillips' notion of "bewilderment," which seems just the right word to describe the calculated play of intermingled cultural noises one finds in the novel.



For example, if we think of the various noises of expressway traffic, radio, television, lectures, telephone conversations, kitchen noises (the compacter, the toaster, the dishwasher), we notice that noise has various sources in the book and, further, that this constitutes a small instance of the book's more general practice of complicating the origin of utterances. White Noise is often vague about personalising enunciative sources. The regularity with which the book reports "the t.v. said," "the radio said," "a voice on t.v. said," becomes a means of indicating that cultural discourses and information have a social circulation that is impossible to trace back to any point of origin, impossible to fix or ground in any decisive way.

This is one of the ways in which the book presents what seems to me its most persistent figure: that of second-order information. Scattered throughout White Noise is the persistent trope of "floating remarks," various scraps of comment, bits and pieces of assertion, knowledge, information (in its broadest sense). It is a panoply of floating utterances derived from dispersed social spaces (radio, television, telephone conversations, supermarket loudspeakers, passers-by in the street), all of which add up to a world of anonymous, adventitious eavesdropping. This is one of the novel's major themes and is neatly encapsulated in the following dialogue exchange between Jack and Babette: "Where did you get that idea?" "I got it second-hand from Steffie" (52).

A deft comic rendering of the broad theme of communication gone askew, information that is half-right and half-wrong, occurs at the beginning of chapter 17 when the family is jammed into the car on its way to the mid-village mall. Denise wants to quiz Babette about the mysterious pill she is taking but the conversation rapidly shifts across a range of references, questions, answers, a series of statements followed by qualification or correction.

"What do you know about Dylar?"

"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 capital is Lagos," Babette said. "I know that because of a surfer movie I saw once where they travel all over the world."

"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."

"They go to Hawaii," Denise told Steffie, "and wait for these tidal waves to come from Japan. They're called origamis."

"And the movie was called The Long Hot Summer," her mother said.

"The Long Hot Summer," Heinrich said, "happens to be a play by Tennessee Ernie Williams."

"It doesn't matter," Babette said, "because you can't copyright titles anyway."

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

"Try an Audi Turbo."

"Try a Toyota Supra."

"What is it camels store in their humps?" Babette said. "Food or water? I could never get that straight."

"There are one-hump camels and two-hump camels," Heinrich told her. "So it depends which kind you're talking about."

"Are you telling me a two-hump camel stores food in one hump and water in the other?"

"The important thing about camels," he said, "is that camel meat is considered a delicacy."

"I thought that was alligator meat," Denise said.

"Who introduced the camel to America?" Babette said. "They had them out west for a while to carry supplies to coolies who were building the great railroads that met at Ogden, Utah. I remember my history exams."

"Are you sure you're not talking about llamas?" Heinrich said.

"The llama stayed in Peru," Denise said. "Peru has the llama, the vicuna and one other animal. Bolivia has tin. Chile has copper and iron."

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

"Bolivians," my daughter said (80-81).

The comic device consists in producing a series of statements which are "correct" to the extent that they identify "error" in a previous statement or

assertion but which at the same time, in that very act of correction, introduce a further factor of error, presenting different kinds of error, thereby effecting an exponential multiplication of misinformation. The sequence ends with the following comment: "The family is the cradle of the world's misinformation. There must be something in family life that generates factual error" (81).

White Noise consistently presents a series of shrewd indications of this more general cultural condition of distorted communication and information, specifically concerning the circulation of mass-mediated language and the relaying of second-hand information. A further example is to be found in the description of the airborne toxic event and the way it shifts through a series of descriptive registers, in part parodic of tabloid journalistic phrases and television network news reporting. When we read the sentence, "it was a black billowing cloud, the airborne toxic event lighted by the clear beams of army helicopters" (127), the narration is repeating phrases used in earlier dialogue exchanges, themselves reportings, retellings of media speech which had seen the description move from being a "feathery plume" (111) to "a black billowing cloud" (113) to "the airborne toxic event" (117). It is a situation in which a particular telling has assimilated an earlier telling such that when we encounter the sentence, "it was a black billowing cloud, the airborne toxic event lighted by the clear beams of army helicopters" (127), it comes as only the latest in a series of descriptive narrations with media hyperbole now included in "straight narration" (if such a thing can be said to exist in White Noise). The progression of this one description indicates at a micro-level the novel's more general cultural point concerning the way certain phrases or statements settle into the everyday, their origins

forgotten in a ceaseless flow of second-order information. Stuart Hall recently commented on this inescapable socio-cultural fact:

We used to have this notion that we really only learnt face to face with the world and I think we now know that that is not true. Most of our learning is secondary learning. We learn through words and through images; through information rather than through seeing what's going on. So I think we have many more sources to draw on now, and they're coming to us increasingly in visual terms, in the form of the image. But that is a shift in the form of the perception and it is a shift in the volume of messages that we have to deal with and codify and categorise every time.<sup>31</sup>

Hence the problem for literary-critical or cultural commentary, which sometimes is regarded as another form of second-hand information, although this need not be the consequence of a belle-lettristic attitude which regards criticism as parasitic on the body of the truly original literary work. Rather, it could be the consequence of the fact, discussed in the previous chapter, that we now inhabit a historical moment where the "fictocritical" has been said to replace the binary opposition of the "fictional" and the "critical."

White Noise seems to invite a range of taxonomising critical manoeuvres which it subsequently evades. For example, it could be placed in the sub-genre of the campus novel (and would keep good company with John Barth's The End of the Road).<sup>32</sup> Equally, it might be described as a novel about popular culture, the culture of the commodity and of the media (especially television). Or else it might plausibly be said to be about the new kinds of social spaces in which crowds now gather (supermarkets, shopping malls, highways, quad cinemas, fast food outlets, the very places a latter-day Walter Benjamin — of the Arcades project —

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<sup>31</sup> Stuart Hall, "Interview," Block, 14 (1988), 11.

<sup>32</sup> John Barth, The End of the Road (London: Penguin, 1958).

would be walking around and writing about). The book might be said to be meta-novelistic to the extent that it foregrounds forms of narration and the play of narrative voice. Examples here would include Jack's "impressionistic eighty-minute documentary" (25), in which "there was no narrative voice. Only chants, songs, arias, speeches, cries, cheers, accusations, shrieks" (26); the "young man" who narrates the air disaster (91-92); Babette's reading aloud of newspapers to a group of blind listeners: "Babette employed her storytelling voice" (142); "Babette changed her voice to do dialogue" (142); "Babette's voice resumed its tone of straight narration" (143); Heinrich's storytelling during the evacuation (130-31); the sequence in which Babette tells Jack the story of Dylar and Mr Gray (191-92).<sup>33</sup>

And even if we were to privilege DeLillo's description of his work as a comic novel about death,<sup>34</sup> this would entail the two most familiar options for discussing comedic form across media, namely the impulse to recite, repeat, reperform the funny bits or else to try to explain both the meaning of the comedy and the techniques which produced it. It is an

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<sup>33</sup> Ian Reid has devised a productive way of talking about the uncertainties or insecurities attaching to one's reading of *White Noise*. In his *Narrative Exchanges* (London: Routledge, 1992) Reid devotes five pages to a discussion of what he defines as the strategy of "narratorial dispossession" (59), citing the moment in chapter 26 when Babette tells Jack about her sexual exchanges with Mr Gray (and her profound fear of death) as a moment which means that "there can be no restoration of the earlier terms of the narrative exchange that this text had seemed to offer" (61).

<sup>34</sup> See Charles Champlin, "The Heart Is A Lonely Craftsman," *Los Angeles Times Calendar*, 29 July 1984, 7. DeLillo there says that his book is "about fear, death, technology.... A comedy, of course." See also Caryn James, "I Never Set Out To Write An Apocalyptic Novel," *The New York Times Book Review*, 13 January 1985, 31. DeLillo says there: "I never felt I was writing a comic novel before *White Noise*. Maybe the fact that death permeates the book made me retreat into comedy ... It's about death on the individual level. Only Hitler is large enough and terrible enough to absorb and neutralize Jack Gladney's obsessive fear of dying."

unenviable choice between the enthusiastic renarration of the fan or an insistent pedantry which is anxious to ensure that everyone get the joke.

In a situation such as this, one strategy — the one I have tried to practise throughout this chapter — is to play down any notion of commentary as a hermeneutic exercise performed on an autotelic text, in favour of a description of the intertextual dimension of the novel.<sup>35</sup> White Noise then becomes an “intertext” in Roland Barthes’ sense: “other texts are present in it, at varying levels, in more or less recognisable forms: the texts of the previous and the surrounding culture. Any text is a new tissue of past citations. Bits of codes, formulae, rhythmic models, fragments of social languages, etc. pass into the text and are redistributed within it ...”<sup>36</sup>

Jonathan Culler describes the intertextual as that which designates a work’s “participation in the discursive space of a culture: the relationship between a text and the various languages or signifying practices of a culture and its relation to those texts which articulate for it the possibility of that culture.”<sup>37</sup> And John Frow defines the intertextual as a field in which texts exist “as traces and tracings of otherness ... shaped by the repetition and the transformation of other textual structures.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> It is as if White Noise existed to justify Wittgenstein’s comment: “At some point one has to pass from explanation to mere description.” In Ludwig Wittgenstein, On Certainty, 189; 26e. Or, more accurately, it is an example of a literary work which prompts its commentator to hesitate between these two options.

<sup>36</sup> Roland Barthes, “Theory of the Text,” trans. Ian McLeod, in Untying the Text, ed. Robert Young (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 39.

<sup>37</sup> Jonathan Culler, The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 103.

<sup>38</sup> John Frow, “Intertextuality and Ontology,” in Intertextuality: Theories and Practices, ed. Judith Still (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), 45.

If we recall Frank Lentricchia's description of DeLillo as a writer who conceives of his vocation "as an act of cultural criticism ... whose work is a kind of anatomy, an effort to represent their culture in its totality," then it becomes appropriate to try to relate White Noise to some of those adjacent fields of discourse which enable a range of its meanings. But these other fields of writing do not constitute a metalinguistic point of entry to the fictional world of White Noise, a means of uncovering the "not said" of the novel. Rather they constitute some of the conditions of intelligibility of the text, delimiting its production and consumption, indicating what I call the novel's socio-literary visibility. Both White Noise and these other writings exist on the same discursive terrain, together forming the "surface" on which a particular form of writing and reading can occur. If we recall that Mobilio said DeLillo was "working a territory thick with social critics" ("Death by Inches," 49), and that Iyer described DeLillo's suburbia as "a crowded set of signs fit for a moonlighting Roland Barthes" ("A Connoisseur of Fear," 293), then academic critical discussion of the novel should hesitate to use certain discourses as a means of amplifying what the novel is held to have said all too gnomically or cryptically. Rather it is a case of saying that cultural commentary and novelistic fiction are to be regarded as optionally equivalent, and yet interconnected, practices of writing.

This becomes part of a larger theoretical question concerning the relation of the literary object to the theoretical writing it provokes. Is this writing to be thought of as "appropriate to" the literary object? As this chapter has demonstrated, in the case of White Noise this particular question has been most intensely focussed on the issue of the novel's relation to the discursive field of postmodernism. Some critical articles argue that since it is a book which contains references to semiotics and

simulacra, the media and popular culture, then it is appropriate to amplify the novel's statements by way of some of the statements of Baudrillard. For example, this seems to be the predominant strategy of Wilcox's article. But the theoretical issue is broader than the relation of White Noise to postmodernism and includes the relation of marxisms, feminisms, post-colonialisms and psychoanalytical theories to the fictional works they discuss. The two most familiar critical moves in these cases seem to be performing criticism as exposure or ideological critique, reading the text "against the grain" (for example a post-colonial reading of The Tempest or Heart of Darkness; a marxist analysis of Jane Austen or Henry James; a feminist critique of Henry Miller or of a Hitchcock film; a discussion of the "place" of women in westerns or film noir), or criticism performed as a process of amplification or discursive alignment (for example a marxist analysis of East German literature and film or of Anglo-American "proletarian writing"; a feminist analysis of Yvonne Rainer, Chantal Akerman or Sally Potter; a discussion of Blade Runner and postmodernism).

But another way of thinking the relation between criticism and the fictional would be to refer to the conditions of social visibility of texts. White Noise and articles on postmodernism in Flashart, interviews with and writing by Baudrillard in Artforum and Art in America, would indicate a shared cultural lexicon or set of cultural references. This then allows a slightly different way of thinking about the relation of criticism to the object which has occasioned it, permitting a concentration on the frame of intelligibility and use of the object. Criticism would not be thought of as having a parasitic relation to the novel. Rather than being regarded as a second-order activity, the book and its criticism would become one's unit of analysis, the book and its critical processings or



uptakes, since they share the same social-discursive space. It is not a matter of reading Baudrillard to understand the simuvac sequence in White Noise or to understand Malcolm Morley's paintings: each works in the same circuit, with DeLillo functioning as a social theorist and Baudrillard as a novelist, and vice-versa. White Noise thus is composed, in part, of bits of social theory.<sup>39</sup>

Consequently, to the extent that this chapter interweaves quotations from the novel and quotations from the cultural criticism of writers such as Barthes, Eco and Virilio, the roles of novelist and cultural critic can be regarded as interchangeable. In suggesting that an intertextual relation exists between these different domains of writing, I am following one of the precepts contained in John Frow's definition of the intertextual: "The identification of an intertext is an act of interpretation. The intertext is not a real and causative source but a theoretical construct formed by and serving the purposes of a reading" ("Intertextuality and Ontology," 45). The following remarks are an attempt to explore the extent to which White Noise can be related to some of these formulations on intertextuality.

One day in the supermarket Jack Gladney observes: "More and more I heard languages I could not identify, much less understand" (40), and in his reading of White Noise, Le Clair quite properly stresses "the complexities of information and communication" that surround Jack. In

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<sup>39</sup> Alternative examples of this might be the relation of the French "new novel" to the project of Tel Quel and other French literary-cultural journals or of some feminist, avant-garde, filmmaking to the theoretical project of the early issues of Camera Obscura. That is to say, a fictional form circulates in relation to a theoretical description of it, the latter working as a kind of manifesto for the former's cultural difference.

referring to the use of lists, usually product names, throughout the novel, Le Clair observes that these lists

do not always seem to be in Gladney's consciousness; rather they are part of the circumambient noise in which he exists ... Gladney's sentences are like these lists: short, noun dominated, sometimes fragmentary ... Often lexically and syntactically repetitious, Gladney's strings of declarations effect a primer style, an expression not of ignorance (for Gladney knows the language of the humanities) but of something like shock, a seeming inability to sort into contexts and hierarchies the information he receives and the thinking he does.<sup>40</sup>

If we set these comments alongside Barthes' description of contemporary culture as "a field of dispersion ... of languages,"<sup>41</sup> we begin to glimpse the kind of cultural criticism on offer in White Noise. Barthes again (although it could well be Jack Gladney): "each day, in myself, there accumulate, without communicating, several isolated languages. I am fragmented, severed, scattered ... And, even if I manage to speak the same language all day long, how many different languages am I compelled to receive." Barthes also remarked that "the separation of languages is a permanent grief" (101). Certainly it is a grief profoundly recognised by Jack Gladney.

Barthes' point is that contemporary society displays an excruciating division of cultural languages together with the strenuous fiction that culture somehow is unified and coherent. It is, moreover, a culture of repetition, of degradation in a special sense: "there is degradation because there is no invention; models are repeated on the spot, banalised" (104). Here the word "degradation" constitutes more a structural description

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<sup>40</sup> Tom Le Clair, In the Loop (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 211.

<sup>41</sup> Barthes, "Pax Culturalis," in The Rustle of Language, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 101. Subsequent references included in the text.

than it does a moral judgement. It functions more as a synonym for "degeneration," much as we would refer to a "degradation" of image resolution in a videotape that had been dubbed from a dub. Barthes notes:

Here, on television, an American spy serial: cocktails on a yacht, and the characters indulging in a kind of worldly banter ... but this has already been seen or said: not only in earlier works belonging to what might pass for another culture, in Balzac, for instance: one might suppose that the Princess de Cadignan has simply changed places, that she has left the Faubourg Saint-Germain for the yacht of the Greek Ship owner. Thus, culture is not only what remains in place, like an imperishable corpse: it is a bizarre toy that history never breaks (100).

With its inherited vocation of realism and the desire (alluded to by Lentricchia) to represent a culture in all its fragmented totality, White Noise, as novel, is obliged to perform the task of analytically incorporating the various degraded (in Barthes' use of the term) social languages surrounding its particular form of discourse. But this fact of the novel's inescapable social circumstance does not result in a mode of writing which fixes or places these other (let us call them mass media) languages with any olympian security.

In his 1980 discussion of DeLillo's writing, Norman Bryson had referred to DeLillo's refusal either to comment on narrative events or to judge characters ("City of Dis," 152). Speaking specifically of End Zone, Bryson said: "The absence of a central, flexible, embracing voice crucially affects how the reader hears the vocal lines. He knows that they are all deformed, ridiculous, radically incomplete; but he cannot say from where he knows this, because no speech within the text provides the triangulation points by which he can take his bearings" (148). Oddly enough, the practice of writing on offer in White Noise bears some resemblance to the strategies of Flaubert, at least as these are "rewritten" by



Roland Barthes. For example, insofar as White Noise provides its reader with “a subtle and complete panorama of the types of discourse”<sup>42</sup> which circulate in late twentieth-century culture, DeLillo becomes an example of a writing in which

the mimesis is without basis or prop: the cultural languages ... are cited ... but by an extremely subtle mechanism ... the author who copies ... remains unrecoverable, insofar as [De Lillo] never gives us a sure means of knowing whether he puts himself definitively outside the discourse he is “borrowing.”<sup>43</sup>

This is not to say that DeLillo is doing the same things as Flaubert and that a late twentieth-century American novelist who is here being discussed in relation to postmodernism and fictocriticism is the same as a nineteenth century French novelist whose work is discussed in terms of realism. But two things do occur to me about this juxtaposition. One is the extent to which it returns me to my opening remark which said that DeLillo might eventually be regarded as providing a slyly modernist meditation on things postmodern. Secondly, in the light of my discussion of the adventures of postmodernism as a critical term, particularly having regard to the comments of Eco and Frow, it is not so unusual a juxtaposition. But finally, my real point of comparison is not “what DeLillo wrote” with “what Flaubert wrote,” but rather what I claim DeLillo’s practice of writing is trying to do and “what Barthes said Flaubert was doing.” Consequently I will pursue a little further the aligning of White Noise with some of Barthes’ remarks on the discourses that circulate in a culture. And I do so because a significant part of the writing in White Noise positions itself in relation to “the language of mass

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<sup>42</sup> Barthes, “The Division of Languages,” in The Rustle of Language, 114. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>43</sup> Barthes, “The War of Languages,” Rustle, 113. Subsequent references included in the text.

culture (popular press, radio, television)" ("The War of Languages," Rustle, 107). Barthes referred to this as "encratic language," language that is "vague, diffuse, apparently 'natural' and therefore not easily discerned: ... the language of conversation, of public opinion (of the doxa); encratic language is both (a contradiction which constitutes its strength) clandestine (it is not easily recognisable) and triumphant (it is inescapable): I shall say that it is sticky" ("The War of Languages," Rustle, 108).

In White Noise encratic language is the language of "information and rumour" (129). Wherever crowds gather, wherever information is exchanged, opinion asserted, misrepresentation becomes the order of the day. "True, false and other kinds of news" (129) circulate. To read that sentence is to be halted by a mismatch between an epistemological realm in which true and false are understandable; even if one relativises the domain of the veridical and speaks of regimes of truth, there is a kind of security in nominalism. But to try to imagine what "other kinds of news" might be is an unsettling task. At this moment in White Noise knowledge is derived from where one works, knowing someone who works somewhere else, eavesdropping. "As people jolted out of reality, we were released from the need to distinguish" (129). It is a world in which "everything drifts and floats" (127).

This difficulty of distinguishing derives from the indistinguishability of the cultural discourses that circulate. I have already indicated that Murray is the vehicle for much of the book's commentary on the languages of popular culture. If we think of one of the vocations of the novel as genre to be the provision of a hierarchising commentary on the discourses and practices of contemporary culture, then it is clear that White Noise gives itself an alibi, by way of the character exchanges between Murray and Jack, for being didactic about popular culture. And the fact of its sub-generic

status as a campus novel provides a further alibi for such commentary: academic disquisitions on supermarkets, movies and shopping malls will not be out of place in such a context. Murray's own "in character" alibi is provided by his status as a displaced New Yorker, conveyed in his saying: "Supermarkets this large and clean and modern are a revelation to me. I spent my life in small steamy delicatessens with slanted display cabinets full of soft wet lumpy matter in pale colours" (38). Quite regularly, Murray becomes the vehicle for casting an anthropological gaze at the self-evidence of the contemporary cultural context. Often this is done by literalising certain locutions to a point of "making them strange," a sort of contemporary cultural studies practising of ostranenie. For example, during the airborne toxic event it is Murray who approaches a carload of prostitutes. "I heard a rumour about painted women and came outside to investigate. One of them is dressed in leopard lounge wear under her coat. She showed me. Another says she has a snap-off crotch. What do you think she means by that?" (149). Much later in the novel Jack follows Murray into the supermarket: "Blasts of colour. Layers of oceanic sound. We walked under a bright banner announcing a raffle to raise money for some incurable disease. The wording seemed to indicate that the winner would get the disease" (288).

Fredric Jameson once remarked that "no society has ever been saturated with signs and messages like this one,"<sup>44</sup> and White Noise provides a sustained meditation on some of the implications of that inescapable social fact. Partly by way of its virtuoso play of free indirect discourse, the novel is able to present a world in which "everything drifts and floats," its embedded discourse working to present a culture of "unverified

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<sup>44</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Reification and Utopian Mass Culture," Social Text, 17 (1978), 139.

information" (153), dramatising the problematic relationship between utterances and their origins, exposing the arbitrariness of any notion of there being a final point of discursive rest. Moshe Ron describes the use of the term "free indirect discourse" as constituting an attempt "to provide answers for questions concerning specific utterances in the mimetic text, such as: Whose words? Whose thoughts? Whose perceptions are these?"<sup>45</sup> This recalls Iyer's reference to "phantom sentences" and "texts without contexts" ("A Connoisseur of Fear," 293).

This situation is not so far from the changes brought by the moment of pop art, at least as Umberto Eco read that moment:

When the erection of the metalanguage is on the level of everyday speech, and of the life of the mass media: then no-one can keep track of it. Only one thing can happen: all differences between metalanguage and object language vanish. Everything becomes equal to everything else. It is no longer clear whether we are listening to a criticism of consumer language, whether we are consuming consumer language or whether we are consuming critical languages as consumer languages.<sup>46</sup>

For White Noise the question concerns how contemporary novelistic narrative might present the apparent unrepresentability of these other social discourses: if novelistic narrative is always already mass-mediated, then how can it indicate a space of judgement, commentary, "interpretative depth"? The characters in White Noise, jolted "out of reality" by the events of the airborne toxic event are, for a time, "released from the need to distinguish" (129), but it is not clear that this is a preferred reading position, an option either for novelist or reader.

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<sup>45</sup> Moshe Ron, "Free Indirect Discourse, Mimetic Language Games and the Subject of Fiction," Poetics Today, 2, 2 (1981), 18.

<sup>46</sup> Umberto Eco, "Lowbrow, Highbrow, Highbrow, Lowbrow," The Times Literary Supplement, 8 October 1971, 1210.

Insofar as the problem persists it is one of representation. For if every representation finds its origin in a chain of prior representation, if to some extent the novel does draw on Baudrillardian notions of simulacra and simulation, the notion of images as murderers of the real, "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal"<sup>47</sup>; if it is now "a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself" (Simulations, 4), then how is novelistic representation separable from that which it represents?; what can ground the dizzying oscillation of discourses?

Confronted with this question, it is helpful to recall John Frow's claim that in White Noise, "representations are lived as real" and his further point that a radical insecurity attends any attempt to distinguish between two realities (and to decipher the irony by which this is rendered). In saying this, Frow's description recalls Barthes' description of Balzac's Sarrasine: "The wall of voices must be passed through to reach the writing: this latter eschews any designation of ownership and thus can never be ironic; or at least, its irony is never certain."<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, Barthes' examination of the "braided — or braiding-voices" (S/Z, 45) which formed the writing of Sarrasine, his description of a "stereographic space of writing" (S/Z, 21), could well apply to White Noise, although we might want to refer rather to a "panasonic" space of

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<sup>47</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman, Simulations (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983), 2. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>48</sup> Roland Barthes, S/Z, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), 45. Subsequent references included in the text. In "City of Dis," Norman Bryson had identified this aspect of DeLillo's writing as early as End Zone when he said that the novel "provides no absolute discursive centre" and "at the precise point which demands the narrator's mediation and his secession from the particularized, out-of-shape discourses of the players, the novel withholds the cultural median voice which could represent the reader in the text" (148).



writing (especially since this was the preferred title of the novel, until legal injunction obliged an alternative choice).<sup>49</sup> Frow takes the episode of Jack's data profile to be exemplary of the way meaning functions in the novel: "Like so many signifying structures in White Noise it offers a profound interpretability but withdraws any precise meaning, or is at best deeply ambivalent" ("Last Things," 424-45).

White Noise might, in all this, be regarded as providing an indication of a distinctive and disturbing post-modernist nature-culture division. As Peter Wollen describes it:

In an age marked by an ever-increasing and ever-accelerating proliferation of signs, of all types, the immediate environment becomes itself increasingly dominated by signs, rather than natural objects or events. The realm of signs becomes not simply a "second nature" but a primary "reality" (the quotes around "reality" mark the effacement of the traditional distinction between reality and representation in a world dominated by representation, as described, for example, by Baudrillard, in vatic terms) ("Ways of Thinking About Music Video," 168-69).

For Wollen, Benjamin's "age of mechanical reproduction" is succeeded now by our "age of electronic reproduction," with a consequent intensification of some of the trends Benjamin discerned: "Reproduction, pastiche and quotation, instead of becoming forms of textual parasitism, become constitutive of textuality. Repetition and citation become the typical forms of post-modern cultural production" (169).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> "Panasonic" is the word which concludes chapter 32, sitting enigmatically in free-indirect-discursive solitude.

<sup>50</sup> One of the implications of the situation which Wollen is describing, the situation in which a book like White Noise finds itself — even places itself — is that the opposition between high culture and popular culture has to be rethought. That is, the relation between, say, the novel and television or the tabloid racks, has to be retheorised.

And in his remarks on postmodernism, Felix Guattari has alluded to a "mass media pollution of the collective subjectivity,"<sup>51</sup> a position quite close to Paul Virilio's pessimistic description of a social stage somewhere between Cronenberg's Videodrome and Laurie Anderson's notion, developed with William Burroughs, of "language as a virus." For Virilio we have entered a society of mass contamination (rather than communication) by viral images. This is a dystopia of a "contamination/pollution" society, a world in which "images contaminate us like viruses. These phenomena of contamination do not need to communicate anything whatsoever. A virus which contaminates me does not communicate with me. It's a one-way relationship. And I believe that television images in particular are epidemiological images."<sup>52</sup>

It is Babette's father, Vernon, who asks Jack the question: "Were people this dumb before television?," saying: "I'm counting on you to tell me Jack ... You're the only person I know that's educated enough to give me the answer" (249). And although DeLillo, as quoted earlier, has spoken of television as America's cathedral, saying television seeps into his work "the way the daylight and moonlight seep into other writers," I do not see this seepage as necessarily epidemiological.<sup>53</sup> Overall the novel does not present a moralistic critique of mass media so much as it presents an extreme ambivalence in the face of them. I have already claimed that DeLillo is not Jerzy Kozinsky or Saul Bellow, and it seems to me that White Noise displays an admirable and productive ambivalence in relation to any tendencies to make certain kinds of flip, baleful cultural judgements. So persistent is this attitude that the novel eventually comes

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<sup>51</sup> Felix Guattari, "The Post-Modern Dead-End," Flashart, 128 (1986), 41.

<sup>52</sup> Paul Virilio, "Interview," Block, 14 (1988), 5.

<sup>53</sup> See footnote 26.

to stand as a practice of writing which helps reformulate those modernist notion(s) of critical distance alluded to by Jameson. If we, as readers, of White Noise, relinquish the dream of fixing discourse in an adequate critical representation, then we might find ourselves positioned like the crowd that gathers after the airborne toxic event. For us too it would now be time to inhabit a space in which remarks existed in a state of permanent flotation. And — this would be the extent of our reading as rewriting — we would regard this as a positive and productive position, one which enabled us to listen in an open, hesitant, manner to the murmurings of the fictocritical.

## Chapter Three

### Writing "In the Direction of" DeLynn: Cruising/Reading Don Juan in the Village

Cruising is the voyage of desire. The body is in a state of alert, on the lookout for its own desire. And then, cruising implies a temporality that accentuates the meeting, the "first-time." As if the first meeting possessed an unheard-of privilege: that of being withdrawn from all repetition... Cruising is an act that repeats itself, but its catch is absolutely fresh.

That's why cruising is a notion I can easily move from the order of the erotic quest, which is its origin, to the quest of texts, for example, or the search for novelistic features ... [A]ll this should be related to the capture of sentences, citations, turns of phrase, fragments. The theme of the short text, obviously. When I try to produce this short writing, in fragments, I put myself in the situation of the author who will be cruised by the reader.

Roland Barthes<sup>1</sup>

[Cruising is a] metaphor for many adventures which are not sexual; the encounter of a glance, a gaze, an idea, an image, ephemeral and forceful association, which consents to dissolve so lightly, a faithless benevolence: a way of not getting stuck in desire, though without evading it; all in all, a kind of wisdom.

Roland Barthes<sup>2</sup>

It is not lived experience which literature describes but the conventions for organizing and interpreting that experience, conventions which are modified and informed by each instance of the genre.

Susan Stewart<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, "Twenty Key Words for Roland Barthes," in The Grain of The Voice: Interviews 1962-1980, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 231.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes, "Preface to Renauld Camus's Tricks," in The Rustle of Language, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 295.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Stewart, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 25-26. Subsequent references included in the text.

Insofar as this chapter constitutes another "interpretative occasion," one in which I hope to interest my reader in my reading of Don Juan in the Village, it does so in a way which continues the twin themes of hermeneutic hesitation and anxiety of commentary which have been emphasised throughout the thesis so far. In my Introduction I alluded to the difficulties that could attach to a straight male's reading of a lesbian cruising novel. A number of arguments, ranging from notions of essentialism and authentic subjects through to debates concerning political correctness are caught up in that particular critical hesitation, and I will have more to say about these debates as the chapter unfolds. The "interpretative occasion" contained in a straight male critic's reading of a lesbian cruising novel is a potentially fraught one insofar as it invites accusations of everything from voyeurism to a notion of a straight recuperation of an allegedly always already oppositional, marginalised form of writing. If I were to don this particular hair-shirt it would be inscribed with Pat Califia's phrase, "dyke daddy."<sup>4</sup> Consequently, my particular "uptake" of DeLynn's novel is carefully signposted and persistently stresses the issue of how one approaches a text, how one aligns oneself with it, much like my previous chapter's discussion of White Noise. For, different as DeLillo's and DeLynn's novels are, their critical processings exhibit some similarities. DeLynn's narrator has posed a problem for many reviewers much as Jack Gladney's narration unsettled some reviewers of White Noise. And DeLynn has been charged with producing a "politically incorrect" fiction in much the same way that some commentators found DeLillo's writing to be un-American. Reviews of DeLynn's book veer between criticising it for replicating gay male forms of writing, or for presenting "bad" representations of its sexual sub-culture,

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<sup>4</sup> Pat Califia, "Gay Men, Lesbians and Sex: Doing it Together," The Advocate, 7 July 1983, 25.

and congratulating it for having broken with a version of lesbian “feel-good” fiction in order to produce a more “literary” and/or “realistic” form of writing. As was the case with my readings of White Noise and My Life Without Steve, my interest in Don Juan in the Village concerns the extent to which a text which exhibits a degree of difference in relation to mainstream strategies of narration and concepts of character becomes a problematic text for particular practices of reviewing and commentary. What such debates seem to me to confirm is the need for a form of critical analysis which can take as its object the text (book or film) and those public institutional-discursive spaces into which such texts are pulled. This becomes the textual unit on which one concentrates one’s attention, and just as the last chapter offered a reading of White Noise in relation to the categories of postmodernism and the fictocritical, so this chapter seeks to place Don Juan In The Village in relation to the specific controversies which have attached to its critical reception. And insofar as I claim that a difficulty exists in locating a “non-anxious” critical space from which a reading of DeLynn’s book might be generated, it is a difficulty that can be described as involving the “positionality” or “directionality” of reading. As such, the particular anxiety of commentary on display in this chapter is nicely captured in some comments from Jacques Derrida.

In talking about the extent to which equivocation, heterogeneity and instability are to be found at the centre of any critical practice, Derrida tries to describe what “good” literary criticism might be. He decides that it would imply “a literary signature or counter-signature, an inventive experience of language in language, an inscription of the act of reading in the field of the text that is read.”<sup>5</sup> And he characterises the uncertainty of

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, “That Strange Institution Called Literature,” in Acts of Literature ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 52. Subsequent references included in the text.

how to “avoid the platitude of a supposed academic metalanguage” (60) by wondering whether his literary criticism is written “about, with, toward, for (what should one say? this is a serious question), in the name of, in honor of, against, perhaps too, on the way toward” (41) the literary texts on which he chooses to concentrate. Eventually, after citing Beckett as one of the writers “who make the limits of our language tremble” (60), Derrida suggests that his literary criticism could be thought of as writing “in the direction of Beckett” (62).

In a similar spirit this chapter writes “in the direction of DeLynn” by assembling a reading of Don Juan in the Village. While I cannot claim that my reading will be an inventive experience of language in language in quite the way Derrida’s literary-cultural criticism so often is, I can say that this particular interpretative assemblage utilises a number of critical modes, ranging from the straightforwardly authorial (insofar as I draw on some of DeLynn’s statements concerning her creative project in producing this book, and her comments on what might be thought to constitute “gay writing” — by which she means both gay and lesbian writing)<sup>6</sup> through to critical positions derived more from recent cultural studies writing. My discussion of the book also opens onto a number of larger discursive-institutional locales. By “institution” I mean the institutions of publishing and reviewing but also the institution of genre (many reviewers find the book difficult to classify) and the institution of political correctness, given that so much discussion of Don Juan has focussed on this issue.

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<sup>6</sup> Jane DeLynn, “What Makes a Gay Book Gay?” (manuscript), and Noel King, “‘Sentences That Can Lead Me Someplace’: An Interview with Jane DeLynn” (manuscript).

DeLynn's book was published in the United States by a mainstream publisher (Pantheon, a division of Random House) and in England by Serpent's Tail Press. It did not emerge from one of the smaller gay/lesbian/feminist presses and indeed was rejected by Virago Press and criticised by Barbara Grier, the editor of Naiad Press, who said she would not have published the book because of its "negativity."<sup>7</sup> Some idea of the ambiguous status of the book is conveyed by the fact that it managed to receive an endorsement from Brett Easton Ellis and also be selected as one of the books for the Feminist Book Fortnight held in London.<sup>8</sup>

I want now to turn to a consideration of the controversy that has attached to DeLynn's book. For the most part this controversy concerns how to "take" the book, how to classify it. For example, some of the book's reviewers regard it as having crossed from the category of "lesbian writing" into a higher aesthetic domain called "literary writing." Thus

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<sup>7</sup> Grier's comment is quoted in Gail Shepherd, "Don Juan: A Nasty, Selfish Lesbian in Search of Love," *Out* (Pittsburgh), June 1992, 28. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>8</sup> This juxtaposition is taken from Claire Monk, "10001 Lesbian Nights," *The Literary Review*, 199 (1991), 25. Subsequent references included in the text. Ellis' praise of the novel is carried on the back cover of the hardcover Pantheon edition, together with praise from Kathy Acker. Ellis says:

Each chapter of *Don Juan in the Village* carries with it not only the emotional punch of a short story (one or two of them are shattering) but also writing so finely crafted that, even though the only thing seemingly linking these episodes of sexual conquest and submission is the narrator's coldly urgent voice, a palatable and troubling suspense builds, and something frightening happens; we recognise ourselves whether we want to or not on just about every page. This is some of the most nakedly honest writing about lust I know of in contemporary fiction.

On the same back cover, Kathy Acker says: "These urgent and disturbing stories of thwarted and self-thwarted love ultimately become, via DeLynn's excruciatingly self-conscious narrator, a powerful metaphor of our intense alienation from society and each other. An intriguing portrayal of that strange and trance-like locus where lust and disgust become indistinguishable."



