Writing (Against) Postmodernism: The Urban Experience in Contemporary North American Fiction

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INAUGURAL-DISSERTATION
zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades eines Doktors der Philosophie
im Fachbereich II der Universität Trier
vorgelegt von Lutz Schowalter, M.A.

Trier, 2005

Acknowledgments

Writing a dissertation can be a solitary project. And yet, it is not. On my way through the past years, thinking about and writing on what you are about to read, I was accompanied by people I am thankful for and towards for having travelled with me in various ways. For their support, friendship, trust, and much else I wish to thank: Marco Borth, Martin Genetsch, Gerd Hurm, Wolfgang Klooß, Annekatrin Metz, Markus M. Müller. And Hartmut Schowalter for just about everything. Helga Schowalter for just about everything, too. Anneliese Zerger for the socks which have kept my feet warm, and for the garden I visit all too seldom.

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Notes

Bibliographical references to the main primary works are indicated in brackets within the text.

The following abbreviations are used:
Jennifer Egan, *Look At Me*: LAM
Bret Easton Ellis, *Glamorama*: G
Arthur Nersesian, *Manhattan Loverboy*: MLB; *Suicide Casanova*: SC
Hal Niedzviecki, *Ditch*: D; *We Want Some Too*: WWST; *Hello, I'm Special*: HImS
Russell Smith, *Noise*: N; *How Insensitive*: HI
Alex Shakar, *The Savage Girl*: TSG
(For detailed bibliographical information, see the bibliography.)

1 Introduction

Writing (Against) Postmodernism: The Urban Experience in Contemporary North American Fiction presents three main arguments. The first is that even though the term postmodernism has come under attack for being too imprecise and for being philosophically unsound, postmodern theoretical positions regarding the loss of human agency and of rationality and the difficulty to communicate in a meaningful manner can arguably describe a contemporary *zeitgeist* amongst the urban middle and upper classes of North America in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As *Writing (Against) Postmodernism* shows, the lives of characters in the texts under consideration - *The Savage Girl* (Alex Shakar, 2001), *Look At Me* (Jennifer Egan, 2001), *Noise* (Russell Smith, 1998), *Glamorama* (Bret Easton Ellis, 1998), *Ditch* (Hal Niedzviecki, 2001), *Manhattan Loverboy*, and *Suicide Casanova* (Arthur Nersesian, 2000, 2002) - correspond to theoretical positions advocated by contemporary theorists such as Frederic Jameson, Paul de Man, Jean Baudrillard, or Jacques Derrida.

In a second step, the present study explains how the aforementioned urban novels all express a disdain towards the postmodern lives they describe. What is more, the texts and their characters search for ways out of the postmodern impasses they initially present as realities, and they actively (try to) overcome them. In thus moving away from postmodern theoretical positions and their practical consequences, the books can be said to be part of a movement towards a 'post-postmodern' period of cultural production. They acknowledge postmodernism as a daily reality and they are *writing postmodernism*, and they then attempt to *write against it*.

While focusing on literary production around the turn of the millennium, *Writing (Against) Postmodernism* also engages in theoretical debates, pointing out weaknesses in much postmodern theorizing and in appropriations of theoretical positions by literary scholars. The theoretical trajectory of the study is an argument in favour of modestly realist modes of writing, and it suggests not to discard easily "that extra edge of consciousness" (Raymond Williams) which might still make it possible for human beings to remain rational agents. Not relying on one single theorist or one single approach, the arguments in favour of realism and of human agency make use of the works of such thinkers as the philosophical realist Hilary Putnam, the fervent critic of theoretical sloppiness M. J. Devaney, and the philosopher of the human subject Calvin O. Schrag, to name some of the most important influences to be considered here.

My thesis in a nutshell is that, as Robert Rebein has written, "postmodernism as a literary strategy no longer pertains in the way it once did,"[1] but that a considerable corpus of literature, some of which will be under scrutiny below, still deals with a zeitgeist that can be subsumed under the notion of the postmodern. In an essay on Douglas Coupland's treatment of this zeitgeist, Mark Forshaw has suggested that

> Coupland has never been a postmodern writer in the sense that we think of Paul Auster, for example, or Donald Barthelme, as being postmodern writers. Nevertheless, he is a novelist who writes *about* postmodernity and he has done so of late with increasing distaste for both its cultural and its economic manifestations.[2]

The same, I would like to suggest, is true for the authors and novels discussed below. My argument shall be that the texts under consideration here have moved away from postmodernism as a philosophical foundation. They do, however, depict characters for whom the confusions and the chaos of the postmodern metropolitan environment is a reality. To the writers discussed below, the "experiments of postmodernism" are *not* "just that – experiments," of which one can "take what has been proven useful and put it to work where and how they may be useful."[3] Quite the contrary. For the texts to be discussed, while postmodern experimental elements are indeed mostly absent or only scattered here and there, the time of postmodern experimentation in literature has rather been one which anticipated the relativist zeitgeist that has since taken hold of much of the North American middle and upper class. It is this relativist zeitgeist, its philosophical roots, its quotidian consequences for the individual, and quotidian as well as philosophical ways out of this dilemma that are central to the novels to be discussed.

In 1979, Gerald Graff argued that

> [o]ne of the most useful functions that literature and the humanities could serve right now would be to shore up the sense of reality, to preserve the distinction between the real and the fictive, and to help us resist those influences, both material and intellectual, that would turn lying into a universal principle.[4]

This need for a distinction between the fictive and the real has not lost its urgency since Graff made his statement. If anything, the need has increased even more as the distinction between the fictive and the real has become more and more blurred for more and more people. Suggestions for a way out of the relativist one-way street which one can find in contemporary literature will be at

[1] Rebein: 15.
[2] Forshaw: 53.
[3] Rebein: 20-21.
[4] Graff: 12. Graff does not want his call for literature to distinguish between the real and the fictive to be understood as an argument in favour of a naïve kind of literary realism. He cautions that his thesis should not "be mistaken for a plea for documentary realism, or for any other convention of representation" (Graff: 11). Literary conventions of representation are not his main focus. He rather concentrates on the 'ideologies' or philosophical paradigms that inform literary production and criticism. He writes, "[m]ost theories of the nature of literature are more or less concealed theories of the nature of man and of the good society" (Graff: 1).

the centre of the following study. What are the attitudes towards urban postmodernity that emerge in present-day North American fiction? Which strategies are employed by literary texts on the levels of content and form?

The authors I have chosen to focus on in this study, Jennifer Egan, Alex Shakar, Bret Easton Ellis, Arthur Nersesian, Hal Niedzviecki, and Russell Smith, much like Douglas Coupland, write *about* (urban) postmodernity from a middle / upper middle class perspective and also do so with 'distaste for its cultural manifestations'. After an introductory chapter on how one might describe these cultural manifestations, the focus of this study will turn to how the authors just mentioned depict contemporary North American urban environments as postmodern. The second major (and larger) part of the present study will then concentrate on how these writers express their distaste for the postmodern and on the suggested ways out of the postmodern impasses their characters encounter.

I have chosen to structure my analyses thematically instead of dealing with one novel in its entirety at a time. Readers will find that the present study also engages in fundamental theoretical and philosophical questions at length. Some might think it does too much of this, and with too much of a focus on issues which have been elaborated on by many others. After all, did Alex Callinicos not already ask, with much justification, in 1989: "Yet another book on postmodernism? What earthly justification could there be for contributing to the destruction of the world's dwindling forests in order to engage in debates which should surely have exhausted themselves long ago?"[5] Many of the things that are said about postmodernism below build on arguments from a familiar debate. I chose to elaborate at such length on theoretical issues because I agree with what Winfried Fluck proposes about much literary criticism of the past decades. Fluck points out that this literary criticism often presupposes a "radical cultural critique" which advocates theses like the "supposed impossibility to differentiate between fiction and history" and "the death of the author or the subject" without thoroughly reflecting on the philosophical problems and challenges such a critique entails.[6] What Fluck observes is all too common in writings by literary scholars, and it is partly to remind those he addresses of what their statements about the state of the world actually entail that I shall comment on and present postmodern theoretical positions in a detailed way. At the same time, it cannot be denied that in some of the cases in which postmodern arguments are developed

[5] Callinicos: 1.

[6] Fluck 1997: 42-43 ["radikale Kulturkritik [...], die den postmodernen Roman nur allzu gern als Kronzeugen für Analysen der philosophischen und politischen Verfaßtheit der Gegenwart benutzt, so dass eine Arbeit nach der anderen über Thesen wie die der Unmöglichkeit von verbindlicher Erkenntnis, der vermeintlichen Ununterscheidbarkeit von Fiktion und Geschichte, des Tods des Autors oder des Subjekts zu sprechen vermag, ohne sich wirklich auf die philosophische Problematik dieser zumeist formelhaften Pauschaldiagnosen einlassen zu müssen", translation: ls].

and treated with more care, these arguments do present serious philosophical, anti-foundationalist and relativist challenges, mainly to the notions of the human subject as a rational agent and to the possibility of knowing the world through language or other media. A rejection of the postmodern zeitgeist hinted at above and sketched in more detail below, therefore, can fall prey to the very same shortcomings Fluck perceives in some postmodernist treatments of literature. In the present intellectual, often anti-foundationalist climate in literary studies and in the face of the serious postmodernist challenges just mentioned, it does not suffice to merely state that a literary text presents an argument in favour of realism or is realist itself. It seems to me that one first needs to lay the philosophical groundwork for such statements, which is what I attempt to do in the second major part of this study.

2 Postmodern Theory and Postmodern Zeitgeist

2.1 Narrations of the City

To avoid misunderstandings, it should be noted that while the 'urban experience' is highlighted in the subtitle of this study, the present text is not primarily a study on urban novels or on the city's role in contemporary literature. *Writing (Against) Postmodernism* rather reads metropolitan environments as representative of a contemporary, postmodern experience. Rather than restricting itself to normative definitions of urban literature[7], which can obviously be useful,the present study will look at novels which take place in urban settings, but in which the city does not necessarily play the dominant role. As Gerd Hurm says in *Fragmented Urban Images*, the

> city in the novel often exists within a wider human landscape; it may be marginal or central to the novel. [...] To deal exclusively with novels in which the city predominates form and content would *a priori* restrict the enquiry to a specific view of the modern city.[8]

The novels analysed in this study do not necessarily try to present the whole city, nor do they portray the city as a whole. In the texts discussed below, the urban environment, however, is an important theme alongside other topics 'within a wider human landscape'. The novels considered in this study are novels about the reaction of the individual to the urban environment. If this is the tradition these texts are set in, they find themselves in good company. After all, Klotz remarks in *Die erzählte Stadt*:

> To write urban novels does not only mean to display the urban environment in part or maybe even completely; it also means to show the antagonisms between events and their consequences, which determine the lives of single characters or of groups of people.[9]

The novels considered in this examination of narrations of the city do exactly that. They describe and display the lives of individuals and of select groups within urban environments, highlighting certain issues, but not presenting a picture of the whole city.

The texts do, however, present the urban world as one which mirrors 'the wider human landscape' of a contemporary experience which can be called postmodern. They go beyond merely telling one

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[7] This prescriptive stance is advocated by, e.g., Diane Wolf Levy, who asserts that in urban literature, "the setting takes precedence over character" and "rises to the level of protagonist" (Levy: 66). Blanche Housman Gelfant provides another illustrative example of this approach to the question of genre. She argues that the "active participation of the city in shaping character and plot distinguishes the city novel from what might be called urban local color fiction. In a local color city novel, the characters act against a static urban setting that is not the vital and necessary condition for their acts" (Gelfant: 5). Gelfant also introduces a different aspect of the genre question, arguing that unlike "a local color writer, the city novelist sees urban life as an organic whole, and he expresses a coherent, organized and total vision of the city" (Gelfant: 6).

[8] Hurm: 108-109.

[9] Klotz: 419 ["Stadtromane schreiben, heißt nicht nur, den Stadtraum teilweise und womöglich insgesamt vorzuführen, es heißt auch, das Widerspiel von Ereignissen und deren Reflexen zu zeigen, das das Leben der einzelnen Bürger und Gruppen bestimmt", translation: ls].

story of many that would have no significance to others in a fragmented and pluralist urban world. In their recent essay "Whatever Happened to the Urban Novel?" Bart Keunen and Bart Eeckhout suggest that while urban literature might not be a thing of the past, it could today not be comprised of texts that would "function as cultural alternatives for the non-literary world or 'modernity'."[10] The "literary world," they argue, "has taken on a post-programmatic form" as "cultural answers and strategies can no longer be unambiguously formulated and presented as a program."[11] With this statement, Keunen and Eeckhout seem to me to be rooted within the theoretical assumptions of postmodernism – and maybe too much so to detect trends in contemporary urban fiction that does make programmatic statements and suggestions about the contemporary experience of the 'non-literary' world. The common trend I observe in the texts that will be discussed below is that they write against theoretical assumptions of postmodernism itself.

In writings on the city as such, it is a commonplace to stress the term's complexity and to emphasize the difficulty of saying just what it is that makes a city a city. Therefore, it is with only a few qualms or fears about being incomplete in its discussion of characteristic traits of the city that the present study of contemporary North American urban fiction joins such theorists as V. Gordon Childe ("The concept of the city is notoriously hard to define"[12]) and Louis Wirth ("Despite the preponderant significance of the city in our civilization, however, our knowledge of the nature of urbanism and the process of urbanization is meager"[13]) in stating that the concept 'city' is a highly complex one needing to be considered from many different angles, and is, even then, hard to grasp. The present theoretical pre-text on the urban environment is far from complete and somewhat eclectic. The amount of secondary literature on the city is so vast that to survey it in only one subject area would be beyond the scope of a study of the length aimed at here.

On a comparatively small scale, thus, the following passages will try to make (some) sense of the city in areas that are relevant in the context of this study, where it is mainly taken as a space that reflects cultural developments. By analysing contemporary urban narratives, it therefore hopes to make some contributions to discussions on cultural developments. Why is the city an environment where the culture of an age can be observed? The city is a product of human civilization. As complex and confusing as it may be and as it may present itself, and as hard as it might be to grasp the city as a whole and to understand its dynamics: this complexity of the city is manmade. It is a

[10] Eeckhout / Keunen: 66.
[11] Eeckhout / Keunen: 66.
[12] Childe: 24.
[13] Wirth: 98.

space that stands in opposition to nature. It is, as James Donald puts it, "by definition unnatural."[14] In his study *Die Geschichte der Stadt*, Leonardo Benevolo calls the birth of the first cities a "revolution" and a "decisive step"[15] in human cultural history: "The adventure of 'culture' begins, a 'culture' which is continuously in the process of adapting its shapes to its ever changing surroundings and requirements."[16]

Benevolo's statement is not to be understood in the sense that a 'culture' will only be found within cities. However, the very fact that urban environments are products of human construction suggests that they are a place where the culture of an age or of a certain group can be observed. Louis Wirth states that nowhere "has mankind been farther removed from organic nature than under the conditions of great cities."[17] Where else but in the city, then, would cultural history become evident? Following this line of thought, some commentators on modern cities have argued that urban environments of their respective times embodied the very culture of the day. Peter Brooker, for example, has recently remarked that from "its beginnings in the last quarter of the nineteenth century European modernism was linked with the environment of the city,"[18] and in her study on the city in American literature, Blanche Housman Gelfant argues, "the city epitomizes the twentieth century."[19] At the end of the 20th century, other theorists have gone so far as to view city life or urbanism as having taken on the quality of an all-encompassing and pervasive lifestyle.[20] If this were the case, a study of the contemporary North American city environment from a perspective of cultural history would make all the more sense.

Particular cities, of course, differ from one another, and the same is true for processes of urbanisation in different countries. If the Canadian city is not distinguished from its American counterpart on the following pages, this is not to say that such a distinction would not make sense in a different context. The history of Canadian urbanisation is quite different from the history of

[14] Donald: 2.
[15] Benevolo: 22 ["städtische Revolution", "entscheidender Sprung"; translation: ls].
[16] Benevolo: 22 ["Es beginnt das Abenteuer der 'Kultur,' die ununterbrochen damit beschäftigt ist, ihre Formen den sich ständig ändernden Gegebenheiten und Anforderungen anzupassen"; translation: ls].

[18] Brooker: 7.
[19] Gelfant: 21.
[20] As early as 1938, Louis Wirth argued that the urban world exerted an influence on the rural with the help, mainly, of modern communication methods (Wirth). No wonder, then, that many contemporary theorists see the world today as an ever-increasing and all-encompassing urban one. When Wirth contemplated the relationship of the city and the country, he did so in a time that must seem almost archaic to us in terms of the communication technologies that were commonly used. Radio was just beginning to be popular and widely used, few people had access to a telephone, TV was in its earliest stages and a technology of the future. For a contemporary argument in favour of urbanism as pervasive, see Clark (117-136), who argues that an "important feature of much of contemporary urbanism [...] is that it has become independent of the city, both locally and at the global scale" (Clark: 117).

US American urbanisation, and the same is true for developments in Canadian urban writing.[21] There are two reasons, however, why this study does not engage in such comparative questions. The first reason is that, as far as the two Canadian authors Russell Smith and Hal Niedzviecki are concerned, one cannot make out decisive country-specific differences of their texts in comparison to their US American counterparts considered below. The second reason is that this study does not discuss particularities of the specific cities the narratives take place in (be they American or Canadian), but works with a more abstract idea of the (North American) metropolis as it emerges from the texts.