Carrie Barnett, co-owner of People Like Us Books, said of Don Juan: "There's a depth of style to it that signals a movement away from lesbian fiction to literary fiction. It's leaving the pulp behind, but as a genre, it's still very young."<sup>9</sup> And Jennifer Robles, in describing how DeLynn's book breaks away from conventional lesbian fiction, alludes to the way some instances of "gay fiction" have crossed a boundary into the domain of "literary fiction": her examples are writers such as James Baldwin, Edmund White, John Rechy and the recent novels from Andrew Holleran (Dancer From the Dance) and Alan Hollinghurst (The Swimming Pool Library).<sup>10</sup> This analogising of DeLynn's book with examples of gay male writing occurs across a range of the reviews and is given, by turns, a negative or positive valorisation. Carol Anshaw's review in the Voice Literary Supplement made precisely this point:

With Don Juan she creates a female analogue to the cruising literature of gay men — a dead-pan close-up of a woman constructing an identity through the rituals performed in bars. Setting herself apart with style and signature tics (should she be someone who drinks out of a bottle or a glass?). Defining herself by attractiveness and attractedness. Rating herself on the youth or celebrity or looks of the insignificant other of the evening. She repeats this process again and again, in search of fresh, instant readings on who she is at the moment.<sup>11</sup>

Sue George's review in Capital Gay stressed the same issue. George found the book to be "far from the loving if over-positive norms of lesbian feminism. In a manner stereotypical of gay men, she is driven towards all sorts of women — an isolated, self-conscious sexual adventurer who at

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<sup>9</sup> Barnett quoted in Jennifer Robles, "A Female Don Juan Cruises the Village," Windy City Times, 15 November 1990, 21.

<sup>10</sup> Robles, "A Female Don Juan," 21. Andrew Holleran, Dancer From the Dance (London: Penguin, 1978), and Alan Hollinghurst, The Swimming Pool Library (London: Penguin, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Carol Anshaw, "Review," Voice Literary Supplement, October 1990, 7-8.

3am will go home with someone she wouldn't have looked at twice an hour earlier."<sup>12</sup> Claire Monk felt the book had "more in common with the vigour of male (homo)sexual literature than with soft-focus lesbian pulp" and Monk also pointed out that DeLynn's novel differed from a book like The Swimming Pool Library to the extent that the heroine of Don Juan "cruises at the cross-roads of self-love and self-hate; seeking connection, she finds alienation" ("10001 Lesbian Nights," 26). Finally, Bo Huston's account in Outweek: "To me, the intriguing thing about the novel's character was the way she departed from conventional lesbian heroines and, in attitude and style, explored a path perceived as forged by gay male characters."<sup>13</sup>

These observations are equivocating to the extent that they say that the appropriation or repetition of aspects of a gay male ethos<sup>14</sup> and form of writing compromises the book in relation to a possible other, larger, political project, one which would be concerned to forge a distinctive discursive space of "lesbian writing."

Those accounts of the book which are not concerned to move it into the domain of the purely literary nor concerned to analogise its relation to gay male writing, but which rather choose to locate it within a sub-genre called "lesbian fiction," are still divided about the book's status and achievement. It is within this taxonomic domain — "lesbian writing" — that debates concerning the book's political correctness are played out most intensely. To read these reviews is to find absolute agreement about how to describe the actions and attitudes of the female Don Juan whose activities and

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<sup>12</sup> Sue George, "Review," Capital Gay, 28 June 1991, n.p.

<sup>13</sup> Bo Huston, "DeLynneations: A Talk with Author Jane," Outweek, 21 Nov. 1990, 59.

<sup>14</sup> On the notion of an ethos in this regard, see Mark Blasius, "An Ethos of Lesbian and Gay Existence," Political Theory, 20, 4 (1992): 643-71.

thoughts unify the book's fourteen episodic narratives. It is as if all the reviewers concurred with Roland Barthes' reference to "the cultural code which identifies Don Juanism with cruising" ("Preface to Renaud Camus' Tricks," in Rustle, 294). But what exactly is to be made of this description becomes an issue of considerable dispute. Some of the negative assessments of the novel's achievement are cited below as a way of indicating the sorts of issues at the centre of this debate. At the risk of preempting slightly the response to these reviews, it does seem to me that they play out, within the domain of a particular sub-cultural group, many of the issues raised in Beverley Brown's recent article, "Troubled Vision," in which she discusses questions of obscenity, pornography and libel.<sup>15</sup> My reason for thinking of this as an appropriate analogy derives from the fact that some lesbian reviewers seem to feel that DeLynn has "libelled" her constituency, if by "libel" one understands that "the feeling is one of insult, an attack on collective identities real or projected" ("Troubled Vision," 31). For these reviewers, the representation of a particular sexuality or sexual preference is the site of a particular problem, one which involves certain readers in saying that the forms of description on offer in the book are not politically appropriate. It is Brown's account of the different literary-legal interpretations visited on The Well of Loneliness and Lady Chatterley's Lover in their respective obscenity trials of 1926 and 1960 that prompts me to suggest this somewhat strained analogy between her historical description of obscenity law and the reviewing of DeLynn's book. Brown describes the legal-literary assessment of The Well of Loneliness in the following way:

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<sup>15</sup> Beverley Brown, "Troubled Vision: Legal Understandings of Obscenity," New Formations, 19 (1993): 29-44. Subsequent references included in the text.

The Well of Loneliness trial shows law's emerging "literacy": a book that describes lesbianism entirely in terms of what it is like to be a type of person (even to distinguishing inverts and perverts according to the sexology of the day), a book that trades on metaphors of the order of wheatfields parting in the wind and whose protagonist ends up herself writing a book called The Furrow, comes to be legally described by the judge as a series of depictions of sexual acts. What makes this reduction possible is a mode of interpretation that can construe the famously oblique sentence, "And that night they were not divided" (followed by a row of asterisks) as corrupting precisely because it was inexplicit. Imagining what it meant — filling in the blanks, conjuring the images — was exactly what would corrupt the reader. "A disgusting book when properly read," the trial judge put it, meaning that the very process of reading and reflecting and being an active constructing reader, was now identified as the problematic process (36).

Against this form of reading, Lady Chatterley's Lover was redeemed from the category of the exemplarily obscene texts (Raped on the Railway, Lady Bumtickler's Revels)<sup>16</sup> and moved into a domain of "serious sexual fiction" by way of a form of reading which could metaphorise the literal (for example, an interpretation which said that heterosexual anal sex was really about spirituality)<sup>17</sup> as opposed to Justice Biron's literalising of the metaphorical. As Brown says, "the Lady Chatterley trial was able to mobilise its experts" to produce "a supremely anti-realist reading" ("Troubled Vision," 42). I am not sure that these readings show the "law's emerging literacy" so much as the "law's emerging literarity." It is not an instance of a capacity to read but rather of a capacity to apply/activate, within the legal domain, different forms of literary reading, ascribing

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<sup>16</sup> This list is given in David Saunders, "The Trial of Lady Chatterley's Lover: Limiting Cases and Literary Canons," Southern Review, 15, 2 (1980), 170.

<sup>17</sup> See Ian Hunter, David Saunders, Dugald Williamson, On Pornography: Literature, Sexuality and Obscenity Law (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 96. Here the authors argue that towards the end of the nineteenth century, "serious literature began to experiment with the techniques of pornographic writing and to dice with obscenity laws." This play between "serious literature" and "pornographic literature" saw the emergence of a new object, "serious sexual literature."

different forms of literariness to the text. Although there is a considerable distance and difference between Justice Biron in 1926 and DeLynn's reviewers in 1990, there is also a strong sense in which DeLynn's book is either called to the dock of political correctness or redeemed into the category of the literary. It is as if the book has met a version of the fates of each of the books discussed in Brown's article. Since I have already cited the redemptive gaze cast at Don Juan, it now remains to examine some of the responses which find the book's representations to be politically incorrect.

Jennifer Robles finds the stories of repeatedly frustrated sexual experiences "tedious and, frankly, unbelievable."<sup>18</sup> Because DeLynn's book does not depict "getting laid and feeling good about it ... it doesn't seem true to lesbian experience ... In some ways then, Don Juan In the Village perpetuates the stereotype of the sad, suicidal lesbian who doesn't have happy love affairs or even gratifying tricks" (21). And Bertha Harris, in New York Times Book Review, says that DeLynn "far too often abandons her particular gift for deadpan irony to go wandering amid portentousness, tough-guy mannerisms and banal philosophizing. Again and again it made me feel like a bartender with a single customer and a long night ahead."<sup>19</sup> The London journal City Limits offered the following equivocation:

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<sup>18</sup> Jennifer Robles, "A Female Don Juan," 21.

<sup>19</sup> Bertha Harris, "The Women Wouldn't Dance With Her," New York Times Book Review, 21 October 1990, 15. DeLynn comments on the unethical nature of this review by pointing out that Harris had "trashed my second novel, In Thrall, in the Village Voice years ago, and I wrote a letter in reply, and it's absolutely unethical of her to have accepted the assignment (ie to review Don Juan). We have an in-print controversy, and she shouldn't have been writing a review of my book — it was outrageous and wrong. The bitch obviously dislikes me and my writing. There's a difference between a bad review and a trashing review." DeLynn, quoted in Huston, "DeLynneations," 59.

Distaste is a frequent refrain in these dispassionate trysts which will no doubt confirm the common het assumption that lesbian sex is dull and even revolting. But why worry? Aren't we through the positive imagery barrier and can now welcome a dyke anti-hero with open arms and some relief that this narrator voices our secret, silenced, anti-fat, anti-ugly prejudices?... Internalised lesbian self-loathing? An exploration of a massive ego? Or more like old-fashioned ennui which echoes the loneliness and disillusionment of post-coming out blues?<sup>20</sup>

Frequently, the negative reaction to the book overall is bound up with a negative response to DeLynn's narrator as a character. As Adrian Weston puts it:

The heroine of Don Juan is very vain. She is insecure and egotistical and totally obsessed with the impression which she is making at any time (even when blindfold and naked in an LA S & M bar). She is also cruel and uses people. Sometimes she is used and abused. Torn between lust and loathing, disgust and desire constantly jostling against each other, she is so full of human frailties that she is the sort of character that reviewers claim to be unable to empathise with.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, Linda Gibson, in The WeekOUT, noted that DeLynn's heroine had been accused of being very "lookist ... a character that hasn't entirely won the critics over."<sup>22</sup> Jewelle Gomez's review encapsulates this sort of response when it says: "I cross the street to avoid this type of person ... so spending time with her in a book is difficult to take."<sup>23</sup> For her part, DeLynn acknowledges that her book "goes against lesbian myths about women" but remains bemused at "why it's okay for Pat Califia to do this

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<sup>20</sup> "Don Juan In the Village," City Limits, 6 June 1991, 38.

<sup>21</sup> Adrian Weston, "A Great Lunch..." , Gay Times, September 1991, 51.

<sup>22</sup> Linda Gibson, "Seduction Seen," The WeekOUT, 27 July 1991, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Jewelle Gomez, "Don Juan In Hell," Outweek, 21 November 1990, 60.

and not me. Maybe it's because her books are more rah-rah about being gay and being superior. My books are about being human."<sup>24</sup>

The reviews which seem to me to be the "best" — in the sense of offering the most productive ways of thinking about the book's inventive fictional strategies — are those which are able to acknowledge the extent to which the book plays with notions of autobiography, confessional narrative and a range of other genres and sub-genres rather than delivering its narrative "straight." These reviews show their flexibility by allowing for a greater fluidity in the book's narrative presentation than do some of the more chastising reviews.<sup>25</sup> Gail Shepherd lays out the situation with precision when she says:

It's not surprising that a lesbian novel whose main character is as complicated, raunchy and downright unpleasant as Jane DeLynn's *Don Juan* should be greeted in both the gay and the straight press with a resounding chorus of disapproval. DeLynn's antiheroine is a politically-incorrect lesbian libertine with a number of repugnant compulsions and some pretty glaring character flaws. She's not the kind of girl you'd want to take home to mother, or to your PC feminist roomies, either ("A Nasty, Selfish Lesbian," 28).

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<sup>24</sup> DeLynn in Sarah Schulman, with Lisa Pilac, "Interview," On Our Backs (September/October 1991), 22.

<sup>25</sup> As a contrast, consider the following responses. Nicholas Lezard's review, "Erogenous Groans," in The Independent on Sunday, 6 June 1991, says that the book "carries the scent of autobiographical experience so strongly that one is surprised to see 'Fiction' stamped on the jacket... Don Juan is about, and narrated by, a lesbian, and like much lesbian fiction, it is too involved in itself to accommodate non-lesbians comfortably (but what it does so well is explain why this should be so)" (16). Contrast this to Elizabeth J. Young's review, "Cruise Missile," in New Statesman and Society, 31 May 1991, 34: "Technically very accomplished, it reads like naked autobiography. But it takes a glance at DeLynn's earlier books ... to see that she has long been a writer of considerable range and with a pronounced ability to cast herself in different roles. There is certainly some flirtation with autobiography in Don Juan, but it would be unwise to regard DeLynn as synonymous with her heroine."

Shepherd finds the book closer to André Gide's The Immoralist than to "the undistinguishable mass of 'upbeat' lesbian love stories published in the last couple of decades" (28).<sup>26</sup> Carol Anshaw supported this view of the novel by saying that DeLynn had created "a tough yet vulnerable hero,"<sup>27</sup> adding that

Don Juan's is a sad life but one certainly worth chronicling, if only to provide a counterpoint to the usually saccharine world of lesbian erotics — a land of tan, athletic gay women and creamy-complexioned straight ones on the brink of coming out, their downy thighs and circling tongues all tangled up in front of ski-lodge fireplaces and on the widely available deserted beaches (21).

Sarah Schulman, in her introduction to the On Our Backs interview with DeLynn, described her as a "lesbian Salmon Rushdie, vilified by dykedom ... [and] roundly criticised for defying dogma with her portrayal of a neurotic, boozing, sex-driven dyke who could care less about global sisterhood."<sup>28</sup> And Elizabeth J. Young, in her very positive review of the book, described the controversy that was surrounding it in the following way:

The lesbian community seems to have claimed this book as their own, as if it were straightforwardly confessional. Having done so they are now, inevitably, fighting over it. Is DeLynn to be reviled for representing a gay woman who grades her lovers ruthlessly in terms of looks and social class, and threatens them with all the cold brutality of a man? Or should she be congratulated for articulating what everyone secretly thinks as they attempt casual pick-ups? Or is it sustained satire? Ideologues may cringe but the book remains ambiguous.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Other reviews allude to a French literary tradition as a way of placing the book. The title of Claire Monk's review obviously invokes de Sade while Kirkus Reviews, 15 August 1990, found the book's style to be "closer to the French literary tradition than to the American" (58).

<sup>27</sup> Anshaw, "Review," 8. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>28</sup> Sarah Schulman, "Interview," On Our Backs, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth J. Young, "Cruise Missile," 34.



Young felt the book was more concerned with power than with sex, exploring the allegedly masculine phenomenon of investing status in successful sexual conquests: "The notion that women — unlike those beasts, men — overflow with tenderness, compassion, sexual healing and non-judgemental erotic bounty is truly sexist. DeLynn's clever, knowing book redresses the balance and puts this ridiculous belief to bed with sharp finality" ("Cruise Missile," 34).

The extent to which the book is drawn into debates concerning the appropriate representational modes and forms of characterisation that should obtain in fictional depictions of lesbian life-styles is addressed in Roz Kaveney's Times Literary Supplement review of a number of gay and lesbian books (among which is Don Juan). Kaveney says:

The writing of the lesbian novelists under consideration reflects the debates about sexuality over the past decade and a half. Lesbian separation demanded of its adherents a Grail Quest for an idealized mode of sexual expression, purified, not merely of role play and fantasy, but of any lust save that necessary to a deepening bonding of the like-minded. The limits that this complex of arguments placed on freedom of expression has produced, by opposition, a generation of lesbian writers aggressively committed to celebrating desire for its own sake and regardless of political correctness.<sup>30</sup>

Kaveney then goes on to say that DeLynn's book "deals with the search for politically correct desire," along the way managing to shatter "some optimistic and repressive myths about the sorts of things that nice lesbian girls don't do." DeLynn's comments on the issue of political correctness are appropriate to cite here:

I can see the utilitarian value of a politically correct line, especially early on in a movement. But that's not what literature is about. This whole concept, among writers and publishers, of feel-good

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<sup>30</sup> Roz Kaveney, "Subcultural Strengths," Times Literary Supplement, 8 March 1991, 18.

lesbian images is just garbage. To pretend that lesbians don't judge each other on looks and style and that we're not an incredibly cliquish and unpleasant group of people is just ridiculous.<sup>31</sup>

Lest it begin to seem in my selective quoting of these reviews that I am implying that the English press was better able than the American press to position DeLynn's book in terms of a broader cultural debate, better able to see it as a distinctive cultural intervention into the depiction of the life-style of an "embattled community,"<sup>32</sup> I will cite the responses of two astute American commentators, Kate Bornstein and Sherre Dryden, each of whom saw the book as performing a quite decisive literary-cultural intervention.<sup>33</sup> Bornstein saw the book as turning "inside out any notions of some universal lesbian nobility, allowing us to be the human beings we are" ("A Novel That Knows No Shame," 40). Like a number of other reviewers, Bornstein conceded that Don Juan was not "a pretty novel" but nonetheless found it to be "a beautiful and courageous novel filled with grace" (40, emphasis in the original). Dryden acknowledged that the book was "about the kind of sex, according to Andrea Dworkin, we should not want." And in trying to address the "shocking" aspects of the book Dryden said that DeLynn's strategy was to redirect the focus on where these "shocks" should be located: "The sex, explicit and about as far from nurturing as possible, is not what is shocking ... It is DeLynn's remarkable ability to convey the contradictions of simultaneous self-love and self-hate and to make erotic the dangerous and the sordid that is shocking." And on the contentious matter of whether DeLynn goes too far in depicting certain thoughts, Dryden observes: "People rarely act on or even admit

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<sup>31</sup> DeLynn, quoted in Huston, "DeLynneations," 58.

<sup>32</sup> Kaveney uses this phrase in "Subcultural Strengths," 18.

<sup>33</sup> See Kate Bornstein, "Appealing to the Alienated," and "A Novel That Knows No Shame," Bay Area Reporter, 18 October 1990, 39-40; Sherre Dryden, "A woman's quest for sex and love," Dare (Nashville), 3, 46 (1991), n.p. Subsequent references included in the text.

thoughts like this, but most of us have them. DeLynn's writing is mesmerizing because it is so accurate about these unarticulated bits of self-hate, about disconnection and difference, about the ultimate choice of the self instead of fitting in."

It is clear that this debate about what constitutes a politically appropriate 90s representation of a lesbian life-style often shades into notions of a certain kind of realism in writing versus a kind of sub-cultural political correctness which would call for another set of representations and a different representational mode. DeLynn's defence of her writing is simply to say that in order to depict this particular cultural milieu in ways that she regards as "realistic" she needs to write in the way she does. She is calling it the way she sees it and this is her social responsibility as a writer; she is not the dyke equivalent of a Party hack.<sup>34</sup> In order to make this defence DeLynn is obliged to appeal (strategically) to categories of the "human" and the "realistic" in an unproblematic way. This offers her a means of deflecting an almost lesbian-separatist political correctness critique which would say that she has betrayed her lesbian constituency by producing such "unaesthetic" representations. On other occasions, however, DeLynn is quick to position herself as a lesbian writer whose writing often handles issues relating to lesbianism. Her attitude towards these matters seems to me to correspond to some remarks made by Monique Wittig when, in talking about her translation of the work of Djuna Barnes, she spoke of the position of "minority writers" who had homosexuality as one of their themes.<sup>35</sup> Wittig claims that there is always

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<sup>34</sup> Representative comments from DeLynn on what might be called the aesthetic consequences of a certain conception of political correctness are to be found in "Interview," *On Our Backs*, 22, and in "DeLynneations," 59.

<sup>35</sup> Monique Wittig, "The Point of View: Universal or Particular?," *Feminist Issues*, 3, 2 (1983): 63-69. Subsequent references included in the text.

a chance that such a text will be diverted from its primary aim “which is to change the textual reality within which it is inscribed” (65). “Taken as a symbol or adopted by a political group, the text loses its polysemy, it becomes univocal” (65). The following comment on Barnes could equally apply to DeLynn: “Djuna Barnes dreaded that the lesbians should make her their writer, and that by doing this they should reduce her work to one dimension. At all events and even if Djuna Barnes is read first and widely by lesbians, one should not reduce her to the lesbian minority. This would not only be no favor to her, but also no favor to us. For it is within literature that the work of Barnes can better act both for her and for us” (66). Wittig also points out that minority writers “are menaced by the meaning even while they are engaged in formal experimentation: what for them is only a theme in their work, a formal element, imposes itself as meaning only, for straight readers” (67). “As meaning only” not only for straight readers but also for sectarian political readers, as the debate around DeLynn’s book demonstrates.

One implication of the political correctness critique of Don Juan in the Village is that DeLynn’s representations provide the “enemy” — that monolith known as the straight world — with ammunition to persist in denunciations of these sorts of alterities, these people and their sexual-cultural ethos. But if we acknowledge that DeLynn’s writing is produced in a much more “out” historical period, in a time when notions of a “gay sensibility” are more vocalised and visible, then one consequence of this changed historical-social circumstance surely is that her writing has an opportunity, even an obligation, to explore different representational modes. There are obvious parallels here between the reception DeLynn receives from some of her subcultural constituency and the way some

reviewers reacted to DeLillo's writing, as discussed in the previous chapter.

In Gays the Word Allegra Madgwick noted that the book "was greeted with dismay in some lesbian circles when it was published in the States last year" and added that "undoubtedly it won't do much for positive images, but its charms call for different criteria... This is neither pornography nor romance, though it makes reference to both ways of writing about sexual connection — or the lack of it."<sup>36</sup>

Precisely what those "different criteria" might be remains the issue. For example, while many of these reviews focus on the sadness contained in much of the narrative's observations, they do not then take that as a reason to say that the book overall is depressing or downbeat.<sup>37</sup> This seems to me a significant move insofar as it recognises the extent to which the book's narration opens a gap between that which it depicts and the way in which it delivers that depiction. It does this in a number of ways.

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<sup>36</sup> Allegra Madgwick, "Casual Conquests," Gays the Word, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Examples — from the reviews cited so far — which foreground notions of sadness, disappointment, emotional immiseration, but which still find the book exhilarating, are Shepherd, Anshaw, Dryden, Bornstein, Madgwick, Young. The following reviews support this position. The Los Angeles Times Book Review, 2 December 1990, 6, said: "I was reminded of the Yeats' line, 'The tragedy of sexual intercourse is the perpetual virginity of the soul.' Don Juan fascinates as it repels, and finally, is terribly moving." The St. Petersburg Times, 4 November 1990, said: "Writing with insight into the intricacies of thwarted desire, recounting in graphic detail her (often violent and shocking) sexual encounters, the author draws a haunting portrait of ... narcissistic suffering." Sebastian Beaumont's "Traumas," Gay Times, August 1991, 56, said: "Never satisfied [the] heroine progresses through her lovers with a curiously narcissistic self-doubt. DeLynn's prose is always sharp, always readable and her observations, whilst often sad, are remarkably fresh and inspired." Finally, Laurence Milne Henderson's "Don Roamin," Marxism Today, June 1991, 45, observes that the book ultimately deals "with the way sex works when it is forcibly detached from emotion, and the sadness of the womanizer eternally hovering in limbo between the two, hardly able to experience either one."

Overall, as most accounts of the book say, Don Juan presents a series of encounters involving humiliation, masochism, misery, delivered in a narrative voice which displays an intense self-consciousness and self-scrutiny. The events catalogued routinely mix disgust with desire, fascination with boredom, to a point of recalling Susan Sontag's observation — prompted by her viewing of Dianne Arbus' photographs — that: "Boredom is just the reverse side of fascination: both depend on being outside rather than inside a situation, and one leads to another."<sup>38</sup> Overall, DeLynn's book presents a sexualised version of a Conradian "fascination of the abomination" insofar as so many of its encounters involve the narrator spending time with someone who is one or more of "fat," "repulsive," "a pig," "ugly."<sup>39</sup> An intense disgust-desire relation is played out across the various stories: it is one of the dynamic binaries that animate the book's movement, along with the boredom-fascination couplet indicated earlier. So, in "Padova," the narrator is hitching to Verona ("This was the early seventies, when such modes of travel were acceptable — admirable, even," 99) and rapidly discovers that she is expected to perform a sexual favour on the man who is giving her the lift. The negotiation is that she masturbate him (having refused his advances on her by saying that she had her period). In a development typical of sexual encounters in the book, an event that begins by being figured as disgusting ends by being layered with an unaccountable degree of desire: "Despite his disgustingness, my body felt on fire, and I was almost sorry I had told him I had my period" ("Padova," 101).

The voice which narrates these dispiriting carnal events is energised, witty, intelligent. In this way the book calculatedly opens a gap between

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<sup>38</sup> Susan Sontag, On Photography (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 42.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Conrad, Heart of Darkness (London: Penguin, 1982 [1902]), 9.

the sad and emotionally immiserated events it frequently describes and the vivacity of its mode of describing them. And a further gap opens between the expectations set up in a reader by a generic scene and the direction in which the book moves after having set up a formulaic narrative mise-en-scene or tableau of a certain kind.

For example, in "Butch" we are given a detailed description of a sexual encounter, in the course of which we read: "'You're very sweet,' she told me" (228). But rather than provoke an immediate dialogue exchange or an intensification of the description of the physical encounter, this sentence is succeeded by the following statement: "I've always felt this to be true, though very few people have recognized it as such" (228). It is typical of a narrative strategy at work across the fourteen episodic narratives that comprise the overall narrative of Don Juan in the Village. There is no dialogue reply, no description of a physical gesture in response to the compliment. Instead we are taken to the interior of the narrating voice — who thereby becomes simultaneously present to and abstracted from a scene her first-person voice is describing for the reader. The narrative voice thus manages to give the impression of being both inside and outside its self-presentation, evoking a sense of being simultaneously present and absent during a sexual encounter. Sometimes the heroine is thinking of how she will boast about a particular event later, or just tell someone about it, or else she is wishing someone else were there with her, or that she were somewhere else. One of the possibilities opened up to DeLynn by the motif of being there and not being there is that novelistic description can be offered in a slightly different way. Thus DeLynn's reader occasionally encounters a description of a current event (that is, present continuous) only to find that it is a description which presents itself as the imagined future description of this event. It is a way of

allowing two temporalities into play simultaneously. For example, in "Padova," the narrator says of her encounter with Carlo and Francesca:

I imagined both the story I would tell my friends and the one I would try to write about this, how I would try to describe the aging apartment with the bidet in the bathroom, its mirrored wardrobes instead of closets, its high ceilings and wooden shutters, and also the way I liked not understanding what was being said — the subservient but not unpleasant feeling of being a kind of toy for these two grownups, one of whom was nonetheless younger than me (97-8).

An imagined future description provides the alibi for an immediate narrative description, allowing a play from a now to a future. It is a technique which allows for the description of a character-narrator's participation in a set of narrative events (the "immediate" scene) with a principal view to the renarration of those events. Throughout the book there is a persistent assumption that everything is either filtered through a grid of earlier representations or else exists only in order to enter a process of fictionalisation which is always anterior to the event described. This results in an insistent mediation — and often "mediatisation" — of the "immediate." It is a strategy (one assisted by having the narrator be a novelist) which allows DeLynn's book to stress two things: first, the immediate narrative description of an event will stand in some sort of relation to a meditation on a subsequent putting-into-storyness of that event; second, it permits a form of narration in which a self-conscious awareness of representational systems (analogous to Frow's identification of the trope of "priority of representation" throughout White Noise) will always impact on the rendering of the "immediate event" or "the event in its immediacy." Thus, in "Key West," the narrator accounts for an unsatisfactory erotic encounter by saying: "I had not had the energy to invent a story in which she could be someone I really wanted to be in bed with" (110). And at another point in the story she explores the



melodramatic possibility of throwing herself away on an aesthetically-intellectually inferior being:

I wondered what it would be like to live with her, to go to barbecues and talk about haircuts and who didn't call for the next ten years. Just how far would I go for a pretty face?

I told myself it would be far, very far, much farther than anyone I knew. The idea of being with someone stupid and unworthy — but with a heartbreaking, sexy beauty everybody would covet — exerted a powerful hold on my imagination. It seemed the wittiest and nerviest thing I could do; I yearned to boast about it, years later, in a bar. It was why my friends called me romantic, or immature ("Key West," 117).

What I want to stress here is the extent to which, across the various stories, one finds the corporeal immediacy of a given event mediated by a consideration of how far it deviates from an earlier-encountered representational form or by a consideration of how it will be put into narrative discourse at a later stage. To the extent that the book does this, it can be said to be working at the edges of the postmodern and the fictocritical, as these were discussed in chapter one. The book also contains a number of intertextual references, a consequence of its exploration of the trope of "real" events becoming indissociable from a recollection of a prior representational experience or else being caught up in the anticipation of a future telling or renarration. This is one aspect of the book's exploration of self-consciousness. Another aspect of self-conscious narration is given in the trope of the heroine-narrator's intense awareness of her self-presentation in everyday life. This connects with the mixed-genre status of many of the stories as amalgams of travelogue/tourism combined with the rendering of a certain degree of realistic gay history. This extreme alertness to the materiality of appearances and the productivity of representational forms regularly involves a notion of the performing self. DeLynn's narrator presents such an intense sense of the presentation of

the (sexualised) self in everyday life that seemingly every social transaction is read through a grid of sexual expectation — from whether to tip in a cab through to how to hold a drink at a bar, whether to use a glass or drink from the bottle. Such moments indicate the extent to which the heroine becomes caught up in questions of authenticity versus imposture, the genuine as against the fraudulent. Invariably it is the second set of terms (imposture, fraudulence) which proves to be the true condition of being in the world. So, in “Puerto Rico,” the heroine is wearing “a pair of gold jeans a friend had stolen from a chic Italian boutique in New York” (21). But apart from the designer label “they looked like they came from one of those cheap places that lined Union Square before it got cleaned up. ‘Puertan Rican’ stores my mother used to call them” (21). As I have already indicated, there is a postmodern edge to this playing with notions of the inability to distinguish between the authentic and the inauthentic. In this emblematic scene the heroine finds herself somehow (mis)placed in an authentic locale (the real Puerto Rico) beset by an anxiety that her appearance carries the semiotic stigmata of a form of third-worldism interior to the New York away from which she has travelled but in whose social terms she continues to define herself.

Understandably, given the emphases on performance and mediated representation, film references provide a particularly strong theme across the various stories. For example, it is difficult to read the title “Morocco” and not hear/see an allusion to Von Sternberg’s film of that name, with its central figure of Marlene Dietrich, especially given that she became such a cult/camp object for the gay/lesbian subcultures and also given that Gaylyn Studlar has examined Dietrich’s Von Sternberg films in terms of

theories of masochism.<sup>40</sup> Scattered throughout the book are references to Fred Astaire, film noir, screwball comedies, and Bernardo Bertolucci. So, in "Key West," the heroine is warned off a woman she has become obsessed with by the following line: "Keep bothering her and your pretty little face won't be so pretty anymore." Her response is: "This was film noir language and I laughed" (130). In "Caroline," the heroine is with the woman she wants to be with in an apartment she does not like and whose owner, Barclay, she does not like:

"Beautiful view, isn't it?" Caroline asked me. She had joined me on the terrace as I stood looking downtown and across the east river. Lights were everywhere: from the buildings of New York, the cars on the avenues and the drive, the stars overhead, and all of these reflected in the whitecaps of the river. In its black-and-whiteness, it was a little bit like an inexpensive downtown art movie, and a little bit like a screwball comedy from the thirties (160).

In "The Duchess of L. A.," after having "poopoo sex" explained to her, she responds: "'Do you do that a lot?' I asked in the same tone I would ask them if they'd seen the latest Bertolucci film" (140). Of all the stories in the book, "Fame" is the one which works most intensely with this trope, as will be discussed later. "Fame" also exhibits the postmodern practice of citation/quotation by invoking American and European literary figures at the same time as it incorporates figures publicised in magazines such as Vanity Fair: "As I slid down the bed I saw the World Trade Center out the window, winking at me with its red light. I was Gatsby, Eugene Rastignac, Norman Mailer, Donald Trump ... anyone who had conquered a city with the sheer force of longing and desire" (187).

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<sup>40</sup> Gaylyn Studlar, In The Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich and the Masochistic Aesthetic (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

Given these sorts of intertextual practices, the taxonomic uncertainty on display in many of the reviews of Don Juan in the Village seems an appropriate response to the way the book ranges across a number of generic-discursive possibilities. No doubt it also relates to the extent to which the book's narration proceeds by deflection and indirection (or unexpected direction). This is perhaps what some reviewers sense when they attempt a hesitant larger-level generic classification of a book whose calculated narrative indirection marks its distance from those other forms of fiction with which some reviews have aligned it. At one level a dyke cruising novel necessarily will be seen as a lesbian version of Cruising or Looking For Mr Goodbar. And just as those books overlay a detective story on their ostensible narrative, so DeLynn's heroine functions as a detective of sorts, if one thinks of that genre as having its origins partly in Baudelaire's figure of the flaneur.<sup>41</sup> The notion of the detective as a social explorer, possessed of an intimate knowledge of the city, an adept semiotician of the inner-urban, corresponds quite closely to the activities of DeLynn's Don Juan.<sup>42</sup> However, the traditional overlaying of detection and knowledge — so central to classical detective fiction — is stalled somewhat in DeLynn's book or at least is disappointingly circumscribed. As the narrator says in the "Epilog: 1988": "I had come to the bar for knowledge, but it turned out that knowledge was only about how to behave in bars such as this" (239). At this point an outsider in the venue or social locale that has drawn her so intensely across the fourteen stories,

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<sup>41</sup> Dana Brand, "From the Flaneur to the Detective: Interpreting the City of Poe," in Popular Fiction: Technology, Ideology, Production, Reading, ed. Tony Bennett (London: Routledge, 1990), 220-37.

<sup>42</sup> Perhaps those reviews which use the phrase "hard-boiled" to describe the persona are picking up on a layering of registers in the book's narration, the extent to which it plays with the "tough-guy," "hard-boiled," American school of American writing (Hammett, Chandler, Cain).

the narrator wonders "what they thought of me, these hideous familial units contemplating the subversive solitary being" (240). The paradox of a cruising context which links one-night stands with a quest for romantic love indicates another of the mixed-genre elements at work in DeLynn's book. Much of the book concerns unrequited love, its sexual-romantic encounters always layered with experiences of humiliation, masochism, degradation, fantasy, disgust, desire, regret. But this exploration of a notion of sexual tourism is linked with the romantic tradition of the quest narrative (in the medieval/romance sense whereby part of the quest is to become worthy of love) and is set against DeLynn's version of Groucho Marx's famous comment that he would never be a member of a club that would have him as a member. When, in "Fame," the heroine announces, "I wanted someone different, the kind of person who would never walk into this bar" (179), it indicates the extent to which DeLynn's book hovers between the "forever" of romance and courtly love and the "right now" of cruising and one-night stands.

These sorts of issues are made very evident in the story "Fame," in which the heroine is picked up by a famous actress in a bar. The story offers one of the book's most detailed accounts of the simultaneous presence/absence of the character-narrator to the events narrated, and as I have already indicated, this is very much a consequence of the narrator's self-conscious awareness of different representational regimes. In this case it concerns the extent to which a cinematic/video representation of the woman in question has replaced the person "in person":

Her breasts were bare, slightly orange in my light, but whiter near the window. It was odd; I had seen them so often before, not just in movie theatres but in this very room, for long minutes, with the pause button on my VCR turned to 'on.' I moved towards her, changing the middle-distance shot to a closeup as I sat down on the

windowsill in front of her. But the lighting was not as good as in the movie, and when I closed my eyes to put my mouth on her breasts it was the movie and not the real life image I remembered ("Fame," 186-7).<sup>43</sup>

For me, these sorts of scenes connect with some of Susan Stewart's remarks in her book On Longing, concerning "the social disease of

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<sup>43</sup> DeLynn has acknowledged the influence of Hemingway's style on her writing, as something she writes both with and against. One of her current projects, for example, is a rewriting of The Sun also Rises from the point of view of Robert Cohn rather than Jake Barnes. As she explains in "Sentences That Can Lead Me Someplace" (22):

I have a thing about Hemingway's style... Cohn is the one Jake is really having his thing with. Lady Brett is just the receptacle, or actually not the receptacle, for Barnes. I think the sub-text of The Sun Also Rises completely contradicts the main text, as opposed to enriching it. Cohn is always accused of being austere and so on, but apart from the bullfighter, he's the only one who gets to fuck Brett. Jake can't, supposedly, her fiance is an impotent alcoholic and the Count is a faggot. In addition, being a lesbian I always had a problem with this book. Why couldn't Jake satisfy Brett in other ways, you know, with the fingers, with the tongue? I always thought this was a very peculiar omission or absence both in the book and in discussions of the book and so I thought it was a really crazy book. I think the violent anti-Semitism is fairly well-acknowledged now, but being Jewish and lesbian, I found it a very fascinating book to try to deconstruct in terms of that sub-text.

Occasionally the prose style in Don Juan recalls, for me at least, the famous moment in A Farewell to Arms where the narrator says:

I did not say anything. I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain. We had heard them, sometimes standing in the rain almost out of earshot, so that only the shouted words came through, and had read them, on proclamations that were slapped up by billposters over other proclamations, now for a long time, and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity. In Hemingway, A Farewell to Arms (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957 [1927]), 177-78.

The Hemingway notion of a dignity residing in "real things" as against the mendacity of discourse is altered by the time of DeLynn. The security of that distinction is gone. Of the stories in Don Juan, "Ibiza" comes closest to the Hemingway theme of Americans abroad but across all the stories there is a trace of the Hemingway "voice."

nostalgia" (On Longing, x). Stewart talks about the relation of narrative and nostalgia in part as being about the relation of lived experience to mediated experience (22-23) and the first meaning of "longing" that is addressed by Stewart's book is "yearning desire" (ix). Some other formulations seem appropriate to DeLynn's book: "Nostalgia is the desire for desire" (23); "longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past..." (23). Earlier, Stewart has said that "the direction of force in the desiring narrative, is always a future-past, a deferment of experience in the direction of origin and thus eschaton, the point where narrative begins/ends, both engendering and transcending the relations between materiality and meaning" (x). The past sought by nostalgia "has never existed except as narrative" and the paradox of the narrative-nostalgia binary is that "the nostalgic dreams of a moment before knowledge and self-consciousness that itself lives on only in the self-consciousness of the nostalgic narrative. Nostalgia is the repetition that mourns the inauthenticity of all repetition ..." (23).

Across its different stories, DeLynn's book regularly marks its (often nostalgic) relation to a sub-cultural community by way of its references to an "us" and a "we" — as in the following statement from "The Waif": "She looked about eighteen but she was probably twenty-one. They're very strict about age in the bar now; it's one of the violations commonly used to shut us down" (4-5). This marking of a relation to a sub-cultural community produces a strong sense of being a specific sexual subject at a specific historical time. From "Iowa" to the "Epilogue," the stories in Don Juan in the Village convey a broader institutional history, a sharp sense of the different ways in which and degrees to which one can be "out" in particular socio-historical contexts. For example, in "Puerto Rico" the

narrator says: "This was a while ago, after people like us had gotten over the initial excitement of beginning to talk about ourselves and our condition both to ourselves and to the world outside" (18), and also says: "I had seen women dressed like this before, back when we were just beginning to talk about ourselves with excitement, in bars where women who knew nothing of this talk still dressed in ways that were a sign of the past we were trying to destroy" (23). As with the use of so many of the historical-temporal markers in the book — references to the time when people still ate white bread, the coming of the walkman — it allows DeLynn the possibility of a tone which conveys an ambivalent rendering of nostalgia and regret mixed within a version of a realist gay history: "Who knew that even then a virus was beginning to make its way through the beautiful bodies, a virus that would eventually bring seasons and death even to this place" ("Key West," 105). Perhaps it also indicates why it is so difficult to conceive of the individual stories as necessarily constituting a larger, linear, narrative progression. One of the central themes of the book plays with a broad notion of some things lost and some things gained, and one way of countering the view that there is no sense of progression across the fourteen stories would be to say that there is no obviously linear progression in the sense of a cathartic movement involving a psychological character's gradual, even painful, attainment of a wisdom not held at the book's beginning. The legacy of the Bildungsroman tradition is not strong in this book; its movement is ordered differently. But it is clear that the choice of an episodic narrative structure provides DeLynn with certain opportunities. She is able to link the perspective of a late 1980s woman on the edge of forty with perspectives relating to the various personal and institutional forms this character has taken across a twenty year period, from the earliest time of the 70s contained in "Iowa" through to 1988 in the "Epilog." She is thus



free to play with different tones across the stories and freed from any obligation to provide strong linear development; she is able to use repetition both as a content/thematic element and as a formal structural option.

Insofar as the book does constitute a kind of sexual travelogue, it is one which practises the "semiotics of nostalgia" which some recent cultural studies writing has associated with tourism.<sup>44</sup> I have already argued that nostalgia is a major theme in the novel, as one might expect from a narrative perspective which, in the opening story, presents itself as coming from a woman nearing forty who regrets not having had a child, and which goes on to move across repeated descriptions of sexual-emotional loneliness, loss and disappointment. In the book's opening story, "The Waif," the narrator says:

Years ago, when the picking up of women in bars was still an astounding novelty for me, I had found it difficult to fall asleep next to these exciting strangers, and this sleeplessness reminded me not of my current insomnia, but of the kind from that long ago and happier time. This feeling did not bring me closer to that time but made it seem even farther away, like the memory of a book read in childhood. At this moment, on the edge of forty, I would have traded all those nights for one human being, say ten or twelve years old, the child I would doubtless never have (6).

And one of the last stories in the book contains the following meditation:

The words "I love you" played through my mind, although I knew they weren't true. But I felt as sad as if they were true. For a while I lay there, then I maneuvered the belt off my hands, pulled out the dildo, and went into the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face. Even when I was back in bed, listening to the country music station play songs from a region I wished I had been able to escape from rather than move towards, as I was doing now, the sadness stayed with me. It was the same sadness that was always there, and it

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<sup>44</sup> See John Frow, "Tourism and the Semiotics of Nostalgia," *October*, 57 (1991): 123-51.

occurred to me I must like it. Why else did I keep going to the bars, if not to find it? ("Butch," 234).

In "Fame," the narrator refers to the way her recollections of former happy nights in a bar "could still arouse the memory of nostalgia, if not nostalgia itself" (179) and in the final story, "Epilog: 1988," there is a bitter-sweet description of the problems of nostalgia and recollection:

The person I was now could not remember the person I had been. I thought if I could remember the women I had been with then this might help me remember the woman who had been with them — the woman who was me — but I could not remember them. That is, even if I could picture their faces, they were no more familiar to me than if I had only seen them in a bar — or perhaps only imagined seeing them. I realised (or perhaps remembered, for surely it was not the first time I had had this thought) that even when I had been with them what I had really been doing was imagining them. Now I could not even imagine imagining them. It was as if it all had not happened, or was familiar, not in the way of life, but in the way of some old movie, nostalgic, and somehow lacking all connection with "reality" (238).

In comments of this kind, which abound in the book, the narrator practises a semiotics of regret. But this aspect of the book, so insistent, is overlooked completely when the book is being criticised from a position of political correctness — specifically in relation to its playing with the notion of being a sexual travelogue which activates different notions of "villages" and "natives," insiderness and outsidership. In the review already cited, Julia Gomez brought a stern, moralising literalism to this aspect of the book when she criticised the narrator's following remark (in "Puerto Rico"): "One of the things I like to do when I travel is fraternize with the natives, and of the many ways to do this, sex is perhaps the best" (17). Gomez comments: "it's not surprising that the Don's patronizing cool manifests itself as racism, as in her attempts to seduce the 'natives' when visiting Puerto Rico and Ibiza" ("Don Juan In Hell," 60). But DeLynn's sentence, with the metaphorising it allows (a play derived from

the colloquial abbreviation of a famous New York area to “the Village”) can become the focus of quite different interpretative uptakes. On the one hand there is the uptake contained in Gomez’s political correctness reproach. But this is a very tendentious reading, one which has to ignore the way DeLynn uses this motif elsewhere in the book. In order to say that DeLynn’s narrator is presented as a racist sexual tourist, Gomez has to ignore the way DeLynn has the motif apply within an American context as well. For example, on the book’s penultimate page, the narrator is back in the bar: “I watched for a while — as I would the natives of New Guinea or a married couple in Passaic, New Jersey” (239). Here, at the book’s end, the narrative voice reaches an eloquent pitch of loss and regret that has nothing to do with racism and everything to do with sexual alterity and outsidersness. In “What Makes A Gay Book Gay?,” DeLynn responds to Gomez’s review and specifically to its charge of racism:

Don Juan In The Village was subjected to an awful lot of negative reaction for everything from being racist and self-hating to being a downer. For instance, in Outweek, the director of the NY state program for dispensing money to the arts — a black woman — criticized as “racist” my protagonists attempts to “seduce the natives when visiting Puerto Rico and Ibiza.” I have always found the logic of this criticism incomprehensible. If I’d written about a white female character who visited Puerto Rico and wanted only to sleep with white women, surely this would have been racist too. Is the only politically correct thing for a white woman in Puerto Rico to do to be utterly chaste? (8).

Gomez’s review conveniently encapsulates much of the political correctness debate as it was played out in relation to Don Juan. As such it reveals the grid of reading that needs to be in place in order to produce criticisms of the kind Gomez produces. But if we allow notions of tourism to bring into play notions of nostalgia (which etymologically allows for a notion of “a painful journey home”) then it seems appropriate to know that DeLynn has referred to a degree of “nostalgia for the closet” that she

detects among gay writers. She has said that “until recently gay/lesbian style and strategy — both in life and in art — depended on subterfuge and codes. The need for that strategy is gone but with it goes a certain kind of richness. Maybe the next great gay/lesbian novel will be about that loss of richness.”<sup>45</sup> Michel Foucault expressed a similar sentiment when he said: “I actually liked the scene before gay liberation, when everything was more covert. It was like an underground fraternity, exciting and a bit dangerous. Friendship meant a lot, it meant a lot of trust, we protected each other, we related to each other by secret codes.”<sup>46</sup>

So much of Don Juan In The Village could be said to be about the “loss of richness” that comes from having things that were previously hidden and therefore intensely culturally charged, brought to what proves to be a disappointingly bland light of social acceptance. It is a paradox to which the book returns across its various stories as it persistently thinks through the question of what is gained and what is lost in the unfolding of gay sexual liberation. Although it is a point to which the stories return again and again, it is not so simple as to say that the situation depicted in “Iowa” has been improved upon by the situation depicted in “A Night on the Town” or “Butch.” A number of different things are happening simultaneously. On the one hand, “Iowa” does refer to a version of a “land of lost content,” as the following quotation makes clear:

A revolution was about to occur in the country that would change everything in ways we weren't sure of but which certainly would eliminate war, imperialism, racism, and the taking of required courses in college. I didn't even consider the possibility that this revolution might make it okay for people like me to sleep with other people like

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<sup>45</sup> Jane DeLynn, “Comment: Lesbian and Gay Literature,” Lambda Book Report, 2, 12 (1991), 7.

<sup>46</sup> See James Miller, The Passion of Michel Foucault (London: Harper/Collins, 1993), 254.

me without being thought of as abnormal or sick; even if things like that had been able to be discussed I wouldn't have known who to discuss them with because people like us had not yet begun to talk about ourselves as a group; there weren't even any names for ourselves except the old, imperial, insulting ones. When I thought about my condition it was always as a condition, a sickness, an affliction that was not my fault but for which I was forever going to be blamed (38).

But the book's moving coda — where the narrator speaks in a post-AIDS time of the envy she once felt for the spaces of sexual freedom (social, psychic) available to the gay males of her generation — makes it difficult to see the narrative as constituting a telos-driven movement to a better social-psychic state.<sup>47</sup> In a narrative voice that recalls the famous heroic-regret narrative codas of such American classics as The Great Gatsby, All The King's Men and U, the narrator says that the view from her apartment window looks over:

that broken-down old pier where men held their secret assignations. I would sometimes wander there with my friend Cam, marveling at the way the sunlight fell in broken stripes through half-rotted ceilings and walls collapsing onto floorboards through which one could occasionally glimpse the river. In these ruined choirs illuminated by horizontal shafts of late afternoon sun where you could see the dust beams dance, the quiet broken only by the groaning of floorboards and men, the unzipping of a zipper, the occasional smack of hand or belt across a body, I would feel I was in some unholy cathedral, one in which the scent was of marijuana and poppers rather than incense, the offering not wine and wafers but the white droppings of birds and men: the latter of which was absorbed

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<sup>47</sup> DeLynn's mobilisation of the Don Juan literary figure is mapped onto an autobiographical dimension and a larger political dimension. DeLynn has said that the book's genesis rested in part in her desire to write about her experiences of cruising in the lesbian bars of West Greenwich Village and has also said that she wanted the book to be positioned in relation to the great changes on social-sexual lifestyle that had followed from the emergence of AIDS. DeLynn makes these comments in her interview, "Sentences That Can Lead Me Someplace," but see also "Written in America (Interview with Noel King)," Burn (July 1993), 21-22, 24, and Noel King, "Cruising with DeLynn," Australian Book Review (July 1993), 62-63, 65-66. For her other comments on AIDS, see her piece, "Pretty Gay Lies: Are Men and Women Enemies in the War Against AIDS," QW, 50 (18 October 1992), 24-27.

by kneeling bodies in a mystic transformation of Idea into Flesh. And how could anyone know that amidst the dark, warm, moist lushness of herpes, clap, amebiasis, hepatitis, syphilis, crabs, etc, other transformations were taking place too?... And in the immense power of my imagination I would envy the calm purity of utter degradation, and curse the slowness, the laziness, the inefficiency, the cowardice and hypocrisy of women — so desirous of the amenities of conversation and a nice clean bed, a history for a face that would somehow provide Romantic justification for that utterly simple desire to explore the wet insides of another's body. For I had taken the promise of our liberation seriously, and thought that, with the right attitude, anybody could be perceived as the most desirable in the world — at least for one night ... And I would stay there as the twilight fell, as the lights across the water came on in a thousand houses and cars, the latter bobbing like buoys as they floated around such obstacles as trees and houses, and around me also would appear the burning tips of a hundred cigarettes, lit by men in the way of airports - less for illumination than destination — and I would wonder where my port was, and if I was ever coming home.

Now the baths are closed, the pier has long since been torn down, and with the revelers of those bright days so too my envy has gone. Hot nights for men now consist of circle jerks; many of the former "sluts" are chaste. I myself, as the song says, don't get around much any more (236-37).

Although the tone is one of classic American regret, and while I do not at all want to force a classical narrative structure onto these episodic narratives, it is difficult to avoid the reading habit of relating a book's opening to its conclusion. At the book's opening, the heroine is "trying to survive. Every night was a torment to me during which I prayed God not to let me jump out of the window and kill myself" ("The Waif," 3). At the book's end, the narrator says that on occasions when she fell in love, her loneliness was replaced by another person in the room until "quickly they became part of the furniture, the television, the paint on the walls, and the papers on my desk" (240). She then adds that this "disturbed me, of course, but in the immense vanity of my self-love and self-hate it was just one more way in which I managed to prove to myself and whoever was listening that I was the most incredible human being in the entire world"

(240). It is of course most immediately DeLynn's reader who has been doing this listening, and having listened across the fourteen stories, it seems to me that DeLynn's reader eventually comes to share with DeLynn's cruising Don Juan some version of Roland Barthes's description of "a way of not getting stuck in desire, though without evading it; all in all, a kind of wisdom."<sup>48</sup>

This chapter has sought to follow and extend the previous two chapters' explorations of some of the central issues contained in the critical writing that hovers around postmodernism, fictocriticism and the paraliterary. Having performed readings of three texts (My Life Without Steve, White Noise, Don Juan in the Village) which seem to me to be aligned with those theoretical debates in productive ways, I now turn to a consideration of a rather different theoretical position, one which conducts itself as a far from anxious critical practice and which expresses only exasperation when confronted with the heremeneutic hesitations I have been exploring across the last three chapters.

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<sup>48</sup> See footnote 2.

## Chapter Four

### Occasional Doubts: Ian Hunter on Self-Problematism in Interpretation

All criticism must include in its own discourse (even if it is in the most indirect and modest manner imaginable) an implicit reflection on itself; every criticism is a criticism of the work and a criticism of itself.

Roland Barthes<sup>1</sup>

I wonder if all criticism is not doomed to analyse its own perceptions.

Julia Kristeva<sup>2</sup>

Hence the combined role of criticism and ambiguity: the former never succeeding in freeing itself from the latter.

Michel Foucault<sup>3</sup>

Joan Didion's novel, Play It As It Lays, opens with the main character Maria saying: "What makes Iago evil? some people ask. I never ask."<sup>4</sup> As we read on we learn that refusals of this kind signal the "neurotic" aspect of her character. In this chapter I want to explore the extent to which some forms of contemporary cultural criticism (by which I mean the textual criticisms produced in the areas of literary and cultural studies) could adopt Maria's line as a positive, polemical slogan, indicating a thoroughly healthy attitude to take towards texts and their critical appropriations. This is not to suggest that we stop asking questions of texts, only that we

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, "What is Criticism?," in Critical Essays, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 257.

<sup>2</sup> In Catherine Francblin, "Interview with Julia Kristeva," Flashart, 126 (1986), 139.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, The Order of Things (London: Tavistock, 1970), 80.

<sup>4</sup> Joan Didion, Play It As It Lays (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 7.



try to discern at what point our questioning becomes compulsive, or perhaps merely compulsory.

This is the task that Ian Hunter recently has set himself by arguing, across a number of articles, that contemporary critical writing has come to conceive of itself as an intensely self-interrogating activity, one involving a systematic problematising of text and self — in the manner indicated by the quotations from Kristeva and Barthes above.<sup>5</sup> According to this conception of critical practice, to come to rest at any point, to accept a particular textual description as adequate, could only be construed either as a form of complacency or as a sign of a particular kind of failure or evasion. It would constitute a refusal to continue putting oneself to a textual-psychic test. From Hunter's perspective, however, all the various critical claims for textual openness and difference, all beliefs in unfixings of the text, must be seen as a series of personalising projects, so many exercises in self-problematisation and self-stylisation.

Consequently, to refuse to enter this process of ceaseless self-scrutiny would become a strategic way of saying that textual meaning is not always and everywhere problematic. The critical issue then becomes one of noticing when, and under what local circumstances, texts could be said to "require interpretation." In the face of a tendency for modern critical institutions to make texts difficult we could adopt the slogan, "do not go looking for misunderstandings," although it has to be said that not looking for misunderstandings has become difficult in a circumstance where contemporary literary-cultural critical institutions seem to oblige us

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<sup>5</sup> The main work from Hunter is Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education (London: Macmillan, 1988) but see also the articles by him noted below.

to complicate texts in particular ways and/or ask us to perform innovative exegetical acts of one kind or another.<sup>6</sup>

Hunter argues that it is the deployment of a post-Romantic cultural apparatus which results in the enigma of the text becoming the enigma of the one who reads it. This is to say that for many forms of contemporary criticism, all texts have an occluded or, to use Frank Kermode's term, an "occulted" dimension precisely because the readers of these texts tend to treat their immediate perceptions of them as a sign that they do not yet know themselves.<sup>7</sup> Such a critical practice — the problematisation of self and text or, more accurately, self via text — constitutes not so much a formal description of a text as a particular use or deployment of a text for an ongoing activity of self-scrutiny, self-shaping, self-problematisation. It is a process in which a lack of aesthetic balance or a lack of sufficient self-reflexivity will always await correction in the reader.

Ian Hunter has argued these sorts of points by suggesting that post-Romantic literary criticism functions as a discipline for incorporating literature in a definite and limited practice of self-problematisation and self-stylisation. Hunter claims that these circumstances formed the conditions under which literature came to be implicated in a particular aesthetic-ethical practice, functioning as a key instrument for critical work on the self. For Hunter this is a process which receives a typical

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6 For recent "complexifications" of texts see the way mainstream cinema has been analysed in film journals such as Screen, Camera Obscura, Quarterly Review of Film Studies, enclitic and East-West Film Journal over the last ten years or so.

7 Kermode says: "The modern critical tradition, for all its variety, has one continuous element, the search for occulted sense in texts of whatever period." Kermode, The Art of Telling, 24, cited in David Bordwell, Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 2. Subsequent references included in the text.

formulation in Schlegel's reference to a potential reader of Goethe's Wilhelm Meister as "one who only half-understands the work" and as one for whom "out of disturbance and doubt, knowledge might emerge, or the reader might at least become aware of his incompleteness."<sup>8</sup> It is Hunter's contention that "at this time criticism acquired the task of problematising the reading of literature in order to achieve the ethical problematising of the reader" (164). The suggestion is that this moment inaugurates the long period in which readers become acutely aware of their inadequacies and incompleteness: "from the Romantics onwards the typical reader ... is the reader 'who only half-understands the work'" (164). Hunter's further claim is that "the systematic misunderstanding of texts required by theoretical criticism is in fact an 'occasional' phenomenon: something that can only be achieved under a definite regimen of problematisation" (174). Hunter here is describing a situation in which the text comes to constitute "a surface always revealing ethical incompleteness and intellectual failure" (183) on the part of the reader.

The remainder of this chapter is an attempt to understand the significance of Hunter's excursions into literary theory. And there does seem to be a need to make a case for the significance and interest of this work. For, apart from some recent writing from Tony Bennett, Simon During, Toby Miller and Meaghan Morris,<sup>9</sup> Hunter's writing has not

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<sup>8</sup> Ian Hunter, "The Occasion of Criticism," Poetics, 17 (1988), 164. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Tony Bennett, Outside Literature (London: Routledge, 1990), 167-190; Toby Miller, The Well-Tempered Self: Formations of the Cultural Subject (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Meaghan Morris, Great Moments in Social Climbing (Sydney: Local Consumption Press, 1992); and Simon During, Foucault and Literature: Towards a Genealogy of Writing (London: Routledge, 1992), 186-194.

attracted a great deal of critical attention.<sup>10</sup> Still it seems clear that a familiarity with Hunter's work is what helps Tony Bennett allude to "the conception of the literary text as unfathomable — as the site for an endless practice of reading which can never be wrong yet never be right."<sup>11</sup> Bennett notes that this way of conceiving of a text sees it as "an artefact of the relation of correction and supervision inscribed at the centre of modern literary education" (280). Earlier in his book Bennett had mentioned "the organisation of a distinctively literary system of truth by means of that artefact of literary criticism — the unfathomable text — which, while allowing that some statements may be disqualified as false, partial, inadequate or incomplete, allows none to be validated as finally true" (271).

Remarks of this kind seem to me to have been generated by some of Hunter's explorations of appropriate ways to think about literary theory and literary pedagogy. If the previous chapter explored the notion of "hermeneutic hesitation" as a particular critical posture, this chapter (and the one which follows) explore a notion of "hermeneutic exasperation." Once again, it is not a question of claiming that this is the critical position to take on all issues. Rather it is an attempt to push this particular critical attitude, one I find in a range of Hunter's writing, to a certain limit. I think it is important to explore this limit, given that the points Hunter is making have a pertinence beyond the domain of literary critical practices and pedagogies, as I hope to make clear in the next chapter when I align

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10 Those parts of Hunter's work dealing with the history of "English" have attracted more attention. See Typereader, 2 (1990), special issue devoted to Culture and Government. It is also likely that Terry Eagleton's description of English as a "moral technology" derives from Hunter's work: see Eagleton, "The Subject of English," Cultural Critique, 2 (1985/6): 95-104.

11 Tony Bennett, Outside Literature, 280.

some of Hunter's arguments with some arguments made by David Bordwell in his book, Making Meaning.

By probing Hunter's formulations I am also trying to determine how far I am willing to endorse them. For quite often, in reading Hunter's work, I find myself initially persuaded to his position only to find myself later thinking that the argument is overstated. I then find myself in the awkward position of wanting to retain some of the things contained in some of the theoretical positions which Hunter is subjecting to such strenuous critique or else I find myself inflecting some of the work Hunter has used to generate his distinctive critical position in directions which seem partly to contradict or limit aspects of that position. Consequently, as I work through Hunter's arguments in this chapter I am hesitating — in the manner I described in my Introduction — between full and partial conversion to his position.

Hunter's formulations on what I will call texts and their differential uptakes<sup>12</sup> makes use of some of the writing of Wittgenstein, Weber, and Peter Brown, and he explicitly acknowledges the influence of Foucault's description of ethical practices in late antiquity. In a sense what Hunter has done is use Foucault's (and Weber's) description of ethics as a "practice of the self" as a model for generating a different understanding of the practice of literary-cultural criticism.<sup>13</sup> (The way in which Hunter draws

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<sup>12</sup> See Alec McHoul and Tom O'Regan, "Towards a Paralogics of Textual Technologies: Batman, Glasnost and Relativism in Cultural Studies," Southern Review, 25, 1 (1992): 5-26.

<sup>13</sup> See Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976); Michel Foucault, The Use of Pleasure, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1985); Peter Brown, Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982); The Making of Late Antiquity (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978); The Cult of the Saints: its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity (London: SCM Press, 1981).

on the work of Wittgenstein will be discussed later in the chapter). While commending Hunter on the innovativeness of his formulations on textuality and interpretation, we should not forget the strong anti-hermeneutic tendency contained in French structuralism, a tendency clearly conveyed in the writing of an English language mediator of that tradition, Jonathan Culler. For example, Culler's The Pursuit of Signs contains statements such as "one thing we do not need is more interpretations of literary works,"<sup>14</sup> and also says that "we need to resist the assumption that interpretation is the task of criticism" (16). Culler believes that we should concentrate on "the conventions and operations of an institution, a mode of discourse" (5).

Although Hunter's writing does seem to lie outside dominant critical formulations and paradigms, one can still find some confirmatory testimony for his overall thesis. In Politics and Letters, for instance, Raymond Williams refers to his experience of studying literature at Cambridge in the 1930s. He describes the seminar situation as one in which "I was continually found out in ignorance, found out in confusion ... and I looked at myself with radical doubt."<sup>15</sup> And in a review of this book, Stuart Hall, recalling his own experience as a colonial (Jamaican) subject at Oxford in the 1950s, provides the following gloss on this moment in Williams' life: "He records with feeling ... the sense ... that any critical statements he made could be immediately beached by a knowing reference to a comparative text he had not read."<sup>16</sup> In seeking to historicise the practice of "literary discipline," Hunter can be seen to be

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<sup>14</sup> Jonathon Culler, The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 6. Subsequent references included in text.

<sup>15</sup> Raymond Williams, Politics and Letters (London: New Left Books, 1979), 51-52.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Williams Interviews," Screen Education, 34 (1980), 96.

offering a genealogy of precisely the situation that confronted Williams. In Culture and Government, for instance, Hunter treats I.A. Richards' Practical Criticism — the manual of “Cambridge English” — as a milestone in the institutionalisation of the formerly esoteric practice of aesthetic self-problematisation.<sup>17</sup>

Another way of understanding the distinctiveness of Hunter's account would be to recall that Roland Barthes once described literature as “that ensemble of objects and rules, techniques and works, whose function ... is precisely to institutionalise subjectivity.”<sup>18</sup> Hunter's elaboration of this would be to suggest that the subject so formed is an ethical, self-doubting, self-interrogating one. So much is evident in his argument that the literary text

is the chief instrument of an interrogative technique in which the master of the text discerns the outlines of the student's character on the grid of the latter's responses. It is the unimpeachable surface on which the student finds his own uncertainties diagnosed, the puniness of other knowledges exposed, his emotional immaturity laid bare. The text is the surface of a pedagogy that reads the student and gets him to read himself in the mirror it provides, and in the process secures the internalisation of the disciplinary setting as conscience and consciousness.<sup>19</sup>

Hunter's recent writing seems to me in part generated by a desire to account for just this systematic production of doubt and confusion in the reader/student, a situation clearly described in the Raymond Williams' anecdote. It constitutes an attempt to describe a situation in which “the

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<sup>17</sup> I.A. Richards, Practical Criticism: A Study of Literary Judgement (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1929). For Hunter's comments see Culture and Government, 22-24.

<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes, On Racine, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983), 172.

<sup>19</sup> Ian Hunter, “Literary Discipline,” Southern Review, 17, 2 (1984), 133. Subsequent references included in the text.

exemplary sensibility of the teacher diagnoses the aesthetico-ethical imbalance and incompleteness of the student."<sup>20</sup> In this particular pedagogic-critical practice the pedagogical relations of criticism are characterised by a "sophisticated play between giving and withholding information — between the transmission of information and the triggering of response."<sup>21</sup> This is held to create an environment in which "the student reads the work in order to be wrong about it" ("Learning the Literature Lesson," 70).

Here it is worth noting that this running together of the figures of "reader" and "student" does not imply that the situation described is confined to the university seminar room. It should be remembered that the pedagogical imperative entailed in this exercise predates the arrival of modern mass education, having emerged historically as a voluntary ethical exercise. This was the form in which it was used by eighteenth-century aesthetes or virtuosi. Part of Hunter's argument in Culture and Government is that the modern secondary and higher educational school system adapted this exercise to a much more systematically administered pedagogy.

In "The Occasion of Criticism," Hunter seeks to historicise the idea that "our relation to texts is characterised by systematic misunderstanding — and that texts are always in need of interpretation" (167). He wants to show that it is only relatively recently that "systematic misunderstanding" has become the "irrevocable condition of a true interpretative relation to

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<sup>20</sup> Ian Hunter, "From Discourse to Dispositif: Foucault and the Study of Literature," Meridian, 10, 1 (1992), 14. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>21</sup> Ian Hunter, "Learning the Literature Lesson: The Limits of the Aesthetic Personality," in Towards a Critical Sociology of Reading Pedagogy, ed. A. Luke and C.D. Baker (Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 1991), 68. Subsequent references included in text.



texts" (168). For Hunter one of the origins of this notion is captured in Schiller's remark: "But it is by no means always proof of formlessness in the work of art itself if it makes its effect solely through its contents; this may just as often be evidence of a lack of form in him who judges it."<sup>22</sup> Hunter treats this transposition of "formlessness" from the work to the reader as emblematic of the emergence of criticism as a practice of ethical self-problematisation. And if it is true that this mode of relating to and using aesthetic texts can be given a positive history, then one needs to notice the techniques of self-problematisation and self-deprecation which allow readers to constitute themselves as incomplete and to say something like: "I am the way I am because I cannot understand or can only half-understand this text."

At first glance it might seem that Hunter's position, as I have described it, is quite close to the "neo-pragmatism" of a Richard Rorty or a Stanley Fish. When Rorty characterises the pragmatist position as one which makes no distinction between interpreting a text and using it, and when he argues that texts have no essential internal or external coherence, it might initially seem aligned with Hunter's position.<sup>23</sup> Given that Rorty's pragmatism is, in part, generated from a reading of Foucault and Wittgenstein there would be grounds for seeing some overlap. As Rorty explains it, the pragmatists blur any distinction between "finding an object

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<sup>22</sup> J.F.C. Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, trans. Elizabeth Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968 [1794]), 157.

<sup>23</sup> See Richard Rorty, "The Pragmatist's Progress," in Interpretation and Overinterpretation, ed. Umberto Eco (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 89-108. For the reference to Wittgenstein, see Richard Rorty, "Texts and Lumps," in Objectivity, Relativism and Truth: Philosophical Papers, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 78-92. For a definition of the pragmatist position, Rorty refers his reader to Jeffrey Stout, "What is the Meaning of a Text?," New Literary History, 14 (1982): 1-11.

and making it" and regard textual coherence as the adventitious outcome of "the last roll of the hermeneutic wheel, just as a lump of clay has whatever coherence it happened to pick up at the last turn of the potter's wheel" ("The Pragmatist's Progress," 97); it is something that is produced in much the same way as one produces shapes by joining dots. For the pragmatist, "we make objects by speaking about them," and textual coherence does not precede its description within another (critical) discourse. Knowledge is not to be thought of as "accurate representation" since "all anybody ever does with anything is use it. Interpreting something, knowing it, penetrating to its essence, and so on are all just various ways of describing some process of putting it to work" ("The Pragmatist's Progress," 93). This critical position has the potential to become something like a structuralist version of the conditions of possibility for the perception of an object, given that the pragmatists seem to erase the notion of the text-in-itself simply by construing textuality as the pure artefact of its use(s) — where "use" equals "conditions of perception."

Hunter's position differs to the extent that it says one can never set the text off somewhere apart, as if it inhabited a separate visual field, since the text and the things done with it are the artefact. This is what Hunter means by using the Foucauldian term of dispositif.<sup>24</sup> Hunter's sense of the "occasion" of criticism does not think in terms of a critical apparatus being brought to a text, being brought to bear on it, standing in some sort of relation of exteriority to it. For Hunter, criticism is "occasional" in a different sense; one in which the act of writing criticism and the object

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<sup>24</sup> For an account of what is implied in this term, see Gilles Deleuze, "What is a dispositif?" in Timothy J. Armstrong, ed. and trans., Michel Foucault: Philosopher (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 159-66.

(film, novel, play) written about, together form part of a single device or dispositif. Criticism, thus conceived, starts to lose its status as a cognitive, "scientific" operation and instead is taken to be "ethical." The "critical occasion" becomes the performance of a particular ritualistic "practice of the self." As Hunter phrases it, "commentary and the novel ... are treated as optionally equivalent instruments or devices deployed by a certain aesthetico-ethical regimen" ("Learning the Literature Lesson," 76).

Some of the clear points of difference between Hunter's position and the pragmatist position can be derived from those sections of "The Occasion of Criticism" in which Hunter explicitly criticises the work of Stanley Fish ("Occasion," 175-83). But I want here to outline in more detail some of the points of difference between Hunter and the position Rorty is putting in "The Pragmatist's Progress." The main difference is apparent in the extent to which Rorty's pragmatism, for all its folksy earthiness, remains an attempt to solve a particular (post-Kantian) problem of knowledge. For all its eschewal of deep structure and the like, the question persists in Rorty's writing of how we can "know the text" given that we initially are cut off from "immediate" access to it. The issue then concerns the extent to which what Rorty means by the "use" of a text is related to "knowledge" of the text. In one sense Rorty might be saying that we "know" texts because they "mean" whatever "use" we happen to have for them. Rorty sets up a certain interpretative situation by saying "the text is indeterminate, therefore how can we know it?" This then allows for a response which puts forward the solution contained in the pragmatic account with its stress on social conventions. The Hunter point differs from this in the following way — and given that philology holds such a charm for Hunter I will use philology as my example. From Hunter's position one would say that philology does not initiate a circumstance in

which it is possible to say "the text is indeterminate." Because it does not begin by asking this question, philology has no need to treat social conventions as a solution to an epistemological problem. Philological description thus begins by saying that there is no general problem of knowing the text. Historical research will make clear the conventions used in particular instances of textual production and consumption. The conventions are not therefore objects of hermeneutic introspection but of "positive description."<sup>25</sup>

Eventually, Hunter's move is a more intensely Wittgensteinian one than Rorty's to the extent that Hunter asks whether the vast number of aesthetic readings of texts falls within a domain of knowledge at all. Further points of difference between Hunter and Rorty can be pursued by outlining their different conceptions of "practices of reading." The Hunter position shares with Rorty's position the belief that practices of reading are indeed "uses" of texts but Hunter's position would insist that, in describing these practices, one is not attempting to solve the problem of how we know texts by, for example, recovering their practices of reading. For Hunter, practices of reading are not things that we fail to know or even can attempt to know. It is not that we fail to know these practices but rather that these practices (of verification or disconfirmation) determine what we call knowledge. They are things in whose use we are directly trained and which, generally speaking, we use without doubt. My gloss on Hunter's point here is to say that we inhabit practices of reading. For

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<sup>25</sup> What Hunter seems to mean by "positive description" — a phrase he uses in "Literary Discipline" — is a form of critical description that is unconcerned by the question of "the conditions of possibility of experience." This would be any disciplinary configuration which was content with its descriptive procedures as they were, eschewing all meta-level justifications of those procedures. Historical philology and demography would be examples of such a discipline.

Hunter such practices are not epistemological. In making this claim Hunter's position approximates the one contained in Wittgenstein's remarks, in Culture and Value, to the effect that it would be a mistake to treat Christianity as a doctrine of historical truth since the whole point of Christianity is that it transforms the way one lives or, as Wittgenstein phrases it, "the direction of your life."<sup>26</sup> Christianity provides a particular narrative and says: "believe, through thick and thin, which you can only do as the result of a life" (Culture and Value, 32e). It is not a theory "but a description of something that actually takes place in human life" (Culture and Value, 28e). To say that we "inhabit" practices of reading also allows me to retain a sense of "habitus," which seems appropriate to the anthropological dimension of Hunter's argument: that is, the concentration on an object of analysis which is composed of the text and the things done with it. An alternative (spatial) metaphor for this perspective would be to say that Hunter's work attends to textual alignments and dispositions, in the sense of being concerned with the particular procedures by which we come to align ourselves with a textual object, range ourselves alongside it or dispose ourselves toward it.