[21] See Hasslöcher and Ickstadt 1991.

2.2 Narrations of Developments in (Urban) Literature

Let us stay with narrations told and developed by literary critics for now. One of the most widely and hotly debated and yet one of the most commonly used narrations literary critics have created and used is the supposed development from realist to postmodernist literature. In a simplified way, the development towards postmodernism in (urban) literature is often summarized in the following way: The realist author, while being aware of the complexities of life (and of the city), believes in the possibility of rendering a meaningful and coherent picture of reality through his text, which is not least expressed in the coherent form of his realist writing. The modernist author is losing faith in the power of traditional writing and the representational value of words and becomes ever more aware of the fragmented world he is living in. He does, however, believe in the power of art to make sense of the complexities of life through the creative power of the artist using, e.g., new and innovative techniques of writing. A postmodern author would argue that this is an illusion as well. The world, in his eyes, is both too complex to understand and not accessible in any case because of the inescapable mediation of every experience. His literature highlights this epistemological problem instead of trying to resolve it through an innovative technique (modernism) or words that would represent a reality (realism).[22]

Raymond Williams makes the point that there were "themes at first contained within pre-modern forms of art which then led to actual and radical changes in form"[23] in modernist art. In this statement, Williams stresses something important, which other critics have as well seen as a central feature of modernism in writing and the arts in general: the search for and implementation of new forms in order to make sense of the world. As far as the city is concerned, then, modernist literature, as Scherpe argues, turns the "encompassing de-localization, disappearance of boundaries, and de-composition of the metropolis"[24] into a constitutive aesthetic element of the text – it tries to pay tribute to the city not only in the themes it introduces but also in the shape in which it presents them. This becomes very clear when comparing the Dickensian novels taking place in the city with John Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer*. Both authors are certainly concerned with urban social problems. While Dickens uses a writing technique that produces a fairly straightforward narrative

[22] This summary of the development from realism to postmodernism is informed by the theses put forth by Jean-Francois Lyotard in, e.g., *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (1986), who argues "l'esthétique moderne est une esthétique du sublime, mais nostalgique; elle permet que l'imprésentable soit allégué seulement comme un contenu absent, mais la forme continue à offrir au lecteur ou au regardeur, grâce à sa consistance reconnaisable, matière à consolation et à plaisier." The postmodern, on the other hand, "serait ce qui dans le moderne allègue limprésentable dans la présentation elle-même" (32). See also, e.g., Zygmunt Bauman's description of the differences between modernist and postmodernist art in Bauman 1997: 105-106.

[23] Williams 1985: 15.

[24] Scherpe 1988b: 130 ["raumgreifende Delokalisierung, Entgrenzung und Dekomposition der Großstadt zum Erzählprinzip", translation: ls].

more concerned with themes than with innovative form, though,[25] Dos Passos' polyphonic text could be seen as a literary attempt to represent the city in innovative ways using modernist techniques of cubism or of filmic montage.[26]

As James Donald points out, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929) follow very similar patterns of creative construction in trying to capture the essence of the city through innovative form:

> By the nineteen twenties, after the trauma of total war and with new forms of transport and new media of communication transforming urban life, the discontinuity and complexity of the metropolis had become so intense as to defy narration in that [realist] conventional form. These two novels attempt to reproduce the inner speech of the metropolis, the mental life stimulated by its size, speed, and semiotic overload.[27]

The move from modernist to postmodernist urban fiction, finally, is often characterised as a move towards the highlighting of a meta-fictional level, stressing the constructed character of the world and of fiction itself. Heinz Ickstadt sees these techniques at work in, e. g., the novels of Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon, and Don DeLillo. Their narrations of the city – of New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles respectively – present, according to Ickstadt, "both found and invented cities" and point back towards themselves "as constructs of language" as well as towards the "constructed character of what they call reality."[28]

It of course needs to be pointed out that a development such as the one sketched above is a simplified, maybe even simplistic narration of literary history. Winfried Fluck, e.g., remarks that "the development of the American novel after 1900, that point in time when 19th century realist assumptions were questioned more and more radically, has by no means been a linear one in the United States."[29] What is more, the periods of realism, modernism, and postmodernism should also not be seen as monolithic and uniform, and many different aesthetic schools have usually existed simultaneously. For example, one could not argue that there has been no realist writing during the

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[25] Cf. Maack: 30-35.

[26] Cf. Hurm: 215, who argues that Dos Passos "replaces the dated objectivism of naturalism with an open cubist diagram" and Lowry (1632, 1636) who sees a "cinematic quality" in Dos Passos' prose and relates that when "Dos Passos spoke with Eisenstein in the late twenties they agreed 'thoroughly about the importance of montage.'"

[27] Donald: 128.

[28] Ickstadt 1998a: 197 ["sowohl gefundene wie erfundene Städte"; "als Sprachkonstrukte"; "Konstruktcharakter dessen, was sie als Wirklichkeit bezeichnen", translation: ls].

[29] Fluck: 39 ["Die Entwicklung des amerikanischen Romans nach 1900, also jenem Zeitpunkt, an dem der realistische Repräsentationsanspruch des 19. Jahrhunderts mit zunehmender Radikalität in Frage gestellt wird, verläuft in den USA keineswegs geradlinig." Translation: ls]. See also Ickstadt 1998a, who argues for a cyclical movement from anti-realism to realism within a somewhat linear development of literary history: "In der Tat haben sich Realismus und Mimesis – obwohl in diesem [20.] Jahrhundert schon mehrfach totgesagt – in der Geschichte des amerikanischen Romans als überraschend überlebensfähig erwiesen. [...] In der Tat pendelt der amerikanische Roman seit ca. hundert Jahren zwischen den Polen von Mimesis und Selbstreferenz, zwischen mimetischen und amimetischen Formen der Darstellung, ohne jedoch 'zweimal durch den gleichen Fluß' zu gehen" (Ickstadt 1998a: 1-2).

supposedly modernist or the postmodernist periods. Both synchronically as well as diachronically, there are more variations than often acknowledged.[30] Still, many literary scholars keep working with the broad categories mentioned here; and they can be employed in a profitable way, as long as we stay aware of their complexities and the danger of simplifications. They provide points of departure for looking at literary texts from a certain period or of a specific aesthetic fabric, and as faulty as they may be, they are, arguably, needed for orientation. in a field which would otherwise be hard to talk about or to categorize. And recently, there have been numerous voices telling us that we are again witnessing a turn towards a new meta-narrative – something beyond postmodern literature.[31] There is little agreement, as of yet, about the contours of this movement, and there is yet no common umbrella term. It is in the context of these discussions that the present study is to be situated.

[30] There have been realist turns in American literature, for example, in the 1930s and around the 1950s (see Sontag 1972: 114-15), which are sometimes not mentioned in simplistic discussions of literary history. And, of course, modernism and postmodernism themselves are umbrella terms which tend to hide the complexity of the periods they are used to describe. For two critiques questioning the term postmodernism as a useful aesthetic category to describe post 1960s American fiction, see Rebein: 9, and Millard: 1-7.

[31] See, as just one example amongst many, Fluck 1997. Fluck suggests, "So selbstverständlich und vertraut ist dieses postmoderne Experiment mittlerweile im Zuge einer Flut von Veröffentlichungen geworden, daß dem gerade erst noch gefeierten 'Ausbruch aus der Mimesis' bereits die Frage nach den Möglichkeiten neuerlicher 'Ausbruchsversuche' aus einer inzwischen als repetitiv und redundant empfundenen postmodernen Orthodoxie nachfolgt" (Fluck 1997: 39).

2.3 Postmodern Narrations of the Present Age

> Within post-modernism, one reads of post-industrialism, post-capitalism, post-socialism, post-communism, post-colonialism, post-confessionalism, and post-everythingianism.
> (Tom Turner, *City as Landscape*)

If we turn our attention to the postmodern, we encounter serious difficulties in trying to grasp its meaning. One of the many convincing notes of caution against the term can be found in the introduction to Alex Callinicos's *Against Postmodernism*. What does postmodernism mean? "That was the question which came increasingly to agitate me as I confronted this proliferating discourse about postmodernism," Callinicos writes, adding that "[m]atters weren't helped by the fact that lead producers of the discourse such as Jean-Francois Lyotard and Charles Jencks offered definitions which were mutually inconsistent, internally contradictory and/or hopelessly vague."[32] As examples for the inconsistencies and contradictions of postmodern theories, Callinicos points out that, depending on who you turn to for orientation,

> Postmodernism corresponds to a new stage of social development (Lyotard) or it doesn't (Lyotard again). Postmodern art is a continuation of (Lyotard), or a break from (Jencks) Modernism. Joyce is a Modernist (Jameson) or a Postmodernist (Lyotard). Postmodernism turns its back on social revolution, but then practitioners and advocates of a revolutionary art like Breton and Benjamin are claimed as precursors.[33]

While there are many reasons to be weary of making definite statements about postmodernism in literature, I think it is safe to attest, as Michael W. Nicholson has done, that there is "no doubt that the postmodernism *debate* is real."[34] This postmodernism debate is, I contend, at least as indicative of our times, or of the past decades, as the literary texts described as postmodern. Many proponents of postmodernism in the academia seem to me to reflect a certain sensibility towards language, towards the world, towards epistemological questions, and towards the human subject – a relativist and skepticist sensibility which we may cautiously approach with some considerations about the role of irony in contemporary life and theory. In his 1981 study *Horizons of Assent*, Alan Wilde suggests to look for uses and understandings of irony in literary texts, not as a technical and linguistic category but "as a mode of consciousness"[35] which informs literary production and its reception at a certain point in time. For Wilde, "the defining feature of modernism is its ironic vision of disconnection and disjunction" coupled with "an anxiety to recuperate a lost wholeness in self-sustaining orders of art or in the unselfconscious depths of the self."[36] Postmodernism, on

[32] Callinicos: 2.
[33] Callinicos: 25.
[34] Nicholson: 299, emphasis added.
[35] Wilde 1981: 2.
[36] Wilde 1981: 131.

the other hand, accepts disconnections and disjunctions as non-surpassable. It "derives […] from a vision of randomness, multiplicity, and contingency: in short, a world in need of mending [i.e. the modern one] is superseded by one beyond repair."[37] For Wilde, there still is some hope within this world 'beyond repair', however. Postmodern irony, to him, has both negating and affirming qualities. But if one accepts that the world and our perception of it are fragmented beyond repair, this is a position which either grants magical powers to the arts (in that they can somehow infer affirmation or create hope) or which is simply illogical (by not taking 'beyond repair' seriously). If the world *is* beyond repair, then Hayden White or Paul de Man, both of whom Wilde argues against, are closer to describing postmodern irony and the postmodern sensibility. For White, irony "provides a linguistic paradigm of a mode of thought which is radically self-critical with respect not only to a given characterization of the world of experience but also to the very effort to capture adequately the truth of things in language."[38] It is this kind of 'unstable' irony (Booth) or bottomless irony, which, to me, makes sense as a description of a skepticist and relativist sensibility that defines the postmodern.

Does such a positioning of the postmodern work, however, as so many different things have been said about postmodernism and postmodernity, and as one thing that seems to be most often asserted about the two terms – usually at the beginning of discussions – is that you cannot properly define them? To give just a few examples, as early as 1985 Umberto Eco complained that "'postmodern' is a term *bon à tout faire*. I have the impression that it is applied today to anything the user of the term happens to like."[39] In 1992, Cornel West declared that "we now have a 'Tower of Babel' in American literary criticism."[40] More recently, Francis Barker has called the common attempts at labelling the 20th century's main cultural trends "the huge cliché about modernity and postmodernity," adding that "it is a cliché, and it is huge, and no one has really been able to pin down what the precise arguments of that argument are or should be."[41] What is more, John Rajchman reminds us that many theorists who have been quoted in the name of the postmodern actually often show disdain for the term. "Foucault rejected the category," he writes, "Guattari despises it; Derrida has no use for it; Lacan and Barthes did not live, and Althusser was in no state, to learn about it; and Lyotard found it in America."[42]

[37] Wilde 1981: 131.
[38] White: 37.
[39] Eco (1985) 1992: 226.
[40] West: 217.
[41] Barker 2001: 206.
[42] Rajchman 1991b: 119.

David Harvey is right in stating that such "uncertainty makes it peculiarly difficult to evaluate, interpret, and explain the shift that everyone agrees has occurred."[43] Another danger, obviously, especially if you argue against postmodernism, is to attack a straw man, i.e., to create or construct a kind of postmodernity and postmodernism that can most easily be dismissed thereafter. Advocates of postmodernism might argue that what has been said above is a misrepresentation of postmodern thought as it puts too much emphasis on its negative aspects. One such advocate is Wolfgang Welsch. In his 2004 essay "What Was Postmodernism – And What Might It Become?," Welsch accuses critics of postmodernism to not have studied it with enough care and to have built up a straw man. "The discussion in the Sunday supplements" of the press was, Welsch argues, "way beneath the level of the philosophical concept of Post-Modernism" which, according to Welsch, "represents the very opposite of a carefree anything-goes attitude and a cynical dog-eat-dog mentality – […] all the clichés propagated by the tabloids."[44] So what characterises this worthy and philosophical postmodernism à la Welsch? It "takes pluralism seriously" instead of "simply play[ing] with it."[45] It does not embrace an "anything-goes approach, relativism, eclecticism, nostalgia, indifference, candy style," but combines "plurality and incommensurability as well as justice" – i.e. it preserves "an overall commitment to a perspective of equity […] within conflict."[46] And does Welsch not have a point? Is it not the case that, as Pauline Marie Rosenau argues, besides the postmodern skeptics who "argue that the post-modern age is one of fragmentation, disintegration, malaise, meaninglessness, vagueness or even absence of moral parameters and societal chaos,"[47] there also are those who value the personal freedom and the possibilities of pluralism which are opened up by moving away from traditional doctrines about reality and about the stable self? And are there not also "affirmative postmodernists" who are "open to positive political action (struggle and resistance)" and who "seek a philosophical and ontological intellectual practice that is nondogmatic, tentative, and non-ideological"?[48]

True, within postmodernism, there might be playfulness, plurality, and personal freedom. But even "where there is room for happiness, farce, parody, pleasure," one could argue, "these are only temporary, empty meaningless forms of gaiety."[49] And certainly, within the contemporary world, there are 'non-dogmatic, tentative, and non-ideological' intellectual and political practices – but to call these postmodern would be misconstrued, and to base political struggles and resistance on

[43] Harvey 1989: 42.
[44] Welsch: 35.
[45] Welsch: 35-36.
[46] Welsch: 35. Welsch here paraphrases and refers to what Lyotard has argued in *Der Widerstreit* (1987).
[47] Rosenau: 15.
[48] Rosenau: 15-16.
[49] Rosenau: 15.

postmodern thought contains a paradox which cannot be resolved. Granted, if you do 'take pluralism seriously,' as Welsch suggests, and if you deny any kind of unity to the world, as many postmodernist theorists seem to do, you might not necessarily end up with an '*anything-goes* approach.' In the end, however, you will find yourself in a '*nothing-goes*' cul-de-sac.[50] If you not only reject simplistic *beliefs* in certain specific foundations but call into question the very idea of any kind of possible foundation, the only thing that is left for you is an anti-foundational bottomless void.[51] On the other hand, if you *do not* call into question the possibility of foundations, then why should we speak of postmodernism, and would modernism not aptly describe our present period?

In this study, the postmodern will be regarded as a particular zeitgeist which is characterised by a sense of epistemological and humanist crisis.[52] An illustrative example of how advocates of postmodernity see the world is their emphasis on the relativity of textual meaning. To make a generalisation, the postmodern theorist sees the world in terms of a text, or the text in terms of the world. Both text and world are perceived as systems of signs, and signs never point to a truth or a reality 'out there' or to something that we could agree upon. They are human constructions pointing towards other signs, which are always interpreted in differing ways by different people and at different times.

An important reason why it might make some sense to call the past decades postmodern is the widespread acceptance of the epistemological crisis sketched above. For example, Callinicos

[50] One should note that Welsch, though not an architectural critic by profession, is mainly concerned with postmodernism in architecture in the essay quoted from here. When he attacks "apologists of Modernism" for adopting and appropriating postmodern categories and postmodern celebrations of pluralism for their own modernist projects, his pieces of evidence are taken from the field of architecture and might not be transferable to other fields of cultural production. In architecture, where the International Style has often been equated with modernism per se, Welsch might be right to some extent to mockingly relate that "[s]uddenly, according to […] recent publications, diversity and contradiction allegedly express the essence of Modernism" when in "1966, when Venturi propagated these categories as axioms for a new kind of architecture, there were loud cries of indignation about his betrayal of Modernism" (Welsch: 36). It is still not unreasonable to include Welsch in the general discussion of postmodernist thought carried out above since he himself extends his argument "beyond architecture" (Welsch: 36), and takes up Lyotard's conception of a postmodernist "'psychological or intellectual condition'" (Lyotard 1986: 97 in Welsch: 35) by arguing that "Post-Modernist attitudes are now an unquestioned part of contemporary consciousness" (Welsch: 36).

[51] For a good example of the anti-foundationalism which, to me, is at the heart of postmodernist thinking, see Vattimo's *The End of Modernity*. In the introduction to this study, Vattimo writes about Nietzsche and Heidegger: "Both philosophers find themselves obliged, on the one hand, to take up a critical distance from Western thought insofar as it is foundational; on the other hand, however, they find themselves unable to criticize Western thought in the name of another, and truer, foundation. It is this that rightly allows us to consider them to be the philosophers of post-modernity" (Vattimo: 2-3).

[52] Some other theorists have suggested applying the term postmodernity as one with a much broader scope. Paula Geyh, Fred G. Leebron, and Andrew Levy, for example, attest that "[f]or many observers," postmodernity is "a historical period stretching from the 1960s to the present" and is "marked by such phenomena as upheavals in the international economic system, the Cold War and its decline, the increasing ethnic heterogeneity of the American population, the growth of the suburbs as a cultural force, the predominance of television as a cultural medium, and the rise of the computer" (Geyh et. al.: x). As Robert Rebein argues, such a scope is much too wide and unfocused since "[a]ccording to this usage, pretty much everything written during the postmodern period should be thought of, in some sense, as postmodern literature" (Rebein: 8).

observes: "What is striking about the philosophical drift towards Aestheticism is how well it accords with the cultural mood of the 1980s."[53] A great number of people have given up the search for truth and the goal to get closer to 'big ideas' or meta-narratives. Instead, what is emphasized is the epistemological problem we face, and the impossibility of overcoming it. As David Harvey argues, "the most startling fact about postmodernism" is "its total acceptance of the ephemerality, fragmentation, discontinuity and the chaotic that formed the one half of Baudelaire's conception of modernity." Postmodernism does not, Harvey goes on, "try to transcend" this ephemerality. It does not try to "counteract it, or even to define the 'eternal and immutable' elements that might lie within it. Postmodernism swims, even wallows, in the fragmentary and the chaotic currents of change as if that is all there is."[54] In Richard Sheppard's words, within "the condition of postmodernity, Lord Chandos's postcrisis situation of radical uncertainty becomes general,"[55] and, as Michael W. Nicholson concludes, "[t]he Minotaur at the heart of the postmodernism debate is a mix of relativism and nihilism."[56]

Could we say that what makes the contemporary period a postmodern one is that these theses are, as Harvey suggests, much more widely accepted throughout large parts of the Western hemisphere's population than they ever used to be? Joseph Dewey remarks about his own attempt at describing the 1980s that to "map out a decade just finished is to invite argument, not to end it. […] Part intuition, part guesswork, such decade-defining speaks a rough truth in its immediacy, in its vulnerability to later correction."[57] It might be partly guesswork, then, to attribute certain attitudes to the young Western middle class of the 1990s and the early 2000s, and it will certainly not remain without objections and corrections. There are ample signs, however, that a new generation has grown up with the awareness that human beings will never be able to come close to final statements about the state or the nature of the world, that meta-narratives cannot be trusted. One example of the general pervasiveness of this attitude is the 2001 German publication *Generation Golf*. Not originating from within the realms of the academia, it expresses postmodernist ideas in a popular bestseller, which has been widely hailed as an authentic report on the situation young people found themselves in a few years ago. Some of its central lines read, "The search for a goal is not on the agenda any more," and "It is quite unlikely that the future will bring any changes."[58] Another example can be found in Douglas Coupland's fictional and non-fictional texts in *Polaroids*

[53] Callinicos: 169.
[54] Harvey 1989: 44.
[55] Sheppard: 354.
[56] Nicholson: 310.
[57] Dewey: 4.
[58] Illies: 197 [Die Suche nach dem Ziel hat sich erledigt. Veränderungen wird die Zukunft kaum bringen", translation: ls].

From the Dead, his attempt to "reflect an early 1990s worldview" of "the milieu in which I and much of North America was raised: middle-middle-class life."[59] Writing a short introduction to the book in retrospect in 1996, it appears to Coupland as if between

> 1990 and 1996, ideas once considered out on 'the edge' or 'the fringe' became the dominant ideas in everyday discourse: the vanishing middle; the collapse of entitlement; the rise and dominance of irony; extreme social upheaval brought about by endless new machines … and the sense that even a place in time as recent as last week can now feel like it happened a decade ago.[60]

Here is not an academic in the ivory tower trying to further his career, here is one of the most successful young North American authors describing his own middle class experience in the early 1990s. His description reads like a (less terminology-laden) list that could have been compiled by a postmodern theorist in an English department. As they are for Illies, meta-narratives are also highly suspect to Coupland. "Up until recently," he states in a piece composed in 1994, "no matter where or when one was born on earth, one's culture provided one with all the components essential for forging identity. These components included: religion, family, ideology, class strata, a geography, politics and a sense of living within a historic continuum"[61] – a list of all the main meta-narratives attacked by advocates of the postmodern, meta-narratives which apparently slip away from the regular population as well. "Suddenly," for Coupland,

> around ten years ago, with the deluge of electronic and information media into our lives, these stencils within which we trace our lives began to vanish, almost overnight, particularly on the West Coast. It became possible to be alive yet have no religion, no family connections, no ideology, no sense of class location, no politics and no sense of history. Denarrated.[62]

In the words of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, people today seem to "lack the conceptual means – so it is being said – to straighten out the convoluted and straggly picture, to conjure up a cohesive model from the confused and incoherent experience, to string together the scattered beads of events."[63] Is this confusion and lack of narratability the contemporary experience? As debated, as philosophically and politically contested, as hard to pin down, and as contradictory as the postmodern is[64] – to a large part of the Western middle class at the end of the 20th century, a relativist skepticism towards meta-narratives often associated with postmodernism seems to have

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[59] Coupland: 1-2.
[60] Coupland: 2.
[61] Coupland: 180.
[62] Coupland: 180. Coupland is, of course making some exaggerations that should not go without objections. Whether the West Coast differs that much from, say, New York, is a highly debatable thought. That the changes occurred as suddenly as Coupland suggests is as questionable a point as that it is a new phenomenon that one could live without religion. It could be argued, however, that the things Coupland lists had become much more widely accepted by the general population in the mid-1990s than ever before. For those who still doubt the general accuracy of Coupland's analysis, his statements are in themselves a sign for a change in attitudes towards meta-narratives with at least some part of the North American middle class he is a part of.
[63] Bauman 1997: 199.
[64] For a good survey of the various and often contradictory theories of postmodernism and postmodernity, see, e.g., Margaret A. Rose.

struck the right chord.[65] Even fervent critics of postmodern philosophical stances, such as José Lopez and Garry Potter, state that "postmodernism managed to escape the confines of the academic world and terms such as 'postmodernity' and 'deconstruction' have passed into journalism and popular discourse."[66] And not just the terminology has made it into the non-academic world. In spite of "all its contradictions," Lopez and Potter admit, "postmodernism served to capture the spirit of the contemporary age."[67] At the beginning of a study that is generally critical of Baudrillard's theses, Jochen Venus nevertheless states that "even if one agrees with the polemical critique that simulation theory is nothing but charlatanism, the question remains why simulation theory is so attractive to many people – its wide circulation cannot otherwise be explained."[68] Marc Chénetier, who answers his essay's title "Should the Post-modern Really Be 'Explained to Children'?" with a fervent 'No, thank you' and offers biting criticism of the term and its uses, still sees many who hold a postmodern standpoint according to which "[d]iscourses of truth are sent packing."[69] And Alex Callinicos, who has argued extensively against the postmodern as a sound philosophy, contends that while "[p]ostmodernity […] is merely a theoretical construct," it is "of interest […] as a symptom of the current mood of the Western intelligentsia."[70] Even if postmodern attitudes and theories are "closer to symptom than cure,"[71] they cannot just be brushed aside. The current mood, of which many theoretical musings are symptomatic, is a reality in itself – not only for academics in the Ivory Tower. Although, as Michael W. Nicholson contends, "characterizing the present period as a postmodern era or even a transition into a postmodern era is, at best, highly problematic,"[72] postmodern relativism has undeniably had a wide appeal in the 1990s. The postmodern might not be the universal phenomenon some take it to be[73] – but as a construct of

[65] See, e.g. David Foster Wallace's comments in a 1993 interview with Larry McCaffery, in which he suggests that "Postmodern irony's become our environment" and that this environment is, more specifically, characterized by "sarcasm, cynicism, a manic ennui, suspicion of all authority, suspicion of all constraints of conduct, and a terrible penchant for ironic diagnosis of unpleasantness instead of an ambition not just to diagnose and ridicule but to redeem" (Wallace 1993: 147-148).

[66] Lopez / Potter: 3-4.

[67] Lopez / Potter: 3.

[68] Venus: 9. ["selbst wenn man die polemische Kritik, dass die Simulationstheorie nichts als Scharlatanerie sei, für gerechtfertigt hält, stellt sich doch die Frage, wie die Simulationstheorie die Attraktivität entfalten kann, ohne die ihre Zirkulation nicht möglich wäre", translation: ls]

[69] Chénetier: 14. Chénetier here also makes the well justified point that a generalised relativism does of course also "not act otherwise" than a discourse of truth as it "proclaims it is […] ultimate itself" (Chénetier: 14).

[70] Callinicos: 8.

[71] Bilton: 12.

[72] Nicholson: 309. Even though Nicholson comes to the postmodernism debate from a theologically grounded standpoint, *some* of his criticism is well based on arguments with postmodern theorists and not on a foundationalist theology; see Nicholson 302-309.

[73] Walter Truett Anderson, e.g., has argued that the postmodern is partly characterized by "a world coming together – a global civilization, the first that has ever existed, emerging into being before our eyes" (Anderson 1990: 231-232). This global civilization, for Anderson, is "different in important ways from anything we have known before." From "small communities to the entire human species," Anderson contends, people "create and re-create the realities that are common to all their members" in a global "social construction of reality" (Anderson 1990: 251).

the 'Western intelligentsia', it did and does 'capture the spirit of the contemporary age' for a large group of people within the North American (urban) middle class.

One of the novels which will be discussed at length below, Alex Shakar's *The Savage Girl*, provides an explicit account of the postmodern spiritual situation in a characterization of its main character Ursula van Urden, which summarizes much of how the contemporary postmodern sensibility is seen in the present study. "More and more," the narrator of *The Savage Girl* states, Ursula is

> coming to feel the outlines of an unnatural growth inside her, something pathologically resistant to even the meagerest infusions of religion, nationalism, racialism, humanism. […] She can feel it gnawing away day after day at the very organs it was supposed to protect: the organ that lets people live as part of a particular clan or group or effort, the organ that lets people orient their beliefs along some particular axis, the organ that lets people feel some particular sense of purpose. Ursula increasingly lacks these normal, healthy functions, and her life has become correspondingly meaningless, and she generally feels so lonely on Earth she could die. (TSG: 55)

Ursula, like other contemporary urbanites who can afford to be to some degree decadent, has reached what a postmodern theorist might call the ultimate aporias of the enlightenment project. Her existence is defined by "a kind of decadent knowingness"[74] – not just a postmodern theory, but a personal, a psychological reality which, as we shall see in more detail below, is dealt with by a number of contemporary authors.

Where does this 'spirit of the contemporary age' come from, however? Like Coupland, Joseph Dewey sees the development as having started at the beginning of the 1980s. The American public, he argues, elected Ronald Reagan and felt comforted by his rhetoric. Rather than facing political realities, it committed "itself to the seductive alogic of a play zone."[75] Reagan's America, in Dewey's opinion, is comparable to

> that supreme postmodern landscape we call the theme park, a deliberate construction, an elaborate spectacle, a play zone without consequence that offers a necessary pause from the pressing responsibilities of the immediate and demands audience cooperation for its fullest effect.[76]

According to Dewey, the American population chose to like Reagan in a "grateful giant step away from rigid logistics of analytical thought to indulge the ludic possibilities of […] rich imaginative inclinations,"[77] inclinations to believe in an "alternate world wholly apart from the press and confusion of the 'real world.'"[78] The embracing of the postmodern theme park, in Dewey's view, was carried out for therapeutic reasons. "The Reagan Era […] began with the conviction that we had reached a critical point of exhaustion – that we needed to take a break, we needed to play."[79]

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[74] Bilton: 1.
[75] Dewey: 9.
[76] Dewey: 8.
[77] Dewey: 7.
[78] Dewey: 9.
[79] Dewey: 9.

While there might be some truth to Dewey's escapist thesis, it does not completely do justice to the nature of the ironic outlook on life and on the world that could be observed during the 1990s and beyond. When you visit a theme park, you can easily go back to the real world by leaving that park; and Dewey maintains that adopting a playful outlook on life was a "happy temporary disengagement" from a never completely negated "sphere of the immediate,"[80] from social and political realities. Can we so easily leave the theme park of postmodernity, though? Jochen Venus seems to have his doubts about this when he remarks about Baudrillard's writings and ideas that their wide circulation is indicative of the "more and more precarious state of educated bourgeois subjectivity"[81] in general. And Hillary Lawson states that "[o]urs is a world awash with relativism" which "has seeped into our culture" and "threatens to become our faith."[82] This kind of theme park cannot easily be left behind.

Alex Callinicos presents a more convincing explanation of the acceptance of relativist postmodern ideas in academic and non-academic circles during the past 30 years. He first cites a passage from Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, in which the latter asserts that "[e]clecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and 'retro' clothes in Hong Kong; knowledge is a matter for TV games."[83] Callinicos does not question that there are people whose life can be described in such a way. He does, however, maintain that "it is a bit rich that Lyotard should ignore the majority of the population even in the advanced economies to whom such delights as French scent and Far Eastern travel are denied," and points out that those who are at leisure to engage in such activities are the wealthy and "the 'new middle class' of upper-level white-collar workers."[84] Others have also seen this connection to economic and class status.

In "Notes on Camp" Susan Sontag suggests a close relation between the middle class and a culture of aestheticism or irony. She asserts, "Camp is the modern dandyism. Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture."[85] David Foster Wallace remarks that postmodern fiction has been "authored almost exclusively by young white overeducated males."[86] And Cornel West claims that "Baudrillard seems to be articulating a sense of what it is to be a

[80] Dewey: 13.
[81] Venus: 124.
[82] Lawson: xi.
[83] Lyotard 1984: 76.
[84] Callinicos: 162.
[85] Sontag 1964: 288.
[86] Wallace 1990: 65.

French, middle-class intellectual, or perhaps what it is to be middle class generally,"[87] contending that poorer and minority groups of the population have a sense of the real that can be lost to those who do not have to worry about fulfilling their basic needs:

> Let me put it in terms of a formulation from Henry James that Fredric Jameson has appropriated: there is a reality *that one cannot not know*. The ragged edges of the Real, of *Necessity*, not being able to eat, not having shelter, not having health care, all this is something that one cannot not know. The black condition acknowledges that. […] Half of the black population is denied this [affluence and comfort of the middle class], which is why they have a strong sense of reality.[88]

Callinicos states that it is "tempting to see Postmodernism as somehow the cultural expression of the rise of the new middle class," but he contends that such a statement, while not missing the point completely, is too generalising. According to Callinicos, the rise of the middle class does not suffice to explain the popularity and acceptance of postmodern ideas. The middle class, he argues, is "less a coherent collectivity than a heterogeneous collection of strata," and "has been around a lot longer" than the "genuine cultural referents"[89] of postmodernism. In a convincing move, Callinicos then links the rise of the ironic outlook on life to two main developments of the past decades – the ongoing "redistribution from poor to rich "[90] and the simultaneous "retreat of the generation of 1968 from the revolutionary beliefs of their youth"[91] into an ideologically disillusioned state of mind. "This conjuncture," Callinicos argues –

> the prosperity of the Western new middle class combined with the political disillusionment of many of its most articulate members – provides the context to the proliferating talk of postmodernism. […] As Chris Harman remarked '[i]f the fashion in 1968 was to drop out and to drop acid, now, apparently, it is to drop in and drop socialist politics'[92] [93]

The rise of postmodern ideas is also linked to the disillusion of former revolutionaries by Odo Marquard in his essay "Nach der Postmoderne." Drawing a picture of European cultural and intellectual history in broad, yet appealing strokes, Marquard advances the thesis that periods of aestheticism – an aestheticization of life and the world in general – typically tend to follow periods dominated by a future-oriented and revolutionary spirit. This suggestion of Marquard rests on the presupposition that modernity first started with and is characterised by the loss of faith in divine redemption, which is then replaced with the hope for human self-redemption. In Marquard's eyes, if revolutionary and future-oriented political and reality-oriented actions do not satisfy this hope

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[87] West: 219.
[88] West: 219. See also, e.g., Susan Sontag (1972), who has very early on called the increasing use of parody from the mid-1960s onwards "a decadent response" of writers "in Western Europe and North America." For Sontag, it is important to remember that there "are many people in this world, in Africa, in Asia, in Latin America […] who don't feel the need to parody anything and who don't worry about exhaustion and cultural glut and the relation of image and reality" (Sontag 1972: 128-129).
[89] Callinicos: 163.
[90] Callinicos: 164.
[91] Callinicos: 165.
[92] Harman: viii, as quoted in Callinicos: 165.
[93] Callinicos: 168, 165.

for redemption, people will move towards the realm of aesthetics in order to find redemption there. This, he argues, is what happened when Romanticism became popular after a period characterised by the French Revolution[94] – and it is what happened again in our century when postmodern thought started to gain credibility after a period of partly skeptical yet ultimately hopeful movements in the political realm.