Overall, Hunter is not seeking to provide a "theory of the text" but rather is claiming that the way one handles texts, the way one conducts oneself in relation to texts, is the crucial point of interest. If we recall the question Hunter puts concerning when doubt is necessary in relation to textuality, this constitutes his presentation of a non-epistemological overcoming of scepticism. This distinguishes his position from those forms of positivism or empiricism which would say that the non-doubting textual moment is the moment in which one has an

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<sup>26</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, trans. Peter Winch, ed. G.H. Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 53e. Subsequent references included in text.

unproblematic access to the text, a moment in which the absence of doubt results from some way of asserting a veridical epistemological perception. Hunter's position avoids saying that we have a true perception based on epistemological notions, saying instead that we conduct ourselves in a particular manner and call it "perception." Hunter is not involved with the description of a condition of "radical doubt," predicated as it would be on a theory of the subject, but rather is describing what I would call "circumscribed zones of doubt."<sup>27</sup>

By now it should be clear that one particularly significant aspect of Hunter's writing rests in the way it opposes an epistemological model of the understanding of literary texts to an account of an ethical technology which is said to have the "facticity and local rationality of an apparatus (dispositif)" ("Occasion," 166). It is probably from a reading of Foucault and Wittgenstein that Hunter comes to insist that we never go any deeper, any place more profound than the "surface level" constituted by a dispositif, by our being able to repeat or perform a particular cultural practice. This is to say that we never move beyond a set of inculcated techniques with which we have a practical familiarity, with those techniques which generate various kinds of literary-critical interpretations providing a case in point. As Foucault says: "There is no sub-text. And therefore no plethora. The enunciative domain is identical with its own

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<sup>27</sup> Some of Wittgenstein's comments on doubt seem pertinent here. See Wittgenstein, On Certainty, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979). Some representative comments on the systemic nature of doubt, the fact that doubt only emerges in particular circumstances or "games," are the following: "One doubts on specific grounds" (60e; 458); "Doubting has certain characteristic manifestations, but they are characteristic of it in particular circumstances." (33e; 255); "What would it be like to doubt now whether I have two hands? Why can't I imagine it at all? ... So far I have no system at all within which this doubt might exist." (33e; 247); "Can I doubt at will?" (29e; 221).

surface.”<sup>28</sup> John Frow’s gloss on this is to say: “The unsaid is not ... a repressed discourse which could be restored. Gaps, absences and limits are merely that — determinate and finite moments of discourse.”<sup>29</sup> And if it is the case, as Hunter claims, that the text never appears “in a domain of free observation but on a surface of inculcated techniques and compulsory actions,” (“Literary Discipline,” 132) then these techniques and practices form a “literary sense.” In opposition to epistemological and psychoanalytic theories of “subject formation,” Hunter argues that “the acquisition of capacities inside cultural apparatuses is a protracted and contingent affair” (“Occasion,” 179). He describes the contemporary critical institution as “a field of analysis whose contours are set by the patchwork of ethical practices, pedagogical imperatives, positive knowledges and instituted relationships that makes up the literary field” (“Occasion,” 175).

One of the central features of this account is its rejection of a binary opposition which would oppose “theoretical” and “ethical” criticisms. For example, from Hunter’s position, it is self-deluding to think that structuralist and post-structuralist criticisms represent a critique and supercession of New Criticism. This is because the usual mode of conducting this critique — whereby New Criticism is denounced as an ideological practice incapable of taking account of its conditions of possibility — is itself taken to be symptomatic of a particular ethical-intellectual practice. In Culture and Government, Hunter argues that post-Romantic “practical criticism” is not to be thought of as an ideology but rather as a positive ethical technology. It should be regarded as a modern spiritual discipline, one which, however it might regard itself, has

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<sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, The Archaeology of Knowledge, trans. A.M. Sheridan-Smith (London: Tavistock, 1974), 119.

<sup>29</sup> John Frow, Marxism and Literary History (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 80.

no cognitive claims on the text and so cannot be criticised for failing to be clear about such claims. “Theoretical criticism,” far from being in a position of judgemental exteriority to another critical mode, is itself an instituted relation, one that pursues self-clarification through the compulsory sceptical problematisations of “first impressions.” Hunter’s analogies at this point seem to derive from a reading of some of the work of Peter Brown (The Making of Late Antiquity), but David Bordwell also provides a nice account of this procedure when he says: “I have been trained to look for significance — that is, I assume that any film worth interpreting has something consequential to ‘say.’ I further assume that what the film says is not ‘literally’ on the surface but is instead meaning of an implicit or symptomatic kind; that is, I look for interpretability” (Making Meaning, 31-32).

For Hunter, “practical” and “theoretical” criticism are equally far removed from more descriptive (for example, philological) approaches to literature and are, in a sense, both forms of ethical cultivation insofar as each makes perception opaque for higher ethical ends. Given that Hunter wants to say that “knowing the text” is not always and everywhere a problem, his descriptive aim becomes more a matter of noticing the means by which a text comes to be incorporated in a particular style of life or practice of existence. One analogy for the model Hunter is proposing would be the way seventeenth-century religious lyrics formed part of broader devotional practices — as was argued in the 1950s by Louis Martz in The Poetry of Meditation.<sup>30</sup> Martz tied Donne’s meditative lyrics to various meditative practices, pointing out that particular treatises, manuals and devotional books, translated from French, Spanish and

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<sup>30</sup> Louis Martz, The Poetry of Meditation: A Study in English Religious Literature of the Seventeenth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954). Subsequent references included in the text.



Italian, circulated in such a way as made it easy for “continental methods of meditation” to reach “a large body of educated Englishmen” (13). Similarly, some significant work on the development of the novel as a genre has tied it to conduct manuals and the keeping of diaries.<sup>31</sup> Such critical work constitutes a strong, if often overlooked, empirical side to literary studies. Bordwell refers to this as a tradition of “positivist scholarship,” (*Making Meaning*, 262) and Stephen Greenblatt has called it the “positivist historical scholarship of the early twentieth century.”<sup>32</sup> In recalling the philological tradition, it should be remembered that for this critical practice, a text required interpretation when it had become historically-culturally distant, had been written in a foreign language, had been corrupted by other hands or was of dubious authenticity. For this particular form of criticism the problematic dimension of the text was a quite practical, contingent matter determined by its age or the language in which it was written. It did not constitute a perpetual problem and could be clarified more or less definitively precisely because the critical practice employed was not a technique for calling the self into question.

As has been indicated already, Hunter’s critique of an epistemological model of criticism proposes a model of criticism which would notice what was done with the textual object, noting what operations were performed on it. Such a view construes the text as a device, or armature within particular conducts of life and practices of the self. Here it is interesting to set Hunter’s account of the ethical exercises done on the self — in relation to the artefact of the unfathomable text — against accounts of the processes

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<sup>31</sup> This work is cited in David Saunders and Ian Hunter, “Lessons from the ‘Literatory’: How to Historicise Authorship,” *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (1991): 479-509, especially 504-6.

<sup>32</sup> Stephen J. Greenblatt, “Towards a Poetics of Culture,” in *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1990), 146.

of self-analysis and self-examination contained in Ignatius Loyola's Exercises, as these are described in Louis Martz's work. In a chapter entitled "Self-Knowledge: the Spiritual Combat," Martz notes that "the process of self-scrutiny does not end in self-contempt, but moves beyond this to a recovery of self-esteem; self-contempt is only a half-knowledge: full self-knowledge demands a recognition of the incalculable value of the Image which lies beyond and beneath all deformity" (152). Hunter's position seems to me to suggest that those people whose relation to literature consists in what we might call "learning to be unhappy with themselves" stay at that point of "half-knowledge" contained in the moment of self-contempt or self-deprecation or whatever phrase one uses to describe a self-chastising, self-mortifying state. On the basis of Louis Martz's writing, however, the following question suggests itself: is this an accurate description of the literary version of "spiritual combat"? This would be to say that there is no equivalent of the "Image and its incalculable value" waiting to move the literary subject on to a further stage. Or, alternatively, does some secular, "fallen," version of this final movement regularly take place in ways that Hunter has not described? I pose this question, and use Martz's work as an example, in order to indicate my reluctance to pursue Hunter's position to its austere and polemical conclusion, while also acknowledging the extent to which I want to avail myself of some of the virtues of its austerity.

Working from Schlegel's remark in his Critical Fragments to the effect that "a classical text must never be entirely comprehensible. But those who are cultivated and who cultivate themselves must always seem to learn more from it,"<sup>33</sup> Hunter makes the following observation:

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<sup>33</sup> Cited in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism, trans. Philip

We make certain texts inscrutable as a condition of performing a certain kind of work on ourselves. We should not assume, therefore, that such a use is absolute. Under other circumstances — for example, those of philological description and rhetorical practice — such texts might be perfectly comprehensible and transparent (“From Discourse to Dispositif,” 23).

The sort of thing Hunter is arguing for here does have some support in available literary historical scholarship. For example, when Stephen Orgel describes the Renaissance court masque, he seems to me to be working in the manner to which Hunter is alluding, to the extent that Orgel is saying that these are texts whose initial uses are now foreign to us.<sup>34</sup> Insofar as this is the case they can be said to require a kind of historical interpretative reconstruction but once this has been done, there is no need to think of these texts in terms of any project concerned with recovering interminably the dimension of their “not-said.” In The Illusion of Power Orgel’s critical project is to explain a particular ritual that is no longer part of social life — the staging of the Renaissance monarch’s divine pre-eminence in a symbolic spectacle — but which once was implicated directly in the production of dramatic works. He discusses texts and contexts which have become historically, socially opaque to us, and this is quite different from assuming that texts possess a perpetually unknowable dimension.

However, a more recent piece from Orgel finds him discussing various practices of textual emendation of Shakespeare, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, and arguing that textual incomprehensibility was given a positive valorisation in Renaissance culture.<sup>35</sup> Orgel argues that what

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Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 40.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Orgel, The Illusion of Power (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975).

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Orgel, “The Poetics of Incomprehensibility,” Shakespeare Quarterly, 42, 4 (1991): 431-37. Subsequent references included in the text.

“is concealed in the process of interpretation .... is the effort of will, or even willfulness involved. The method of elucidation assumes that behind the obscurity and confusion of the text is a clear meaning, and that the obscurity, moreover, is not part of the meaning” (433). Orgel goes on to question the assumption that “we are, by elucidating, recovering meaning, not imposing it,” further claiming that the elucidations, marginal glosses and footnotes of Renaissance editions make “the idea that we are recovering meaning by looking up hard words and sorting out syntax ... very difficult to maintain” (434). For what such textual rewritings tend to overlook is the extent to which “the Renaissance tolerated, and indeed courted, a much higher degree of ambiguity and opacity than we do; we tend to forget that the age often found in incomprehensibility a positive virtue” (436). Orgel closes his article by referring to Aby Warburg’s analysis of “two of the learned spectators’ accounts of the famous Medici intermezzi of 1589, probably the best documented of the great Renaissance festivals, and observed that the meaning of the performance, and indeed the very identity of the symbolic figures, was opaque to even the most erudite members of the audience” (437). In thus suggesting that textual obscurity might have been precisely what was expressed to a Renaissance audience, Orgel seems to me to allow for the presence of a productive, culturally tolerated, even valorised, notion of “vagueness and confusion” (437) in particular texts. And although this is an aspect of Orgel’s work which Hunter’s position would not want to privilege as much as other aspects (namely, the possibility of a decisive historical clarification of textual opacity) it nonetheless provides an unexpected link between the critical practice discussed in this and the following chapter, and the “hermeneutic hesitation” explored in the previous chapter.

Orgel's critical practice in The Illusion of Power has some similarities with Ian Hacking's reference to "forgotten styles of reasoning."<sup>36</sup> In his discussion of "incommensurability," after quoting some remarkable statements from Paracelsus, who died in 1541, Hacking says:

He [Paracelsus] exemplifies a Northern Renaissance tradition of a bundle of hermetic interests: medicine, physiology, alchemy, astrology, divination. Like many another "doctor" of the day, he practised all of these as part of a single art. The historian can find in Paracelsus anticipations of later chemistry and medicine. The herbalist can retrieve some forgotten lore from his remarks. But if you try to read him you will find someone utterly different from us (69-70).

Hacking says this difference results from an incommensurability of discourses. Paracelsus originally wrote in dog-Latin and proto-German but his work is now available in German and English. As Hacking describes the situation: "It is not that we cannot understand his words, one by one," but rather that Paracelsus' ordering of thought "is based on a whole system of categories that is hardly intelligible to us." Hacking also alludes to the fact that many Renaissance writers of "high seriousness and intelligence" make what seem to us now "extraordinary statements about the origins of duck or geese or swans." For example: "Rotting logs floating in the Bay of Naples will generate geese. Ducks are generated from barnacles." Hacking observes that "we do not lack sentences to express these thoughts" and mentions the word "anatiforous," together with its dictionary definition: "producing ducks or geese, that is producing barnacles, formerly supposed to grow on trees, and, dropping off into the water below, to turn into tree geese." These references alert us to "an alien system of thought that we can only barely recall, for example, in

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<sup>36</sup> Ian Hacking, Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Natural Science (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 71. Subsequent references included in text.

homeopathic medicine." Paracelsus' "style of reasoning [is] alien" and Hacking uses the word "dissociation" (71) to describe this form of historical incommensurability of discourses.

Hacking's reference to Paracelsus recalls Foucault's reference, in The Order of Things, to the Renaissance naturalist Aldrovandi's Treatise on the Serpent, in which snakes, griffins, dragons and other mythological beasts are treated as if they were in the same order. Paul Hirst glosses the significance of Foucault's observations on this point in the following way:

Foucault's point is that it is not because Aldrovandi is ignorant or stupid, or fails to observe that he does this, but because he has a quite different conception than our own of the order of knowledge, of the beings which are possible, and of the status of knowledge of Ancient and Medieval texts in which such mythical creatures are referred to and described.<sup>37</sup>

And Ludwig Wittgenstein, in Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief, offers some comments which relate to the examples provided in the writing of Orgel, Hacking and Foucault. Wittgenstein asks us to "suppose someone were ignorant of the tradition among sculptors of making busts. If he then came upon the finished bust of some man, he might say that obviously this is a fragment and that there must have been other parts belonging to it, making a whole body."<sup>38</sup> Wittgenstein here is exploring two things: the urge to interpret and the question of when an interpretation might stop. On the matter of the urge to interpret he makes the following remark:

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Hirst, "Power/Knowledge — Constructed Space and the Subject," in Power and Knowledge: Anthropological and Sociological Approaches, ed. Richard Fardon (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985), 176.

<sup>38</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief, ed. Cyril Barrett (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966), 49. Subsequent references included in text.

There might be no mark which we recognised as a conventional sign in any alphabet we knew, and yet we might have a strong feeling that they must be a language of some sort: that they mean something. There is a cathedral in Moscow with five spires. On each of these there is a different sort of curving configuration. One gets the strong impression that these different shapes and arrangements must mean something (45).

Elsewhere in his book, in some comments on Freud's work, Wittgenstein poses the question (but does not provide an answer to it) of "when an interpretation could be regarded as complete — and so about when it still requires completion, when further interpretation is needed" (49). Wittgenstein notes that, for Freud, interpretation ended under different circumstances: perhaps when the patient was satisfied or when the doctor's expertise was allowed to rule the day:

Freud never shows how we know where to stop — where is the right solution. Sometimes he says that the right solution, or the right analysis, is the one which satisfies the patient. Sometimes he says that the doctor knows what the right solution or analysis of the dream is whereas the patient doesn't; the doctor can say that the patient is wrong.

The reason why he calls one sort of analysis the right one, does not seem to be a matter of evidence ... (42)

Freud is constantly claiming to be scientific. But what he gives is speculation — something prior even to the formation of an hypothesis (44).

Another way of phrasing this would be to say that, for Freud, interpretation often was pragmatic.

These comments from Wittgenstein, Hacking and Orgel present an attitude which, when aligned with Hunter's position, takes on a more general force. For all their differences, these examples seem to be saying that texts require the reconstruction of specific "orders of thought" and "styles of reasoning"; things which, for Wittgenstein, are embedded in

different forms of living (Lebensformen). To recall the example provided by philology, interpretation here would mean such things as deciphering a text from a lost script or the recovery of the meaning of a particular word (such as "anatiforous"). The notion of "recovery" operating here does not involve the bringing to consciousness of a text's fugitive semantic substructure but rather describes the careful reconstruction of a particular positive use of the text.

The same points apply to the study of popular cultural texts, as Richard Ohmann has recently indicated. In discussing a story published in an 1895 popular American magazine Ohmann makes the claim that his reading "does not look behind or through the text to 'background' conditions but reconstructs meanings that were 'there' in the text for properly schooled contemporaries."<sup>39</sup> Much as was the case with the references contained in the writing by Orgel and Hacking, the textual mystery can be clarified by interpretative work of historical reconstruction (Orgel on the Renaissance court masque, Ohmann on the nineteenth century American popular magazine).

Each of these examples, in its different way, might seem like a dream of a positivist utopia when placed against notions of the eternal ineffability and undecidability of texts. Such notions appear in some relatively recent comments made on postmodernism and deconstruction. We have already encountered, in the chapter on postmodernism, fictocriticism and the paraliterary, Fredric Jameson's description of the difficulty allegedly faced by contemporary critical attempts to "complete the hermeneutic gesture." But when set alongside the examples discussed in this chapter it

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<sup>39</sup> Richard Ohmann, "History and Literary History: The Case of Mass Culture," in Modernism and Mass Culture, ed. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 38.



becomes possible to say that the particular interpretative problem to which Jameson alludes only emerges in a context where the notion of "hermeneutic gestures" overwhelmingly refers to those critical practices which purport to recover hidden meanings of a particular kind. Activating the "optics" of either marxism or psychoanalysis or a mixture of both, it is a critical system in which the twin figures of "the subject" and "the unconscious" loom large. It is a theoretical position which holds that the text will always, to some extent, escape its reader and its reading and it seems to me to refer to a critical context in which meanings are recovered from the unconscious dimension of the subject's experience. Furthermore, in the dispersed moment of the postmodern, the alleged loss of faith in "depth-readings" presents one explanation as to why the text might be said to escape its reading, especially given that even the critique of "depth readings" can, paradoxically, operate as a means of intensifying the elusiveness of the text.

It has already been noted that the category of "surface" is an important one for some formulations of postmodernism. At this point it might be useful to make some comments on what distinguishes Hunter's account of hermeneutic depth from both avant-garde and postmodernist celebrations of surfaces.

From Hunter's perspective, any avant-garde valorisation of "surface" can only appear as the latest in a long line of strategies aimed at removing literary texts from the sphere of positive description (albeit a "positive description" which refuses to describe the cognitive content of texts). Equally, to adopt Hunter's position would be to say that the postmodern enthusiasm for "surface" becomes a paradoxical way of saying that not even depth is deep enough. Even the deep description of meaning must be problematised in a practice of self-problematisation, one which valorises

the concept of "surface." As the device for achieving this end, "surface" comes to function as a new "depth" of criticism, a familiar modality in which the text is made "inscrutable" so that those who use the text as a means of cultivating themselves might go to work on their perceptions, "deepening" the critical object even as they celebrate its "surface." And just as I have suggested that Hunter's understanding of "surface" is more properly aligned with Foucault's use of that term rather than with any avant-garde promotion of surfaces, so I would regard his eschewing of depth as more likely to derive from Brecht's refusal of the term rather than be aligned with the allegedly characteristic postmodern anxiety concerning depth. Brecht's blunt comment was: "Depth doesn't get you anywhere at all. Depth is a separate dimension, it's just depth — and there's nothing whatsoever to be seen in it."<sup>40</sup>

For Hunter, the prolongation of critical reading is a consequence of the repetition of an ethical exercise. Nothing new is discovered. Overall, the difference of Hunter's move rests in the way it avoids treating criticism as an epistemological exercise bound up with a cognitive relation to texts, replacing this understanding of critical practices with a description of some of the practices that incorporate particular texts as devices within specific ethical exercises. Within the practice of aesthetic criticism outlined by Hunter, a hierarchical interaction exists between the position of criticism and the position of the text. In what I take to be another Peter Brown-inspired moment, Hunter says that one relates to the text as an object produced by a higher spirit than oneself. To encounter writers and critics is to encounter so many secular "holypersons." Hence the degree of emphasis on self-deprecation and self-abasement before the text. In an

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<sup>40</sup> Walter Benjamin, Understanding Brecht, trans. Anna Bostock (London: New Left Books, 1977), 110.

earlier formulation, Hunter had described the modern literary critic as “an exemplary ethical personage, possessor of something like ‘secular grace.’”<sup>41</sup>

A particularly influential description of the inevitable elusiveness of the text is to be found in Jacques Derrida’s Dissemination which contains the following specification of “the text,” a specification which typifies a certain position in some deconstructionist theories of textuality:

A text is not a text unless it hides from the first comer, from the first glance, the law of its composition and the rules of its game. A text remains, moreover, forever imperceptible. Its law and its rules are not, however, harbored in the inaccessibility of a secret; it is simply that they can never be hooked in the present, into anything that could rigorously be called a perception.<sup>42</sup>

Hunter’s (Wittgensteinian) response to this formulation is simply to ask: “Is this so — at all times and under all circumstances?” (“Occasion,” 167). This is Hunter’s way of indicating that “hiding from the first comer,” far from being transhistorically definitive of textuality, is a characteristic of a text’s deployment within a post-Romantic critical apparatus. Hunter treats Gadamer’s reference to Schleiermacher’s distinction between “a looser hermeneutical practice, in which understanding follows automatically, and a stricter one, which starts from the view that what follows automatically is misunderstanding” as evidence of a historical transition in the use of texts.<sup>43</sup> Hunter’s move in relation to Derrida’s formulation is a way of insisting that things are not automatically dubitable. Doubt too

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<sup>41</sup> Hunter, “On Reflection Theory,” Australian Journal of Cultural Studies, 3, 1 (1985), 26.

<sup>42</sup> Jacques Derrida, Dissemination, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 63.

<sup>43</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method (New York: Seaburg Press, 1975), 163.

has its conditions, as Wittgenstein remarked in On Certainty.<sup>44</sup> One has to decide not to trust one's initial apprehension of a text — or this has to be decided for one in the literature classroom — and so texts come to be problematised under definite circumstances rather than being held to be problematic as a result of the elusive hermeneutic contours of subjectivity and its "formation." Hunter's point is that one has to be trained into a self-and-text problematising mode. For Hunter doubt is an aptitude and a habit, although to say this does not necessarily grant a privilege to a non-doubting reader, nor does it negate the value of a reading born of doubt. It simply instances another one of his polemical insistences, one that I am drawn to, up to a point, but also shy away from to some extent.

Of course there are other assessments of Derrida's critical practice which find more in its favour than does Hunter's polemical challenging of some of deconstruction's central terms. For example, Steven Connor describes the achievement of Derrida's critical practice by saying that Derrida's "works of commentary never simply comment on the texts they discuss, thereby fixing the distance between text and commentary, and freezing the play of language within the original texts, but always attempt to prolong the energies of association at work in those original texts. In this situation, criticism does not aim to tell the truth about the text it criticizes, but to use those texts as generative machines for new texts."<sup>45</sup> Connor also points to the way these kinds of critical languages are subjected to "extraordinary strains and complications " (218), resulting in what Vincent Leitch, in his Deconstructive Criticism, called a "poetics and practice of fracture" (quoted in Connor, 218). And Stephen Heath, in an article which provides a very

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<sup>44</sup> See footnote 26.

<sup>45</sup> Steven Connor, Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 215. Subsequent references included in the text.

subtle account of various issues concerning Derrida and deconstruction, had made points similar to those made by Connor. Heath characterises Derrida's writing as a critical practice which pulled "the text being read into a reflexive, pluralising, disseminating movement of language," and also notes that the "weight of deconstruction falls on reading and the terms of that reading are literary, an attention to rhetoric, figure, trope, to the specific practice of writing, to the text."<sup>46</sup> The various deconstructive criticisms eventually produce

interpretation as crucial and problematic for literary theory and criticism. In a sense this is nothing new: interpretation was central prior to Derrida and deconstruction and was always never-ending (no reading ever finished the interpretative debate around this or that text); in another sense it is, for that never-ending interpretation was interpretation with an eye to ending, a belief all the same in at least a stability of reading, the terms of which might be intention or moral statement or social representation or whatever else might be adduced as a reference for settling the text ("Literary Theory," 299-300).

But from Hunter's perspective, this view of the text as the source of riffs for endless critical improvisations is not confined to the moment of postmodernism and deconstruction. If we recall his citing of Schlegel's remark that "a classical text must never be entirely comprehensible" since "those who are cultivated and who cultivate themselves must always seem to learn more from it", we would remember that Hunter's central point is to insist that the incomprehensibility of difficult texts is, to a significant extent, a function of the techniques of cultivation applied to them by "those who are cultivated," to recall Schlegel's phrase.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Stephen Heath, "Literary Theory etc.," Comparative Criticism, 9 (1987), 292. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>47</sup> See footnote 33.

By now it should be clear that one of the most controversial implications of Hunter's position is the extent to which it suggests that one cannot be right or wrong in any cognitive sense in relation to a text. According to Hunter's account one does not miss something that is in the text so much as one does something else with it (although it is not clear to what extent, in Hunter's system, this "doing" can be thought of as a "knowing" of some sort). And if conflict among critics has become a feature of the critical domain, Hunter's position would say that this is no more than the spectacle of various critics trying to outgun one another by way of a display of the critical self. Criticism becomes, quite literally, an "occasion" for the critic "to engage in a public staging of the self" ("Learning the Literature Lesson," 77) much as Bordwell refers to that "evanescent moment" when one critic's interpretation trumps its predecessors simply by being the most recent (Making Meaning, 246). And if there seems to be a potential contradiction between a notion of self-mortification and the consummate display of a set of critical skills, it can be explained by saying that self-mortification is the first step in that display. Only virtuosi can be so thoroughly self-denigrating, just as it takes a certain arrogance to proclaim one's humility in the face of a text about to be interpreted.

But whatever account of the interpretative compulsion we are dealing with, there are still some people who resist it. We began this chapter with Maria, at the start of Play It As It Lays, refusing to ask what makes Iago evil. Here is Maria at the end of that novel: "I lie here in the sunlight, watching the hummingbird. This morning I threw the coins in the swimming pool and they gleamed and turned in the water in such a way that I was almost moved to read them. I refrained" (168). Maria is being a little disingenuous here. She has, after all, narrated her story by this point,

and that is a considerable interpretative achievement. And if the kind of restraint and detachment Hunter urges seems far less languid than Maria's, we might still detect, even in his insistent refusal of hermeneutic doubt and depth, something of this desire for equilibrium and tranquility. How it might be attained remains a matter of some debate.

By now it should be understood that I am using particular chapters to explore the limits of particular critical postures rather than arguing for one critical alibi as being more persuasive than others. Thus chapter one's exploration of the concepts of postmodernism, fictocriticism and the paraliterary was followed by readings of two contemporary novels which seemed to me to offer productive sites on which to play out some of the terms of those particular debates. Those three chapters' explorations are not meant to be thought of as now being superseded by this chapter's exploration of Ian Hunter's position on what constitutes a "critical occasion." Rather, in each instance, what I have attempted is a probing of what these particular critical postures allow one to say of particular texts; each critical posture constitutes a "textual assemblage" or an "uptake" of a particular kind.

Just as this chapter's exploration of Hunter's critical position has seen a notion of "hermeneutic exasperation" replace the previous chapter's exploration of a notion of "hermeneutic hesitation," so my next chapter continues this exploration of "hermeneutic exasperation" by way of a reading of David Bordwell's Making Meaning, a book which seems to me to have effected a very significant intervention into contemporary film and cultural studies. But although the shift is now away from literary studies and towards film criticism as a particular rhetorical-cultural practice, many of the issues raised in this chapter will continue to

influence the way I discuss this new set of debates, occurring as they do in a different critical domain.



## Chapter Five

### Critical Occasions: David Bordwell's Making Meaning and the Institution of Film Criticism

One does not perform acts of criticism by breaking free of the profession's norms and constraints ... and whenever the claim to have broken free is made you can be sure that it is underwritten, authorized and rendered intelligible by the very disciplinary boundaries it purports to have left behind.

Stanley Fish<sup>1</sup>

This chapter begins and ends with a reading of David Bordwell's Making Meaning, as a means of exploring the "occasional" nature of film criticism. Bordwell's book offers an impressive mini-history and typology of various forms of film criticism and does so in a way that Bordwell hopes might "help characterize interpretive practices in other domains."<sup>2</sup> The book is both an ambitious cultural history and an instance of the way a discipline, once professionalised, comes to investigate its own history. Bordwell is arguably the most distinguished American film scholar, and any book by him usually attracts a good deal of critical attention. But this was not the case with Making Meaning, and the critical silence that initially greeted the book seems unusual given that the book was presenting a synoptic history of the various critical practices that have constituted film study as a legitimate academic-theoretical domain over the last forty or fifty years. Eventually the book did attract commentary from some of the critical areas

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Fish, "No Bias, No Merit: The Case Against Blind Submission," PMLA, 103, 5 (1988), 747.

<sup>2</sup> David Bordwell, Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 254. Subsequent references included in the text.

(represented by particular film journals) it was targeting for critique but this took the better part of four years to happen.<sup>3</sup>

Later in the chapter, as a way of engaging with aspects of Bordwell's overall argument, I offer an elaboration of some of the points he makes (principally in Making Meaning, but also in in some other writing) concerning the relations that exist between the practices of European "art cinema" and the so-called "new hollywood" cinema of the early 1970s.<sup>4</sup> I do this by discussing Bob Rafelson's Five Easy Pieces (1970), reading the film as an example of the way in which, according to Bordwell and Staiger, "new hollywood" selectively borrowed "from the international art

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<sup>3</sup> So far the most established film journals to have reviewed the book are Wide-Angle, Film Quarterly, Screen and Movie, and some of my later comments take into account the book's critical reception so far. See Herb Eagle, "Review of Making Meaning," Wide-Angle, 12, 3 (1990): 118-23; Seymour Chatman, "Making Meaning," Film Quarterly, 43, 4 (1990): 56-59; V.F. Perkins, "Must We Say What They Mean?: Film Criticism and Interpretation," Movie, 4, 35 (1990): 1-6; Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Review," Screen, 34, 3 (1993): 293-98; Tom Gunning, "Under the Sign of the Scorpion; or, Interpretation Where is thy Sting?," Semiotica 92, 1/2 (1992): 107-119. Subsequent references included in the text.

It does seem significant that Making Meaning has not received attention from some of the "heavier" film-critical spaces represented by journals such as Camera Obscura and The Quarterly Review of Film and Television Studies. Both Screen and Camera Obscura have been associated, to a greater or lesser extent, with the forms of psychoanalysis and marxism of which Bordwell is critical throughout his book, which perhaps explains why it took Screen four years to review the book. Camera Obscura was planning to have a special issue on "the institution of film criticism" which would have been obliged to take account of Bordwell's book, but that issue fell through.

To some extent the North-American silence in regard to Bordwell's book was redressed by a special issue of Film Criticism, 17, 2/3 (1993), being devoted to a response to the issues generated by Bordwell's book. The issue took its title, "Interpretation, Inc.: Issues in Contemporary Film Studies," from Making Meaning and in terms of the issues discussed throughout this chapter, Bordwell's response to the eight offerings, "Film Interpretation Revisited," 93-119, is the most useful contribution.

<sup>4</sup> See Bordwell, "The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice," Film Criticism, 4, 1 (1979): 56-64. Bordwell updates this essay in his Narration in the Fiction Film (London: Methuen, 1985), 205-33.

cinema."<sup>5</sup> In this way Five Easy Pieces can be seen to exhibit a time-honoured Hollywood "process of stylistic assimilation," a strategy of appropriation which saw "new hollywood" cinema selectively absorb several conventions of the art-cinema mode. Not that this absorption is to be understood as "simple copying" (374). Bordwell and Staiger claim that "art-film practices have been merged with certain conventions of the classical style" (374) and so my discussion of Five Easy Pieces relates these two sets of film practices to one another, concentrating particularly on narrative and character relations across the two textual systems.

Towards the end of Making Meaning, Bordwell announces that "we live in an era of ordinary criticism" (261). Thus his book is written out of a belief that "the great days of interpretation-centred criticism are over" since all the "basic strategies and tactics" have been tried. And the very fact that the book lays out "a logic of interpretive practice" suggests "what a routine activity criticism has come to be" (xiii).

Another American film theorist, Robert B. Ray, recently declared a similar weariness with available forms of academic film-critical discourse by likening it to "a machine running on automatic pilot."<sup>6</sup> Ray's claim is that "after nearly twenty years of exhilarating work, film studies has stagnated" (231) and he finds himself disillusioned by the fact that "we know in advance where ... analyses will lead" (232). Ray wants his students to produce critical writing of a kind which would acknowledge

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<sup>5</sup> See Bordwell and Janet Staiger, "Historical Implications of the Classical Hollywood Cinema," in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristen Thompson, The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 373. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>6</sup> Robert B. Ray, "Andy Hardy Finds the Avant-Garde," in Modernity and Mass Culture, ed. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 232. Subsequent references included in the text.

"the formal experimentation" of "contemporary theory" (236) and which might also help criticism regain its alleged social function of asking "improper questions" (233). For Ray, the work of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida is very strange at a formal level and he wants his students to "imitate the forms" (236) rather than pretend that this work has appeared in a conventional format. Ray wants contemporary criticism to acknowledge the bizarreness of a mode of writing which activates "surrealist techniques of collage, fragments, typographical play, puns, neologisms, development by motif rather than by logic" (236).

But although Bordwell and Ray might agree that current film criticism is both repetitive and arid, Bordwell's position still differs from that of Ray. A principal difference can be indicated by saying that the Bordwell of Making Meaning, rather than encouraging the taking up of a mimetic, performative relation to the formal inventiveness of a Barthes or a Derrida, would be more likely to itemise the various topoi and rhetorical strategies enabling that kind of writing in the first place. Equally, one of the things Ray finds arid about contemporary film criticism, as he has indicated in his other writing, is what he calls Bordwellian "empiricism."<sup>7</sup>

Bordwell begins his book by referring to the classical hermeneutic division between the art of understanding (ars intelligendi) and the art of explaining (ars explicandi) and he notes that most critics make a distinction "between comprehending a film and interpreting it, though they would often disagree about where the boundary line is to be drawn" (2). But for the most part Bordwell's book deals with a somewhat different hermeneutic paradigm: "To speak of hidden meanings, levels of meaning, and revealing meaning evokes the dominant framework within

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<sup>7</sup> See Robert B. Ray, "The Bordwell Regime and the Stakes of Knowledge," Strategies, 1 (Fall, 1988): 143-81.

which critics understand interpretation" (2). Frank Kermode's reference to the modern critical tradition's "search for occulted sense in texts of whatever period" is mentioned (2) as one of the more succinct descriptions of the interpretative paradigm Bordwell's book will investigate. Other writers have provided equally succinct descriptions of this particular critical paradigm. In his Marxism and Literary History, for instance, John Frow refers to "the hermeneutic release of meaning concealed beneath the textual surface."<sup>8</sup> And in The Political Unconscious, Fredric Jameson claims that the object of scrutiny should become "less the text itself than the interpretations through which we attempt to confront and to appropriate it. Interpretation is here construed as an essentially allegorical act, which consists in rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretative master code."<sup>9</sup>

But it is probably Michel Foucault who has cast the most withering glance at this understanding of critical commentary. The paradigm to which Bordwell is alluding receives the following gloss in The Archeology of Knowledge, when Foucault refers to the belief that

all manifest discourse is secretly based on an "already-said"; and that this "already-said" is not merely a phrase that has already been spoken, or a text that has already been written, but a "never-said," an incorporeal discourse, a voice as silent as a breath, a writing that is merely the hollow of its own mark. It is supposed therefore that everything that is formulated in discourse was already articulated in that semi-silence that precedes it, which continues to run obstinately beneath it, but which it covers and silences. The manifest discourse, therefore, is really no more than the repressive presence of what it

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<sup>8</sup> John Frow, Marxism and Literary History (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 18. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>9</sup> Fredric Jameson, The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act (London: Methuen, 1981), 9-10.

does not say; and this “not-said” is a hollow that undermines from within all that is said.<sup>10</sup>

Foucault is equally severe on that conception of the history of thought in which “the analysis of thought is always allegorical in relation to the discourse that it employs. Its question is unfailingly: ‘what was being said in what was said?’” (27-28). Foucault’s counter-claim is that discourse must be “treated as and when it occurs” (25). And he later describes the situation by saying that we “do not seek below what is manifest the half-silent murmur of another discourse; ... The question proper to such an analysis might be formulated in this way: what is this specific existence that emerges from what is said and nowhere else?” (28). This formulation is of a piece with Foucault’s belief that the conditions enabling certain kinds of discourses to take the form they take constitutes the appropriate object of critical analysis. This form of analysis is preferred to that of a symptomatic reading which would be concerned to identify gaps and absences in discourse, demonstrating thereby the paradoxical power of the not-said and not-present to shape that which is present and is said. Throughout Making Meaning Bordwell is heavily critical of the symptomatic reading as it has found its way into film criticism, and I discuss this in more detail later in the chapter. But before reaching that point it is necessary to give some broader account of the understanding of criticism that Bordwell is presenting in his book.