Another, related point presented by Paula Geyh et al. might be added to these suggestions to explain the widespread and exceptional success of postmodern thought in the US academia (and beyond). For a European observer, some popular versions of history and of national identity prevalent in the United States often seem to be of a somewhat uncritical and simplifying character. A common story told about the United States and about its inhabitants follows simple story lines and works heavily with broad generalisations.[95] As Howard Zinn maintains, "[t]he idea of the saviors has been built into the entire culture"[96] through the importance accorded to various presidents in much American historiography. Geyh et al. argue that in the post-war period, "the national emphasis on unity and resolve in the face of external threats was extended to perceived internal threats in the 1950s," which led to "the outright repression of the McCarthy era"[97] and the simplistically applied notion of 'un-American activities', while, on the other hand, an "optimistic vision of American life […] had initially prevailed after World War II."[98] The optimistic vision of American life was then shaken with the assassinations on Martin Luther King and the Kennedy brothers; the Watergate scandal, the Vietnam War. These and other events for Geyh et al. "extended the widespread skepticism of the 1960s beyond government to include a suspicion of almost any form of institutional authority."[99]

In *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1961), Daniel J. Boorstin presents yet another theory of how reality was lost in the United States. At a time when Boorstin believed it to still be

[94] In Marquard's words, "Das zweite Stadium dieser ersatzhaften Selbsterlösungsveranstaltung der Menschen, die Phase der *Ästhetisierung der Wirklichkeit*, beginnt justament unter dem Eindruck eben dieser Enttäuschung der revolutionären Naherwartung. Die Romantik [...] rettet den politisch in der Realität gescheiterten Versuch der revolutionären Vollendung und Erlösung der Menschheit in ein ästhetisches Programm" (Marquard: 50-51, original emphasis).

[95] There are, of course, alternative stories that are told and offered in the United States. In the field of history, one such alternative story is told by Howard Zinn in *A People's History of the United States* (1995). Zinn's motivation to write his own "biased account" of US history is that he sees a large majority of US historiography as painting a simplified and distorted picture of the country's past. "All those histories of this country centered on the Founding Fathers and the Presidents weigh oppressively on the capacity of the ordinary citizen to act," Zinn proposes. "They suggest that in times of crisis we must look to someone to save us […]. And that between occasional crises everything is all right, and it is sufficient for us to be restored to that normal state" (Zinn: 618).

[96] Zinn: 618.

[97] Geyh et al.: xii.

[98] Geyh et al.: xii.

[99] Geyh et al.: xii.

possible to "dispel some of the mists" of unreality,[100] he also saw a growing and dangerous "thicket of unreality which stands between us and the facts of life."[101] As he claims, in the early 1960s, Americans

> are threatened by a new and particularly American menace. […] It is the menace of unreality. The threat of nothingness is the danger of replacing American dreams by American illusions. Of replacing the ideals by the images, the aspiration by the mold. We risk being the first people in history to have been able to make their illusions so vivid, so persuasive, so 'realistic' that they can live in them.[102]

And while, in Boorstin's opinion, Americans already were "the most illusioned people on earth" in the 1960s, they did not "dare […] become disillusioned, because our illusions are the very house in which we live; they are our news, our heroes, our adventure, our forms of art, our very experience."[103] Boorstin traces this reliance on illusions back to the psychological make-up of the American people themselves, who, in his analysis, "want and […] believe these illusions" because they "suffer from extravagant expectations."[104] Every trip to the restaurant next door is expected to be an extraordinary experience, every newspaper is expected to report spectacular news items, Boorstin suggests. "We expect new heroes every season, a literary masterpiece every month, a dramatic spectacular every week, a rare sensation every night."[105] Therefore, every American "individually provides the market and the demand for the illusions which flood our experience."[106]

All of these supposed changes in how we experience the world in the second half of the 20th and at the beginning of the 21st century are also often linked to developments in (media) technology and in the global economy by postmodernist thinkers. For Robert Rebein, for example, the terms "information age, or the media society" are synonymous with the term "postmodernity."[107] And in more radical versions of the postmodern, it is often argued, for example, that the ever-increasing mediation of the world in Western societies in the past decades has lead people to not experience a real world any more. The distinctions between the real and the fabricated, the mediated, supposedly falter. In Richard Sheppard's words, postmodernist theorists claim that

> because of the all-pervasiveness of the new media and advertising, the aestheticization of everyday life, and the increasing commodification of culture […] it is extremely hard to disentangle fantasy from reality, consumption from culture, ideology from commodity, and genuine personal aspiration from artificially induced need.[108]

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[100] Boorstin: viii.
[101] Boorstin: 3.
[102] Boorstin: 240.
[103] Boorstin: 240.
[104] Boorstin: 3.
[105] Boorstin: 4.
[106] Boorstin: 3.
[107] Rebein: 15.
[108] Sheppard: 354.

Likewise, Gianni Vattimo asserts that our life worlds are in the process of turning into a "reduction of every experience of reality to an experience of images (no one ever really meets anyone else; instead, everyone watches everything on a television screen while home alone)"[109], and Robert G. Dunn tells us that the

> technological intensification of signification processes through consumerism, entertainment, and information systems has raised the specter of a drastically transformed order of experience, whereby problematizing effects of visual culture are surpassed by a state of affairs in which the foundations of meaning formation have been completely abolished.[110]

The combination of a global capitalism, which seems to be beyond the control of the individual, the dominance of mediated images over any other kind of sign and over reality, and the fleeting character of these images, for many results in an intensification of "the individual's sense of not being in control." While we are surrounded "with an increasing range of fetishized commodities that are designed to give their owner the illusion of being in control," the world now seems to actually be "governed by economic forces that even experts are hard put to identify and understand, let alone control."[111] In other words, a "mutation of the visual and informational world of signs and images into a transcendent order of simulation"[112] has, according to postmodern theorists, taken place, and is propelled ever forward by the economic powers that be.

And even critics of postmodernist theoretical stances tend to agree with these analyses to some degree. Jedediah Purdy, for example, who has recently attacked the ironic mode of life prevalent in North America and who has called for a return to its non-ironic counterpart, concedes: "Irony is not just something we watch [on television]; it is something we do. [...] Echoing the words of screenwriters and the rhythms of perfume advertisements, we mime a thousand carefully set images of spontaneous delight. We know this, but we cannot escape it."[113] Alan Bilton joins in, stating that by "the time we have reached adolescence we have already experienced (and many times over) all the possible permutations of adult life in soap-operas and made-for-TV movies." For Bilton, therefore, "life itself becomes a kind of rerun, our responses a mixture of boredom and irony."[114] And even for Floyd Centore, a most fervent opponent to postmodernist outlooks onto the contemporary world, the media have a decided effect on people's sense of missing directions and

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[109] Vattimo: 7. For Vattimo, this assessment does not reflect the world as it is, but it describes one "at which it seems reasonable to expect to arrive" (Vattimo: 7).
[110] Dunn 2000: 125.
[111] Sheppard: 352-53.
[112] Dunn 1998: 99. It should be added that even though Dunn values the ideas of Baudrillard ("the most provocative, clever, and insightful theorist of consumerism, media, and high technology" (Dunn 1998: 103)), he himself does not give up completely on the distinction between reality and simulation (Dunn 1998: 101, 104) and criticises Baudrillard on many points (Dunn 1998: 103-106).
[113] Purdy 2000: 11-12.
[114] Bilton: 1-2.

foundations. As he suggests, in present-day TV programmes, comedy is characterized by "a continuous stream of fast and unexpected developments – all leading nowhere."[115] Centore goes on to argue that what "the 'Theatre of the Absurd' is to the intelligentsia, current popular comedy is to the less educated people in society"[116] – a reflection of life in a postmodern world:

> The present-day comic is always walking on the edge; always, like John Cleese's comic characters, just on the verge of going over the edge, of going completely insane. The fact that he doesn't actually 'go off the deep end,' but instead continues to teeter on the brink, is precisely what makes his characters so believable and pertinent in post-modern times. We can empathize with such beleaguered characters, because that is the kind of world in which we ourselves live.[117]

[115] Centore: 12.
[116] Centore: 13.
[117] Centore: 13.

2.4 Narrations of Postmodern City Life

> The city envisioned by the futurist architect Forunato Despero in his 1916 Aerial City was to be an 'aerial and mobile city of leisure,' a thing of beauty. What America created instead was Las Vegas, the ultimate landscape of spectacle – the capital of entertainment; the city of lights. Here's a "nowhere" city that is really nowhere.
> (Laura Rice, "Trafficking in Philosophy: Lines of Force in the City-Text")

One can argue that metropolises also had their share in creating the zeitgeist described above,[118] and that they are, of course, in turn also shaped by it. When, in the following, I will suggest what a postmodern city and life within a postmodern urban space might be like, it is important to keep in mind that the kind of urban environment described is not to be conceived as a universal reality. The differences between modernism and postmodernism might be particularly clear in architectural history. As C. Barry Chabot has remarked, there is a "comparative uniformity of architectural modernism" which "consists largely of the so-called International Style."[119] It is therefore easier to identify the postmodern with a specific style in architecture than to do this in cultural or literary history, where modernity and modernism are much broader terms and much more debated. The picture that will be drawn of the postmodern city below is, however, not informed by architectural questions. It is that of an urban space as it presents itself to and as it is constructed by those who embrace or feel themselves caught within the contemporary postmodern zeitgeist of relativism. It is, at the same time, as we shall see, the kind of urban world that emerges from many contemporary literary renditions of city life.

Lyotard has likened language and linguistic structures to the urban world. "Our language," he suggests, "can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses with additions from different periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses."[120] While language can be figured in terms of a city, one can also reverse the image and figure the city in terms of a postmodern notion of language. A maze where orientation is hard if not impossible, a place where the individual is as lost as he is within the text and the world constructed by postmodernism in general – or at least a place that invites the individual to lose himself in his aestheticized environment. As Mike Featherstone suggests, in "descriptions of the contemporary city" the "emphasis is not only on the type of new

[118] Cf. Chambers.
[119] Chabot: 105.
[120] Lyotard as quoted in Harvey: 46.

architecture specifically designated postmodern, but also on the more general eclectic stylistic hotchpotch which one finds in the urban fabric of the built environment." What is more, he adds,

> a similar decontextualization of tradition and a raiding of all cultural forms to draw out quotations from the imaginary side of life are found amongst the young 'de-centred subjects' who enjoy the experimentation and play with fashion and the stylization as they stroll through the 'no place' postmodern urban spaces.[121]

The German author Florian Illies provides his readers with similar suggestions as to how an individual could react to the epistemological crisis. He promotes the strategy of resorting to playfulness and mindless fun. "The search for a goal is not on the agenda any more," he asserts (as has already been mentioned above) and suggests:

> If there is one place in the countrywide theme park known as Germany where this dictum has turned into a tangible reality, it is the children's paradise at Ikea stores. A huge glass box, filled with coloured balls which invite you to dig through for hours on end without hurting yourself and without ever getting anywhere. [122]

With the children's paradise where no one will get hurt and life is pure pastime, Florian Illies has come up with a suitable image describing the individual's possible reaction to a postmodern world devoid of meaning and of foundations. In the academic context, Zygmunt Bauman argues along similar lines in his essay "From Pilgrim to Tourist – or a Short History of Identity." Echoing Illies' statement about the loss of aims, he asks: "What possible purpose could the strategy of pilgrim-style 'progress' serve in this world of ours"[123] when we face a "fragmentation of time into episodes, each one cut from its past and its future?"[124] Furthermore, echoing Illies' image of the children's play-place, Bauman suggests that one possible image that describes the contemporary world is the game. It is, Bauman suggests, a game that "is fast and leaves no time to pause and think and draw elaborate designs" and that aims at "maximal impact and instant obsolescence." He adds that maximal impact is what is sought after today because "the world is over-saturated with information" and therefore, "attention turns into the scarcest of resources," only to be reached by "shocking messages, and one more shocking than the last."[125]

Bauman goes on to suggest the metaphor of the "Cosmic casino"[126] to describe contemporary social reality, thereby making an implicit connection to a children's paradise for adults where the playful reaction to the postmodern crisis is highly evident. It is the city that has been called the "the

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[121] Featherstone 1991: 65.
[122] Illies: 112 ["Wenn es einen Ort im Freizeitpark Deutschland gibt, an dem sich dieses Diktum ['Die Suche nach dem Ziel hat sich erledigt.'] bewahrheitet, dann sind es die Ikea-Kinderparadiese. Ein riesiger Glaskasten, mit bunten Kugeln gefüllt, durch die man sich stundenlang durchwühlen kann, ohne daß man sich weh tut und ohne daß man irgendwo ankommt", translation: ls].
[123] Bauman 1996: 24.
[124] Bauman 1996: 25.
[125] Bauman 1996: 25.
[126] Bauman 1996: 25.

brightest star in the neon firmament of post-modernism"[127] and the "first city of the twenty-first century;"[128] it has been described as a city which "takes our most commonplace actions and paints them on a bigger canvas: playing, eating, consuming, having fun" while showing us, at the same time, the "necessary truth which has to be faced if we wish to go on living: 'it is all just a huge and grotesque farce'"[129]: Las Vegas.

In Las Vegas, 'The Strip' of casinos and hotels celebrates an artificial and virtual environment, which Alda Huxtable describes and interprets in the following way:

> The real fake reaches its apogee in places like Las Vegas, where it has been developed into an art form. Continuous, competitive frontages of moving light and color and constantly accelerating novelty lead to the gaming tables and hotels. The purpose is clear and the solution is dazzling, the result is completely and sublimely itself. The outrageously fake fake has developed its own indigenous style and life style to become a real place. This is an urban design frontier where extraordinary things are happening.[130]

The amounts of people who choose Las Vegas as a place of residence, but especially the enormous amount of visitors who choose Las Vegas as a destination are proof of the strong and pervasive attraction this city exudes.[131] Since metaphysical truths are widely believed to not exist any more or seem to be completely out of reach, people enjoy the superficial fun that they are offered in the city in the Nevada desert. In the essay quoted from above, Huxtable goes on to argue that architecture "and the environment as packaging or playacting, as disengagement from reality, is a notion whose time, alas, seems to have come. [...] Surrogate experience and synthetic settings have become the preferred American way of life."[132] Las Vegas represents a last logical step in the developments of cities seen from a point of view of cultural history and semiotics that sees us living in a postmodern age. Bruce Bégout, for one, certainly seems to believe that this is where we have arrived. In the preface to his book *Zeropolis* he writes:

> Las Vegas is nothing more than our everyday cityscape. What has become established in the middle of the Mojave Desert: the might of entertainment dictating the flow of life; the organization of the city through shopping malls and amusement parks; non-stop, day and night bustle in the streets and covered walkways; themed architecture that combines commercial seduction with childlike make-believe […] – are all things we are already familiar with, and will be induced to become more accustomed to. […] We are all inhabitants of Las Vegas, however far away we are from southern Nevada.[133]

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127 Davis 1998: 54.
128 Denton / Morris: 3.
129 Bégout: 13.
130 Huxtable.
131 The city of Las Vegas has grown by 85.2 per cent from 1990 (258,295) to 2000 (478,434). Cf. U.S. Census Bureau. The amount of visitors it has attracted has grown by almost the same percentage in the years 1990 (ca. 20 million) to 2000 (ca. 35 million) and ca. by 500 per cent since 1970 (ca. 6 million), cf. Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority.
132 Huxtable.
133 Bégout: 12.

The fact that Las Vegas is located in the desert makes its symbolic status as a postmodern replacement of metaphysical or truth-oriented views of the world all the more obvious. In the Christian tradition, the desert signifies a place of spiritual renewing, an obstacle on the way to the promised land either to be traversed out of necessity (by the Israelites on their way to Palestine after the exodus from Egypt) or as a place of the chosen challenge (by Jesus who is confronted with the devil and his offerings). Instead of being a place of contemplation and meaningful obstacles, the desert city Las Vegas is a place where all contemplative thoughts are drowned in a blinking sea of lights, and where everything is done in order to not present any obstacles to its visitors on their way to mindless entertainment and spending money to keep the cosmic casino going. Instead of presenting a space to be traversed, the fake desert island Las Vegas is a place where people end up – in a colourful neon spiritual desert.

How this spiritual desert and metaphysical desert is presented in contemporary urban fiction shall be the focus of attention in the following chapter, which will first analyse the supposed loss of a meaningful language and the importance of surfaces and simulacra in the postmodern city. In a second step, the precarious position of the human subject in the postmodern will come under scrutiny.

3 Writing Postmodernism

3.1 Reality in Quotation Marks

> It is harder and harder to take things straight. Everything seems to come in quotation marks with its own built-in ironies.
> (Susan Sontag in an interview with Joe David Bellamy)

In a thoughtful essay on quotations and on quotation marks, Marjorie Garber points out that "one of the curious properties of these typographical signifiers [...] in their present condition of use" is that "they may indicate either authenticity or doubt."[134] Much other theoretical discourse on the nature of the world and on the conditions of language or literature which has been published in recent decades does not offer such a balanced view of what quotation marks might mean 'in their present condition.' Postmodern theory clearly tends towards Garber's second point or will accept doubt as the only true meaning of the 'these typographical signifiers.' In fact, quotation marks signifying doubt might be construed as a symbol of postmodern theory's central attitude towards epistemology.

The number of essays on literature which, at one point or another, mention the severed connection between the signifier and the signified is legion. Baudrillard's simulacrum is constantly evoked in discussions of contemporary culture and the world which surrounds us. The ominous word 'reality' is seldom found without quotation marks around it. Severe doubts about the ability of language and of images to represent the world, to refer to something besides signifiers is a commonplace in much literary theory today.

And, as has been argued in the preceding chapter, such a skepticist stance towards language is not necessarily limited to academic circles, where, as Garry Potter suggests,

> [t]he joke (was she joking?) which Gayatri Spivak once made at a conference, that she would neither say what she meant nor mean what she said, was no joke ... at least not to the myriad disciples of Derrida in the literary critical establishment. Meaning, communication, apparently was impossible.[135]

The very same attitude seems to have made its way into the world of the urban middle class as well. In 1989, Kurt Andersen and Paul Rudnick declared that an "Irony Epidemic" had broken out in New York. "Welcome to the wacky, totally awesome, very late-1980s world of heterosexual camp, Camp Lite," they told the readers of *Spy*. "This is the era of the permanent smirk, the knowing

[134] Garber: 8.
[135] Potter: 184.

chuckle, of jokey ambivalence as a way of life."[136] Those affected by the epidemic, Anderson and Rudnick claimed, belonged to a generation that had the "luxury of making fun, of grinning and scoffing, of being ironic," a generation constantly raising "the middle and forefingers of both hands, momentarily forming twitching bunny ears – *air quotes*, the quintessential contemporary gesture that says, *We're not serious*."[137] Language did not seem to be a trusted means of communication any more, and the self did not seem to be in a much better position: "Today's irony-stricken yuppie," Andersen and Rudnick argued, "lives in terror of becoming . . . *anything*." Instead of identifying with a role or embracing a non-fluid self, "everything is a pose, a sitcom riff" and "you're still a kid, just goofing around."[138]

A 'culture of irony', of not taking things seriously and of not speaking in earnest is by no means a completely new phenomenon of the late 20th century, of course. A good example can be found in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854/55). Margaret, the female protagonist, characterises the conversations she has witnessed in London by comparing them to those taking place in a different environment. "She silently took a very decided part in the question they were discussing. At any rate, they talked in desperate earnest – not in the used-up style that wearied her so in the old London parties."[139] In Gaskell's novel, pervasive irony was thought of as belonging to a small and elite subculture. Today, however, not speaking in earnest is much more widely accepted and tied to the deep philosophical skepticism promoted by postmodern theorists. Relativist skepticism is now an attitude not of a few philosophers or of a few dandies – it has turned into a mass phenomenon especially associated with the affluent and educated urban population. "Those who communicate with each other in an earnest manner," Dirk Baecker observes,

> are – in a strange way – subject either to suspicion or to being ridiculed. It is not that one would not believe their sincere attitude. People do believe that someone tries to be sincere. But there is no way around assuming that someone who is intentionally sincere has not understood certain basic things.[140]

Why is this the case? Why should people who try to be sincere not be taken seriously? What have they not understood? They have apparently not grasped one of the ideas central to postmodern theory; the idea that language, it seems, can only ever reach the status of a quote, since language is only defined by language and cannot really represent 'things out there' or 'things in there' (i.e. concepts, emotions, and thoughts). In the words of two theorists amongst countless others who

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136 Anderson / Rudnick: 94.
137 Anderson / Rudnick: 94, original emphasis.
138 Anderson / Rudnick: 97, original emphasis.
139 Gaskell: 193.
140 Baecker: 389 ["Wer ernst miteinander spricht macht sich auf eine eigentümliche Weise entweder verdächtig oder lächerlich. Es ist nicht einmal so, dass der Ernst nicht geglaubt würde. Man glaubt, dass es jemand ernst meint. Aber man kommt nicht umhin, jemandem, der etwas ernst meint, zu unterstellen, bestimmte wesentliche Dinge nicht begriffen zu haben"; translation: ls].

could be quoted here, the contemporary age is seen as a "period of almost universal skepticism about the interrelatedness" of "the worlds of language and of things"[141] – and the present is therefore seen as a time beyond "the moment when the very writing of a book became an unavoidable act of irony – not, that is, an irony that could be developed, used, exploited by the writer but a 'situational' irony that generates e-phemerality [sic] as the condition and ground of persistence."[142]

These thoughts provoke the question of which developments have led to this deep skepticism about language as a medium of information about the world. Two specifically interesting writers who have commented on the nature, the problems, and the possibilities of language are Wilhelm von Humboldt and Benjamin Lee Whorf. They are often neglected yet important precursors of what has been said about language in much postmodern theoretical discourse. Humboldt is a thinker who stresses the influence of language on thoughts and ideas themselves.[143] And the question of whether people can conceive of the world around them independently of the linguistic system they have grown up in is also a central issue in the writings of Whorf, an influential if controversial linguist.[144] In the field of linguistics, and more specifically in the sub-discipline which examines the connections between language and thought, Whorf is best known for his so-called hypothesis of linguistic relativity. I am referring to it here with the qualification 'so-called', because the label 'linguistic relativity', which denotes the differences between languages in describing the world, does not capture the whole scope of Whorf's theses. While linguistic difference is central to his argument, it is also informed by (sometimes stronger, sometimes weaker) claims of linguistic determinism. John Gumperz and S. C. Levinson provide a very useful summary of Whorf's arguments. In their words,

> Given that
> (1) differences exist in linguistic categories across languages;
> (2) linguistic categories determine aspects of individuals' thinking;
> then
> (3) aspects of individuals' thinking differ across linguistic communities according to the language they speak[145]

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141 A. L. Smith: 47.

142 Punter: 76.

143 In "Über Denken und Sprechen," Humboldt for example states: "Kein Denken, auch das reinste nicht, kann anders, als mit Hülfe der allgemeinen Formen unsrer Sinnlichkeit geschehen [...]." He goes on to argue that the "sinnliche Bezeichnung der Einheiten nun, zu welchen gewisse Portionen des Denkens vereinigt werden, um als Teile eines größeren Ganzen, als Objekte dem Subjekte gegenübergestellt zu werden, heißt im weitesten Verstande des Wortes: Sprache" (Humboldt 1796: 3). Cf. also the excellent summary of Humboldt's ideas on language in Di Cesare.

144 For a positive assessment of Whorf's contribution to linguistics, see Lucy 1992a; for a harsh critique of parts of his work and its treatment by others, see Pullum.

145 Gumperz / Levinson: 24. In Whorf's own words: "We dissect nature along the lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds – and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds" (Whorf 1940: 213). Another passage from his essays reads: "Each language performs this artificial chopping up of the continuous spread

Another early 20th century linguist who has been much more influential than Whorf and who has been cited frequently in post-structuralist and postmodern theoretical discourses is Ferdinand de Saussure. In the present context, his notion of the linguistic sign is especially significant. For Saussure's contemporaries Ogden and Richard, the model of the sign took the shape of a triangle that connects three constituents of the sign, i.e. the *referent* (a thing in the real world, something independent of the language system itself), the *thought* or *reference* (a mental representation of the referent), and the *symbol* (the graphemic or phonemic combinations which represent the reference). Saussure's model of the sign takes a different shape. It has only two constitutive elements: the well-known pair of *concept* and *image acoustique*, or, as they are usually referred to in post-structuralist and postmodern writings, *signified* and *signifier*. The former element, the 'concept' or the 'signified' corresponds to Ogden's and Richard's *thought*, the latter to his *symbol*; the *referent*, however, is absent from Saussure's model of the sign, which is partly due to the fact that Saussure sought to study what he called "internal linguistics"[146] and discarded most things external to an ideal language of forms as things that he did not wish to study.[147] Another important aspect of Saussure's view of the sign is his proposition that a sign does not have an intrinsic semantic value, but that it gains its value mainly if viewed in opposition to other elements within the same system, i.e. within the same ideal language.

The notions of language and of texts as they are developed in postmodernist theory might not be directly or solely drawn from Humboldt, Whorf, and / or Saussure, but they can certainly be conceived of as a radicalisation or misreading of what these earlier theorists have suggested. Humboldt's and Whorf's theses about the way different languages create different ways of viewing the world and determine the human mind is taken to an extreme which leaves all the power with language and no power at all with the human mind. While this is a statement highly relevant for theories of the human subject, it is also with regards to language. For denying a human being to be able to step outside of a particular linguistic system, evaluate it from a critical distance, and possibly change it so that it is in better correspondence with ideas or with the world itself means that language is considered as the sole medium which structures our experience of the world. This argument, if taken to the extreme conclusion some postmodern theorists have taken it to, has momentous consequences for both the field of epistemology and the possibility to make any kind

and flow of existence in a different way. […] As we shall see, the patterns of sentence structure that guide words are more important than the words" (Whorf 1941: 253). For Whorf, then, linguistic determination of how we view the world takes place both on the lexical level, and, more fundamentally, on the syntactial level, i.e. according to Whorf not only determines how we categorize the world, but also how we logically combine our categorizations, how we reason in general, is determined by the language we speak.

[146] Saussure: 22.

[147] Saussure: 20-23.

of ontological statement. If it is the case that we conceive of the world only via the medium of language, and if we are denied a critical distance to this system of signification, then what appears to us as real only ever resides in the media we face or in the medium we use.

Like Humboldt's and Whorf's ideas on the connections between language and thought, Saussure's ideas on the sign have also undergone radicalisations in postmodernist theory. In the essay "Signature Event Context" Jacques Derrida, for example, deals with the question of the signifier and the signified in the following way: He first asserts that a referent need not be present when language is used, and certainly, few would argue against the following: "If I say, while looking out the window, 'The sky is blue', the statement will be intelligible […] even if the interlocutor does not see the sky; even if I do not see it myself, if I see it poorly, if I am mistaken, or if I wish to trick my interlocutor."[148] Derrida then goes on, however, to make a more extreme claim. That the presence of the (conventionally agreed on) signified is necessary, he continues to argue, is also highly questionable. And again, he has a point that is hard to reject. The examples he presents – "abracadabra" and "green is or"[149] – might not make any sense, but this does not mean that they are impossible within a linguistic system. Since these examples "do not constitute their context" of securely anchored meanings and significations "in themselves, nothing prevents their functioning in another context,"[150] Derrida suggests. What is more, the phrase "green is or" can without much difficulty be translated into other languages such as French or German, and it might also be argued that it now "signifies an *example of agrammaticality*."[151] With the argument presented here, Derrida is attacking Husserl, claiming that logical and epistemological considerations are less important when it comes to language than the German philosopher thought. To grasp Derrida's understanding of language, it is useful to quote at length a passage in which he makes this point utterly clear. "What interests Husserl in the *Logical Investigations*," Derrida points out,

> is the system of rules in a universal grammar, not from a linguistic point of view, but from a logical and epistemological point of view. In an important note from the second edition, he specifies that from his point of view the issue is indeed one of a purely *logical* grammar, that is, the universal conditions of possibility for a morphology of significations in the relation of knowledge to a possible object, and not a pure grammar in *general*, considered from a psychological or linguistic point of view. Therefore, it is only in a context determined by a will to know, by an epistemic intention, by a conscious relation to the object as an object of knowledge within the horizon of truth – it is in this oriented contextual field that 'green is or' is unacceptable.[152]

What emerges from this quote is that Derrida is not attacking Husserl's argument as such. He is arguing that, besides the 'epistemic intention' in which Husserl is interested, there are other

[148] Derrida 1971: 95.
[149] Derrida 1971: 96.
[150] Derrida 1971: 96.
[151] Derrida 1971: 97, original emphasis.
[152] Derrida 1971: 96, original emphases.

contextual fields in which one could and should also study and perceive language. Therefore, when Derrida then goes on to argue that the fact that everything can be quoted "does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center of absolute anchoring,"[153] Husserl's view of language is not really discredited. In the context of epistemological inquiries, it still has its value, one could claim. In fact, Derrida's argument seems to boil down to little more than an emphasis on what Saussure had said much earlier: the sign is arbitrary in character, i.e. the connection between the signified and the signifier depends on the context and on connections which users have agreed upon.[154] But this is not what Derrida had in mind – or at least it is not what most of his readers have read him as saying. When Derrida speaks of 'presence' and 'absence', he does not stay on the purely linguistic level of Saussure's ideal language (langue). What Derrida is, or is seen as, attacking when he speaks of the absence of 'any centre of absolute anchoring' is the (philosophical) trust in these kinds of anchors of meaning in general and in any context we can conceive of. "The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification indefinitely,"[155] he suggests in another essay – and the way statements such as this are most often read is that they argue in favour of the ultimate fallibility of language when it comes to logical and epistemological discourse, when it comes to inquiries about the world, and when it comes to truth claims.

This, then, is how and why we have arrived at theoretical positions which call into question the referential *and* the signifying powers of language in general; and this is what has influenced theorists whose position Robert G. Dunn sums up in the following way:

> The 'sign' of semiotic theory was clearly delineated under modernity into signifier (image, word), signified (meaning, concept), and referent (reality), corresponding to the three autonomous spheres of culture (aesthetic, theoretical, and moral-practical). With the collapse of these spheres, the structure of the sign itself collapsed, reducing the mode of signification to the signifier, abolishing both signified and referent in a world of freely circulating and self-referential signs and images.[156]

The distinction between fiction and factual writing has not been touched so far, but to ponder upon it at this point will be instructive of how some postmodern theorists have conceptualised the role of language as regards epistemological questions. In "Autobiography as De-facement," Paul de Man deals with "assumptions about autobiographical discourse" and identifies them as "highly problematic."[157] One of the central assumptions he attacks in his essay is that language allows an individual to truthfully represent himself in a text. De Man does so, amongst other things, by

[153] Derrida 1971: 97.
[154] See Saussure: 67-69.
[155] Derrida 1966: 110.
[156] Dunn 2000: 125-26.
[157] de Man 1979b: 919.

putting under scrutiny Wordsworth's *Essays upon Epitaphs*. He quotes from this text at length – and the passage is worthy of being repeated here. Wordsworth writes:

> Words are too awful an instrument for good and evil to be trifled with: they hold above all other external powers a dominion over thoughts. If words be not […] an incarnation of the thought but only a clothing for it, then surely they will prove an ill gift; such a one as those poisoned vestments read of in the stories of superstitious times, which has power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on. Language, if it do [sic] not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation and the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit […].[158]

In de Man's reading, in this passage Wordsworth is hoping for a kind of language that would not be figurative, a language with the power to denote as opposed to 'clothing' a thought in connotations. But Wordsworth's argument itself, de Man notes, is built with metaphors – the 'incarnation of the thought' and 'a clothing for it'. What this passage unwillingly shows, one could then argue, is that all language is "figure (or metaphor or prosopopoeia)," that it is "indeed not the thing itself but the representation, the picture of the thing"[159]. And if these pictures or clothes available to us do 'alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on,' can we escape de Man's argument about the unclear character of the "distinction between autobiography and fiction," between the imaginary and the true expression of the self? "We assume that life *produces* the autobiography as an act produces its consequences," de Man challenges traditional notions of expressing oneself via language,

> but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium?[160]

This, of course means trouble for the idea of a sovereign individual if it is true. But in the present context, the focus shall lie on the difficult distinction between fiction and factual or referential writing. What de Man argues for in this area is that we have to seriously question this distinction.

For many contemporary postmodern theorists, however, not only language prefigures how we experience the world. As Alan Bilton has it, "[i]n essence, we have all been here before. Contemporary life seems ringed by quotation marks, and for that reason, impossible to take seriously."[161] The line between the artificial and the real is, according to radical postmodernist theories, blurred and dissolves into a virtuality where differences between the referent and the signified are erased, where all that is left are deferred signifiers. What is the difference between a piece of art and real life? How does your life differ from the movie you saw in the theatre yesterday or the TV show you are watching on television at the moment? What is the difference between the

[158] Wordsworth: 154, as quoted in de Man 1979b: 929.
[159] de Man 1979b; 930.
[160] de Man 1979b: 920, original emphases.
[161] Bilton: 2

news and an entertainment format on the radio? In the end, some postmodernist theorists would claim, there is no difference between all of these things. Many of them would draw on the writings on Jean Baudrillard, who has argued that images or copies, which he calls simulacra, are becoming more and more dominant to a point where these simulacra are accepted as the 'real' environment, a point where there are no connections to originals any more, to a point where new images are produced by reverting to other images and not to a 'real' world.[162] In the words of Douglas Kellner, Baudrillard's "recurrent theme is the destruction and disappearance of the real in the realm of information and simulacra, and the subsequent reign of illusion and appearance."[163] Michael Dear applies this theory to the urban environment. In his study *The Postmodern Urban Condition*, he argues that in today's cities it "is no longer possible to recognize the boundary between the screen and the street, between cinematic fantasy and the creation of the urban. Representations of cities are becoming cities. Life is becoming a virtual reality."[164] What Dear means by this statement can be clarified by examining the term 'virtuality'. The relationship of a virtual space to reality, for the advocates of the postmodern condition, is to be sharply distinguished from the relationship of a fictional space to reality. Elena Esposito argues that virtuality confronts people with a "reality of fiction" in contrast to a "fictional reality."[165] This means that according to Esposito conventional views of truth and reality have to be radically reconsidered. If fiction is perceived as reality, the distinction between the imagined and the real, which is central to the meaning of the term 'fiction', will be blurred or destroyed.