For Bordwell, criticism is an “occasional” activity in the sense of being a site-specific activation or application of various heuristic devices, schemata and semantic fields. As he asks at one point: “How does this film provide an occasion for us to entertain, as an imaginative possibility,

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<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, The Archeology of Knowledge, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1974), 25. Subsequent references included in the text.

the juxtaposition and development of certain semantic fields" (263, emphasis added). Furthermore, interpretation is said to occur by way of "a more or less disciplined speculation on the possibilities of meaning" in which "the film becomes an occasion for the critic to explore a theory's semantic implications and affinities" (258, emphasis added). Earlier in his book Bordwell had described the moment of the arrival of "explanatory criticism" in the domain of film studies as a moment which "sought to demonstrate that film was a worthy cultural enterprise." It did this by claiming that cinema "produced rich, complex experiences that would form the occasion for intellectual reflection and debate" (69, emphasis added).

Bordwell's conception of the "occasional" nature of film criticism works with the notion of a critical apparatus being brought to a text, standing in a relation of exteriority to it. Bordwell's writing thus exhibits a belief in a difference and distance existing between the act of writing criticism and the object which has provoked or "occasioned" it. This view of the "occasional" nature of criticism implies that one could specify a relation existing between a text and a particular critical apparatus, and to that extent Bordwell's writing constitutes a slightly different understanding of the "critical occasion" from the one put forward by Ian Hunter, discussed in the previous chapter. At the same time, in its insistence on the localised, contingent nature of interpretation, Bordwell's account of the practices of film criticism often recalls Wittgenstein, much as Hunter's writing had been enabled by some of Wittgenstein's writing. A certain Wittgensteinian phrasing is evident in the slogan Bordwell uses to characterise his project: "we must look beneath what critics say and examine what they — concretely, practically — do" (144), as well as in some other descriptions offered throughout the book. For instance, criticism is said to be "a

practical art, somewhat like quilting or furniture-making" (xii). The production of an interpretation is "a skill, like throwing a pot" and because "its primary product is a piece of language, it is also a rhetorical art" (251). Another use of Wittgenstein appears in one of Bordwell's most elaborated descriptions of the critical persona, depicted as someone who is not necessarily "a master of theory" nor "an expert on cinema, or art, or life" (202). Rather, the critic simply displays a certain "dexterity in projecting semantic fields on to the minutiae of the film" (233). For Bordwell, a critic is

a person who can perform particular tasks: conceive the possibility of ascribing implicit or repressed meanings to films, invoke acceptable semantic fields, map them onto texts by using conventional schemata and procedures, and produce a "model film" that embodies the interpretation. Though acquired by each individual, these skills and knowledge structures are institutionally defined and transmitted. And though it is possible to abstract a critical "theory" or "method" from individual "readings," and thus to reify that theory or method as a self-sufficient procedure of discovery or validation, employing such an apparatus will not carry any critic all the way through an interpretation. Decisions about cues, patterns, and mapping must still be made by "just going on" as Wittgenstein puts it, and following the tacit logic of craft tradition (202, 204).

Without wanting to try to trace every Wittgensteinian element in Bordwell's book or, for that matter, to rewrite his critical project in terms of Wittgenstein's interests, it is worth remembering the extent to which Wittgenstein was concerned with the limits of interpretation, a point to which I will return at the conclusion of this chapter.

Apart from displaying the legacy of Wittgenstein, Bordwell's account of the institution of — and academic institutionalisation of — film criticism connects him, however loosely, with such things as Stanley Fish's notion of "interpretive communities" (presented in *Is There a Text in This Class?* and cited by Bordwell) and with Fish's subsequent work on



“professionalism” and “the literary community” (now collected in Doing What Comes Naturally).<sup>11</sup> At the same time, Bordwell’s book has similarities with Jonathan Culler’s Framing the Sign, and with some other writing from John Frow and Samuel Weber.<sup>12</sup> In each of these cases interpretation is shown to have specific institutional limits. Bordwell’s characterisation of this situation is to say:

Does the interpretation “apply” a theory in a fresh way? Does it activate overlooked portions of films? Does it contribute to “recent developments?” These are constraints of habitual practice and reigning rhetoric. To use Todorov’s term, film interpretation has become almost wholly “finalistic,” based upon an a priori codification of what a film must ultimately mean. “It is foreknowledge of the meaning to be discovered that guides the interpretation.” Many of the film’s nuances now go unremarked because the interpretive optic in force has virtually no way to register them (260).

Earlier in the book, Bordwell had given a range of examples of the workings of such “optics” or “gazes” (to use a more Foucauldian term). One example involved the critical manoeuvre of deciding that the “the driven male protagonist” and “overall style” of Raoul Walsh’s Raw Deal (1947) would “put it into the class of film noir.” Bordwell’s point here is that the making of such an interpretative move “will recast the film along certain lines, throwing particular cues into relief and downplaying others” (142). I am not sure how much of the strength of the point is lost by using the example of a film category invented by post-World War II French film criticism, as opposed to using the examples, say, of the western or the

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<sup>11</sup> Stanley Fish, Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Culler, Framing The Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988); John Frow, Marxism and Literary History, 170-206; Samuel Weber, “The Limits of Professionalism,” Oxford Literary Review, 5, 1/2 (1985): 59-79.

musical; that is, categories which possess both an industrial-economic and a critical-taxonomic force.

But another example, this time an instance of what Bordwell might call "heuristics in conflict," occurred at the 1991 Dissonance conference in Sydney. Lesley Stern delivered a paper, part of which was devoted to a discussion of aspects of Raging Bull.<sup>13</sup> In a response to the paper, Patricia Mellencamp said that Stern had "missed" the central point of Jake La Motta's speech about having "small hands ... little girl's hands." Mellencamp said that this meant La Motta, or the film, was referring to La Motta's penis. Here it is worth noting that the Freud invoked by Mellencamp in order to generate a symptomatic reading is not the Freud who said "sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." Alternatively, what if the interpretative "optic" applied at this point came from someone who knew something of the history of boxing rather than the history of psychoanalysis? That is, someone who knew the boxing truism that even the greatest of light-heavyweights (say, José Torres) could be knocked out by the most pedestrian of heavyweights (say, Jerry Quarry), let alone the hypothetical scenario alluded to at this moment of Raging Bull, in which a great middleweight (La Motta) imagines himself going up against a legendary heavyweight (Joe Louis). A more contemporary analogy would be to imagine Marvin Hagler fighting Mike Tyson. The point of relating this anecdote is simply to indicate how fervently some heuristics are held. The force of Mellencamp's remarks meant that she was not simply saying that an interesting interpretation would result from taking La Motta's hands to be his penis, but rather was claiming that what was signified there was the penis, insistently and self-evidently. Bordwell's position would argue that this indicated the presence of a different heuristic,

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<sup>13</sup> Lesley Stern, "Meditation on Violence," unpublished paper.

resulting in a clash of "optics." As Bordwell says, when speaking of the way symptomatic criticism entered the field of film study: "Any interpretive practice seeks to show that texts mean more than they seem to say. But one might ask, why does a text not say what it means?" (64-65). As Bordwell acknowledges, the response of symptomatic criticism is to insist that "the text cannot say what it means; it tries to disguise its actual meaning" (65). For Bordwell, symptomatic criticism does not constitute a significant break with New Criticism since, "in a broader sense — that which takes the critical task to be the interpretation of one or more texts — symptomatic criticism is the newest avatar of the New Critical practice of close-reading" (97). Sometimes what might seem a rather banal, literal, interpretative frame — the person who knows about boxing — is capable of producing as plausible and persuasive an interpretation as a daringly symptomatic interpretative frame — the person who knows about Freud. From a Bordwellian perspective, the real issue of interest in an example such as this is the immediacy and conviction with which one particular interpretative move is said to be the only move or the right move to make.

Bordwell's comment, "why does a text not say what it means?," constitutes a call for a degree of self-evidence in film interpretation, and to that extent, recalls a remark made some time ago by John Ellis: "Meaning in cinema is obvious: the average cinema film appears straightforward and can be understood immediately (with subtitles) by virtually everyone on the planet."<sup>14</sup> Ellis introduces this generalisation only in order to present the critical paradox that "this obviousness of meaning has meant that film has resisted textual analysis: there is always something that

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<sup>14</sup> John Ellis, "Notes On the Obvious," in Literary Theory Today, ed. M.A. Abbas and Tak-Wai Wong (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1981), 14. Subsequent references included in the text.

seems to evade the analysis" (14). Ellis then goes on to oppose traditional literary-critical methodologies to semiotic understandings of cinema, before eventually privileging, as the object of study, a notion of the institution of cinema. And one way of marking the historical distance separating the critical projects of Ellis and Bordwell is to note that the Ellis' reference to the "institution of cinema" has been replaced in Bordwell's writing by "the institutionalisation of cinema studies," a sub-set of which would be precisely the mode of constituting film study that is exhibited in Ellis' remarks on the cinematic institution. Ellis conceives of cinema as a composite of the site of cinematic consumption, the institutions of stars and genres, publicity material, reviews, posters and advertisements. Furthermore, cinema "proposes a particular kind of spectator for itself" (27); cinema-spectating is a "modality of existence" that has "changed over the short history of cinema" (27):

Originally addressed to a male spectator (in US, respectable working class; in Europe, partly the vaudeville public), cinema quickly (ie by 1920) settled to addressing a very specific social unit: the couple. Cinema-spectating in that sense became a very specific and displaced form of heterosexual activity; hence perhaps the guilt that many still feel on entering a cinema alone. Nowadays this unified address has diversified; there is no longer the monolithic address to the couple (27).

Ellis claims that cinema-spectating has become a more fragmented activity, with the existence of different audiences: cinéaste audiences, involved in the "perverse activity" (28) of watching old films; youth audiences; art-film audiences and so on. Later in this chapter Ellis' remarks will resonate in my discussions of both Bad Timing (1980) and Five Easy Pieces (1970), as I discuss the interconnections among the representational regimes of classical hollywood cinema, new hollywood cinema and art cinema. For

the moment I want to continue teasing out some of the implications of Bordwell's broader argument in Making Meaning.

Overall, Bordwell regards his book as a study of "how film critics build up interpretations and try to convince others that those interpretations warrant attention" (xii). For Bordwell, "making films mean" is a "convention-bound activity ... an institutional process" (19). Critics "build up meanings by applying institutional protocols" (3), and "the critical institution offers a diversified but not unlimited range of interpretive options" (224). In pointing to the limits of film interpretation, Bordwell's book eventually makes the point that academic criticism "has assembled a battery of all-purpose heuristics that drill into a film at the standard junctures and mine out examples which can be sorted into the standard bins. Semantic fields are not so much explored as invoked to serve as fixed points of reference" (260). In presenting his account of the dominant practices of film criticism, in insisting that "meanings are not found, but made," Bordwell is careful to avoid potential charges of nominalism by insisting that film criticism is not a place where "sheer relativism or an infinite diversity of interpretation" operate. Critics, he claims, "typically agree upon what textual cues are 'there', even if they interpret the cues in differing ways" (3). But here I think Bordwell needs to make more of a distinction between applying a grid of reading or activating a regime of reading and producing an interpretation. For example, one could talk about the imagistic significance of tattoos in Charles Laughton's The Night of The Hunter (1946), Jonathan Demme's The Silence of the Lambs (1991), and Martin Scorsese's version of Cape Fear (1992), producing different "interpretations" by the very process of working within an agreed system of image or theme-based reading. Equally, to ask the significance of the "window motif" in Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights is to invite a series

of declarations of interpretative difference all generated within a shared system constituted by the act of asking about the significance of a particular motif. For Bordwell, meaning is constructed out of textual cues (a composition, a camera movement, a line of dialogue), and the play between the individual and the institutional is evident in the fact that "each individual" acquires those "skills and knowledge structures" (3) courtesy of the institution. In a self-reflexive moment (itself a topos of recent cultural criticism) Bordwell characterises the role of the film critic thus: "I have been trained to look for significance — that is, I assume that any film worth interpreting has something consequential to 'say.' I further assume that what the film says is not 'literally' on the surface but is instead meaning of an implicit or symptomatic kind; that is, I look for interpretability" (31-32).

One of the main strengths (or provocations) of Bordwell's overall position lies in his claim that the institution of film criticism encourages a drive to produce innovative acts of critical exegesis at the same time as it operates certain limits and constraints in order to determine what will be counted as "innovative." The academic institution regulates the production of novelty in interpretation, and a broad rule for the interpreter is said to be: "Quit when the interpretation starts to sound like those that we supplant" (247). The film scholar's principal authority derives from "knowing how to make movies mean" and this is done by applying a series of rhetorical strategies. Bordwell mentions one such interpretative strategy, that of "domestication, the taming of the new," an activity which "subsumes the unfamiliar to the familiar." This is said to be an "institutionally necessary function" since "the unschematised film is the uninterpretable film" (256).

Bordwell characterises the workings of the film critical institution or interpretative community by saying that it produces a critic who

relies on already-accepted semantic fields, cues, schemata, and heuristics. These provide arguments and examples on which to build a case. No dissenter in this community can persuade his opponents without relying largely, if tacitly, upon basic concepts and routines. But the critical institution is so made that nobody can be a legitimate dissenter without having come to share them anyhow. The dissenter is not, finally, all that lonely and his objection often triggers only a family quarrel (244).

Bordwell's point here is that different critical protocols produce different "model films":

This process is, I suggest, one source of the plurality that criticism traditionally ascribes to the text itself. What permits the endless variety of meanings to be generated from a film are, in large part, the critical practices themselves, particularly the indefinitely large variety of semantic fields and salient cues that can be "processed" by a set of schemata and heuristics in force. The ambiguity sought by the New Critic, the polysemy praised by the structuralist, and the indeterminacy posited by the post-structuralist are largely the product of the institution's interpretive habits. Our ability to recognize, however tacitly, these habits in action, emerges in our praise for the text's "richness"; it must be polysemous if we can imagine using different, but equally permissible, procedures to make sense of it, and to make cases for its discrete meanings (245).

While Bordwell's comments are persuasive they do not necessarily mean (as they seem to imply) that we can return to a singular interpretative regime (or "regime of reading" or "reading formation"), nor do they mean that institutional structures are "wrong." They are neither wrong nor right, but simply present. Bordwell's comments here are similar to Tony Bennett's description (drawing, as I have indicated, on Ian Hunter's work) of the "conception of the literary text as unfathomable — as the site for an endless practice of reading which can never be wrong yet never be

right.”<sup>15</sup> And Foucault, in characterising “the exegetic attitude,” spoke of its conception of discourse as “an inexhaustible treasure from which one can always draw new, and always unpredictable, riches; a providence that has always spoken in advance, and which enables one to hear, when one knows how to listen, retrospective oracles” (The Archaeology, 120).

Given the drive to produce new interpretations, and given the potential endlessness of interpretation, the question inevitably arises of when and how to stop the pursuit of interpretative novelty. Initially, says Bordwell, one finds the threshold of interpretative termination only “by positing a meaning that is more subtle, pervasive, remote, or elusive than other meanings, particularly those already constructed by other critics” (246). This production of interpretative novelty “demands topoi of improvement, revisions, breaks and subversion; a display of indignatio aimed at previous critics; the savoring of the evanescent moment (perhaps only twenty minutes on a conference panel) when the critic’s interpretation incarnates innovation, trumping its predecessors simply by being the most recent” (246).

And Bordwell dryly notes that it is obviously in the critic’s interest to “postpone determinacy for as long as possible before locking in her candidate meanings” (246).<sup>16</sup> One way of postponing determinacy is to

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<sup>15</sup> Tony Bennett, Outside Literature (London: Routledge, 1990), 280. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>16</sup> This male-feminist use of “her” to replace the historical grammatical convention of “his” has unfortunate consequences in a book of this kind. Given that so much of the book consists in having the “she” or “her” figure articulate positions which are being shown by Bordwell to be not so mysterious or complicated as they imagine themselves to be, then the new-mannish grammatical moment looks both misguided and condescending. It might have been more strategic either to have pluralised throughout or else to have retained the convention of “he” and “his” and to have cast this figure as a version of the “male bimbo” sometimes



celebrate ambiguity, and ambiguity has always been one of the distinguishing features of art cinema. Accordingly, the next section of this chapter argues that the notion of “structured ambiguity” is a key textual instrument or device in the production and consumption of “art cinema.” My textual example is Nicholas Roeg’s Bad Timing (1980).

### Art Cinema and the Ambiguity-Effect

As the art cinema became more influential, other humanistic fields emerged and have remained in force. Works by Bergman, Fellini, Kurosawa, and others encouraged critics trained in modern literature to propose interpretations that highlighted themes of reality and illusion, the artist’s vocation, the alienation of modern life, the difficulties of loving. One persistent semantic mode is the problem of personal communication.

Bordwell, Making Meaning, 108

At a number of times in his career as a film theorist Bordwell has said delightfully deflating things about art cinema, principally by outlining its conventions.<sup>17</sup> Typical of his position in this particular regard is his comment in Making Meaning that “art-cinema conventions invite the viewer to take an object symbolically” (272), and he has another such moment when he responds to Teresa de Lauretis’ much published interpretation of Bad Timing. In an account which recalls some of the formulations of late 70s Stephen Heath, de Lauretis presents Bad Timing as a film which “undercuts the spectator’s pleasure by preventing both visual and narrative identification, by making it literally as difficult to see as to understand events and their succession, their timing: and our sense

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alluded to in feminist cultural studies writing. The male feminist hairshirt could then truly be worn with pride.

<sup>17</sup> See references in footnote 4.

of time becomes uncertain in the film, as its vision for us is blurry" (quoted in Making Meaning, 268).<sup>18</sup> Bordwell's comment on this is: "On the contrary: such problems of identification and such temporal uncertainties constitute fundamental art-cinema conventions, and they have shaped viewing skills ever since Hiroshima Mon Amour, Red Desert, Persona, and similar films became models for ambitious directors" (268). Though neatly made, the point risks seeming a little monolithic or unilateral. The situation is more complicated in that one's reading would not necessarily inhabit only one set of conventions but might well display conflict among two or more interpretative regimes. Having said that, however, it is the case that Roeg's strategy of cutting on the gaze or look of a character throughout Bad Timing does allow the film to become a candidate for one of the more recent heuristics described by Bordwell: "Looking for the look is currently one of the critic's most productive heuristics, and whatever semantic quality gets assigned to it ... it remains inextricably part of the character's embodiment, traits, goals, and relations with other characters. It is a pure, if sometimes abstruse, personification" (155). An alternative position on this particular issue could be generated by invoking John Ellis' comment that "the cut is perhaps the most radical moment of risk in the cinema" ("Notes on the Obvious," 15). One could then say that Roeg's film explores this moment to the full. If it is the case, as Ellis claims, that across a cut, "total difference of image and sound can occur, everything is at stake, the following image (and/or sounds) need

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<sup>18</sup> Stephen Heath's Questions of Cinema (London: Macmillan, 1981) collects Heath's writing from the 70s. De Lauretis' writing on Bad Timing appeared first as "Now and Nowhere: Roeg's Bad Timing," in Discourse, 5 (1983): 21-40, and was subsequently gathered into Re-Vision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp and Linda Williams (Frederick, M.D.: University Publications of America Inc., 1984), 150-69, and in Teresa de Lauretis, Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 84-102.

have no relation with those which precede," if it is true that the risk is of "disorientation and panic, or their obverse, disinterest, boredom" (15), then this would constitute another heuristic to apply to a film such as Bad Timing. It would be a way of showing that one could attend to the productivity and textual frisson of the cut without at the same time "looking for the look" in the specifically psychoanalytic film-theory way that Bordwell is denigrating.

I want to stay with the example of Bad Timing for a while in order to indicate the way Bordwell's point can be linked to some aspects of Ian Hunter's arguments discussed in the previous chapter. First, if we contrast the editing technique used to introduce a flashback in Bad Timing to the techniques used in classical hollywood cinema, we can notice the way an interpretation is produced by the viewer's knowledge of or familiarity with a particular textual technique (here a mode of editing) in tandem with that viewer's performing of some ethical work on the self of the kind described by Hunter.

To recall some signalings of flash-backs in classical hollywood cinema: wind blows through an open window as the camera moves in close on a tabletop calendar whose leaves are "blown" backwards until we reach the date it is necessary to reach for that point in the fiction (Douglas Sirk's Written on the Wind, 1956). A character has to tell another character what really happened in a gunfight that occurred some time earlier. He drags on a cigarette, says "Think back, Pilgrim," exhales the smoke which momentarily defocusses the screen to enable us to make the transition back to that time (John Wayne to Jimmy Stewart in John Ford's 1962 film, The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance, although, to be more precise, this is a flash-back within a flash-back structure). An intense light fixes around the eyes of a character as the camera moves into close-up (film noir flash-

back). A character looks into water, a point-of-view shot sees the water ripple, shimmer, fill the image, and we flashback.

Bad Timing, on the other hand, cuts directly, taking its viewer abruptly across different times and locations. And the notorious scenes depicting Alex's (Art Garfunkel) rape or "ravishment" of the comatose Milena (Theresa Russell) — scenes which have provoked much writing on this film — are given to the viewer by way of a cut on the look of the investigator, Netusil (Harvey Keitel). This is one of the film's modernist gestures (or, as Bordwell would put it, "art-cinema conventions") — albeit one used to troubling sexual-political effect. Its consequence is to prompt the viewer to ask him or herself whether this event really happened or whether it is Netusil's fantasy. And this viewer also knows that the film will not provide a definitive answer (no John Wayne here). So we encounter a film which employs some of the techniques of a modernist, art-cinema practice to produce what I would call "structured ambiguity" or the "ambiguity-effect." Its viewer can never know for sure, although of course many viewers might decide one way or another and have conversations and arguments accordingly. But one of the textual points of the film is to insist on the ambiguity and undecidability of this moment. There is no equivalent of third-person omniscient narration and no first-person character confession. All we have to go on is our capacity to interpret a textual device calculated to help produce an ambiguity-effect. The "correct" reading position to take up is one in which we are content not to be able to decide. And these features of textual openness, ambiguity and undecidability are achieved under definite conditions. My alluding to a technique of editing indicates a formal textual convention or condition, but it is one which needs to be accompanied by the ethical-interpretative work the viewer has to do on

him or herself. For example the viewer has to inhabit a mode of reading which says: "read for maximum ambiguity, interpret knowing that there will be no definite resolution and try to take pleasure in this circumstance." And one of the main points to be derived from a reading of Bordwell (and of Hunter) is that particular critical protocols need to be in place in order for a film to be said to be ineffable.

In some of his other comments on art cinema and its interpretation, Bordwell implies that the move from applying a humanist interpretation to employing a structuralist-semiotic interpretative paradigm is not so great as one might think: "A critic already inclined to see films as centering on problems of communication or the nature of art does not have to take a giant step in order to treat the same film as being about the opacity of representation or the nature of signification" (110). Furthermore: "with the rise of structuralism, reflexive interpretations were licensed by the assumption that all art could reflect upon signification" (111).

I want now to turn from these comments on the conventions of art cinema in order to discuss an instance of the intersection of European art cinema and Hollywood cinema. I do this by discussing some of the textual strategies at work in Bob Rafelson's Five Easy Pieces, a film which has come to be seen as a "classic" of the period now known as "new hollywood cinema." My discussion of the film will also have occasion to discuss some of the critical discourse which has attached to this and other new hollywood films. Consequently my object of analysis becomes the film and its various critical processings.

My initial interest in Five Easy Pieces concerns the extent to which it can be read as a Hollywood product which appropriates some of the features more usually found, at that time, in European Art cinema. That is to say, I read it as a film crossed by two different practices of cinema. For me, it is a film which oscillates between a notion of American “movies” — with production values of entertainment, action, linear narrative, the use of genres and stars — and “European Art Cinema,” a more obviously marked artistic/cerebral/ intellectual form of cinema, one which usually exhibits a complex narrative structure, with the director often functioning as an artist-star.<sup>19</sup> In particular I want to concentrate on the Nicholson character-function since it is at this textual level that the two film practices are mapped onto one another most clearly.

Five Easy Pieces was produced independently and released in 1970.<sup>20</sup> Contemporary accounts of the film slotted it into a cluster of so-called “youth” or “alternative” films of the late 60s and early 70s, involving “anti-heroes” (Easy Rider, Medium Cool, They Shoot Horses Don’t They, Bonnie and Clyde, Midnight Cowboy, Tell Them Willie Boy is Here, Joe, Adam at 6am, Alex in Wonderland).<sup>21</sup> Stephen Farber contextualised the

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<sup>19</sup> Some of my remarks on art cinema here draw on Steve Neale, “Art Cinema as Institution,” Screen, 22, 1 (1981): 11-39. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>20</sup> See David Thomson, “The Decade When Movies Mattered,” Movieline, 4, 11 (1993): 43-47, 90, for an account of the way BBS productions (Bert Schneider, Bob Rafelson, Steve Blauner) “did a deal with Columbia for a series of low-budget features that would draw on new talent” (43). This resulted in Five Easy Pieces (1970), The Last Picture Show (1971), A Safe Place (1971), Drive, He Said (1972) and The King of Marvin Gardens (1972), the first two of which were hits.

<sup>21</sup> See “Anti-Heroes,” a series of articles on Five Easy Pieces by Jacob Brackman, Harold Clurman and John Simon in Film 70/71: An Anthology by the National Society of Film Critics, ed. David Denby (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 33-43.

film in precisely this way, and Thomas Elsaesser repeated this taxonomic move.<sup>22</sup> Elsaesser said:

the significant feature of this new liberal cinema is that it makes an issue of the motives — or lack of them — in its heroes, and that this has implications on the narrative form and thereby on how one sees these films. The combination of the unmotivated hero and the motif of the journey, that is, the recourse to a motivation, ready-made, highly conventionalized and brought to the film from outside would appear to indicate a kind of malaise already frequently alluded to in relation to the European cinema — the fading confidence in being able to tell a story.

As it happens, Five Easy Pieces has no trouble telling a story. It does so in a fairly straightforward classical narrative fashion by invoking the enduring American myth of travelling on the open road. Five Easy Pieces' intersection with art cinema occurs, rather, on the level of the Nicholson character-function. This is the textual device which links the familiar Hollywood archetype of the hero/anti-hero as self-willed social outcast with elements of the existential protagonists of, say, an Antonioni film. Throughout Five Easy Pieces, Nicholson's character-function is relentlessly mediational, crossing two classes, two cultures: it functions as "Bobby" in the world of trailers, oil-rigs, bowling alleys, and as "Robert" in the world of classical music and island homes in Puget Sound. The cultural bilingualism invested in this character-function is the strategy which simultaneously enables some overt interrogation of questions of class and culture and prevents the possibility of a resolution of such issues being thought through at any level other than that contained in the figure of an existential character. It therefore becomes important to try to understand the way character is given and consumed in the film, and I do

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<sup>22</sup> See Stephen Farber, "Easy Pieces," Sight and Sound, 40, 3 (1971): 128-31, and Thomas Elsaesser, "Notes on the Unmotivated Hero: The Pathos of Failure: American Films in the 70s," Monogram, 6 (1975): 13-19.

this by concentrating on the way some commentaries on the film generate interpretations that work with a particular notion of character and narrative.

Stephen Farber, for example, in "Easy Pieces," argues that Easy Rider had questioned some prevailing American myths, namely "the freedom of the open road, the magical power of the unpolluted land, the journey away from civilisation as a regenerative experience containing the secret of life" (128). Farber then says that Five Easy Pieces "is a more mature and honest work, a critique of some of the unacknowledged assumptions of Easy Rider." Rafelson's film "extends these criticisms of American myths in a more thoughtful and coherent way" (128). Farber argues that this literary tradition, mediated via Thoreau, Emerson, Twain, Whitman, Kerouac and the Beats, is criticised consistently in the film. In this reading the Nicholson character's travelling, far from being an uncritical invoking of the myth of drifting as a poetic adventure — a Whitmanesque openness to all experience on the open road — is instead subjected to serious critique. Rather than be an "enriching" experience (as it usually is in its literary appearance), it is a stunting one. Consequently the character played by Nicholson is held by Farber to render the familiar literary-cultural figures problematic rather than unifying. As Farber phrases it: "Five Easy Pieces is remarkable for the perception and precision with which it delineates an individual character who is idiosyncratic enough to resist anyone's theories of social malaise" (130). This is a reading which activates the strategies of character and event that figure so prominently in Hollywood narratives. By remaining at the level of an interpretation of a fully individuated psychological character, Farber's analysis reproduces the familiar trope of a radical individualism which "escapes" all theorising. It is for this reason that I propose the somewhat awkward term, "Bob/ert,"



as a way of indicating that what Farber is reading is the recruitment to traditional Hollywood film practices of a feature of art cinema. The specific strategy here derived from art cinema is a habit of endowing characters and social situations with the status and inscrutability of objects, as a way of insisting that a character can never finally be known. The character will always retain an unknowable otherness, although this unknowable otherness will be the clear, unproblematic knowledge-effect of a circle of writings and readings of art cinema texts. As one critic has said of Antonioni's films, they are baffling, but "baffling in a highly intelligible way."<sup>23</sup>

At one level, the Nicholson character-function works in a quite pure classical-narrative fashion. To apply Marc Vernet's terms, he is the person with whom the camera moves, the one who stitches the space together in that he functions as the link between the film's shots and sequences. He guarantees both the progression and the continuity of the fiction.<sup>24</sup> Opposed to this stylistic regime is an art cinema practice characterised by Steve Neale as having a "stress on visual style (an engagement of the look

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<sup>23</sup> Kimball Lockhart, "Blockage and Passage in *The Passenger*," *Diacritics*, 15, 1 (1985), 77. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>24</sup> Marc Vernet, "Personnage," in Jean Collet, Michel Marie, Daniel Percheron, Jean-Paul Simon, Marc Vernet, *Lectures du film* (Paris: Editions Albatros, 1976), 177-79. At one point Vernet says: "Corrélativement, le personnage principal est, au cinéma, celui avec qui la caméra se déplace: il lie l'espace, dans la mesure où il fait le lieu entre les différentes séquences ou les plans d'un film. Il est lui qui assure à la fiction à la fois sa durée et continuité" (177-78). Or, in Steve Neale's terms: "With the emergence of the star system at the point of the elaboration and stabilisation of novelistic modes of cinematic narration, the body, in Hollywood, became simultaneously the incarnation of the coherence of fictional characterisation and the nodal site of a fetishistic regime or eroticisation and sexual representation. Together with a reticence of gesture and (later) of vocal delivery, these features come definitively to mark the representation of the body in Hollywood films" ("Art Cinema," 13).

in terms of a marked individual point of view rather than in terms of institutionalised spectacle), by a suppression of action in the Hollywood sense, by a consequent stress on character rather than plot and by an interiorisation of dramatic conflict" ("Art Cinema," 13). Neale goes on to specify some features peculiar to an Antonioni film: "An extreme de-dramatisation coupled, as a corollary, with a lack of spatio-temporal 'intensity,' a problematisation of character motivation and a rebalancing of the weight of attention accorded the human figure on the one hand and the landscape and decor on the other" (18). In his Diacritics article, Lockhart formulates this aspect of Antonioni's film practice in the following way, describing the final shot of L'avventura as a shot which "effects a forceful change, a clean break, a violence upon the limits of the text which stresses an overt concern with cinematic form, technique and the production of narrative cinema" (77). Lockhart continues:

This last shot of L'avventura might well be one of the most abstract single shots in the history of narrative cinema. It is a long shot from behind the two principals who have not moved and who remain immobile throughout its duration, the length of which emphasises this immobility and makes the shot resemble a still photograph. The stunning and clearly self-conscious design of this shot obviously marks a climax, but not a dramatic one. I would argue that this last shot is not so much a resolution as it is a statement of an irreconcilable separation, not just between the two characters, but between the two signifying levels of the film. By stressing elements of film technique and deemphasizing narrative, Antonioni underscores the importance of the signifier, not for its own sake but in order to call into question the necessary and differential relation between filmic signifier and signified. In this shot, the artificiality — a kind of abstract "designedness" which comes to be imposed at the moment of greatest dramatic ambiguity — opens the gap between the image and the drama it bespeaks, implicitly stating the problem of a cinematic semiology. In other words, the spectator is being invited to ask, "how do films, and in particular, the baffler I've just seen, signify?"<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Lockhart's interpretation is evidence of Bordwell's claim that the advent of structuralism saw reflexive interpretations "licensed by the assumption that all art could reflect upon signification" (Making Meaning,

A specific sequence in Five Easy Pieces which instances, at least within these terms set out by Neale and Lockhart, a crossing of art cinema and classical hollywood cinema, is the fight in the oil-field and Elton's subsequent arrest. The representation of the landscape alludes to Antonioni's film practice (and is meant to stand for the psychological situation of Bob/ert in a way that is analogous to Lockart's description of the end of L'avventura). The fade of Bob/ert on his knees with the oil-rigs behind him is at once an anthropomorphised registering of alienation and a quotation (via the temporal elision in the colouring of the sunset fade) of a specific pictorial-sculptural mode of imaging the American west. Crudely put, Camus and Sartre meet Frederick Remington.

The logic of this *mise-en-scène* is repeated in the following scene where Bob/ert visits his sister at a studio classical-music recording session. Throughout their conversation Bob/ert's body (the body which, according to Vernet, constitutes the spectator's principal purchase on the fiction) is cut across by the metal rod of the open piano. The reading solicited here (via the imaging of triangulation and spatial restriction) is that the *mise-*

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111). Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, in his review of Bordwell's book, used Antonioni's film practice to make a different point; namely as an example of work which defies "contentistic interpretation." See his "Review," in which he cites Roland Barthes' and Sam Rohdie's writings on Antonioni as exemplary to the extent that they say that the importance of Antonioni's film practice does not reside "in the meaning, latent or manifest, of the things Antonioni's films 'say'." He then goes on to say:

If there is a discourse of meaning immanent in Antonioni's films, it has to do with the way meaningfulness of the ordinary kind is suspended and the spectator is invited to experience a certain absence of meaning at times where one would normally expect a plenitude. But it does not follow from this that the films are 'about' absence, or loss, or alienation, or any of the things they are normally described as being about. The task of criticism therefore cannot, in this instance, be one of uncovering meanings, since they are simply not there to be uncovered. It is rather one of producing a parallel text which does not interpret the films but elicits from them a sense of what they are doing and what is to be seen in them (295).

en-scène “stands for” Bob/ert’s psychological dilemma. In this case it concerns the restriction of this other, high-cultural, half of his life/character. The immediate cut from this scene to Bob/ert having vigorous sex with a pick-up confirms a reading which works in terms of a binary opposition of cerebrality versus sexuality/physicality. That is to say, the Bob/ert character-function contains the text’s principal structural oppositions, running together the working-class world of hard hats and hard-ons, and the antiseptic high-cultural world of pianos and ping-pong. A quick listing of structural oppositions would be:

low culture	high culture
oilfield	piano
body-macho	head-mind
literal-direct	metaphorical-nuanced
Tammy Wynette	Chopin
Bobby	Robert

The Nicholson character-function — what I am calling “Bob/ert” — plays across this set of oppositions in order to show that each cultural area is emphatically rule-bound. The family life on the island home operates inside strict social-cultural codes and everywhere exhibits the penalties of living too much in the head. So the father is mute and in a wheelchair (as a result of a stroke) and brother Carl has a “totalled” neck (and neck-brace) as a result of an accident. The low-culture version of this state of affairs is given in the celebrated restaurant scene involving the confrontation between Bob/ert and the roadside diner waitress. The waitress is shown to be a rule-bound literalist by the Nicholson character-function which, now working as “Robert,” is able to out-think, out-speak the waitress before smashing the glasses from the table (“See this sign!”). By contrast, in the cerebral space of the island home, the character-function works as “Bobby,”

asserting bodiness, physicality — “taking” Catherine, smashing perfume bottles, fighting with Spicer. The sequence which best demonstrates this strategy comes after Catherine has asked him to play for her. It is an encounter in which Catherine represents the affective level and Bob/ert the level of the jaded existential. Accordingly she speaks of having been “truly moved,” of having been touched by the “inner feeling” of his playing. Bob/ert denies having had any inner feelings, explaining that it was the easiest piece he knew, one he had played first and better at the age of eight. Two accounts of this exchange are then given: the affective when Catherine says: “You played. I honestly responded. You made me feel embarrassed.” And the X-Ray-existential when Bob/ert replies: “Come on. I faked a little Chopin. You faked a big response.” This scene can be compared with a scene from Douglas Sirk’s All That Heaven Allows (1954) where Cary is taken by Ron to meet some rustic friends. Cary picks up a copy of Walden, reads a few lines and pronounces them “beautiful.” She then learns that this book is the “bible” of Ron’s ex-advertising friend. Asking whether Ron has ever read the book she is told: “He doesn’t have to read it, he just lives it.” One could imagine a similar sequence in Five Easy Pieces where a character reads some beautiful lines from Camus’ L’Etranger or Sartre’s La Nausée, only to be told that Bob/ert does not need to read such texts because he lives them. In each case it represents an intersection of the existential and the affective. But for me the main point of interest in the Bob/ert character function lies in the way it is able to shatter the pretensions and decorum of each social context it encounters, simply by revealing its appropriate alternative side. So Bob/ert can exit from the frustration of a traffic jam by playing classical music (Chopin) to his “fellow” lumpens, and can exit from the frustrations of formal evenings with his family (and Rayette’s gaucheness) by going to a wharfside bar, getting loaded and sleeping on the jetty. In its ability to

mediate and transcend all oppositions, this character-function becomes the most privileged textual element in the film.