Noise: The Superficial World of Toronto

> 'Another Martini, James?' said Carmen.
> 'No, thanks, Carmen, I actually hate martinis. I don't know why I ordered it.'
> 'Because it looks so pretty.'
> 'I guess so.' (N: 230)

Seen in the context of this theoretical pre-text, the city of Toronto as it is depicted in *Noise* would almost appear to be a realist one. It is a place, however, where surfaces play a dominant role, and where it is often stressed that there is not much beneath them. Russell Smith describes an urban environment of young people preoccupied with images and looks. Over and over again, the

[162] cf. Baudrillard 1988.
[163] Kellner 2005. While Baudrillard is most often understood this way, other theorists do not agree with the summary of Baudrillard's position provided by Kellner. David Johnson, e.g., claims that to portray "Baudrillard's work […] as an all-out attack on the reality principle" constitutes a "caricature of Baudrillard" (David Johnson: no page). Johnson claims that Baudrillard is trying to "dismantle the reality principle," but that he does so "only in part, in order to introduce an order of reality in which the ecstatic or seductive phenomena are truly 'real'."
[164] Dear: 206.
[165] Esposito: 287 ["Realität der Fiktion"; "fiktionale Realität", translation: ls]

characters of *Noise* demonstrate that the surface is more important to them than practical considerations. The quote preceding this section is but one example of many but is very telling. Things are done because of looks and not because of other reasons. In one typical episode James Willing, the novel's first person narrator observes "two punks with mohawks" in a *Swiss Chalet* discussing the large posters depicting Swiss landscapes on the interior walls of the restaurant:

> 'I don't get Switzerland,' said the first punk, as slowly as if in a dream. 'I mean it's never really turned me on, you know?'
> 'Yeah. It's not sexy. Fuck Switzerland.'
> 'Fucking Swiss bastards. Fuck 'em.' (N: 207)

In this dialogue, the country of Switzerland is judged solely by its representation on posters and in its use in the media. The real country and its people are of no importance. It is the superficial depiction that matters. In addition, this superficial depiction is judged via an aesthetics of appearance and style that lacks grounding in a system of values other than a very personal, arbitrary, and intuitive appeal. The signifier (i.e. the poster), one could say, seems to truly be severed from the signified and the referent.

While it could be argued that Switzerland is so distant to Canadians that perceiving it in terms of two-dimensional poster images is possibly to be expected, another region, which is much closer to Canadians, is shown to be mainly thought of in terms of style by the American media. James is asked to write an article about the Canadian writer Ludwig Boben for the American magazine *Glitter*. His Canadian contact explains to him that Boben has become interesting in the States because the North has been creating excitement there. It has not aroused attention because people think of the North as a fascinatingly complex region, however, but because the North is reduced to a style that is in vogue. His contact's American counterpart "'has a lead on this Paris designer who's doing Arctic fashions now. Like based on Inuit designs'" (N: 81). The disinterest of the fashion and style industry in the real North and in the issues at stake there is illustrated in the American editor's use of the word "Eskimo" instead of "Inuit" (N: 81) and by her evident ignorance towards basic issues such as national territories and boundaries in the North. In a phone-conversation with James later on, she tells him that her magazine has cut all references to Canada from the article he wrote because her readers are "'going to be interested in everything that's Alaska and stuff, but if you keep reminding them that that means *Canada*, then they might be a little frightened off'" (N: 226, original emphasis).

This ignorance towards issues going beneath superficial appearances is also plain in the fashionable restaurants James visits in his job as a food critic. One of these restaurants is described in some detail. It features a "deconstructed wall" with "plasterwork just ending twenty feet above them,

giving way to girders and cables and cinderblocks," a "huge rusted girder that just stopped half way across the room, in imitation of a bridge blasted by a retreating army." As James sees it, the "whole room bore these carefully constructed signs of devastation, as if bravely continuing operation after an earthquake or nuclear attack" (N: 109). Mixed with the design of this wall is "a sort of Renaissance-Baroque classicism, with Ionian columns painted gold stretching up to the hangar-like ceiling" and "heavy red curtains suspended between them" on the other side of the room, while artwork on a third wall presents post-structuralist slogans such as "'DON'T BELIEVE WHAT I TELL YOU'" or "'I AM NOT A FREE AGENT'" (N: 109). In addition, the restaurant guests are exposed to "cleverly ironic" and "highly orchestrated pop from the sixties" (N: 105) and a "legion of genetically engineered Alpha Babes" (N: 107) waiting the tables. While the restaurant could therefore be thought of as a multi-media art exhibit that would entice the public to think about and to discuss a wide range of issues, the restaurant guests display no tendency to do so. They might be entertained by interesting and fashionable surfaces but they go no further. Instead, they – young hippies, a "TV mogul, [...] various cosmetic surgeons and sports commentators" (N: 116) – discuss telephone contracts on their cell phones (N: 105), order "eight dollar martinis" (N: 107), and engage in "frenzied hand-waving and finger-snapping" (N: 116) in order to get food.

As for his immediate surroundings, James Willing also moves within a world dominated by outer appearances. The apartment he moves to, for example, features a kitchen chair that is "not a real chair" (N: 89) but a piece of decoration. The fact that it is highly uncomfortable seems to be of no significance. Pragmatic and functional considerations give way to questions of style and looks. The same is true for his roommate De Courcy's collection of wines. He keeps six bottles in his desk drawers: "'Red on the right, white on the left, champagne and rosé in the top middle'" (N: 48). While a colour coordinated storage of wine bottles in drawers, hidden from view to everyone but those who open the drawers, already suggests a considerable obsession with looks and aesthetics not only on the visible surface but in every aspect of life, De Courcy emphasises the dominant significance of style in his life when he admits to James: "actually I *detest* rosé" (N: 48, original emphasis). The reason he keeps rosé wine is not to have it available for guests who might enjoy it, but because "it just makes a nice aesthetic bridge" (N: 48). Again, pragmatic questions of functionality are put aside and overruled by aesthetic concerns.

Is James' life equally governed by looks and appearances as the urban world surrounding him? An episode that depicts events surrounding the tearing down of his apartment building at first suggests that it might not be. He is critical of the looks of his former landlord, who is wearing "dark glasses [...], shiny leather shoes," and a "black mock turtleneck" under his jacket in spite of the heat (N:

76). The new landlord's car, a "bubbly yellow jeep, squashed high and short and perky like a toy helicopter," also meets his disapproval. Judging this car as "some sort of urban adventure vehicle designed exclusively for carrying Mozart-listening babies to and from farmers' markets" (N: 77), James seems to apply questions of functionality in his verdicts on outer appearances. Later, however, he reveals himself to contrast only one non-justifiable surface-centred opinion, that of others, with his own. The new landlord is wearing "another linen suit and canvas espadrilles that made James, inexplicably, want to vomit on them" (N: 77), not because he thinks that her shoes are uncomfortable, inconvenient, or non-functional but, as he tells her explicitly, because they are out of style: "'Do you know how ridiculous you look in those frumpy shoes? Do you know how dated you look? Do you?'" (N: 78). Even considering James' irritation at the destruction of his building, this statement is a clear indication of the high importance of looks and style in his life. The very fact that James turns to aesthetic issues and not to other concerns to vent his anger is symptomatic of his focus on surfaces and on questions of style.

The importance of looks in James' life is also made evident on his return to the family home in New Munich. Arriving at the house, his mother asks him to take off his shoes, as the whole family traditionally does. James refuses, claiming that it is important for him to wear them because: "'You see, Mom, the problem is that I plan my outfit,'" and that his shoes, he tells her, "'are part of my outfit'" (N: 160). In this episode, a claim against functionality cannot be as easily held up since James does not wear any socks and might feel cold if he takes off his shoes. On the other hand, it would certainly be no problem for him to ask for socks. This would, however, ruin his planned outfit. Functionality aside, though, James is obviously valuing his looks higher than the family tradition, which does serve as an indicator of his preoccupation with surfaces.

Look At Me: The Inauthenticity of Charlotte Swenson's New York

While the novel *Noise* deals with the theoretical notions introduced above in a rather subtle way, Jennifer Egan's 2001 novel *Look at Me* is more explicit in this regard. The question of authenticity is one of its central themes and is most prominent in the narrative strand which deals with the novel's first person narrator Charlotte Swenson. Since her personal development will be taken up in a more detailed analysis below, it shall here suffice to say that, as the novel progresses, Charlotte seems to move ever more into a state of inauthenticity. When we meet her at the beginning of the book, she is a professional model who has just been involved in a terrible car crash. Subsequently, she has to undergo plastic surgery and her face is almost completely reconstructed, making the mask she has to wear in her professional life a material part of her body. She then gets involved in

a media project, which culminates in her life being monitored around the clock and broadcast around the globe on the internet. What shall interest me here is the idea of fabricated or fake authenticity which emerges as the fundamental philosophy in the background of this media project.

What is remarkable about the media project Charlotte becomes involved in is that it caters to an audience which is, apparently, craving authenticity and non-fabricated, non-artificial stories and people. As Charlotte asks her agent Oscar whether business is good, the latter explains that it is "'[s]trange'" as the:

> 'mania for real people is becoming a full-fledged pain in the ass.' […] A few weeks ago, he told me, a booker at Elite had spotted a beautiful, starving Hutu refugee in *Time*. Somehow, through Doctors Without Borders, this booker managed to track the refugee down and fly her and her eight children to New York, where 'Hutu,' as she was known (her name having been deemed unpronounceable) promptly shot covers for *Marie Claire* and Italian *Vogue* and garnered an avalanche of publicity for [the fashion model agency] Elite. Not to be outdone, Laura, the CEO of *Femme*, noticed a beautiful North Korean girl in a story about famine. (LAM: 36, original emphases)

So now Oscar has the North Korean woman as a boarder at his New York apartment, and Charlotte soon gets invited to take part in a *reality* project as well. Oscar informs her that the *New York Post* would like to run an article on her, adding that this might be her chance to turn around her dwindling career, which, since an accident she was in involved in, seems to have come to an end altogether. "[Y]ou'll be a Real Person, a person in the news" (LAM: 72), Oscar tells Charlotte – and while one could argue that newspaper articles *do* in general portray real people and real events, the fact that the words 'real' and 'person' are capitalized here already indicates that what the newspaper and Oscar are really interested in is not an authentic representation of the real Charlotte but a fabricated, commodified, and mediated version of her which will sell. "'The beast must be fed […]. We both know that.'" (LAM: 152), Oscar says to Charlotte. And what it is fed with, in Oscar's and Charlotte's eyes, is not what is really happening or really the case but something that is fabricated in such a way as to appear real to the audience.

This becomes more evident when Charlotte gets involved with an internet start-up company another character, Thomas Keene, is trying to establish in a profitable corner of the world wide web. When Charlotte first meets Thomas, he explains his business idea to her in the following way:

> 'It's not a magazine – it's a database […] What I'm doing is, I'm optioning the rights to people's stories, just ordinary Americans: an autoworker, a farmer, a deep-sea diver, a mother of six, a corrections officer, a pool shark … Each one of these folks will have their own home page – we call it a PersonalSpace™ – devoted exclusively to their lives, internal and external. (LAM: 198)

Thomas Keene hopes for enough subscribers to generate money from this part of the project, called Ordinary People, but he envisions Charlotte as part of "an offshoot of Ordinary People […]: 'Extraordinary People,' meaning people who were undergoing unusual experiences" (LAM: 201). For both the ordinary and the extraordinary people he is planning to create web sites for, Keene stresses that "authenticity is everything here" and tells Charlotte that he would like to portray "people in their natural environments, doing exactly what they would normally do" (LAM: 200). When Charlotte objects that it all "sounds like watching paint dry" to her and that, in her opinion, not many people at all are "going to give a damn about some fisherman's dreams and family history" (LAM: 200), Thomas Keene explains why he thinks that the opposite is the case. "Most of us are desperate for raw experience," he tells her.

> We work in offices, dealing with intangibles; we go to lunch and talk to other people surrounded by intangibles. No one actually *makes* anything anymore, and our so-called experiences are about climbing Mount Kilimanjaro on our two-week vacations or snapping a picture of the Dalai Lama in Central Park. But we're so powerfully aware of all the stuff we're missing. […] TV tries to satisfy that, books, movies – they try, but they're all so lame – so mediated! They're just not *real* enough. (LAM: 200, original emphasis)

Charlotte and the readers soon realize, however, that what Thomas Keene has in mind when he stresses authenticity and reality so much is a highly mediated, fabricated authenticity. Charlotte decides to hire a ghostwriter – Irene – whom she gives interviews so she can write a first person narrative about Charlotte's experiences. When Charlotte sees the product of this writer's toils, she is surprised. "I was staring at the chunk of pages," she tells the reader. "There must have been a hundred of them – more! I tried to connect this wedge of paper to the sparse notes I'd seen Irene taking in my apartment; one small notebook, and it wasn't even full. I'd urged her to embellish, true. But the number of pages confounded me" (LAM: 253). But not the quantity of words her ghost writer has written is the most important thing here – they only hint at the fact that Charlotte's experiences are, in their textual representation, made to follow an aesthetic of what might be accepted as authentic and of what will at the same time attract and fascinate an audience of reality-craving internet users. Over and over again, Thomas Keene may repeat phrases such as, "'Remember, authenticity is the beginning and the end of this product'" (LAM: 255), or, "'irony we don't want – there's too much of it out there! We just want the story without the built-in commentary'" (LAM: 257). In the end, his requests are guided not by an *ethics* but by an *aesthetics* of authenticity, and by how large an audience will be attracted because of this aesthetics. It is geared towards the market he wants to satisfy and take a hold in. "'A few pointers," he tells Charlotte's ghostwriter, advising her how to render Charlotte's accident. "Number one: Drama. Excitement. I want fireballs rolling through the cornstalks. Lots of bright, rich color – find the beauty in it. Write it as one long narrative, and we'll use what we need'" (LAM: 255). For the prevalence of aesthetics and business over ethics, it is more than telling that, during the conversation these quotes

are taken from, Charlotte is present as well but Thomas Keene only looks at and talks to her writer. The person itself and what exactly happened to her is not important to him. And is this not where you should actually start if you were trying to be authentic? Much later, when Charlotte is back in Rockford with Irene and Thomas Keene to produce a filmic version of the accident, Thomas approaches Irene with the request to "'write the farmer'" whose field they are going to make the car crash in "'into the script'." To Charlotte's

> stupefaction, Irene said mildly, 'Sure, I'll write him in.'
> 'Whoawhoa,' I said, wheeling around to look at her. 'Explain how a farmer fits into my accident?'
> 'He can call an ambulance.'
> 'Perfect,' Thomas said. 'That's nice. And it doesn't take anything away from the authenticity.'
> 'Except it didn't happen,' I said.
> 'Well, it could have,' Irene said. 'You don't know who called the ambulance.'
> 'I know it wasn't a farmer!' I said, but I didn't want to argue with Irene. (LAM: 373).

To be sure, a realist aesthetics is maintained in the above example. But the documentary ethics Thomas claims to want to follow is chucked out of the window. Authenticity is, in the end, a highly mediated Charlotte Swenson who appears on the screens of internet users, being shoved into a form(at) which makes her appear to be real.

Another telling example for the constructedness of Charlotte's online life is Irene's and Thomas's reserved reaction to Charlotte's suggestion that a homeless person she knows become part of the Ordinary People network. The following dialogue shows just how much Thomas's and Irene's reactions are tainted by their desire to cater to the market, by media formats, and by an aesthetics of fabricated authenticity – and how Charlotte is bypassed in the construction of her online life. Charlotte's suggestion makes Thomas say,

> 'Well, there are two ways we could go with something like this. The easiest is to introduce him as part of your daily life and see if people take to him. If they do, we consider setting him up on his own as a kind of spinoff.'
> 'I'm not sure I see a homeless man being part of Charlotte's daily life,' Irene told Thomas.
> 'Oh, but he really is,' I said, thinking she'd misunderstood. 'I mean, not a huge part. A small part.'
> 'No, but Irene has a point, though,' Thomas said. 'It may be kind of a stretch.'" (LAM: 262).

What is more, as the narrative progresses, the novel *Look at Me* as such more and more resembles a television programme Charlotte watches early on in the narrative: "*The Making of the Making of*, a documentary about how documentaries were made about the making of Hollywood features" (LAM: 78, original emphasis). It does, in other words, involve an increasing number of meta-fictional elements as it approaches its end. Egan's text starts as a straightforward first person narrative, related in the past tense, but creating the impression of a narrative taking place in one, authentically depicted narrated present. Slowly, however, the narrative levels and perspectives multiply. Readers will not be much distracted by the first additional narrative level, as it is a

conventional one often employed in novels. The first person narrator soon starts to reminisce about her past and taking readers along. This is not in the least surprising since she is spending the time after her accident in the city where she has grown up, is meeting people she has strong memories of, and, since she has to recover from the accident, she has ample time to think back to her past. Not far into the novel, however, in chapter three (LAM: 43), another narrative level is introduced. This time, it is accompanied by a different narrative perspective as well, a third person narrative focusing on people in Charlotte's hometown Rockford, Ill.: Charlotte's old friend Ellen, Ellen's brother Moose, Ellen's teenage daughter, who is also named Charlotte, and others. This narrative voice is neither omniscient nor is it narrowed to one character's perspective. It does give some special attention to the teenage Charlotte but also switches from one character to another. What is important in the present context is that the first time this third person narrative voice appears, it is clearly delimited from Charlotte Swenson's first person narrative. It is the sole narrative voice in the third chapter (LAM: 43-63), and since we are provided with detailed information about Moose's recent past – a period Charlotte Swenson has admitted to knowing next to nothing about (cf. LAM: 27), we can deduce that what we read is not Charlotte herself telling us about her friends and acquaintances in Rockford. Chapter four then belongs to Charlotte Swenson's first person narrative again, and the Rockford third person narrator relates chapters five and six. This neat separation of narrative voices via chapters and locations is kept up in the novel until past the middle of the book.