Hélène Cixous has some observations on the category of character (in literary texts) which are helpful to the analysis of Five Easy Pieces being put forward here. She notes:

If "character" has a sense, then it is as a Figure that can be used in semiotics: the "personage" functions as a social sign, in relation to other signs ... through "character" is established the identification circuit with the reader: the more "character" fulfills the norms, the better the reader recognises it and recognises himself. The commerce established between book and reader is thus facilitated. The marketable form of literature, we might say, is closely related to that familiar decipherable human sign that "character" claims to be: in the "concept" of "character" the allurements are all asserted, forming mutual leagues and legacies in order to make up a certain literary scene: this "concept" organizes "recognition"; it is offered to the perception of the reader who can take account of it; it leads one, finally, to assume a "depth," a truth that is hidden but discoverable. By definition, a "character" preconceived or created by an author, is to be figured out, understood, read: he is presented, offered up to interpretation, with the prospect of a traditional reading that seeks its satisfaction at the level of a potential identification with such and such a "personage," the reader entering into commerce with the book on condition that he is assured of getting paid back, that is recompensed by another who is sufficiently similar to or different from him — such that the reader is upheld, by comparison or in combination with a personage, in the representation that he wishes to have of himself.<sup>26</sup>

In the case of film, what is of interest in relation to this category of "character" is the notion that a character can unify in itself, in its corporeal "physical presence," the contradictory discourses being worked out and over in the film. A traditional film theory argument has it that the unity

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<sup>26</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Character of 'Character'," New Literary History, 5, 2 (1974): 384-85. For more recent and highly suggestive work on the category of character see Ian Hunter, "Reading Character," Southern Review, 16, 2 (1983): 226-43, and John Frow, "Spectacle Binding: On Character," Poetics Today, 7, 2 (1986): 227-50.

of the classical-narrative text is constructed by various procedures which work to efface the ruptures/seams left by the montage of the text's construction. By carrying the viewer effortlessly from one shot or sequence to the next, with as smooth a transition as possible, the film folds over itself and positions the viewer in particular ways at a point from which textual contradictions and gaps supposedly become difficult to come to grips with, assuming one wanted to do that. What my remarks on character-function in Five Easy Pieces are trying to demonstrate is the presence of a specific mechanism. I am arguing that the process of identification with a "character" is not only a means of tying the viewer into the fiction and of affording certain viewing pleasures, but is also, and perhaps more importantly, a part of the unification procedures of the classical narrative text. The distinctiveness of the form of character given in Five Easy Pieces derives from the extent to which it layers the tradition of character in classical narrative with aspects of character found in art cinema. One instance of this is to be heard in the concluding scene of the bowling alley sequence where Bob/ert sits alone, thoughtful, with the hitherto realist sound of the sequence faded into silence: it functions as a kind of sonic point-of-view whereby the sound within the diegesis as a whole momentarily becomes the sound (of silence) experienced within the central character.

The conclusion of Five Easy Pieces typifies the way art cinema practices have been mapped onto Hollywood practices throughout the film. Bob/ert goes into a gas station toilet, takes off his jacket and looks long into the mirror. In the manner of classical narrative (as Raymond Bellour's writing has consistently demonstrated),<sup>27</sup> the sequence rhymes

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Raymond Bellour, "To Analyse, to Segment," Quarterly Review of Film Studies, 1, 3 (1976): 331-43. "The classic cinema

an earlier one when Bob/ert had first tried to leave Rayette behind before going north to visit his family. In the first sequence he had looked into a bathroom mirror and, to that point in the narrative, it could have registered conventionally as narcissism or self-obsession. In the film's final sequence, a demarcation point is signified. This is Bob/ert's ultimate moment of existential self-scrutiny and decision. He leaves his jacket in the washroom, having already given Rayette his wallet. He climbs aboard the truck, shivering, and explains that his car "got the shit burned out of it." The statement rhymes an earlier sequence involving a conversation outside the bowling alley, where Rayette had said: "I am not a piece of crap. You treat me like I was." The truckie warns that their destination is "colder'n hell," and the oxymoron contained in that colloquialism is an appropriately final marking of the degree to which an oscillating narrative structure has prevailed throughout the film. And once again, as in the oilfield sequence, the *mise-en-scène* obeys the rules of art cinema. The signs GULF-CAFE-MEN are prominent, a pole partitions the frame, and Bob/ert re-enters the totalised male world by emerging from the "graphic bigness"<sup>28</sup> of MEN to move into the truck cabin. This provides a final foregrounding of the two sets of film practices, art cinema and Hollywood, the play of which has enabled so much of the film's meaning and the intersection of which, to a significant extent, marks out the textual space of new hollywood cinema.

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(especially the classic American cinema) knows well these rhyming effects; they are, to be precise, what constitute it" (331).

<sup>28</sup> Kimball Lockhart, in "Blockage and Passage in The Passenger," refers to the appearance of two huge bottles in Antonioni's first feature, Story of a Love Affair, and says: "The appearance of something as visually striking as these giant bottles, relating to nothing else in the film, seems to do nothing except, maybe, call attention to a kind of weird GRAPHIC BIGNESS" (74).



I want now to conclude this chapter by returning from my detour into new hollywood cinema and art cinema — albeit a detour provoked by Bordwell's formulations on these two forms of cinematic practice — to cast a further glance at Bordwell's achievement in Making Meaning. It is also a detour from my own particular exercise in "making meaning," one which sought to read Five Easy Pieces in relation to a mixed set of cinematic conventions while also taking account of some of the critical processings of the film.

Towards the end of his book, having cast a devastating, mid-western glance at the film criticism produced in, or processed through, such metropolitan critical-cultural capitals as Boston/New York (in his account of October) and London (in his account of Screen), and after saying that "the arrival of citational footnotes in Cahiers, Screen, and Artforum should be seen as a major event, signalling not simply 'academicisation' but a move towards arguments from external expertise" (209), Bordwell assesses the state of current film criticism. Finding it "astonishingly barren" (261), he then says that one lesson of his book "is that while the particular results of any interpretative act are indefinitely numerous, the textual cues, the procedures that rank and organize those cues, and the semantic traits which are assigned to them, have become quite limited" (260). It is Bordwell's contention that the late 60s, although in many ways quite fruitful for film theory ushered in

a mode of criticism that has in the last decade or so become astonishingly barren. We need no more diagnoses of the subversive moment in a slasher movie, or the celebrations of a "theoretical" film for its critique of mainstream cinema, or treatments of the most recent art film as a meditation on cinema and subjectivity. In retrospect, the revamped symptomatic readings of the mid-1970s look like originality's last gasp. We have had no exemplars since then; we live in an era of ordinary criticism. Theory too is waning. Hence perhaps critics' desperate swerve to television, to publicity materials,

to cultural artifacts — as if the repetitiveness of Interpretation, Inc., could be disguised by a turn to new sorts of texts (261-62).

The polemic seems to overtake its target here. For example, how does one distinguish between the historical analyses of cinema exhibition, the picture palaces and so forth, and something like Lyn Spigel's analyses of the coming of television or William Boddy's work on American television in the 1950s?<sup>29</sup> One would need to distinguish between two different things: the swerve to find a new (televisual) object to interpret, where once one had interpreted film (for example, a t.v. soap opera replaces a film melodrama), and the legitimate transposition of some sort of historical/archeological approach from film to television as distinct social-institutional spaces.

Some readers might be surprised to see just which instances of critical writing are valorised in Bordwell's study. What eventually escapes the sometimes scathing synoptic view are such things as André Bazin's writing on Renoir and Welles, Parker Tyler's books, Barbara Deming's Running Away from Myself, some of Manny Farber's "rhapsodic evocations" (264), the early work of the Cahiers and Positif groups, the early Movie analyses of Hitchcock by Wood and Perkins. These are all said to be likely to "endure for a long time" (261). Perkins' status as one of the elect does not, however, stop him from producing a quite critical review of the book.<sup>30</sup> I want to take up some of the remarks made by Perkins in his review as a means of restating my belief in the necessity for some critical writing to attend to the way particular critical postures and performances

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<sup>29</sup> See Lyn Spigel, Making Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), and William Boddy, Fifties Television: the Industry and Its Critics (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990).

<sup>30</sup> See footnote 3.

give themselves particular alibis for being in the world, for making a claim on our time and attention.

What is of immediate interest to me, then, is the critical alibi Perkins' article gives itself by way of its opening gambit. The review opens with Perkins providing a fairly detailed account of a fifteen second segment from Max Ophuls' Caught (1948). Having given his film-critical version of the anthropologist's "thick description," Perkins immediately declares it to be, of necessity, a "thin description" because it has not been able fully to convey all that is going on in a viewing of that particular sequence. So, at this point, Perkins' reader encounters a humanist, film-practical-criticism version of what Raymond Bellour called "the unattainable text."<sup>31</sup> And it is worth recalling the extent to which a semiotic, structural-linguistic textual analysis, for all its imposing scientificity, shared with the humanist criticism it was hoping to displace a belief that the text would always, in some measure, escape, evade or exceed its critical analysis or description. For Bellour, the film text was unattainable because it was unquotable. The moving image was "peculiarly unquotable, since the written text cannot restore to it what only the projector can produce: a movement" (25). And although indispensable, reduced film stills are "already derisory in comparison with what they represent" (26). Consequently, filmic analysis "constantly mimics, evokes, describes: in a kind of principled despair it can but try frantically to compete with the object it is attempting to understand. By dint of seeking to capture and recapture it, it ends up only

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<sup>31</sup> Raymond Bellour, "The Unattainable Text", Screen, 16, 3 (1975): 19-28. Subsequent references included in the text. The significance of Bellour's article for a particular (structuralist-semiotic) moment of film analysis is indicated in Ben Brewster's editorial introduction which advises that Bellour's article derived from a talk given "at a seminar organised by Screen and the Educational Advisory Service of the B.F.I. at the National Film Theatre on the specific problems film raises for those engaged in its textual analysis" (5).

always occupying a point at which its object is perpetually out of reach" (26). Moreover, filmic analysis "always seems a little fictional: playing on an absent object, never able, since their aim is to make it present, to adopt the instruments of fiction, even though they have to borrow them. The analysis of film never stops filling up a film that never stops running out: it is the Danaïds' cask par excellence" (26).

If one were to take seriously the Perkins/Bellour claim that film criticism can never really represent its object, then criticism (of the Bordwell Making Meaning sort) could only be a deeply misguided endeavour. But, as Ian Hunter points out, such declarations of the impossibility or inadequacy of criticism are never followed by a decision to give up this disappointing endeavour. On the contrary, "this theme announces its (criticism's) redoubled application."<sup>32</sup>

Perkins' opening gambit is meant to demonstrate the aridity and reductiveness of Bordwell's tactic of typologising interpretative manoeuvres of various kinds. But if you read Bordwell's book and then

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<sup>32</sup> Ian Hunter, "Notes on Wittgenstein and Film Criticism," unpublished manuscript. Hunter says:

It is like trying to represent distance with a thermometer or temperature with a ruler. Very well then, let's give it up and do something more worthwhile — teach children how to read and write or learn to cook fine food. But the theme of the impossibility of criticism never goes in this direction, unfortunately. Rather than signalling the abandonment of a useless endeavour this theme announces its redoubled application. This only makes sense as something that critics do to themselves as a condition of giving their practice ethical significance. It signals above all that the text is 'difficult' in a very special way. Not hard to read like a bad fax but hard to read like a sign from God. Only those who strive after the ineffable have the ethical authority to interpret such signs. How interesting that film criticism should be able to activate all the old glory of religious hermeneutics and pass it off as a contemporary activity. But in these allegedly post-modern times the real challenge is to be post-hermeneutic. We need critical descriptions that don't inflate us to such absurd ethical dimensions.

read Perkins' review, you find that this opening gambit exhibits one of the interpretative strategies outlined by Bordwell (Making Meaning, 52-6).<sup>33</sup> So although Perkins' opening strategy seems calculated to stand as a decisive reproach of the central thesis of Bordwell's book, it prompts me to wonder how carefully Perkins has read the book he was reviewing. For it is surely unusual to think that you could provide a powerful or persuasive rebuttal of an overall argument when the critical act you are performing provides further evidence of that overall argument.

It must be said, however, that other critical responses to Bordwell's book take a quite different position from the one I am arguing here. For example, Adrian Martin quotes approvingly from Perkins' review, showing a particular fondness for the slogan, "meanings are filmed."<sup>34</sup> But this admired slogan, far from settling any critical dispute in a decisive way, is itself open to a few different interpretative uptakes. It could be taken to say that meaning is performed in the scenic unfolding of a particular film but equally, it could be taken to suggest that meanings pre-exist their particular scenic performances and then are filmed. In this case "meanings" would have something like the status of the "pro-filmic," a category capable of being as stable and decided or as elusive and ambiguous as you like, depending on the particular critical discourse you are activating at the time. Or it could be some combination of these two things.

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<sup>33</sup> For Bordwell's response to Perkins, see Bordwell, "Film Interpretation Revisited."

<sup>34</sup> Adrian Martin, "Mise-en-scène is Dead, or the Expressive, the Excessive, the Technical and the Stylish," Continuum, 5, 2 (1992), 108. Martin glosses Perkins' slogan by saying: "here is a rich formulation that offers a materialist understanding of the mystique of mise-en-scène, returning us forcefully to an art of bodies in space."

Reading Perkins' review of Bordwell's book seems to have confirmed Martin in a particular attitude towards the appropriate form current film-critical practice should take. But in my case, as I indicated earlier, reading Perkins' review simply convinced me of the need for some film criticism to attend to the various kinds of critical alibis we encounter whenever we read film criticism. This is not to say everyone should do it, only that some people should, and it is also to insist that doing it is just as important and interesting as trying to generate ever more vivacious descriptions of particular filmic encounters.

A slightly different example of the sort of thing I am talking about here occurs when Martin quotes Bellour's gloss on Lyotard's notion of acinema,<sup>35</sup> and then goes on to say that "the writings of Brooks and others point to a comparable conception — cinema as a reservoir of excessive flows, pulsions, psychical-physiological effects" (117). Martin had earlier cited Jodi Brooks' description of a scene from Dreyer's Gertrud as evidence of the kind of film-critical analysis he felt was on the right track.<sup>36</sup> The article in question begins in the following way:

Some films elicit particular types of cinematic obsession and fascination. Dreyer's Gertrud and Duras' India Song offer themselves for (and seem to encourage) obsessions with cinematic immobility-fascinations with the immobility of the body/figure in film, with the immobility of the image/shot itself-held, suspended, but precariously so (79).

Every article has to have a beginning, has to enact what I am here calling a "critical alibi" of one kind or another. In the case of the Brooks article, it is

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<sup>35</sup> For the Bellour, see Raymond Bellour, "Thierry Kuntzell and the Return of Writing," trans. Annwyl Williams, Camera Obscura, 11 (1983): 29-59, and for the Lyotard, see J.F. Lyotard, "Acinema," trans. Paisley Livingston, Wide-Angle, 2, 3 (1978): 52-9.

<sup>36</sup> Jodi Brooks, "Consumed by Cinematic Monstrosity", Art and Text, 34 (1989): 79-94. Subsequent references included in the text.

the familiar alibi of implying that the critical assemblage the reader is about to encounter does not in itself constitute a productive theoretical apparatus. The alibi being enacted here is that the critical description contained in the textual analysis will not be a rewriting of the film but rather will have been compelled by the film or, more phenomenologically still, will have been compelled by the experience of encountering/viewing the film. While speaking of encounters, it must be said that the reader of Brooks' article encounters an intelligent, elegant piece of rhetorical film criticism, written in a very distinctive voice and built up by an equally distinctive processing of some writing from Balazs, Ropars, Caws, Lyotard, Caillois, Kristeva, Deleuze and Barthes. Come the end of the article, various traditional understandings of *mise en scène* and film performance have been unsettled, reformulated by way of a highly suggestive, even alluring, notion of a cinema of what might be called "scenic devastation." As it unfolds, the article presents its reader with a series of disorientatingly paradoxical formulations, ranging from a notion of vertiginous immobility, through notions of vectorised, volatile scenic tableaux, until eventually the film-shot itself is reconceived as a moment of luminous decay.

As a critical performance, Brooks' article certainly deserves the praise Martin brings to it. It is very much an example of "the action of critical writing" he so desires, and throughout its argument, Brooks' article everywhere indicates just how much an act of criticism can "conjure, perform, circulate, transform" ("Mise-en-scene is Dead," 131). But in the terms of critical attention I am proposing here, Brooks' article is also an example of an alibi in motion. If it is a given that "immobility is a central thrill of cinema," then the tacit claim of Brooks' article is that, for all the elegance of its critical assemblage, it really will be doing no more than

rendering the experience of viewing these films. And since it is also a given that "some films elicit particular types of cinematic obsession and fascination," then the particular critical performance contained in Brooks' article accordingly will do no more than elaborate that circumstance, albeit with somewhat more pizzaz than would some other critical discourse. At least this is the alibi her article seems to me to give itself, and it has to be said that, as alibis go, it is not a bad one.

Brooks' strategy in that article has something in common with Stanley Cavell's comments at the start of his book on screwball comedy, Pursuits of Happiness.<sup>37</sup> Cavell, a distinguished Harvard philosopher who has written on everything from Coriolanus to Now, Voyager, has a particular fondness for the nineteenth-century American transcendentalists.<sup>38</sup> So it is perhaps a naivete of the kind discussed in the writings of Thoreau and Emerson that Cavell is urging on his reader when he says: "I am always saying that we must let the films themselves teach us how to look at them and how to think about them" (Pursuits, 25). This dictum seems close to Perkins' attitude, as expressed in his review of Bordwell.<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere in his introduction, Cavell says that "to take an interest in an object is to take an interest in one's experience of the object" (7), and further: "a reading of a film sets up a continuous appeal to the experience of the film, or rather,

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<sup>37</sup> Stanley Cavell, Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1981), 25. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>38</sup> See Cavell, Disowning Knowledge in Six Plays of Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); The Senses of Walden (New York: Viking, 1974); and "Ugly Duckling, Funny Butterfly: Bette Davis and Now, Voyager," Critical Inquiry, 16, 2 (1990): 213-89.

<sup>39</sup> The title of Perkins' article alludes to an earlier book of Cavell's, Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) and Adrian Martin draws my attention to the Film Comment "critics' poll" of 1976 in which Perkins lists Cavell's The World Viewed (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971) as top of his list of favourite critical texts.



to an active memory of the experience (or an active anticipation of acquiring the experience)" (11). And at another point Cavell explicitly announces the performative aspect of the criticism he will be writing in this book when he says: "I would like to say that what I am doing in reading a film is performing it (if you wish, performing it inside myself)" (37-8). Beyond representing Cavell's version of a phenomenological approach to film analysis, what those remarks seem to me to exhibit is a rhetorical sleight of hand wherein a highly sophisticated critical apparatus (in Cavell's case, involving the writings of Kant, Wittgenstein, Frye, Austin, Emerson, Thoreau, Shakespeare) must somehow be thought to have been summoned by the film rather than brought to bear on it within a particular critical milieu. Far from indicating the presence of an intrusive pedagogical apparatus, the "films themselves" will be the true pedagogical instrument, determining what is to be said about them. In this fantasy scenario it is "the films themselves" that will provide the pedagogical dimension for the encounter of the philosopher and the cinema.

The brief examples provided by these bits of writing from Perkins, Brooks and Cavell should indicate what I mean when I say that film criticism, however it is to be regarded, must to some extent be acknowledged as an "occasional" activity. It is a public discursive performance, a public staging of the self by way of the activation of a particular critical apparatus or framework in which a critical alibi of some sort is put into play. And the point of the alibi is to persuade us to attend to this particular piece of critical writing by practising a form of "willing suspension of disbelief" which enables us to think that this piece of criticism will take us someplace truer, more profound, more interesting, or simply more poetic, than will other kinds of critical writing.

For example, one finds, scattered throughout Martin's article, statements of the sort of film-critical practice he would like to see adopted. He prefers "a kind of intellectual and emotional ambivalence — a worried oscillation between cinema as a socially regulated institution and cinema as a poetic art," and he "cannot imagine a truly powerful or interesting critical practice that was not devoted — in the work it addresses, and in its own work of writing, speaking or teaching — to the living history of poetic insight" (123). I would like to think I am at least as interested as is Martin in the realm of the poetic, together with the various insights to be found there, but perhaps I tend to find poetic insight in different places from Martin.

I have discussed Martin's critical position in this detail only because it seems to me to represent a further instance of the taking up of Perkins' position against the attitudes put forward by Bordwell in Making Meaning. I have already indicated that I regard Bordwell's book as a very significant intervention in the field of film and cultural studies, an intervention which seems to me more productive than the critical recidivism of a Perkins or a Martin. And since I have, at various times in the last two chapters, quoted Wittgenstein to elaborate my endorsement of what I take to be the virtues of a Bordwellian and Hunterian perspective, it seems appropriate to refer again to Wittgenstein as a means of distancing myself from Martin's position. I have already indicated that much of Wittgenstein's writing was concerned to clarify what would count as an explanation in a particular circumstance, what it meant to follow a rule, under what conditions doubt and certainty manifested themselves, and so on. For Martin, Wittgenstein probably figures as one of the founding fathers of a rather dry critical practice. But we should remember that Wittgenstein, like Perkins, Bellour and Martin, was

concerned with the conditions and limits of interpretation. "(T)hese explanations must after all sometime come to an end" was his terse formulation of such limits.<sup>40</sup> Wittgenstein's concern was not, however, to pour out more interpretation. For Wittgenstein, interpretations came to an end not in an "unattainable text" but in a "practice of life," a set of procedures in which one is already engaged. Explanations come to an end in the fact that we happen to do things in a certain way. This is what I have tried to capture by saying that we "inhabit" modes of reading. Film criticism is also a particular "practice of life" but one that regularly seeks to provide its habitual actions with mysterious alibis. On this point we could momentarily adopt a Cavell-style attitude and say that such forms of mystery are best left in mystery movies.

Bordwell's book moves towards its end by citing the new "historical turn" in film studies. This refers to the various attempts by people such as Tom Gunning and Miriam Hansen to reconstruct earlier acts of film comprehension.<sup>41</sup> This work is taken to confirm "the precept that through time some potential meanings are lost" (266) and these meanings "can be revived through an analysis akin to the study of iconography in art history" (266). It is clear that Bordwell has a great deal of sympathy for this kind of critical work, and this prompts me to think that he would be sympathetic towards the empirical side of the history of literary studies, alluded to in the previous chapter by way of reference to Louis Martz's work on Donne.

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<sup>40</sup> See Wittgenstein, On Certainty, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979) ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, 34; 6e.

<sup>41</sup> Tom Gunning, D.W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), and Miriam Hansen, Babel & Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

Bordwell's book concludes by saying that if film criticism is to progress, then the "greatest novelty, at this moment, will come not from new semantic fields (postmodernism or whatever will follow) but from a side-stepped dislocation of interpretation itself" (274). Before this somewhat elusive conclusion, Bordwell had spent most of his last few pages outlining the virtues of an "historical poetics" of cinema. Bordwell is keen to see film criticism display some of the "positivist scholarship" (262) that has been part of the history of literary criticism, and he says that the two main questions film criticism should ask are: "how are particular films put together? Call this the problem of films' composition," and: "what effects and functions do particular films have?" (263). The interpretative critic hounded by Bordwell throughout his book has a ready-made answer to these questions by presuming that "the film's composition and effects are the vehicles of its implicit and/or symptomatic meanings" (263). Bordwell then has an unwitting Foucauldian moment in suggesting that "what may matter as much as implicit or repressed meanings is the surface of the work" (264, emphasis added).

In calling for historical study of particular films, a "study of form and style in given historical circumstances" (267), Bordwell says he does not want such work to be conducted in a critical language that would "flatten out our predecessors' difference" (265). The current state of film scholarship is said to be such that we lack detailed analyses of genres, histories of acting, lighting, editing, music, camera techniques, aesthetic uses of colour, and even descriptions of such basic things as dialogue, scene construction and optical effects. Nor are there sufficiently thorough explanations of the norms governing the output of most national cinemas. Bordwell contends that a "theoretically rigorous historical scholarship," a "self-conscious historical poetics of cinema" (266) is best

placed to produce studies of particular cinematic forms, genres, and styles in such a way as would demonstrate "how, in determinate circumstances, films are put together, serve specific functions and achieve specific effects." (266-67). The beginnings of such a critical practice are said to reside in the work of Arnheim, Russian Formalism, the early Soviet filmmakers, Bazin's writing on the evolution of cinematic language and Noel Burch's work on the history of style in Japanese cinema. An "open-textured historical poetics of film" would display an "awareness of historically existent options" (268) in cinema. The poetician "aims to analyse the conceptual and empirical factors — norms, traditions, habits — that govern a practice and its products" (269). Such an historical poetics would study practices of reception as well as those of production, seeking to establish particular viewing conventions, "the inferential protocols of certain historical modes of viewing" (272) or historically specific "norms of comprehension" (274).

In moving towards his conclusion Bordwell also says that the spectator can "use the film for other purposes than the maker anticipated. There is nothing mysterious or surprising about this" (270). No, but the question remains of what status one gives to such construals within the broad account of interpretative acts that Bordwell is undertaking in his book. Is it, for example, to be aligned with some of the accounts found in recent cultural studies writing which celebrate triumphalist popular-transformative readings of received cultural texts?<sup>42</sup> Or would Bordwell be more likely to align himself with Umberto Eco's comments on an

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<sup>42</sup> See John Fiske, "Popular Forces and the Culture of Everyday Life," Southern Review, 21, 3 (1988): 288-306, and Barbara Klinger, "Digressions at the Cinema: Commodification and Reception in Mass Culture," in Modernity and Mass Culture, 117-34.

interpretative process that respected the historical lexicon of the text?<sup>43</sup> On this issue of what particular viewers do with particular films, Raymond Durnat has said that "very few spectators seek to read texts. They want to raid them for some relevance to their own interests. The study of movies undoubtedly has its place, but very few moviegoers want to study movies. They want to loot them."<sup>44</sup> Before this, Durnat said that

film can count on the spectator's possessing a certain formative (sub)culture. And, reciprocally, the spectator can estimate the sorts of meaning which a text expects him (or her) to construe ... The purpose of debate isn't only to establish a preferred meaning, but first to decide whether there is one, and also to establish the range of interpretations which a film can accommodate (76).

And Herb Eagle, reviewing Bordwell's book for Wide-Angle, touches on the issues alluded to in Durnat's comments, by saying: "Bordwell's detailed analysis of interpretation as a specialized craft raises a central question about the general spectator's cognitive response to film art: To what extent are the schemata and heuristics that Bordwell has attributed to the 'professional' film interpreter also employed by the general spectator in constructing meaning?" ("Review of Making Meaning," 120-21).

For example, one viewer might watch Martin Scorsese's Cape Fear and relate it to the earlier J. Lee Thompson version, also finding intertextual relations to Hitchcock, John Boorman's Deliverance (1970) and Jonathan Demme's The Silence of the Lambs (1991) while another viewer might use

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<sup>43</sup> Umberto Eco, Interpretation and Overinterpretation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), ed. Stefan Collini. Eco's example concerns the word "gay" as found in Wordsworth's poetry. A "sensitive reader ... has the duty to take into account the state of the lexical system at the time of Wordsworth" (68).

<sup>44</sup> Raymond Durnat, "Nostalgia: Code and Anti-Code: A Review of Jonathan Rosenbaum's Moving Places: A Life at the Movies," Wide-Angle, 4, 4 (1981), 77. Subsequent references included in the text.

the film as an occasion to wonder about how to avoid such a real-life circumstance (surely the judicial and policing arms of the state would intervene before these dreadful events came to pass); still another might deplore the misogyny of the film. And so on. As Eagle says: "the boundary between comprehension and interpretation is a variable one" (121). But what would be evident in these different construals of the film would be precisely their statuses as modes of reading that simultaneously function as appropriations, uptakes or rewritings of particular kinds. The options are that the film is taken to be analogous to "real life" (how can these sorts of acts/people be stopped?); or it is recruited to a film fanzine/theoretical mixture of thinking about re-makes and intertextuality; or it is submitted to the "political" critique constituted by a feminist attention to the way women are depicted in the film — that is, a criticism of the violence done to women within the diegesis and within more general terms of representation.

But Eagle's very positing of the notion of "the general spectator" invokes a straw figure, and goes against his recognition of the limits of Bordwell's study; namely the fact that the book is an investigation of "the assumption and protocols of the past half-century of critical and academic film interpretation" (118, emphases added). More significantly, Eagle notes the extent to which Bordwell's cadastral survey of academic-critical discourse on film from 1940 to the late 80s tends to favour "those critics who employ semantic fields demonstrably present in the fabula (for example Parker Tyler or Barbara Deming) over those who approach the text with semantic fields which originate in sociopolitical or psychoanalytic theories and have no clear relation to story elements" (121). Such an observation hints at the presence of a symptomatic tendency for Bordwell's writing to naturalise some forms of film criticism over others,

in the very act of prioritising them within the terms of his survey. In a book which has so consistently castigated symptomatic interpretative activity, it would be ironic to find Eagle's criticism to have a force.<sup>45</sup>

Bordwell ends his book with a very structuralist gesture (pace Todorov and Culler) by displaying a topos of self-reflexivity. He says: "I offer not a hermeneutics ... but a poetics of interpretation," a fact he claims is indicated by the extent to which any criticism of his book would still be obliged to operate within its concepts: "Like every poetics of writing, mine hands over to the reader the tools with which my own discourse can be taken to pieces" (273). This chapter has sought not so much to dismantle Bordwell's writing as to align it with other, related, theoretical writing in order to indicate some potential directions for future critical endeavours. Playing the role of a polite host, it has introduced some fragments of writing that previously did not seem to know one another and (topos of candidate's modesty) this has seemed enough of a thing to do.

In the next chapter I turn to discuss one aspect of contemporary film criticism — critical discussion of the teen movie — in the context of broader debates concerning the "popular" and how best to theorise it. The notion of the "general spectator" alluded to by Eagle re-emerges in debates on whether one should "intellectualise the popular" or do something else with it. And it is intriguing to note the extent to which this particular region of film criticism wishes to valorise a carnivalesque concept of "fun," given that Tom Gunning concluded his review of Bordwell's Making Meaning by saying how irritated he was by "the puritanical topoi of film study" ("Under the Sign of the Scorpion," 117). Gunning found it

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<sup>45</sup> And indeed when Screen eventually did review Bordwell's book, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith pursued the issue of Bordwell's antipathy towards the notion of a symptomatic reading, defending this practice and Screen's association with it. See his "Review," 296-97.



tiresome that each new transformation of film study seemed "to find it necessary to don its black and white Sunday clothes" and was annoyed that many film academics "seemed "determined to indicate that whatever they may be doing when they study film, they are not having fun ... " (118). I hope to demonstrate in the next chapter that the appeal to the category of "fun," far from constituting any sort of critique of Bordwell's project in Making Meaning (a project with which Gunning is in overall agreement), instead provides compelling evidence for the necessity of privileging precisely the kinds of things Bordwell is saying throughout that book. In making a move to a different area of contemporary cultural debate, it will become evident that the perspectives derived from a consideration of the writings of Bordwell and Hunter enable me to inflect this teenpic debate in a direction towards which the polemic, as currently constituted, has not moved. When one encounters the figure of the demotic critic-as-fan and when one encounters assertions that a critical discourse should performatively convey the essential popularity of the popular cultural text, it is helpful to recall some of the more austere insights and anti-enthusiasms contained in the work of Hunter and Bordwell.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> "Enthusiasm" here is meant to indicate a particular critical posture and is not to be conflated with any notion of the passionate. Bordwell seems to me very much a passionate critic, one who might well agree with Eco's comment that all readings are "passional readings." Eco says: "I think we are always reading passionately, by reactions inspired by love or hatred" (Interpretation and Overinterpretation, 143).

## Chapter Six

### Intellectualising the Popular: The Teenpic Debate

In this chapter I eventually take, as a mini-case study, two pieces of film criticism which, although published two years apart and in different countries, discuss the popular cultural phenomenon of the teenpic in quite similar ways. But I want to begin by noticing the persistence of a particular trope across the writing of a number of different cultural critics, from Roland Barthes writing in France in the mid to late 1950s through to Dick Hebdige writing in England in the late 1970s and Iain Chambers writing somewhere between London and Naples in the late 1980s.<sup>1</sup>

In each case the cultural critic has tried to understand some aspect of contemporary society and its (usually) popular cultural artefacts and in each case the critic expresses anxiety at the prospect of having produced an unpopular critical discussion of a popular cultural object. In one sense this is simply another instance of the familiar doubt and despair concerning the status of all critical discourse, metalanguages, "jargon," or various forms of technical language. But what seems new is the intensity with which the popular cultural critic interrogates his or her own critical-ethical-political standing in the act of performing cultural criticism. As I said in my Introduction, it seems that the production of a book on a canonised literary figure does not generate quite the same order of anxiety

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<sup>1</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1972), 156-59; Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), 139-40; Iain Chambers, *Popular Culture* (London: Methuen, 1986), 12-13. Subsequent references included in the text.

at possibly having got something profoundly wrong in relation to a readership that is at the same time conceived of as a constituency.

For example, towards the end of Mythologies, Roland Barthes says the following:

I must, as a conclusion, say a few words about the mythologist himself...: his status still remains one of basically being excluded. Justified by the political dimension, the mythologist is still at a distance from it. His speech is a metalanguage, it 'acts' nothing; at the most it unveils — or does it? To whom? His task always remains ambiguous, hampered by its ethical origin. He can live revolutionary action only vicariously: hence the self-conscious character of his function (156).

Furthermore,

... the mythologist cuts himself off from all the myth-consumers, and this is no small matter... But when a myth reaches the entire community, it is from the latter that the mythologist must become estranged if he wants to liberate the myth ... To decipher the Tour de France or the 'good French wine' is to cut oneself off from those who are entertained or warmed up by them. The mythologist is condemned to live in a theoretical sociality; for him, to be in society is, at best, to be truthful...

One must go even further: in a sense, the mythologist is excluded from this history in the name of which he professes to act (156-57).

Barthes then concludes:

The fact that we cannot manage to achieve more than an unstable grasp of reality doubtless gives the measure of our present alienation: we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it but we restore it to a state which is still mystified. It would seem that we are condemned for some time yet to speak excessively about reality (158).

I want to suggest that these statements should be thought of as a set of tools for working on the person who makes them, producing the

speaker/writer as a particular kind of figure, a cultural critic of a certain kind. They occur within a discursive system in which two phantasmatic figures oppose one another: the figure of "the people" is set against a figure called "the intellectual" in a piece of cultural-critical shadowboxing. For when Barthes worries about cutting himself off from the Tour de France and "good French wine" he is not acknowledging another function performed by his writing. This concerns the fact that, as much as cutting the cultural critic off from a social space, such a practice of writing allows the critic to enter a particular sphere, namely that particular discursive space in which the critic deciphers these objects in this manner. It seems equally plausible to think of the critic as a person who participates in a venerated class and enjoys a quite cosy membership. Far from being cut off from "history in general" such cultural critics are deeply embedded in a particular history, their history and their belongingness.

Although Barthes' remark on "the object and its demystification" is presented to the reader as the formulation of a paradox, it need not be understood precisely in those terms. Rather than see it as a sombre description of a necessary cultural dilemma, the formulation can be seen to generate another series of inversions and binary oppositions (along the lines of the "popular" and the "intellectual"). For example, what happens to Barthes' claim if we say that the cultural object is never alienated per se but only becomes so under certain circumstances and for particular purposes, such as the occasion which enables a cultural critic to submit him or herself to a series of quasi-spiritual, ethical-political reproaches? In a sense there is an obligation on the part of the "demystifying" cultural critic to construe certain cultural objects or practices as "mystified" in order to justify the nature of the critical enterprise in which they are engaged. Barthes eventually came to view things in this way, as is evident in his

remarks on "China," quoted in my Introduction: "We want there to be impenetrable phenomena, so that we can penetrate them: an ideological atavism has made us deciphering creatures, hermeneutic subjects. We believe our intellectual task is always to discover a meaning."<sup>2</sup> Another way of phrasing this would be to say that one only construes something as "hidden" in order to bring it to light.

In the specific case of the cultural critic who is scrutinising popular cultural objects, as will be argued in more detail later in this chapter in relation to film criticism and teen movies, there is no particular problem surrounding the fact that intellectuals "enjoy" popular cultural forms, whether it be hollywood films or prime-time t.v. programmes. They simply do not enjoy them as intellectuals or if they do use them in an intellectualist fashion they are not "demystifying" the cultural object so much as putting it to another use, submitting it to a particular uptake. The popular cultural object becomes the "occasion" for the pop-culture critic to interrogate his or her role as a cultural critic.

Barthes' work was translated into English in 1972, and in 1979 Dick Hebdige published Subculture: The Meaning of Style. At the end of a book which contained case-studies of punk and rasta — subcultural practices whose very urgency and contemporaneity caused them to stand in an uneasy relation to a form of analysis which was, in many ways, not so immediate and accessible — Hebdige offered the following lament:

The cord has been cut: we are cast in a marginal role. We are in society but not inside it, producing analyses of popular culture which are themselves anything but popular. We are condemned to a 'theoretical sociality' ... 'in camera' to the text — caught between the object and our reading ...

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<sup>2</sup> "Well, and China?," trans. Lee Hildreth, Discourse, 8 (Fall/Winter 1986/87), 116-117.

The study of subcultural style which seemed at the outset to draw us back towards the real world, to reunite us with 'the people' ends by merely confirming the distance between the reader and the 'text,' between everyday life and the 'mythologist' whom it surrounds, fascinates and finally excludes (139-40).

Given that it draws so closely on Barthes' work, it is not surprising that Hebdige's writing also activates the trope of the binary opposition containing the popular/intellectual divide. In Hebdige's case one can also detect the residue of an older literary-critical aesthetic division between the sensuous/immediate and the cerebral/rationalised. To statements such as this one must say that you cannot have your critical cake and eat it too. The only way not to talk about commercial/popular culture in an academic way is not to talk about it in that way.

The grief displayed in these statements from Barthes and Hebdige (with Hebdige's description quoting some of Barthes' phrases) is a familiar one and recalls the romantic dislocation of the cultural anthropologist, conceived as a person doomed to move wistfully between two cultures, making sense of one to another, translating one to another.<sup>3</sup> And in a

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<sup>3</sup> As Steven Connor has characterised it, in his Postmodernist Culture (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989):

It is conventional to regard the work of the cultural analyst in something of the same way as that of the anthropologist, as somehow always a kind of intrusive alien in the culture that is being studied and brought to light, and perhaps even in the end destructive of that culture. Dick Hebdige employs this model when, at the end of Subculture he mourns the necessarily excluded condition of the cultural analyst ... But this is to assume that there exist spaces of pure sociality which, like some brooding, primitive wilderness, fragily preserve the principles and experiences of real life; and that once explored, once understood, this unreflective and spontaneous life may be extinguished ... But this kind of remorse may be the reverse of a kind of hubris, in promoting the cultural analyst to the real condition of existential hero, marginalised as s/he is even from the subcultural margins, and condemned to a life of intellectual wandering (211).

Subsequent references included in the text.

review article in Screen focussing on critical discussions of popular culture, Simon Frith characterised the dilemma of the popular cultural critic — a dilemma I am saying is displayed here by Barthes and Hebdige — in the following way: “Isn’t the very act of ‘intellectualising’ the popular (a close reading of The Cosby Show or Batman or Madonna) a move away from it, a form of misreading?”<sup>4</sup> Frith’s conclusion was that the domain of popular culture, far from constituting a significant political site, more closely resembled a fantasy land where “the fantasies are those projected onto it by (male) intellectuals themselves: intellectuals longing, daring, fearing to transgress: intellectuals wondering what it would be not ... to be an intellectual” (235). Thomas Elsaesser had expressed a similar opinion fifteen years earlier when he spoke of the way Cahiers du Cinéma’s analysis of hollywood cinema in the 1950s and 1960s displayed “the conflict of the intellectual when trying to articulate the value inherent in non-intellectual art, or indeed any art that grows from different social preconditions: doomed to resort to his own language, he necessarily distorts his own intuition and transforms the object of his study into a metaphor.”<sup>5</sup> Meaghan Morris has characterised the situation as one in which a gap opens “between the cultural student and the culture studied” such that the “‘understanding’ and ‘encouraging’ subject may share some aspects of that culture, but in the process of interrogation and analysis is momentarily located outside it. ‘The people’ is a voice or a figure of a voice, cited in a discourse of exegesis.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Simon Frith, “Review Article,” Screen, 31, 2 (1990), 232. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Elsaesser [sic], “Two Decades in Another Country: Hollywood and the Cinéphiles,” in Superculture: American Popular Culture and Europe, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby (London: Paul Elek, 1975), 213.

<sup>6</sup> Meaghan Morris, “Banality in Cultural Studies,” in Logics of Television, ed. Patricia Mellencamp (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 22. Subsequent references included in the text.

A further indication of the broad reach of this anxiety is to be found in Geoffrey Galt Harpham's review in Raritan of Susan Stewart's book On Longing.<sup>7</sup> Harpham there refers to an intensification of "academic alienation from the world" (107), and his central observation is that Stewart's book, "while anatomising nostalgia ... seems itself caught up in a nostalgia for a time when academic discourse was not so academic, for a dream-time in which the free and perfectly informed intellect would gaze about the world, understanding everything without effort or ideological implication, describing the world in a neutral, untroubled and authoritative way" (113).

For his part, at the beginning of The Function of Criticism, Terry Eagleton imagines the moment when a critic,

sitting down to begin a study ... is suddenly arrested by a set of disturbing questions. What is the point of such a study? Who is it intended to reach, influence, impress? What functions are ascribed to such a critical act by society as a whole? A critic may write with assurance as long as the critical institution itself is thought to be unproblematical. Once that institution is thrown into radical question, then one would expect individual acts of criticism to become troubled and self-doubting.<sup>8</sup>

Eagleton's lament for criticism's lack of social impact overlooks the fact that criticism is co-extensive with the crisis it claims to perceive. That is to say, it is a critical posture which, to a significant extent, produces the crisis it purports spontaneously to recognise. In saying this I am suggesting that these sorts of critical agonistics are only possible inside a particular critical practice. To argue that criticism's politics do not contain the principles on which social life is based (and therefore to denounce criticism as useless)

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<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "The Language of Longing," Raritan, 4, 4 (1985): 107-114. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>8</sup> Terry Eagleton, "Preface," to The Function of Criticism (London: Verso, 1984), n.p.



fails to acknowledge that there is no loss of political power here. To believe that there is a loss is to believe that there once existed that particular criticism/society relation (moment of arcadian loss) or that sometime in the future such a relation might exist (moment of utopian hope). What I want to suggest is that the statement of this crisis is the source of a particular version of criticism, one which claims to perceive the truly political aspect of society beneath its currently compromised socio-textual form. In casting his argument in this way Eagleton places himself in a critical-discursive space similar to that occupied by Roland Barthes when he was practising his form of critical anxiety.

And while this "troubled and self-doubting" aspect might be found on the faces of all criticisms, it particularly seems to be the case with writing in the field of cultural studies and more particularly still, within that sub-region which concentrates on popular cultural objects. The principal anxiety, as I have already indicated, centres on the possibility of producing "unpopular" academic discussions of "popular" social texts. This prospect of "intellectualising the popular" repeats the weary accusation that "academic discourse" (momentarily unified into a boring, lumbering, monolith) must, for example, solemnify the everyday energy and naive fun of the popular cultural object in order to talk about it. The critical position here becomes a version of a Wordsworthian "meddling intellect" which "misshapes the beauteous form of things" and "murder[s] to dissect."<sup>9</sup> A tediously heavy, distorting critical discourse dumps itself on a lissome, fun-time object. At least this seems to be the accusation contained in some following statements on the inadequacies of dominant forms of film criticism when faced with the phenomenon of the "teenpic." In the

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<sup>9</sup> William Wordsworth, "The Tables Turned," in William Wordsworth: Selected Poems and Prefaces, ed. Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1965), 107.

next section of this chapter I examine two instances of critical debate concerning the relations of an allegedly “academicised” film-critical discourse to instances of “popular” cinema. But before moving on to that particular case-study I want to indicate one other feature of this writing on popular cultural objects, and I want to do this by counterposing two sets of comments (from Andrew Reimer and Simon Frith) made in very different domains but operating with an unexpected overlap of a critical category: that of cultural value.

Reimer had been quoted (in an article by Tony Stephens on the reorganisation of the Sydney University English curriculum) as saying: “I will continue to teach in the ruins of an English department that thinks soap operas have as much cultural value as the novels of Jane Austen.”<sup>10</sup> Simon Frith’s comments come from an article published in Diacritics:

To deny the significance of value judgements in popular culture (to ignore popular taste hierarchies) is, if nothing else, hypocritical. How often, I wonder, do cultural studies theorists celebrate popular cultural forms which they themselves soon find boring? I’m sure in my own cultural practice that Jane Eyre is a better romance than a Mills and Boon or Harlequin title, just as I know that the Pet Shop Boys are a better group than U2 and that Aerosmith has no value at all. The problem is how best to argue this.<sup>11</sup>

The juxtaposition of these two comments provokes a brief reflection on the transformation of the tertiary humanities curriculum over the last fifteen years or so. In particular I am thinking of one particularly odd feature of that transformation: namely the extent to which there had been

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<sup>10</sup> Tony Stephens, “Winds of Change,” Sydney Morning Herald, 17 May 1993, 3. A similar position was put more recently by Robert Dessaix in the Book Chat segment of Peter Ross’ t.v. programme, Sunday Afternoon, in a debate with Darren Tofts, broadcast on ABC 2, 4 July 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Simon Frith, “The Good, the Bad, and the Indifferent: Defending Popular Culture From The Populists,” Diacritics, 21, 4 (1992), 105.

a polemical democratisation of the curriculum, operating with a broadened conception of textuality and involving a quite different set of critical assumptions from those contained in the white, male, liberal-humanism which was said to have produced the English curriculum in a particular form. One can now see that this initial process of broadening the curriculum was caught up, to some extent, in a kind of populist politics and Frith's comments seem to be staging a retreat from an earlier radical relativism in order to introduce some form of a non-transitive, normative system of cultural value. And Frith seems to repeat this position in a later piece in Critical Quarterly:

Perhaps the most important (and neglected) question for popular culture teaching and research concerns the value of popular culture. In cultural studies themselves the working rule that some sorts of cultural experience are better than others (because more complex, more difficult, more self-conscious) has given way to a more or less explicit market populism — if it sells it must be valuable (and cultural theorists have become adept at finding something worthwhile in even the most irredeemably reactionary pop texts). In other words, if popular cultural forms were once judged in terms of high cultural norms and, necessarily, found wanting, now the question of good (or bad) television or pop music or genre fiction is avoided.<sup>12</sup>

Frith then quotes approvingly Colin MacCabe's comment (but does not provide a source for it) that "there can be no useful analyses of popular culture which are not also evaluative" before going on to say that to "academicise popular culture is to politicise it in new ways, which raise the question of our authority for doing so — how can we validate our readings?" ("Contemporary Culture and the Academy," 6). Frith's point is "that to politicise popular culture, these days, is to aestheticise it, and

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<sup>12</sup> Simon Frith, "Contemporary Culture and the Academy: Notes Towards a Research Strategy," Critical Quarterly, 35, 1 (1993), 5. Subsequent references included in the text.

aesthetic instruction is a tricky business which has been systematically avoided (“Contemporary Culture and the Academy,” 6-7).

Towards the end of the introduction to his most recent book, What Was Postmodernism?: Cultural Studies and Cultural Value, John Frow captures some of these same anxieties and ambivalences when he says:

One of the themes running through the book is the impossibility of a general economy of value which would impose a hierarchy of valued objects. Rather, the cultural domain is marked by a disjunction between different realms, and the impossibility either of a universal aesthetic or of a fully relativistic model of aesthetic judgement. Given this, some crucial pedagogic questions follow: what do we teach? High culture, low culture or some mix of the two? And what basis can there be for our decision? Do we teach a canon, or expand the canon, or dispense with a canon altogether — and how would this be possible? Are some texts better than others — is it possible for us not to believe this, but if we do, what grounds do we have for such a judgement? Is it possible to give a fully descriptive account of value (historical or sociological) — where would that lead us, and where would our own cultural position be found in relation to this description? And who are “we” who agonize over such questions?<sup>13</sup>

Frow eventually answers his final question concerning who it is that agonizes over such questions by saying that his book will concentrate on “the enunciative interests of intellectuals” (27). This seems to me not only an appropriate move to make, but the only possible move to make. I have already indicated that whenever there is a reference to the “intellectual” and the “academic” in relation to the place of popular culture within cultural studies more broadly, a series of crises and anxieties is introduced, as is evident in Frith’s writing and in Simon During’s “Professing the Popular,”<sup>14</sup> where he outlines some of the unsettling consequences that

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<sup>13</sup> John Frow, What Was Postmodernism?: Cultural Studies and Cultural Value (forthcoming), 27.

<sup>14</sup> Simon During, “Professing the Popular,” Meanjin, 49, 3 (1990): 481-491. Subsequent references included in the text.

could follow from the academicisation of popular culture. One potential consequence is a crisis in pedagogical authority, consequent on the fact that “an undergraduate may know more than an instructor — a lot more, particularly in a field that has not yet become the object of sustained academic research” (“Professing the Popular,” 488). During’s account overlooks the fact that it is the Professor who grades the work done by the student — that institution has not been unsettled by the appearance of the new curricular object — and it also overlooks the possibility that the new object might well be submitted to a technical-academic uptake (say a “Derridean” reading of a William Gibson novel or a graphic art comic book), in which case the expert knowledge formed in a para-institution and brought by the fan/street-wise person into the academy is subsumed to the disciplinary institution constituted by the forms of analytical knowledge activated within the English department seminar.

Across these various remarks, as across much other recent writing on cultural studies, certain themes recur. Principally, these concern the category of the popular, the role of the intellectual-academic as opposed to the fan, the place of the university as against various para-institutions or, more starkly, the street (and the street-wise), questions of pedagogy and pedagogical authority, and above all, the question of what is the most appropriate critical discourse to deploy in relation to the popular cultural object. Frith’s remarks, for example, shift between implying the possibility of a sociological description of “popular tastes” — with popular there functioning in the sense of “well-liked by many people” — while also describing forms of discrimination operative within the domain of the popular. I assume this is what is meant by his references to “the significance of value judgements in popular culture” and “popular taste hierarchies.” But when he goes on to say that Jane Eyre is better than a

Mills and Boon, Pet Shop Boys better than U2 and poor old Aerosmith not worth zip, something else is going on. Frith now occupies the position alluded to by Frow, that of the intellectual-academic who takes as his or her object of analysis something from popular culture and who brings into play his or her discriminations within that domain together with his or her way of relating that domain to whatever domain might be said to include Jane Eyre. Elsewhere Frith has spoken of the way "Universities have been instrumental in systematising, sustaining and legitimising" contrasts between "high culture, folk culture, traditional culture, art." As he puts it: "Academic literature, music and fine arts departments created the high cultural canons (and still instruct people in their values)" ("Contemporary Culture and the Academy," 2). Obviously there can be no doubting Frith's awareness of the particular dilemma he is describing but I would prefer to say that it is a dilemma he is enacting and that the discussion of the relation between a politics (populist or otherwise) and an aesthetics of popular culture is better replaced by a concentration on ethics, in the sense that Foucault ascribes to that term in his last works.<sup>15</sup>

I propose now to argue this position in more detail by way of a consideration of two relatively recent instances of film-critical discussions of the teen movie in relation to the category of the popular more generally.

In an article in Cinema Papers in 1989, Adrian Martin used the teenpic as an occasion to launch a broadside against the current state of film criticism and film reviewing in Australia.<sup>16</sup> Martin claimed that the

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<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, The Use of Pleasure, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Viking, 1986), 3-32.

<sup>16</sup> Adrian Martin, "The Teen Movie: Why Bother?," Cinema Papers, 75 (1989): 10-15. Subsequent references included in the text.

teenmovie posed a “‘problem’ for film writing at all levels,” particularly for a film criticism deriving from “seventies film theory” and for a film journalism which consisted of “mild-mannered full-time film reviewers,” “‘adult’ pundits of contemporary cinema” possessed of “extremely middle-ground ‘liberal’ tastes” (10). So far as Martin was concerned such people were dwelling in the “rigor-mortis of ‘adulthood’” (11), a location so bad and inauthentic it had to have inverted commas placed around it. This bunch of Clark Kents and old farts was incapable of dealing with “the querulous strangeness,” the “libidinal intensity” (10), of the teenpic. Perhaps unsurprisingly in an article on such a topic, these figures are cast as the equivalent of Ed Rooney, Dean of Students, in John Hughes’ Ferris Bueller’s Day Off (1987). That is, as so many modern versions of an ancient comic persona — the figure of Rule and Authority who blocks the growths and energies of the Young and whose destiny is to be denounced, evaded and, eventually, gulled. Against this figure comes the figure of Martin, a cultural critic wanting to “overcome a few resistances and settle a few scores” (11) with various outdated or febrile forms of film-critical discourse.

Now if this is your mission then your own critical discourse will need to be quite different from those you are attacking. To some extent Martin’s is quite different, but in other ways it is quite similar. On the one hand Martin writes the way Martin Scorsese talks — and it is always exhilarating to be around that. Martin does not declare his approved critical models so much as he indicates the critical models he does not like and implicit in his overall argument seems to be the familiar notion that some forms of film criticism tend to be tedious, heavy, distorting, a little too stolid to capture the energies and volatilities of popular film. Such a view is in line with the belief that film criticism somehow could embody,

in a performative way, the essential elements of the thing it is discussing; that somehow it could, in the very workings and textures of its own prose, effect a kind of mimetic capture of some affective, evanescent dimension of the popular film; that it could render, with a suitably energised immediacy, the volatility of the film or at the very least, some crystallisingly expressive detail from it. Only in this way would criticism be able to convey in a true fashion the popular aspect of the text in question. A genealogy for such a criticism could be anything from the moment of new journalism through to Manny Farber's "termite criticism" and even (to name a personal favourite) Fassbinder's wonderfully laconic, Plumpes Denken descriptions of some of Douglas Sirk's films.<sup>17</sup>

Adrian Martin's prose includes terms such as "funky," "flipped-out," "way-out," "savvy," "daggy," "nerdy," "fake," "stupid," "kick," "craziness," "slumming" — a lexicon which works to produce him as a distinctive critical persona. In Making Meaning, David Bordwell provides a short glossary of some of the critical manoeuvres of the film reviewer, manoeuvres which are being used by Martin in his writing:

The reviewer may present him or herself as a solicitous consumer guide, advising the reader or viewer of the best and worst on offer (for example, Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert, two nationally televised reviewers.) Or the reviewer's ethos may be that of the passionate advocate for the bizarre or overlooked film (for example, J. Hoberman of The Village Voice). The reviewer may present the image of the vulgar but righteous film fan (Pauline Kael) or the cultural pundit with stringent standards (John Simon). Minimally the reviewer must play the role of either the well-informed expert or

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<sup>17</sup> See R.W. Fassbinder, "Fassbinder on Sirk," trans. Thomas Elsaesser Film Comment, 11, 6 (1975): 22-24; Manny Farber, Negative Space (New York: Praeger, 1971).



the committed amateur, each of which offers an idealised surrogate for the reader.<sup>18</sup>

And as Meaghan Morris has observed, film reviewers do “in the reiteration of certain tastes and values or in the repetition over time of certain pet clichés, favoured syntactic structures, rhythms, jokes, didactic obsessions etc., produce an effect of Identity which is sometimes taken to be that of an Authorial Voice.”<sup>19</sup>

Martin clearly has just such an Identity and he mobilises it very effectively in defence of a “mass of films” he finds “sadly unloved” (12). Perhaps a phrase like “sadly unloved” provides a sense of what it is that Martin wants. He values people who write “passionately” (13) about cinema; values a criticism that is “enthusiastic” (12) rather than criticism that is performed “as an exercise in superiority, the power to bless what is comfortably good and damn what is uncomfortably bad” (14). For in this latter mode of criticism: “What is lost ... is any notion of cinema — even and especially popular cinema — as a place where risks can be taken, where experiments (sometimes inadvertently) happen, and where thrillingly uncertain encounters between viewers and films should (and do) occur.” (14) This is a conception of filmviewing as cruising, and perhaps even derives from some of Roland Barthes’ writings on the pleasures of the text and a (cinema) lover’s discourse.

Martin is annoyed that the “interests and achievements” (11) of the teenmovie are being overlooked. The teenmovie either is ignored completely or is “rhetorically dumped on as the odious ‘norm’ of

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<sup>18</sup> David Bordwell, Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Film (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 35-36.

<sup>19</sup> Meaghan Morris, “Indigestion: A Rhetoric of Reviewing,” in The Pirate’s Fiancée (London: Verso, 1988), 14.

contemporary commercial cinema, even 1980's mass culture generally" (11). Alternatively, particular films sometimes are separated off from the pack and redeemed as "not your average teen movie" (11). (An example of this would be River's Edge).<sup>20</sup> Martin is unhappy with such moves to isolate "the precious" from "the norm" and asks: "Is it enough, for instance, to want to seek out (sixties 'film buff' style) the unsung 'masterpieces' of the genre, the undiscovered auteurs, or the films that display a knowing reverence for traditional Hollywood forms?" (13)

For Martin it is not a matter of "discovering masterpieces or auteurs, isolating 'subversive' or avant-garde exemplars" because "such critical gestures, at some level [are] fancy ways of separating, once again, the supposedly 'good' from the supposedly 'bad', the 'precious' from the 'normal' and 'us' (intelligent critics) from 'them' (the mass audience)" (13). Yet earlier in his article, after listing an impressively diverse number of teen movies, Martin had said: "Not all these films are masterpieces by any means but all of them are interesting and exciting in myriad ways" (11).

So to some extent Martin works with a category ("masterpiece") he later finds inappropriate for the "non-evaluative criticism" (15) needed to describe the teenmovie. This simply goes to show the extent to which he is in between critical discourses as he casts around for the appropriate terms in which to discuss the teenpic. What Martin wants to put in place of the isolating, evaluative, auteurist gaze, is the "amorphous 'mass' of objects branded teen movies" (12). He works with a conception of popular cinema as so much "sand on the beach" (13) or, in his more vivid description, a situation where "hundreds of films [are]

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<sup>20</sup> See Fred Pfeil, Another Tale to Tell: Politics and Narrative in Postmodern Culture (London: Verso, 1990), 192-226.

bouncing/feeding/ripping off each other, mutually creating each other in a network " (15).

In asking for a non-evaluative description of the larger popular cultural system of which the teenmovie is a part, and in wanting an account of "the delicate interplay of convention and invention" (15) found in the teenpic, Martin's critical orientation can be aligned with such other projects as the Russian Formalists' descriptions of a literary system, Bordwell/Thompson/ Staiger's account of classical hollywood cinema, some of the writing of Pierre Macherey, Tony Bennett's notion of a "reading formation," and Bennett and Janet Woollacott's discussion of the James Bond phenomenon.<sup>21</sup> In other words there are models for an analysis of the teenmovie as a broadly social text (and it is interesting that most of them are conducted outside the domain of cinema studies). But I am sceptical of the extent to which such an analysis could escape value judgements or discourses of value of one kind or another. For although it seems clear that, to some extent, Martin wants to escape a normative or normalising aesthetic discourse the question remains of whether or not this can be done. In his polemic he operates (albeit as a provocation) a negative version of just such a process of valuing, when he challenges: "Own up all those readers who choked when I cited that oh-so sensitive film Running on Empty ... as a teen movie!" (12). Of course Lumet's film can be called a teenmovie (it also contains "Fire and Rain" to attract the The Big Chill generation of James Taylor fans) but after that initial

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<sup>21</sup> See John Frow, Marxism and Literary History (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 83-102; David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985); Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott, Bond and Beyond: The Political Career of a Popular Hero (London: Macmillan, 1987); Pierre Macherey, "An Interview with Pierre Macherey," trans. and ed. Colin Mercer and Jean Radford, Red Letters, 5 (1977): 3-9.

taxonomising move, discussion might quite reasonably and usefully centre on the way the film refigures some 60s American political issues (Weathermen etc.), and to the extent that this is done, the film could be moved into a subset of teenmovies that explicitly foreground questions of politics and class (John Sayles' Baby It's You, Paul Schrader's Light of Day, John Hughes' Pretty in Pink, That Was Then, This Is Now). This would not be to claim that these films are "better" (that is, to "redeem" them) but would simply be to notice important differences of emphasis within the "anonymous mass," recognise some significant deviations within that pulsating system.

What I am trying to insist on here is that Martin's article — however admirable its desires and sensible its proposals for the terms in which to analyse the teenpic — still inhabits a very clear domain of value. It is simply that in this particular domain what gets valued is the expression of the dynamic, the energetic, the volatile rather than something less pulsional, more sedate. The cinema, after all, while certainly a place of the thrilling, uncertain encounter, a place of unguarded moments, is also a place of airconditioning, popcorn and Mars Bars. Martin's entire article plays with an opposition of a purely descriptive kind of writing (the possibility of a neutral mapping of the "anonymous mass" of films) and a writing which would confess intense, breathless enthusiasms. One reply to this would be to say that, while many individuals have enthusiasms, few are in a position to publish them and have them taken as culturally significant. Only a special category of person — the critic — is in a position to have responses publicised as being exemplary. Consequently the crucial issue remains who is doing the talking and in what capacity: namely, Adrian Martin as popular cultural critic. His discussion of teenmovies, after all, is a very sophisticated ethical-rhetorical exercise, one enabled by a

range of education, reading and research. This is to say that Martin's own distinctive "critical gestures" separate him, as an "intelligent critic" from them, the "mass audience." It is a fantasy to imagine it could be otherwise. After all, what social group is going to agonise about whether or not the teenpic is being given its critical due? The target audience for such films is unlikely to be concerned in this way. As is often the case with analyses of popular culture, Martin's writing implies that the very fact of discussing a popular cultural text in a way that is not "high theory" somehow connects the demotic-discoursing critic with that object in a truer way, perhaps even connecting with its consumers (if they also happen to read Cinema Papers).

Adrian Martin's account of the relation of the teenpic to film criticism finds its polemical perspective repeated in an article published one year later in Cinema Journal.<sup>22</sup> In this article, Rutsky and Wyatt present a provocative image of themselves as masculinist Cyndi Laupers, boys who just wanna have fun. And although their article moves from Plato to Laura Mulvey, from Comolli/Narboni to Deleuze and Studlar, and although their eventual example is Ferris Bueller's Day Off, the general drift of their argument, together with some of the particular terms they come to privilege, closely connects both with Adrian Martin's writing on the teenpic and with some of the writing of Iain Chambers on popular culture.

For Rutsky and Wyatt "academic film criticism" as a subset of "academic discourse in general" has "pleasures that presume a purpose: intellectual or moral pleasures." They are "serious pleasures" (3), as opposed to being

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<sup>22</sup> R.L. Rutsky and Justin Wyatt, "Serious Pleasures: Cinematic Pleasure and the Notion of Fun," Cinema Journal, 30, 1 (1990): 3-19. Subsequent references included in the text.

pleasures of sensation and excess. In saying this they establish an opposition between a form of criticism said to be instrumentalised by its subordination to purposes, and a form of criticism given over to an ecstasy of immediate contemplation. The double-bind of academic film criticism is said to reside in its obligation to be "serious about its own pleasure" and in its having extreme difficulty in "theorising a pleasure that was not 'serious'" (3). The academic legitimacy of film criticism is said to be based on "the distinction between serious pleasures and mere diversion" to such an extent that "the history of academic film theory could ... easily be written as a series of attempts to establish systematic criteria for distinguishing serious pleasures" (4). Rutsky and Wyatt then cite a number of baleful tendencies within the field of academic film criticism, from the marauding influence of "an aesthetic of political modernism" through to the (presumably "Althusserian") moment of film criticism found to be persisting in the writing of Comolli/Narboni. This moment is characterised in the following way: "a privileging of the 'serious' and 'difficult' pleasures of 'criticism' over the too easy pleasures of reassurance is, in many ways, symptomatic of academic film theory's attitude towards pleasure" (5).

In the kinds of films it chooses to discuss, academic film discourse is alleged to favour the very pleasures on which its own discourse is based, the pleasures of "analysis and critique" (5). This presents an image of a mimetic critical performance of a rather different kind from the one that is being argued for in relation to popular cinema. In this "bad" version of performative film criticism, film critical discourse would "resemble," say, a Straub-Huillet film or a Godard film (from the late 60s and early 70s period of "didactic" political cinema). Rutsky and Wyatt then outline a series of forms of film critical discourse whose claims to "expertise" and "a

certain mastery of knowledge" (6) result in an assertion of the sadistic pleasures of rational critique. These are pleasures which "assume a position of authority, of power, over others" (6). Rutsky and Wyatt depict the academic as a stern figure of Authority, "the one who knows more and better" (6), and from this observation they describe a scene that seems to derive from somewhere between Venus in Furs and The Story of O: "Thus furnished with the whip and chains of 'expertise,' the academic is free to practise the bondage of definition and categorisation, to flay falsity and to punish the 'misbehaviours' of errant thinkers" (6-7).

By suggesting that one make no claims on the text, asking nothing of it that it does not ask of and for itself, Rutsky and Wyatt are obliged to reject the theme of "radical pleasure." Apparently, in being opposed to "rational discourses," this term too would fall under the sign of the serious. As they say, "the radical pleasure of abandoning seriousness becomes a serious pleasure" (10). And even when the writing of Gaylyn Studlar is opposed to that of Laura Mulvey,<sup>23</sup> such a move from theories of sadistic to masochistic pleasures cannot help with "the trivial pleasures of those films that do not take themselves very seriously, those pleasures that we might describe as fun" (10). Although this comment overlooks the fact that, in terms of economic calculation, "fun" films clearly take themselves very seriously, Rutsky and Wyatt are more concerned to situate their concept of "fun" outside "the sadistic pleasure of rational knowledge and authority" (Mulvey's account of "visual pleasure"), and outside "the masochistic pleasure of radical abandon and fascination" (10) (Studlar's

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<sup>23</sup> See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," and "Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Visual and Other Pleasures (London: Verso, 1990), 14-26 and 29-38, and Gaylyn Studlar, In the Realm of Pleasure: Von Sternberg, Dietrich and the Masochistic Aesthetic (Chicago and Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

writing). "Fun," we learn, "is not based on hierarchy, on power: it is never entirely serious" (10). This ludic, elusive concept of "fun" is "always critical." It always involves a deflation or levelling of pretentiousness, of the overly serious: "Fun ... makes fun of that which takes itself too seriously, of that which cannot laugh at itself. In its essence ... fun is parodic, ironic" (10). "Fun" is democratic, demotic, never degrading or excluding other critical positions. "Fun" is radically populist: "The pleasure of a film that is fun is not based on hierarchy, but on the deflation of pretension and seriousness, including its own" (10-11). Always self-ironic, always acknowledging a commonality with its subject, the critiques practised by "fun," "unlike those of academia, are always provisional, contingent" (11). "Fun" is the great leveller, a kind of Robin Hood of critical discourse: "Thus any discourse where the differential in seriousness between what it includes and what it excludes becomes too great, any discourse that comes to take itself, its knowledge, or its power, too seriously, will become liable to the 'critique' of fun" (11).

Rutsky and Wyatt offer a description of the visual-metaphorical status of "fun" and counterpose it to that of "serious pleasure." While the latter "depends on a notion of vision that either penetrates and masters or involves and fascinates, the viewing of fun might be described as obvious or superficial" (11). Consequently "the viewing of fun cannot be figured in terms of depth. It slides over the surface of a text like a passing glance, never staying fixed for long, never 'anchoring' itself in the depths of meaning" (11). The "sheepish glance," the "self-ironic wink" of fun, "does not take itself too seriously" (11), and would never dream of trying to redeem popular cinema by way of an isolating, evaluative auteurist gaze or through a (depth-reading) revelation of subversions of dominant ideologies.



The message is clear. Even pleasure can be instrumentalised by the heavy hand of reason. Even the happiest of critics might be happy for a reason and hence not truly happy. This account ends up approaching the point where the most sophisticated critical response would be the pure laughter of those who do not write criticism for scholarly journals. But surely this would be both too much to hope for and too little. Too much, because such laughter is meant to excoriate and humiliate those who are incapable of it (the stolid academics) and so it must take a written or publicised form. Too little, because we need to know from what sources such a concept of fun derives its theoretical-ethical force, its capacity to perform this powerfully dismissive critical judgement.

In their valorising of a superficial, passing glance, Rutsky and Wyatt seem to me to align themselves with Iain Chambers' comments on popular cultural texts and the kinds of analysis appropriate for them.<sup>24</sup> In the introduction to his Popular Culture, Chambers refers to an "official culture," a culture "preserved in art galleries, museums and university courses," a culture which "demands cultivated tastes and a formally imparted knowledge" (12). This culture "demands moments of attention that are separated from the run of daily life" (12). Popular culture, on the other hand, "mobilises the tactile, the incidental, the transitory, the expendable, the visceral. It does not involve an abstract aesthetic research amongst privileged objects of attention, but invokes mobile orders of sense, taste and desire" (12). Rather than cast a "contemplative stare" which adopts "the authority of the academic mind that seeks to explain an experience that is rarely personal" (13), Chambers opts for "an informal knowledge of the everyday, based on the sensory, the immediate, the

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<sup>24</sup> See Iain Chambers, Popular Culture, 12-13. Subsequent references included in the text.

pleasurable, the concrete" (13). Rather than be "appropriated through the apparatus of contemplation," popular culture is better approached through Walter Benjamin's notion of "distracted reception" (12).

Meaghan Morris has indicated some of the critical limitations and unwitting self-ironies attaching to projects which conceive of themselves in this way ("Banality in Cultural Studies," 22). Insofar as some sort of appeal is made to the category of "the popular," the popular culture critic ends up turning "the people" into "the textually delegated, allegorical emblem of the critic's own activity" (23). Morris refers to the "play of identification between the knowing subject of cultural studies, and a collective subject, 'the people'" (22-23). In a situation where "the people" are "both a source of authority for a text and a figure of its own critical activity" (23) then "the populist enterprise is not only circular but ... narcissistic in structure" (23). Morris calls writing of this kind "antiacademic pop-theory" (24) and claims that within it "a stylistic enactment of 'the popular' as essentially distracted, scanning the surface and short on attention span performs a retrieval, at the level of enunciative practice, of the thesis of 'cultural dopes'" (24).

John Frow, in "The Concept of the Popular," identifies a problem with Chambers's thesis by saying that the opposition of "spontaneous pleasure" and "formal learning" tends to "play down the part of learning and discrimination in all cultural formations (think, for example, of the effort that teenagers put into constructing a learned canon of records, and of the whole pop-scholarly apparatus that goes into that construction)."<sup>25</sup> But the main reason that Frow finds Chambers' dichotomising to be "theoretically dubious" rests in the way Chambers

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<sup>25</sup> John Frow, "The Concept of the Popular" in What was Postmodernism: Cultural Studies and Cultural Value (forthcoming).

seeks to appropriate this streetwise epistemology for his own academic discourse. This is a knowledge that, when put to use in a book about popular culture, denies its own expository and analytic — its own intellectual — status, and indeed positively masks it in the anti-intellectual opposition of the “visceral” to the “cerebral.” If I wish to question, for example, why it is that the history recounted in the Introduction has this particular form — why it begins with the Stones rather than with Elvis or with music-hall — or indeed to ask what it’s a history of, I can only be referred to the series of images which “do not so much ‘verify’ what I have to say as refer back to themselves” (pp. 12-13): which is precisely what I want to question. It’s an epistemology which can never be wrong because it can never be contested.

Chambers is not alone in thinking of popular culture in the ways that he does. In an essay in Modernism and Mass Culture, Jim Collins argues that popular texts, “by operating outside the confines of the academy and/or museum are deprived of the very institutional frameworks that secure canons and maintain traditions.”<sup>26</sup> But this depends on how strictly the category of “institution” is understood. The “institution” of the juke-box, for instance, in a pub, club or coffee-shop, performs some of the archival, memorialising functions of the museum (and only those functions if I am playing it). And if one thinks of arts pages in newspapers, theatre programme booklets, television arts and rock programmes, popular magazines and the like as so many institutional spaces in which taste is displayed, confirmed and formed, then the weary opposition of the cold academy to the pulsating street, the aloof, deracinated academic to the hot child in the city, starts to lose some of its romantic allure.