Then, however, in chapter twelve, the third person narrative for the first time focuses on New York and on Irene, Charlotte Swenson's ghostwriter in the ExtraOrdinary internet project. Sitting down at her computer, Irene is beginning to write.

> I, she typed. Then consulted her notebook, letting the memory of Charlotte's voice soak her mind until, with a ventriloquism that still amazed Irene, words tumbled from her in a voice that wasn't her own or Charlotte's but a hybrid, an unholy creature, that was Irene's creation, too, fed by the cheap detective novels she still gulped down when she had time. She could hardly type fast enough. (LAM: 243-244, original font change)

What happens then, on the level of the narrative perspective of the novel, is at once fascinating and perplexing. We read a short paragraph which is clearly separated from the rest of the text in that it is both printed in a different font, Courier New, and set in bold print, signalling that this passage is not part of the main narrative of the novel but Irene's (first person) depiction of events in Charlotte's recent past. There then still seem to be clear boundaries between one narrative level and another, between one narrative voice and another. Significantly, however, after the short first person narrative written by Irene, the narrative perspective directly switches to Charlotte's regular first person voice within one and the same chapter. While the different font signals the change of

narrative voice and its separation from Charlotte's own first person narrative, the fact that various voices appear within one chapter is a first move towards the breaking down of these boundaries. The same goes for the content of what Irene is writing. Her imitation of Charlotte's voice, which now appears on a more or less regular basis throughout the rest of the novel, does not relate information readers already know. It gives them vital information about the time period in Charlotte's life which led up to her accident. The two first person narratives, thus, are still graphically separated, but for readers attempting to piece together, (re)construct, and imagine Charlotte's life, the two voices are merging into one. In a further step in the merging of narrative perspectives and voices, this process that is first taking place in the reader's mind is also intruding into Charlotte's. Driving to Rockford with Irene in order to recreate the accident on film, her ghostwriter asks her how it feels to again be on the same road that led to the accident. Charlotte considers

> the question. How did it *feel*? But almost immediately, the breathless narrator who had taken up a pampered existence in one lobe of my brain (red curtains, ostrich feather slippers) began piping in her own treacly reply: **It had been nearly a year since the devastating event, and oh, the pain Charlotte felt on returning to the scene, the anguish of seeing those same fields scarred by terrible memories . . .** and as she spewed this dreck, tilting her face for the overhead camera, I felt not just unable to speak, but unable to feel. 'Like nothing,' I said. 'I could be absolutely anywhere.' (LAM: 315-316, original font change and emphasis).

To be sure, the two voices are still separated here, not only via the font but also because Irene's imitation of Charlotte's voice remains in the third person as it enters Charlotte's mind. But still, coupled with the explicit discussions of authenticity above, the shifts from one narrative perspective to another, their almost-merging, the texts within the text create an atmosphere of unreliability and of possible inauthenticity. Evolving subtly but with much force, these meta-fictional elements also typically partly function as an emphasis of the fact that the text the readers are holding in their hands is fabricated.

Glamorama: Fiction or Reality?

In similar ways, yet even more forcefully, multiple narrative voices and levels lead the reader into a state of confusion about what is real and what is not in Bret Easton Ellis's novel *Glamorama*. As a German reviewer of the book sees it, the text depicts a "colourful multimedia world in which the distinction between reality and fiction has been lost long ago, and for good."[166] How is this loss of a distinction between reality and fiction realized in *Glamorama*? As the narrative progresses, it is less and less clear to the readers and to Victor Ward, the novel's first person narrator, whether what is

[166] Pfohlmann ["kunterbunte[ ] Multimediawelt, in der die Unterscheidung von Realität und Fiktion längst abhanden gekommen ist, und zwar unwiederbringlich", translation: ls].

happening is part of a movie that is being shot, whether things are happening outside of a film script, or whether it might generally not be possible any more to make such a distinction.

To shed some light on how this confusion is created in *Glamorama*, it is helpful to turn to Ellis's earlier novel *American Psycho* (1991). Its main character, Patrick Bateman, reveals that he often understands what he experiences in terms of a film being screened in a movie theatre, as the following example may illustrate. Bateman has spent the evening with a woman, and

> though it has been in no way a romantic evening, she embraces me and this time emanates a warmth I'm not familiar with. I am so used to imagining everything happening the way it occurs in movies, visualizing things falling somehow into the shape of events on a screen, that I almost hear the swelling of an orchestra, can almost hallucinate the camera panning low around us, fireworks bursting in slow motion overhead, the seventy-millimeter image of her lips parting and the subsequent murmur of 'I want you' in Dolby sound.[167]

What is significant about this description is that it demonstrates a discernable distinction between reality and its fictional representation in movies. Patrick Bateman does not actually experience "the swelling of an orchestra" or "the camera panning low around" him and his partner. He only "almost" does so. He is conscious of the fact that he comes close to seeing something real in terms of something else. Accordingly, "at first distantly and then with greater clarity," Bateman describes himself as becoming aware of "some kind of reality."[168]

In *Glamorama*, cameras are present in Victor Ward's environment from the beginning. At first, though, there still is a clear distinction between the actual world and its representation via the medium of film. As Victor and his crew are busy with last-minute preparations for the opening of a club, a reporter from a magazine accompanies them. "Assignment: follow me [Victor] around for a week. Headline: THE MAKING OF A CLUB. [...] Behind her, some guy wearing a Velcro vest over a rugby shirt and a leather windjammer follows us, camcording the scene" (G: 6, original emphasis). In this passage, actual events are recorded for presenting them via the medium of film and nothing throughout the first pages of *Glamorama* seems to suggest that Victor is mistaking reality for film or seeing it in terms of it.

However, towards the end of the first part of *Glamorama*, this distinction between reality and filmic representation begins to falter. As David Punter correctly claims, one early "emblematic moment"[169] of how the lines between the mediated and the real are blurred in Ellis's novel can be found in chapter 6 of the novel's first part. Victor is in a "bleak 24-hour diner" and people there

[167] Ellis 1991: 265.
[168] Ellis 1991: 265..
[169] Punter: 68.

engage in the quotidian things people usually do in a diner. They drink coffee and talk to each other. But then strange things are beginning to happen without being met with the surprise they would seem to deserve by the first person narrator. Confetti, for example, is somehow and for some non-explained reason continuously spread across the interior of the coffee shop. Victor "keep[s] blowing" it off his table, but has to cope with the fact that, "whenever I'm not paying attention it reappears" (G: 167). Just as strange as the confetti, and just as nonchalantly accepted by Victor in this passage is how the narrative reality seems to glide from his actual experiences, from his empirical life into a movie that is being shot. At the beginning of the chapter, which only comprises one and a half pages, cameras and a film team are already present in the background, but they are depicted as not being directly and actively involved in what is happening to Victor. "[B]ehind me something's being filmed, a camera crew's setting up lights," (G: 167) the first person narrator observes. Like the documentary film team which has followed Victor around before, like the "coke" he is now drinking and the magazine he is reading, the camera crew and its tools are external to Victor's life. Or so it seems. For the first person narrative soon starts to partly involve a vocabulary and expressions typically used in describing a filmic narrative. Film is starting to intrude into Victor's life. As he thinks back to a visit to his apartment, for example, he remembers seeing "someone in the *cast* I hadn't met yet" in a car on the street. Back in the present and in the diner, the distinction between a movie shot and Victor's life is at first re-established as Victor looks "at the set designer and continuity girl who stare back." Again, there is no indication that they are directly involved in what is happening to Victor. A reader will, for now, most likely assume, that these two people are part of the film team which is present in the background "filming something" – and what follows, a dialogue between Victor and the waiter Bailey, does not give rise to any other interpretations of the scene. Until, that is, towards the end of the chapter, the film vocabulary starts to be ever more present in Victor's first person narrative as "*the director*" suddenly and strangely "leans in to me and warns, 'You're not looking worried enough,'" – a comment Victor describes as his "*cue* to leave" the diner. The film team has now moved from the background of what is happening into the foreground, from being exterior to the narrative to being a constitutive part of it. "Outside, more light, some of it artificial, opens up the city," Victor continues,

> and the side-walks on 14th Street are empty, devoid of *extras*, and above the sounds of faraway jackhammers I can hear someone singing 'The Sunny Side of the Street' softly to himself and when I feel someone touch my shoulder I turn around but no one's there. […] 'Disarm' by the Smashing Pumpkins starts playing on the *sound track* and the music *overlaps* a *shot of the club* I was going to open in TriBeCa and I *walk into that frame*, not noticing the black limousine parked across the street, four buildings down, that *the cameraman pans to*. (G: 167-68, emphases: ls)

What is happening to the narrative in this passage, as movie jargon intrudes into Victor's first person account of his walk in Manhattan early in the morning? What has seemed like an authentic

if confused account of Victor's life so far seems to now be on the verge of becoming something else – an account of Victor relating what is happening in a movie he plays a part in.

As David Punter states, the rest of the novel from this moment on, is characterized by "a constant sliding between worlds, between a sense of the real and a sense of the filmic; of being an actor in another script, of the *virtual*."[170] Throughout the rest of the narrative, the lines between reality and a mediated, scripted version of it remain more or less blurred. For example, after the character Chloe terminates her relationship with Victor, he has a nervous breakdown, imagining her in a drug related mental crisis. As he wonders whether he should return to her apartment, "crew members" appear on the scene, "struggling to hold me back" and Victor is "crying out 'No but why but why this wasn't in the script'" (G: 178-79). In contrast to Patrick Bateman's experiences in *American Psycho*, Victor seems to have moved into a state of experience that knows no distinction between fiction, performance, and real life any more. In his time of personal crisis, he seems to have started to experience things not *in terms* of but *as* a film, slipping deeper and deeper into a virtual reality.

For readers, this confusion remains a part of the narrative until the end. There are episodes which suggest that Victor is imagining being filmed, such as a London club scene in which he is asked by an acquaintance where he is staying. He replies that he is "really not sure where we are," adding that it is "just a set anyway" (G: 278). Does this imply that he imagines his surroundings to be a movie set? Later, he asks another person whether their conversation is part of a film, "scanning the room, looking for signs of a camera, some hidden evidence that a film crew was here earlier or is right now" (G: 373). The addressee, however, seems to have no idea what Victor is talking about.

Some scenes seem to leave no doubt whatsoever about the fact that a movie is being shot. As the character Bobby talks to Victor, a "director" intervenes, asking for a part of the conversation to be performed again:

> Bobby looks into my eyes. 'I really appreciate this, Victor.'
> 'No, man, I'm honored.'
> 'Can we do this again?' the director asks. 'Victor – put an emphasis on *I'm*. Okay, go ahead – we're still rolling.'
> Bobby looks into my eyes. 'I really appreciate this, Victor,' he says with even more feeling.
> 'No, man, *I'm* honored.' (G: 274, original emphases)

Two interpretations, then, are possible. The first is that Victor has turned into such a confused person that he is imagining and making up what is going on around him, even other people. The second would be that this confusion is generated deliberately by a narrative authority other than

[170] Punter: 68, original emphasis.

the first person narrator Victor, thereby intending to make a point about the confusing and constructed nature of reality.[171] Victor Ward, it seems, finds himself in a Baudrillardian world in which "we will never in the future be able to separate reality from its statistical, simulative projection in the media, a state of suspense and of definitive uncertainty about reality."[172]

A similar undecidability characterizes the fashions which go rapidly in and out of style in the New York of *Glamorama*. In the arbitrariness of a postmodern urban world of surfaces lacking foundations, all questions of style are decided on completely non-rational and non-justifiable, obscure grounds. Consider the following conversation between Victor and JD about the general question of 'in' and 'out,' which was sparked by the question of whether or not there should be a magician doing card tricks at the opening night of the club that is to be opened:

> 'I mean,' JD continues, 'I think it's comparatively in.'
> 'But in is out,' I explain [...].
> 'What are you saying, Victor?'
> 'Out is in. Got it?'
> 'In is . . . *not* in anymore?' JD asks. 'Is that it?'
> I glance at him as we descend the next flight of stairs. 'No, in is out. Out is in. Simple, non?' (G: 15)

While Victor utters these tautological declarations, the two literally and metaphorically move "farther down into the darkness" (G: 15). It is the literal darkness of the club basement and the metaphorical darkness of undecidability and elusiveness. Victor's employee JD identifies the problems of his boss's circular and purely formal statements. He makes a final move of intervention: "'But then what exactly is *in*?' JD asks." Victor responds by simply repeating his original assertion ("'*Out* is, JD'") and finally declares that, if JD needs "specifics" – or content instead of mere form – he might be "'in the wrong world'" (G: 15, original emphases). The wrong world: a world in which assertions are not merely tautological and void of content; a world in which a signifier ('in') can still be connected to a thought, a concept, or a referent, and is not constantly deferred. The right world, the New York of *Glamorama*, part I: a world that relies on purely intuitive and inexplicable personal tastes that cannot be pinned down and that circulate in nonsensical loops.

The Savage Girl: A Jamesonian World of Surfaces

Postmodernism is, apart from skepticist theories about language and epistemology, sometimes also thought of as a historical period brought about by decisive changes in the economic systems of the

[171] There are strong similarities to *Crying of Lot 49* here. As Ickstadt states about Pynchon's novel: "Die scheinbar unmittelbar zugängliche Welt der Alltagserfahrungen ist durchsetzt mit wuchernden Strukturen korporativer und medialer Vernetzung, *von denen allerdings nicht deutlich ist, ob Oedipa sie vorfindet oder erfindet*" (Ickstadt 1998a: 304, emphasis added)
[172] Baudrillard 1985: 210.

industrialized world. The theorist most often connected to this latter stance is Fredric Jameson. While Jameson has many things to say about postmodernism (and views it quite critically), only some of his central theses shall be introduced here. For Jameson, postmodernism can be seen as the sensibility or zeitgeist that accompanies the present state of the global economy. As he has it, there are "three fundamental moments in capitalism," namely "market capitalism, the monopoly stage or the stage of imperialism, and our own, wrongly called postindustrial, but what might better be termed multinational, capital."[173] These three stages of economic development, in Jameson's opinion, go along with three stages of "cultural periodization": "realism, modernism, postmodernism."[174] In the late capitalist or postmodernist present, according to Jameson, there is a tendency for everything to be commodified. This all-encompassing commodification of the world is, in turn, accompanied by two main notions. Firstly, the notion of an economy without a centre, in which "the advanced capitalist countries today are now a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm,"[175] which might be said to resemble "the circuits and networks of some putative global computer hookup," a "network of power and control […] difficult for our mind to grasp."[176] And secondly, a kind of Baudrillardian and Derridean notion of language, of the media, and of cultural production which, mainly due to the changes in the economy just described, are all characterized by "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" which is, for Jameson, "perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms."[177] What is more, as everything is in the process of being commodified, the media and cultural production themselves turn into commodities and are consumed for consumption's sake instead of functioning as containers of information or of the production of (oppositional) meanings or utopias.

The urban world introduced in Alex Shakar's novel *The Savage Girl* in many ways closely resembles Jameson's vision of the postmodern present. The text describes the world of the trendspotter company located in "Middle City" through the eyes of the central character Ursula van Urden:

> There's something off balance here, and that certain something – she's almost prepared to admit it – may very well be irony. Excessive amounts of it have been released into the atmosphere. The city is already too cool for its own good, and the temperature is dropping. Soon it will be supercool, too cool for living tissue. The only survivors will be a race of disaffected, lounge-posing, ad copy-writing, indie film-watching androids. (TSG: 34)

If we understand irony in terms of unstable irony, we may reconnect this passage to Jameson's stance on the contemporary age and on the individual's dismal place within it. The fact that the

[173] Jameson 1991: 35.
[174] Jameson 1991: 36.
[175] Jameson 1991: 17.
[176] Jameson 1991: 38.
[177] Jameson 1991: 9.

central characters of the novel belong to a trend-spotting agency is also significant. The current period, according to Jameson, is characterised not by the creation, but rather by an economically driven reproduction of media images and of fashion styles for a world in which all that matters is consumption and the depthless surfaces of things and products. In our postmodern age, for Jameson, "the cultural and the economic […] collapse back into one another."[178] And is this not what the trendspotters stand for? Instead of creating something original which might challenge the powers that be (Jameson's modernist art), their 'creative' acts are almost passive ones, acts of archiving and collecting things that are already there, rearranging them, creating new trends out of what is already in existence. The world of tomorrow, in *The Savage Girl*, is assembled from pre-existing artefacts by the trendspotting agency tellingly called *Tomorrow Ltd.*!