Eventually Collins comes to define popular culture as: “an endlessly configurable assemblage of representations, the function, audience and

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<sup>26</sup> Jim Collins, “Appropriating like Krazy,” in Modernity and Mass Culture, ed. James Naremore and Patrick Brantlinger (Bloomington: Univ. of Indiana Press, 1990), 204. Subsequent references included in the text.

value of which are subject to constant re-articulation" (222). In his account of popular culture Collins applies a version of the concept of "intertextuality" as a means of showing how the accelerated retro-tendencies of the late twentieth century produce a popular culture that is intensely self-reflexive. To recall a quotation from Collins' cited earlier in the thesis: "How do we account for texts that are so hyperconscious about their own history and their own discursive frameworks that the very basis of their textuality appears grounded not in representation but in the appropriation of antecedent representation?" ("Appropriating like Krazy," 203-204). Collins gives, as an example of such a retro-gestural practice, the Patsy Cline/k. d. lang couplet. This is described as a double-direction valorisation whereby the contemporary object (k. d. lang) is congratulated on being the inheritor of a tradition (Patsy Cline) which thereby comes to enjoy the status of being the distinguished progenitor.

It seems to me that certain overlaps exist between Chambers' and Collins' remarks on how best to constitute popular culture as an object of analysis, and Rutsky and Wyatt's version of the inevitably solemnising tendencies of academic film criticism. In each case the implication seems to be that descriptions of popular popular cultural texts call for a form of discourse which could somehow, on its own enunciative terms, embody the essential elements of the thing it is describing. The drive to render energy, pulsions, feelings, sensations, velocities, volatilities is held to demand an intensely affective, performative mode of writing. In part this demand derives from the belief that there is an immediate, spontaneous affective dimension, an intense thrill, bound up with the experience of watching a film. Consequently, to interpose a dry, stolid, critical language between this experience and its description, would be to alienate, distort, misdescribe.

Adrian Martin's critical position, outlined at the beginning of this chapter, similarly is close to aspects of the Chambers, Collins, Rutsky and Wyatt positions. Martin's attempt to constitute an expanded notion of the teenmovie by way of "an understanding of youth culture in all its extensions and implications" (15) will no doubt connect him with the following areas: popular music (as in the carefully packaged soundtracks of the early John Hughes films); contemporary American fiction<sup>27</sup> and television sitcoms such as Family Ties — which provided the teenmovie with some of its personnel and perhaps also encouraged its tendency towards homilies and moralising. While I agree with Martin's desire to "describe the anonymous system" without auteurising it and/or pointing out "a knowing reverence for traditional Hollywood forms" (13), surely the regularity with which later John Hughes films (for example, Christmas Vacation) allude to Frank Capra films (displaying a special fondness for It's a Wonderful Life) might tell us something about the way Hughes is pitching his stories, might indicate the populist-schmaltz cinematic calculation in which he is involved.

Finally, it is simply not clear to me how Martin's own position as a film critic escapes those "limits deriving, fundamentally, from ... 'taste'" (13) that he finds so disabling for other critics and their criticisms. If the "taste" of other critics determined what they were "willing to find interesting enough to spend time analysing" (14), and if the consequence of this was

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<sup>27</sup> Not only S.E. Hinton, from whose novels several of the teenpics discussed by Martin are adapted, but also the currently controversial Brett Easton Ellis, and the reprise of F. Scott Fitzgerald and J.D. Salinger contained in the figure of Jay McInerney whose status as the pre-eminent voice of Manhattan yuppies sees him writing introductions to coffee table books on New York and to a reprinting of Dos Passos' Manhattan Transfer. These last comments are meant only to describe McInerney's social location. As it happens, I like his writing and also like the fact that he has been, from the beginning, a public praiser of DeLillo's writing.

that "the despised "mass" of anonymous teen movies remained "safely cordoned off" (13), this was only the case until Martin, in his role as popular cultural critic, was willing to find them interesting enough to spend a lot of time analysing. And that analysis necessarily displays his ability to turn the supposedly low-prestige products of popular cinema into a sort of "aesthetic occasion" in which the display of the critic's response and "taste" is paramount.

To return to Rutsky and Wyatt, the two American practitioners of this same critical discourse, we find that when they shift their discussion onto films which seem "too obvious and shallow for in-depth analysis" ("Serious Pleasures," 11), they take as their example a film "whose pleasure film theory seems unable to account for: a film that is and is about fun" (11). The film, as indicated earlier, is Ferris Bueller's Day Off, the very title of which allegedly "implies a sense of frivolity, of a lack of purpose" and which proves to be a film about "taking off from 'purposeful' work (school) for a day of leisure" (11). The purpose of the day is to have some fun and this is "of course the purpose of the film too. It makes no pretensions to art" (12).<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, the film's moral statements are taken to be limited to saying that one should refuse seriousness in order to have some fun. At this point an unusual feature of Rutsky and Wyatt's description becomes evident: namely, the extent to which it ignores any discussion of genre and sub-genre. No real mention is made of comedic form or the teenpic. They choose to describe as "sadistic" those figures in the film who are opposed to fun (Ed Rooney, Cameron's parents) but an equally plausible account would see these characters too as versions of the comic persona alluded to earlier: that

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<sup>28</sup> This depends on whether or not art cinema conventions count as "art." The sequence involving the truants' visit to an art gallery self-consciously cites art cinema conventions, and not at all in a parodic manner.

figure of Rule and Authority who blocks the energies of the Young and whose destiny is to be tricked and overcome. (Indeed, in their article, "academic film criticism" is cast in the role of Ed Rooney, Dean of Students, just as Adrian Martin had cast Australian film journalism in that role). And equally "the day off" could be taken to correspond to the notion of "carnival" in comedy, that strictly limited period of licence in which the usual social order is reversed or upset. Further, it seems a bit misleading to say that the film's moral statements are limited to suggesting that we all should have fun. Like many teenpics, Ferris Bueller's Day Off moralises heavily about the relation of middle-class and/or rich kids to their parents, and a number of discourses of therapy invade these films at particular moments, much as they do television programmes from Family Ties through to thirtysomething. For Rutsky and Wyatt, "fun" becomes "an autonomous space" (12), and for the critic who can embrace it, "having fun" means being able "to place oneself in a non-hierarchical position" (16). Throughout their article "fun" seems analogous to the more traditional notion of "aesthetic play" and becomes the principal means by which individuals can use films as devices for calling themselves into question.

For all its desire to be seen to be escaping the constraints of conventional academic film-critical discourse, Rutsky and Wyatt's writing can be seen to constitute a specific social-ethical activity, one which establishes a link between the ethical style of an individual (here the film popular culture critic) and the way this individual (in this case) watches films. The films thereby become the "occasion" for the critic to concern himself with himself, although any other cultural artefact (a novel, a t.v. programme) could be used in precisely this way, could also become the means for an individual to call himself into question as one who requires

some further work of self-stylisation and self-cultivation. For Rutsky and Wyatt this further process of (late twentieth-century) self-fashioning occurs by way of the figure of "fun," and to refuse the injunction to "fun" would be to demonstrate a failure in the area of self-stylisation. It would be to show oneself as too serious, rational, too in control, too out of touch with the senses (and "the people"), too much the unself-reflexive egg-head. The paradox contained in all this, however, is that even the evangelists for fun might be equally ham-fisted and egg-headed in their attempts to cultivate an appropriate lightness of being (insofar as they treat these qualities as the "other" of the serious and the rational). This is to say that the very way in which "fun" is defended or promoted might betray the embarrassing and deforming presence of an underlying earnestness. The fact that "fun" can be approached only with the lightest of touches, can be addressed only by way of the most refined of intellectual instruments, reveals its power as a device of ethical self-problematism.

But as Wittgenstein might have said, "fun" too has its conditions. Rather than ask what it is that escapes established academic discourse and conventional moral purposes, and answer "fun!," one could ask instead under what conditions certain individuals (here a doctoral candidate and a recent PhD) come to treat the intellect as necessarily and inevitably stereotyping?<sup>29</sup> Consequently, rather than accept the proposition that

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<sup>29</sup> John Frow's "Discipline and Discipleship," *Textual Practice*, 2, 3 (1988): 307-23, contains a quite different account of the getting of doctoral wisdom and for the purposes of the current discussion the following quotation seems particularly pertinent: "The ritual of the PhD has to do at once with the authorisation of interpretative credentials and with the transmission — but also the controlled transformation of — a disciplinary structure. In its usual form it is organised as a passage from an undergraduate community to post-graduate loneliness; a breaking down of ego; and the acquisition of a specialised lore through a difficult and intense relation to a supervisor. The ordeal of candidature is a mad process in its assignment of a structural role to insecurity. It challenges the candidate's sense of



“fun” is what always escapes the high seriousness of a stolid, alienating, academic discourse, one might rather ask under what conditions, in what specific circumstances, “fun” can be taken from a hedonistic playground in order to perform its (solemn) task of lightening the intellectual load? The bottom of the first page of Rutsky and Wyatt’s article announces their respective academically-certificated statuses and on the inside back cover of the journal some other writing indicates the passage their article would have followed before bursting into print urging academic film criticism to adopt the category of “fun”. First, “only members of the Society for Cinema Studies may submit essays to Cinema Journal”; secondly, “after a prescreening, articles are anonymously refereed by at least two specialist readers, one of whom is a member of the journal’s editorial board”; and finally “to be considered for publication, manuscripts shall be no longer than 7,500 words, should follow the format specified by The Chicago Manual of Style (13th edition) and should be double spaced.” One strategy available to Rutsky and Wyatt would have been to have included these instructions (cut-up style) in the body of their text as a means of indicating some quite practical, first-instance, examples of the expertise and mastery their own critical discourse needed to exhibit in order to have its appeal to the notion of “fun” heard at all. For after all, which social group is likely to worry about being too intellectual or about being intellectual in the wrong way? Who, other than intellectuals, has access to these ethical exercises and instruments of such intense introspection, this array of techniques which constitutes the capacity for such a heightened self-consciousness and self-concern?

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worth, provoking a trauma of loss as one of its central knowledge-producing mechanisms, one which is often cruelly prolonged or repeated” (318).

Remarks of this kind are meant to indicate that the defence of "fun," "pleasure," "shallowness," "surface," can be regarded as a version of what Ian Hunter has called "ethical athleticism" and what Colin Gordon has termed "moral judo."<sup>30</sup> It constitutes a specific intellectual exercise, an activity which has at its centre a rule which says "read films by way of the category of fun." For example, it only becomes possible to say that a film like Ferris Bueller's Day Off contains, in a thematic form, the dialectic of fun and seriousness, spontaneity and Law, when you demonstrate this by performing an allegorical reading (much as Rutsky and Wyatt perform a hermeneutic reading of the film's "surface" in order to demonstrate "the truth of fun").

At the bottom of the call for a thoroughly self-reflexive popular culture critical practice lies a particular irony. Many of the intellectually trained do indeed watch teenpics for "fun" in the sense of "after work," "without writing articles about them," and "without using the concept of fun as a means of self-interrogation." So there exists a tribe of the intellectually-trained watching films for fun. Does this mean that "theoretical funsters" such as Rutsky and Wyatt are the anthropologists of this tribe? Perhaps, but as soon as the anthropologists of the fun-ritual transcribe it, they necessarily put it to a new use, and I am suggesting here that it is being put to use in a practice of aesthetic self-stylisation and self-problematisation. To say this is not to say that watching fun films for fun is ineffable or untheorisable. Rather it is to say that not too much can be made of it

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<sup>30</sup> See Ian Hunter, Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education (London: Macmillan, 1988), *passim*. Colin Mercer adapted the phrase to "ethical aerobics" in his "Never-ending Stories: The Problem of Reading in Cultural Studies," New Formations, 13 (1991): 63-74. Colin Gordon's phrase appears in his "Governmental Rationality: An Introduction," in The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller (London: Harvester, 1991), 48.

without making it into something else — such as an article in Cinema Journal.

Finally, the critical displays of Martin and of Rutsky and Wyatt also constitute a self-distinguishing activity or enterprise of a particular kind. It is a mode of writing which, in large measure, tries to set itself apart from a leaden intellectualism by displaying a nimbleness of response that barely disturbs the surface of a number of films whose very popularity signifies their delicate and recessive character. But this particular practice of self-distinction is quite routine for a post-Romantic criticism in which the authority of judgement derives from the aesthetic style and standing of the critical persona. As my analysis and elaboration of Ian Hunter's work indicated, such a critical practice constitutes an "occasion" for the critic to "engage in a specific public staging of the self."<sup>31</sup> Or as David Bordwell's writing would put it, the apparently endless institutional compulsion to display ever more innovative exegetical readings of films, the drive towards interpretative novelty, sees a "threshold of termination" appear only when the meaning being posited is found to be "more subtle, pervasive, remote or elusive than any other meanings" (Making Meaning, 246).

What I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter is the extent to which the writing of Martin and of Rutsky and Wyatt remains an instance of "intellectualising the popular" by way of a particular critical performance which stylises the self in a certain way. And if it is the case that this writing causes some readers to say "I would not have been able to put it like that, get that much out of it, see that much in it," then such a

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<sup>31</sup> Ian Hunter, "Learning the Literature Lesson: The Limits of the Aesthetic Personality," in Towards a Critical Sociology of Reading, ed. A. Luke and C.D. Baker (Amsterdam: John Benjamin, 1991), 77.

moment of self-deprecation only indicates the uneven social distribution of the critical skills exhibited in this writing, possessed as it is of a particular capacity to “deepen” the everyday object even as the notion of “surface” is celebrated. Consequently such critics might do better to recall Julia Kristeva’s injunction: “What is essential for the interpreter is an ethics of modesty: that he doesn’t consider his own perception as the only one.”<sup>32</sup> These popular culture critics would then be in a position to acknowledge the constitutive presence of the forms of critical discourse they activate rather than trying to play a populist-mimetic game in which the critic’s cluster of particular discourses is held to recede in favour of the luminous, pulsating presence of the popular object itself.

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<sup>32</sup> Catherine Francblin, “Interview with Julia Kristeva,” *Flashart*, 126 (1986), 139.

## Conclusion

### "That Was Then, This is Now": Towards a Diagnostic Critical-Pedagogic Practice

For we can no longer assume that what we are in our present, in our actuality, is given to us either through tradition or through transcendence of our capacities or our faculties with respect to tradition.

John Rajchman<sup>1</sup>

I can't help thinking of a critic who would not try to judge, but bring into existence a work, a book, a phrase, an idea. He would light the fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, snatch the passing dregs in order to scatter them. He would multiply, not the number of judgements, but the signs of existence; he would call out to them, he would draw them from their sleep. Would he sometimes invent them? So much the better. The sententious critic puts me to sleep. I would prefer a critic of imaginative scintillations. He would not be sovereign, nor dressed in red. He would bear the lightning flashes of possible storms.

Michel Foucault<sup>2</sup>

Much of this thesis has been concerned with the relation of literary studies to film studies to cultural studies, with the currently "hip" area of cultural studies perhaps threatening to subsume all earlier configurations to its domain. And although I have not stressed this thesis systematically as a "cultural studies" thesis, many of the issues with which it is concerned would now come under that particular rubric or nomenclature. For "cultural studies" has suddenly emerged as the umbrella term under which many of

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<sup>1</sup> John Rajchman, "Crisis," *Representations*, 28 (1989), 96.

<sup>2</sup> Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher," trans. John Johnston, in *Foucault Live: Interviews: 1966-84*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 196.

the debates discussed in this thesis are played out.<sup>3</sup> I want therefore to use this conclusion to make some brief comments on the paradigm shifts within "English" which have made possible the writing of a thesis of this kind. And I then want to make some comments on the kinds of pedagogical and research practices which seem to me the most productive way to move through the coming decade of writing, research and teaching. That is to say, having written a thesis which in part explores the positions of hermeneutic hesitation and hermeneutic exasperation, I feel obliged to indicate some ways of moving beyond these critical options. And although I do not want to open onto areas which have not been addressed in detail elsewhere in the thesis, I will allude to aspects of Stephen Greenblatt's work, in particular his notion of a "poetics of culture." It is a notion which seems to me both to connect with some of Michel Foucault's writing and also to help indicate some of the tasks that I see as needing to be done in order for me to move on from the issues covered in this thesis.<sup>4</sup> Such an attempt to move on should not be thought of as an abandoning of the issues and debates discussed throughout; it should be clear that whatever further moves I attempt to make can only be made in the wake of the considerations undertaken in this thesis. Overall I think of it as my version of Foucault's notion of "thinking differently" or working "diagnostically."

There are a number of ways of remarking the emergence of cultural studies as a field which is impinging on the domains of literary and

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<sup>3</sup> See K.K. Ruthven, ed., Beyond The Disciplines: The New Humanities (Canberra: Australian Academy of the Humanities, 1992); in particular, Meaghan Morris, "Cultural Studies," 1-22, and John Frow, "Beyond the Disciplines: Cultural Studies," 22-28.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, Learning To Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture (London: Routledge, 1990), 146-60.

media/communication studies. We need to remember that as recently as the period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s it was possible to oppose an allegedly moribund discipline — English — to an emergent, energised, interdisciplinary field — communication studies or media studies. The gradual transformation of a rather conservative literary-critical domain was achieved by way of a renewed interest in marxist literary theory, together with the intensification of work in the areas of popular culture, psychonalysis, film and literary theory, feminism, cultural studies, postcolonialism and multiculturalism. All of this indicated the extent to which a discipline was opening itself up to contributions from points of view which hitherto would have been regarded as falling outside its disciplinary brief, thereby effecting a renovation of traditional forms of literary study.<sup>5</sup> The following juxtaposition of two institutional events indicates the extent to which circumstances have changed over the last decade. In 1980 the first Australian Communication and Cultural Studies conference was held at the then-South Australian College of Advanced Education, Magill campus. The conference was organised, in part, to promote the B.A. in Communication Studies that had just been set up at Magill by Gunther Kress. The key-note speaker was Tony Bennett (who eventually was to return to Australia to teach at Griffith University, where he is now a Professor of Cultural Studies), and other speakers and attenders included Ian Hunter, Meaghan Morris, Bill Bonney,

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<sup>5</sup> Just how decisive that transformation has been in Australia is conveyed in John Frow's inaugural lecture for the Chair of English at the University of Queensland, published as "The Social Production of Knowledge and the Discipline of English," in *Meanjin*, 49, 2 (1990): 353-67. It will be clear from the names on this list how many of these then-lecturer/tutor "young turks" of communication/cultural studies have gone on to occupy very senior institutional positions, producing major books and articles, editing journals etc.

Noel Sanders, Dugald Williamson, Mick and Terry Counihan, Bob Hodge, Cathy Greenfield, Lesley Stern, Marie Curnick, Peter Williams, and a host of students from Communication and Media studies courses in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. That was 1980. In 1992 Melbourne University, principally through its Department of English, hosted an international Cultural Studies conference.<sup>6</sup> As the S.E. Hinton novel (and the teenpic adapted from it) puts it, "That was then, this is now." For me, those sorts of shifts indicate the extent to which it is no longer possible to claim that a sharp distinction exists between the current constitution of various disciplines and the various interdisciplinary configurations which once challenged them so polemically. And since so much of this thesis has concentrated on the "situatedness" of textual production and consumption, textual compositions and readings, I want to acknowledge, in these concluding remarks, some aspects of the overlap of the institutional and the personal.

This thesis, presented to the department of English at the University of Adelaide, was written while I was working in the School of Humanities at the University of Technology, Sydney and the presence of the word "technology" in the title of some post-Dawkins tertiary institutions is a happy coincidence, given the extent to which "technology" has become a contemporary theoretical buzzword. Where once one heard of "culture industries" one now hears of "cultural technologies" and "moral technologies" — which could describe anything from the daily functioning of a museum to the

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<sup>6</sup> As Ken Ruthven recently put it, describing this time in the early 1980s: "critical theory was more likely to be encountered in the media studies and courses on popular culture developed and taught in some of the CAEs and newer universities than in the high-culture oriented older universities." In K.K. Ruthven, "Remembering Southern Review 1980-1985," Southern Review, 26, 2 (1993), 154.



activity of reading a novel.<sup>7</sup> This particular shift in terms of critical terminology and forms of critical attention has come principally from the work of Michel Foucault. More specifically it derives from Foucault's move from discussing the governmentality of populations to discussing self-government and technologies/techniques of the self.<sup>8</sup> In terms of my own teaching and writing emphases, this shift has had quite particular consequences. Having taught for so long at tertiary institutions which stress some sort of link between theory and practice — once called "praxis" but now more likely to be described as "trainings in audio-visual literacy" or "compositional rhetorics"<sup>9</sup> — I have been obliged to rethink certain notions of subjectivity as they relate to pedagogical trainings in particular discursive/compositional forms. It is now much clearer to me that one should insist that students are always involved in practices of reading and writing, and I now prefer to talk, as I have throughout this thesis, of "textual assemblages" as a way of trying to indicate that texts are assemblages (of various kinds) which also work to "assemble" their different composers and consumers. For example, a practice of editing or framing is a calculated soliciting of a certain kind of reading. Knowing and using a certain kind of film editing or framing is an attempt to assemble a viewer at the same time as knowing how to deploy the particular technique assembles the person who is utilising that particular stylistic choice. The same thing applies to critical

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<sup>7</sup> See *Formations*, 4 (1988), special issue on "Cultural Technologies."

<sup>8</sup> See Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," trans. Colin Gordon, in *The Foucault-Effect: Studies in Governmental Rationality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1991), 87-104; and "About the Beginnings of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth," *Political Theory*, 21, 2 (1993): 198-227.

<sup>9</sup> For more on this see my "'That was Then, This is Now': An Interview with Colin MacCabe," *Southern Review*, 26, 2 (1993): 157-69.

writing. Cultural criticism is an assemblage where what is assembled is a cluster of discourses and a subject of some kind, one who becomes evident in an achieved practice of composing a textual form. So I now find myself, somewhat weirdly, running together post-structuralist critiques of subjectivity with a pre-structuralist humanism. Perhaps there is an echo here of Greenblatt's conclusion to Renaissance Self-Fashioning, where he says that he wants "to bear witness at the close to my overwhelming need to sustain the illusion that I am the principal maker of my own identity."<sup>10</sup> Two years later Greenblatt invented the term "new historicism"<sup>11</sup> to describe a particular orientation towards textuality and interpretation. The term is accompanied by his notion of a "cultural poetics" or a "poetics of culture" mentioned earlier and I want now to spend some time indicating what I take to be the usefulness of this notion.

Greenblatt's recent writing has deservedly had great impact on Anglo-American literary and cultural studies. Since the invention of the term "new historicism" there has been a series of attempts to define it, but it has yet to acquire any really decisive, consensually agreed meaning. The term has been applied to works taken from the Renaissance, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and, quite recently, some mediaevalists have begun to dispute the new historicist claims that a distinctive sense of self emerges in the sixteenth century, claiming that such a sense was present far earlier.<sup>12</sup> So the impact of

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen J. Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 257.

<sup>11</sup> Stephen J. Greenblatt, "Introduction," Genre, 13 (1982): 3-6. Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>12</sup> David Aers, "A Whisper in the Ear of Early Modernists; or, Reflections on Literary Critics Writing the 'History of the Subject'," in Culture and History 1350-1600: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing, ed. David Aers (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), 177-202.

“new historicism” has been both backwards and forwards from the historical period to which it was first applied. In a recent interview Greenblatt provides yet another definition of what is involved in a “new historicism” or a “cultural poetics,” and he does so, characteristically, by relating an anecdote.<sup>13</sup> This particular anecdote concerns his visit to the Uffizi, in Florence, to attend an exhibition called “A School for Piero,” on the occasion of Piero’s 500th anniversary:

For example, I just came back a couple of days ago from giving some lectures at the University of Florence. And while I was there I went to the Uffizi to see a show called “Una scuola per Piero” — because it’s also Piero della Francesca’s 500th anniversary as well as Columbus.<sup>14</sup> And this was a small show in the Uffizi, in a long Last Year At Marienbad-style corridor whose length they’d cleverly exaggerated. You walk through these rooms in which there are no Pieros at all because the idea was the presentation of a “school” for Piero, in which there were paintings by his teacher, Domenico Veneziano, or by Uccello, by people who might in some way or another have been in some sort of relation to him. And there were these experiments with light and perspective, many of them quite wonderful. And in the presence of all these things you were instructed, in effect, to think about Piero. You could see that these rather odd objects that had been collected together and that seemed to have almost nothing in common with each other, nonetheless, when brought together could seem somehow to connect with or anticipate Piero. Together, they formed, as they say, a “school” for Piero, the place out of which his work could come. And there’s no Piero in the exhibit at all except in the last room of this long corridor whose end you think you’ll never reach.

But you do eventually reach the end and there is a Piero which you already know. It’s the Piero from the Uffizi, the famous double portrait of Federico de Montefeltro and his wife, Battista Sforza. And I think the intention of the exhibit was, in a sense, the intention of the “old

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<sup>13</sup> See Noel King, “‘Intensifying the Surprise as well as the School,’: An Interview with Stephen Greenblatt,” Textual Practice, 8, 1 (forthcoming, 1994). Subsequent references included in the text.

<sup>14</sup> For another account of the work of Piero, see Carlo Ginzburg, The Enigma of Piero: Piero della Francesca, the Baptism, the Arezzo Cycle, the Flagellation, trans. Martin Ryle and Kate Soper (London: Verso, 1985).

historicism.” That is, to give you a sense of the context out of which Piero’s work came. It would explain and help you to understand the remarkable achievement of Piero, indicating how he learned to do these things with perspective and how he learned to achieve certain effects of light and so on. But actually the effect of the exhibit on me was exactly the opposite of this. I was staggered by how weird Piero’s double-portrait was. A sense of weirdness that was somehow intensified by all the things you had seen before, precisely because of all the contextualising work you had done. Not that the radical achievement of Piero had been normalised but rather that its true peculiarity, its unexpected, unforeseeable, surprising power, suddenly welled up. And I would say that one long-term commitment of any cultural poetics or new historicism — which is always, to some extent, an anti-historicism — would be to intensify and not to lose that sense of surprise. One of the problems with Marxist aesthetics was that it tended so easily to round up the usual suspects, and tended so much to collapse what looked remarkable into the predictable, the familiar, the same. But in fact one’s experience of life is precisely of things that you can’t possibly have predicted. Afterwards they may look inevitable or you may project back (“Intensifying the Surprise”).

The anecdote demonstrates the importance of two keywords for Greenblatt’s formulations, “resonance” and “wonder,” and it is the play between these two terms which helps indicate the difference of the “new historicism” from an “old(er)historicism” and also from the “new criticism” that was so dominant in American English departments from the 1950s to the late 1970s. Greenblatt’s “new historicism” is not a stunningly sharp break with these earlier interpretative traditions but it is a significant re-orientation of them. “New historicism” is respectful of the deep historical contextualising knowledge of the “older historicism” (for example the work of Louis Martz and Stephen Orgel cited in this thesis) and is also mindful of the intense formal attention to detail contained in the “new criticism.” The particular re-orientation contained in the “new historicism” seems to me to rest in the extent to which it tries to relate the “wonder” of a particular textual artefact — the capacity for an artwork to astonish or surprise its viewer/reader in a

moment of ravishing arrest — to a sense of the artwork's "resonance" — namely, the broader cultural-discursive framework which enabled it to be composed in the first place. The notion of "resonance" directs our attention to those larger systems of cultural meaning which enable someone to write, paint, create an artistic work of some kind within the artistic-cultural conventions of a given historical period. The notion of "wonder" describes those occasions on which the artwork escapes, exceeds or somehow breaks away from the larger system which made it possible in the first place.

Greenblatt describes his emphasis as being on a "poetics" rather than a "mechanics" of culture because it concerns the way cultural meanings are produced and reproduced in an often unexpected or unpredictable form. And Greenblatt's notion of "the school" should be taken to refer both to the currently familiar or habitual critical-theoretical ways of knowing about cultural objects as much as to the historically available representational systems enabling the composition of particular cultural artefacts in particular historical periods. In this sense there is a double temporality to be placed on the concepts of "resonance" and "wonder." On the one hand it means, as I have said, the play between the available discourses enabling cultural production in a particular time together with an acknowledgement of those occasions on which an artwork seems to move beyond the discursive or representational systems that obtain in a particular historical moment. But concomitantly, it implies that there is an onus on current hermeneutic description or cultural commentary to provide critical witness to this moment of eccentric escape, this act of "surprising the school." Greenblatt's feeling that certain kinds of marxism and structuralism (or whatever — and I should stress that these are interpretative systems with which Greenblatt has

a great sympathy) have tended to enact the denouement to Casablanca by, as he puts it, rounding up the usual suspects<sup>15</sup> would explain his saying that a proper cultural poetics will need to find

much better ways than we have so far, of describing, articulating, intensifying the surprise as well as the 'school.' And that's what I'm trying to do, without re-mystifying, without simply saying it's all a matter of individual genius or the surprises of the human spirit. You have to find a better language than that in order to talk about these things. We need a richer, more interesting, more convincing language in which to do this work. But if you don't try to do that, then the enterprise doesn't seem to me worth doing at all ("Intensifying the Surprise).

In remarks of this kind I see Greenblatt's formulations as being quite similar to Foucault's notions of "thinking differently" and "working diagnostically." For the moment, however, I will remain with Greenblatt's notion of a "new historicism" and note the extent to which it distances itself from a particular tendency found in the "older historicism." This was the tendency to regard the larger background against which a particular text appeared as being the most important thing to discuss. The particularity of the artwork vanished into a larger political-historical backdrop. As Greenblatt puts it, this older historicism was monologically concerned with "discovering a single political vision, usually identical to that said to be held by the entire literate class or indeed the entire population" ("Introduction," 7). So one would find references to "the world-view of the later middle-ages," with this assuming

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<sup>15</sup> See his "Towards a Poetics of Culture" where he admits, "it's true that I tended to like those Marxist figures who were troubled in relation to Marxism — Walter Benjamin, the early rather than the later Lukacs, and so forth ...," and further admits, "I'm still more uneasy with a politics and a literary perspective that is untouched by Marxist thought, but that doesn't lead me to endorse propositions or embrace a particular philosophy, politics or rhetoric." In Learning to Curse, 147. Subsequent references included in the text.

the status of an historical fact rather than being seen to be the work of the historian's invention. As Greenblatt says, "protected from interpretation and conflict, this vision can serve as a stable point of reference, beyond contingency, to which literary interpretation can securely refer. Literature is conceived to mirror the period's beliefs, but to mirror them, as it were, from a safe distance" ("Introduction," 8). The "new criticism," on the other hand, brought the text firmly into the foreground by insisting that the most important thing to do was a very close formal analysis of "the words on the page," revealing thereby the internal harmonies of the iconic object (the poem, play, story). Thus the "new historicism" wants to avoid the fetishising of an invented historical context said to be the "real" text which speaks through the "minor" object which exists only to reveal a larger epochal truth. And it also wants to avoid the mode of reading that is at the centre of "new criticism," whereby a notion of "the words on the page" abstracts the text from all other historical-cultural practices, discourses and contingencies. The "new historicism" erodes any notion of a firm distinction between criticism and literature, asking questions of the methodological assumptions underpinning other interpretative traditions while also being very self-reflexive about its own interpretative procedures. One of its strategies (one drawn from Derrida's writing) is a pluralising of the concept of "context," moving it beyond meaning some absolutely original or originary context to include subsequent contexts of circulation, consumption and rewriting. So, to use some of Greenblatt's examples, Dover Wilson lecturing on Richard II to the German Shakespeare Society in Weimar in 1939, would become a significant "context" in which to situate the account given of the play by Dover Wilson. And equally, although modern literary scholarship has pronounced Richard II a non-subversive "hymn to Tudor order," that particular interpretation was

not so evident to Queen Elizabeth in 1601, when she claimed: "I am Richard II. Know ye not that?," shortly after the failed Essex uprising ("Introduction," 3). So Richard II travels across history, changing from something utterly seditious to something utterly benign. Shifts of this kind, the different contexts and critical debates into which texts are pulled, will always be one of the interests of the "new historicism."

If the "new historicism" is, in part, born of a refusal of these two earlier, dominant interpretative traditions, it is also born of the American encounter with "French Theory" in the 1970s. Anecdotal evidence for this is given in the fact that Greenblatt has acknowledged the influence on his work of Michel Foucault's writings ("Towards a Poetics of Culture," in Learning to Curse, 146-47). Foucault visited the Berkeley campus regularly in the last years of his life, and I have already said that his writing on power, knowledge, sexuality and discourse, his eventual shift from an attention to the "governing" of specific populations to the various techniques of "self-government" (what we do to ourselves, independently of outside agents, to produce ourselves as subjects of certain kinds), has been very influential on recent Anglo-American literary and cultural studies of all kinds.

One of the things an encounter with this sort of work, these sorts of emphases, prompts in me is a rethinking of my attitudes towards writing, teaching and research. In pragmatic terms, I want my students (and myself in my role as doctoral student) to be aware of genres, discourses, the many kinds of compositional forms or rhetorics which clearly pre-exist their own compositional efforts. But I also want them to think there is some point or significance attaching to the particularity of their contributions. It seems to me a very "necessary fiction" to say that innovation within a received system



is possible, and further to say that, if there is no new thing under the sun, then at least there is an art of rearrangement and realignment. Greenblatt's notion of a "poetics of culture" goes some way towards satisfying this requirement. Consequently I try to tread a delicate line between urging students towards the creative and the passional while also urging them towards the archival and the already-said. For me, it is increasingly a question of attempting to encourage innovation within the terms of a received body of knowledge.

I happen to teach at an institution that has courses in film, video, and audio production, and which also teaches creative writing at an undergraduate and post-graduate level. But I am never keen to encounter people who regard themselves as creative creatures waiting to happen in their chosen medium of film, the novel, poetry, drama, or the short story. Rather I want students to have an equal interest in gaining a critical knowledge of the medium in which they are electing to do their creative work. Film writers/directors as different as Scorsese, Godard, Spielberg and Schraeder are all (differently) vastly knowledgeable about the history of film. So in teaching film courses, I want my students to become critical cinéastes of this kind.

That is why I give a rather grandiose justification to the critical-pedagogical dimension of these concluding comments by saying that I am trying to work "diagnostically," in Foucault's sense of that word. For Foucault, the "diagnostic" was opposed to the "archive" and described the opening up of a space in which we try to depart from the things we have been doing and saying for so long. It is a fragile space of freedom from, and transformation of,

what used to be.<sup>16</sup> This part of Foucault's thought, displaying as it does a slightly utopian aspect, might embarrass some of his sterner followers. But for me, it resonates with some of Roland Barthes' comments on pedagogy just as it relates to Greenblatt's notions of "resonance" and "wonder."<sup>17</sup> As Foucault puts it: "The main interest in life is to become someone else than you were at the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think you would have the courage to write it? What is true for a love relationship is also true for life. The game is worthwhile only insofar as we don't know what will be at the end."<sup>18</sup>

Finally, if Marianna Torgovnick is right in saying that cultural criticism's "subject matter is wider than ever before, and so is its resourcefulness,"<sup>19</sup> then the directions, orientations or alignments sketched in this conclusion seem to me the ones in which we should be trying to move. The critical space one occupies, the area from which one's future interpretative occasions will come, can be thought of as existing somewhere between the opening and closing epigraphs of this thesis: somewhere between Wittgenstein's "crumpled ideas" and Foucault's critic who "would bear the lightning flashes of possible storms." Such a space might eventually reconcile the stances of hermeneutic hesitation and hermeneutic exasperation adumbrated throughout this thesis.

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<sup>16</sup> John Rajchman discusses this aspect of Foucault's work in his article "Crisis." See footnote 1.

<sup>17</sup> See Stephen Greenblatt, Learning to Curse, 161-83, and Marvelous Possessions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> Michel Foucault, "Interview," in Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, "Introduction," South Atlantic Quarterly, 91, 1 (1992), 3.

And since I have chosen to inflect my remarks in the direction of teaching, the curriculum and writing, I will close by referring to some comments of Roland Barthes.' The first comes from his inaugural lecture on his election to a Chair of Literary Semiology at the College of France (an election assisted by Foucault). Barthes there warns us that "what can become oppressive in our teaching is not, finally, the knowledge or culture it conveys but the discursive forms through which we propose them."<sup>20</sup> In quoting this here I am not suggesting that we abandon all meta-theoretical work (which is after all, before all else, writing) but rather that, in these times of scrambling to define ourselves as the sort of "centre of excellence" that would be likely to attract appropriate levels of funding, we should work to maintain spaces for eccentric practices of writing and research. This would be writing which "drifts" and "hesitates," as Barthes puts it.<sup>21</sup> It would be writing which refuses the easy confidence of "rhetorical clause," by which he means writing that refuses the comfort of having "the last word" (Barthes by Barthes, 94). Which is my last word.

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<sup>20</sup> Roland Barthes, "Lecture, In Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology, College de France, January 7, 1977," trans. Richard Howard, Oxford Literary Review, 4, 1 (1979), 42.

<sup>21</sup> See Barthes, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 106. Subsequent references included in the text.

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