A personification of the change in cultural production from creation and opposition to the system to repetition and compliance with the system in *The Savage Girl* is the novel's main character Ursula van Urden. Before moving to Middle City, Ursula had been trying to live as an artist, a "*real* artist, she had thought, whether idealistically or snobbishly, she's no longer sure, not just a commercial artist" (TSG: 27, original emphasis). Her paintings had all been on one and the same

> theme in dozens of variations. They were all triptychs, some actually consisting of three separate panels, some divided in more subtle ways, but all presenting three distinct views of the subject at hand: in every painting there was an idealized world and an infernalized world and the everyday world in between – three takes on the same objects, or people, or landscapes, or even abstract geometries. (TSG: 28)

To analyse her paintings, it is helpful to take a look at Jameson's description of modernist art. "How is it," Jameson asks,

> that in Van Gogh such things as apple trees explode into a hallucinatory surface of color, while his village stereotypes are suddenly and garishly overlaid with hues of red and green? I will briefly suggest […] that the willed and violent transformation of a drab object world into the most glorious materialization of pure color in oil paint is to be seen as a Utopian gesture, an act of compensation which ends up producing a whole new Utopian realm of the senses, or at least of that supreme sense – sight, the visual, the eye.[179]

In both the description of Irene's paintings and Jameson's interpretation of modern art, an everyday world, possibly an infernalized world, is contrasted with an ideal or utopian world – implicitly in van Gogh's, explicitly in van Urden's paintings. From this kind of art, in which signifiers had signifieds and referents and came with various semantic potentials, in Jameson's view, postmodern art has to be clearly distinguished. It is, as quoted above, characterized by an essential flatness, depthlessness, and focus on surfaces.

[178] Jameson 1991: xxi.
[179] Jameson 1991: 7.

Ursula used to be an artist, working with a broadly modernist aesthetic. But now she is leaving her oppositional and utopian pictures behind. "Her foray into the world of art had been a serious miscalculation," she now judges her past, "a boondoggle, her own personal Somalia, an effort to save a seething mass of humanity with a compass and a bowie knife." But now that she has left her art, "she realizes the profound and pitiless extent of her desire never to return" (TSG: 27). Instead, she is warming up to the world of surfaces and of glamour which surrounds her in ironic Middle city. At a party she attends, she observes people's attire and then "returns her attention to her […] drink. Lemon wedge or lemon peel? The wedge would taste better, but the peel would look better. The choice might have been obvious to her before, but no longer. Appearances *mean* something after all. They offer a pleasure of their own" (TSG: 42, original emphasis).

For Jameson, modernist art is "hermeneutical, in the sense in which the work in its inert, objectal form is taken as a clue or a symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth." Postmodernist art, such as Warhol's, on the other hand, "does not speak to us with any of the immediacy of van Gogh[…]; indeed," Jameson suggests, it might "not really speak to us at all."[180] It is pure surface, commodified, and, in Warhol's case, it even concerns itself with commodities on the content level. With these considerations in mind, read how Ursula's boss, the trendspotter guru Chas Lacouture trains her in her job as a trendspotter. Recalling the training of one of Ursula's colleagues, Javier, Chas recounts: "'I remember the day I told him that surfaces were all people had. […] You should have seen the poor kid. He was in tears.'" Like Javier, Ursula also seems to initially have some problems with this proposition. "She stares at him, trying to process everything he's saying. ' "Surfaces …," ' she repeats. 'What do you mean?'" (TSG: 63) And Chas explains,

> 'Look around you. How many of these people do you think ever get to experience a great passion, a great love, a great cause? A product can stand in for those experiences. A surface can stand in for the depths most people will never know. That's what it all comes down to: *surfaces*.' (TSG: 63)

This depthlessness and the process of commodification reach an epitome in the revolutionary product *Tomorrow Ltd.* gets the marketing contract for: Diet Water - an artificial water-like fluid which "passes through the body completely unabsorbed" (TSG: 44). Here, finally, is a product, a material simulacrum, which is all surface and which you can literally consume (i.e. drink) without even changing the status quo of your own body.

[180] Jameson 1991: 8.

3.2 Urban Subjects Lost in Discourse

How the Self Was Found and Lost

The narratives under scrutiny in this study are narratives about the place of the individual in the city and foreground questions of the self and of identity. As Charles Taylor puts it, "our modern notion of the self is" a "historically located self-interpretation which would" seem "opaque and perplexing to outsiders."[181] In order to be able to locate the notions of the self that are found in the narratives by Egan, Ellis, Nersesian, Niedzviecki, Shakar, and Smith in a wider context, I will therefore assume the position of such an outsider and attempt to outline some historical developments of ideas about the self and about identity.

Charles Taylor argues that modern concepts of the self can be traced back to Plato's distinction between the 'inner' and the 'outer'. In Homer's texts, Taylor argues, there is no clear sense of a unified, locatable inner category that is responsible for the characters' actions. Instead, "there seems to be a fragmentation,"[182] a chaotic and non-hierarchical parallel existence of many sites where thinking and feeling take place. Considering this fragmented of the self, Plato's suggestions, which require "some conception of the mind as a unitary space"[183] are radical steps towards a unified and coherent, definable notion of subject, self, agent, and identity. The most significant of Plato's propositions with regards to the notion of self is that he introduces an inner category (reason) that can control other parts of the human being, thus making him a responsible and definable agent, someone not fragmented, and someone who can consciously act in ethical ways.

Another important stepping stone in the development of the notion of the self is, as maintained by Taylor, the medieval philosopher Augustine. His writings promote a turn towards a clearer distinction between inwardness and outside world. In contrast to Plato, Augustine argued that truth was not only to be found by looking at the world of objects, or at Plato's shadows of true ideas – but rather also by probing one's inner self, since the human being, according to the Christian tradition, had been created as a mirror image of God and would thus reflect eternal truths:

> The inner light is the one which shines in our presence to ourselves [...]. What differentiates it from the outer light is just what makes the image of inwardness so compelling, that it illuminates that space where I am present to myself.[184]

[181] Taylor: 113.
[182] Taylor: 118.
[183] Taylor: 119.
[184] Taylor: 130.

As some historians of the self argue, Augustine's turn towards the individual did not have a great effect on most of the population of medieval Europe.[185] This was to change from the 17th century onwards, however. The rise of a bourgeois middle class changed the social fabric of Europe dramatically and gradually made people more aware of themselves as individuals. And in the field of philosophy Descartes carried the notion of self-reflexivity further by promoting self-reflexive reason as both the proof of and the only maintainable locale of the self, culminating in the famous cogito ergo sum. The metaphysical, yet personal agency of reason, according to Descartes, is strictly separated from the outside world. It is a purely inner category.[186] If this is the case, though, one conclusion has to be that the self founded on reason needs to be independent of anything outside of itself, therefore stable through the course of time, stable in various environments, and a human category that would be universally present in every human being. It is these three notions that define the 'Cartesian subject' that is so often referred to and objected to in contemporary theory.

This notion of the self as a stable entity may have been a dominant one for most of the Western population for much of the twentieth century. When Walter Truett Anderson recalls his notions about the self during the 1950s and 1960s, he might sum up what most of his contemporaries thought as well. "The view of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated cognitive universe was still the social consensus, the official definition of sanity and identity," Anderson writes. But by his use of the past tense, he indicates that things have changed since then. And he goes on to state the "the times were a-changin' in those mid-century years, even though we did not have Bob Dylan to sing about it."[187] Anderson's evocation of Dylan of course points to the fact that, after having developed from Plato through Augustine to Descartes and others, the concept of the 'core' has been put into question in modern and postmodern theory. More precisely, what comes under scrutiny from different directions is the assumption that there is a personal core, which is of one matter, does not change through time, and can be identified through self-observation. In its most radical variety, this questioning of the core denies any discernible or graspable notion of the self. This is why Anderson begins his book on *The Future of the Self* (1997) with the claim that "all human societies are built upon a lie," the "lie of self."[188] For, as a theorist of the constructionist school puts it, the

[185] Roy Baumeister, e.g., maintains that "the particulars of individual human experience were not very important" during the Middle Ages. "What mattered," instead, "was the broad cosmic drama of faith and salvation" in which the "life of a particular person was only a good or poor approximation of the archetypal patterns of heavenly or biblical events" (Baumeister: 30).
[186] Cf. Röd: 21-30, who writes: "Der philosphische Begriff des Ich [bei Descartes] enthält [...] nichts, was zum Bereich des Leiblichen gehört. Daß wir Menschen mit Fleisch und Blut sind, läßt sich grundsätzlich bezweifeln" (Röd: 27).
[187] Anderson 1997: 24.
[188] Anderson 1997: xi.

> constructionist stance rejects the very possibility of claiming 'true' representation of 'reality' or 'real life experience.' Wedded to the constructionist stance is the destabilizing of any notion of a centered subject or a stable identity, something which is of crucial importance for the way we theorize about representations or constructions of Self and identity.[189]

There are three main strands of argument that are brought forth against the 'Cartesian Subject.' The first argument is directed at the notion that the self has certain universal features that would be the same for every human being on the planet. The second argument turns against the notion of stability of the individual self through time and against its stability in varying contexts. The third argument targets the nature of the self on a still more basic level. If Descartes' fundamental point 'I think therefore I am' is to be disagreed with, then the very process of 'thinking' has to be viewed as an unreliable one. If thinking is not an action that one can see as a secure foundation, then, naturally, the 'I' and the 'therefore' of Descartes will hold no validity any more either.

As for the argument against the stability of the self in time, the emergence of modern psychological theory and science as well as the theory of evolution by Charles Darwin challenge the notion of the stable self. The latter, Darwin's theory of evolution,[190] offers no direct challenge to the stable self but has certainly helped to establish a general view of the world as one that is not stable but in constant processes of change. The psychological approach, on the other hand, challenges the stable self via, e.g. Freud's, claims that the adult self is determined by events of one's childhood or of the past in general. The consequences of such a theory are obvious. If an event or a certain environment can have an influence on the self, and if it can be changed through psychological therapy or treatment, then this self necessarily has to be one which is not a purely metaphysical agency of reason, and it thus has to be one which is in a state of development. The self would be a process rather than a state of being.[191]

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[189] Hestetun: 2. Hestetun is, of course, a representative of only one school of thought that put forth doubts about the nature of the self. In his insistence on constructionism, he is not to be taken as a representative of all the different approaches that have led to a questioning of 'the Cartesian subject' – the general aim of his criticism, though, is a good example of the kind of critique that will be developed further in the following paragraphs.

[190] Cf. Darwin.

[191] Cf. Fischer / Wiswede, who relate about psychological theories up to the 1960s: "Den meisten Persönlichkeitstheorien [within the field of psychology] liegt die Annahme zugrunde, daß die Sozialisationserfahrungen des Individuums zu überdauernden Kognitionen oder Bewertungen der eigenen Person führen, die ohne therapeutische Interventionen nur sehr schwer zu verändern sind" (Fischer / Wiswede: 331). While this statement still sees a relatively stable subject once it has been formed, they also report changes having taken place in more recent years, stating: "Nach und nach wurde die Vorstellung der Persönlichkeitspsychologie, das Selbst sei ein festgefügtes Gebilde, zugunsten der Annahme aufgegeben, daß der wissenschaftliche Begriff des Selbst ein Konglomerat von Bildern, Schemata, Konzepten, Typen, Theorien oder Zielsetzungen umfasste" (Ibid.). In *Entering the Maze* (1981), O.B. Hardison highlights another aspect related to Freud's theories which, looking at how common understandings of human experience changed with Freud, also speaks against the notion of a stable self. Hardison suggests that "Freud's powerful and comprehensive theory of behavior has had an influence that extends far beyond the medical profession" and that "it has encouraged new norms while examining traditional ones" (Hardison: 264-265). As, in Hardison's opinion, people are generally "influenced by what they think their behavior ought to be" (Hardison: 264) and since this sense of what someone's behavior ought to be, what a normal person is like dramatically changed with Freud's writings,

Also within psychology, in conjunction with sociology, there is another highly important theory confronting the notion of the stable self: role theory. In its most radical reading, the subject *equals* a role it lives according to and does not simply *act according to* this role. As Kenneth Gergen concludes from his psychological studies:

> Taken together, our experiments document the remarkable flexibility of the self. We are made of soft plastic, and molded by social circumstances. But we should not conclude that all of our relationships are fake: subjects in our studies generally believed in the masks they wore. Once donned, the mask becomes reality. [192]

If one takes into consideration that every human being has numerous roles, it is then not far to Gergen's further conclusion: "I doubt that a person normally develops a coherent sense of identity, and to the extent that he does, he may experience severe emotional distress."[193] There is, then, no "single, basic self to which we can be true"[194] – people change not only through time, but also depending on the context they find themselves in. If we accept that these contexts tend to become more and more numerous in our contemporary world, and especially in the urban one, it does not seem outrageous if Joseph E. Davis argues that the

> destabilizing and uprooting social forces that created the 'homeless mind,' that pervasive uncertainty about how to place oneself in an increasingly pluralistic environment, have, if anything, only intensified. The social conditions of advanced capitalist society have rather served to accentuate the plurality of authorities, the de-institutionalization of private life, the multiplicity of role expectations, the disembedding from geographical place, and the loss of overarching systems of meaning that so strained the task of establishing and maintaining a coherent sense of self in modern times. While by no means affecting everyone equally, many well-documented features of contemporary life, from consumerism to new technologies, can have a powerfully fragmenting and relativizing effect on personal experience and on the continuity and content of the self-narrative.[195]

While selves defined by their contexts and their history could still be definable at a certain point in time[196] – even if one would depict them as multi-dimensional, as a conglomeration of various and possibly contradictory tendencies, masks, or selves hosted within one single human being – there are more radical challenges to the notion of the self. As hinted at above, these challenges focus on the very nature of the mind – or of thinking rationally and of being an agent – as such. The self,

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"Freudian psychology demonstrates the discontinuity, not the continuity, of human nature and the validity of all attempts to describe it in universal terms" (Hardison: 265).

[192] Gergen: 142. Cf. also Fischer / Wiswede: 453: "Insbesondere bei geringer Rollendistanz bzw. hoher Rollenidentifikation werden Individuen dazu neigen, in ihrer Rolle 'aufzugehen', so daß Persönlichkeit und Rolle weitgehend verschmelzen." For a short, yet concise survey of psychologists' and psychological views promoting a fragmented self, see Joseph E. Davis 2000, esp. 155-56. Davis's essay, it should be noted, opposes the view that the contemporary self should be seen as fragmented and argues that psychologists who take such a view represent a minority within the profession.

[193] Gergen: 138.

[194] Gergen: 137.

[195] Davis 1999.

[196] One could, in fact, argue that the theories described above are of a deterministic nature, attributing a very definite self to a person on the ground of his experiences or his present situation. The result of this is not a stable self in time but certainly an identifiable self at a certain point in time.

according to its most radical challengers, is not a site of original subjectivity or rationality at all. If such a self is felt or considered to actually be in place by and in a human being, this is, then, at best an illusion or a fiction. As Robert G. Dunn sums up many radical positions on the self, consciousness "serves no useful purpose for poststructuralists, since meaning inheres exclusively in textual objects" and the subject is "discursively determined."[197] The mask has now truly become reality.

In the 1950s, Erving Goffman suggested that the performer of a social role "can be fully taken in by his own act." Goffman, however, also still believed that it might also be possible to "find that the performer may not be taken in at all by his own routine," that the self might "control"[198] its behaviour, and that the "claim that all the world's a stage" should "not be taken too seriously."[199] Up to the present, this is a view of social interaction which finds many followers and has not lost its appeal. In an essayistic analysis of the so-called Generation X, i.e. those American born "in the 20-year period from 1965 through 1984," Bernard Carl Rosen sees many members of that generation as engaging in what he calls "chameleonism." Faced with fierce competition on their way up the social ladder, Rosen sees "elite Xers" as being "[f]reightened that challengers may be getting the upper hand" and therefore donning "masks to hide their intentions, adjust mirrors to distort reality, and pretend to be what they are not."[200] As this passage clearly shows, Rosen does not question the idea of a stable subject and of a true reality 'out there.' He later expressly states: "Being unmasked and consequently disgraced and rejected is always possible", and he argues that there is a "private inner identity,"[201] a stable internal core self beneath the masks that members of the Generation X choose to wear.

Others were not so sure about the internally stable self any more. For Lacan, e.g., the individual consciousness is dependent on language. As two of his followers point out, according to Lacan, the "human being is born into language and it is within the terms of language that the human subject is constructed."[202] It is therefore one possible deduction from Lacan's theory that, if language is a fundamental feature of consciousness and of thinking, and if language itself cannot be trusted and is highly indeterminate, then, as a consequence, the self also has to be indeterminate and unstable. The result of this fundamental critique of the concept of the subject is, as Vincent Descombes puts it, to regard the belief "that a lover is the subject of his desires, that a thinker is

[197] Dunn 1998: 191.
[198] Goffman: 15-17.
[199] Goffman: 254.
[200] Rosen: 3.
[201] Rosen: 10.
[202] Mitchell / Rose: 5.

the subject of his thoughts, that a writer is the subject of his writing, that an agent is the subject of his action, and so on"[203] as an illusion. Instead, "the speaking subject is not the subject of but subject to the conventions of linguistic discourse."[204] In another critic's words, the postmodern subject can be conceived of "as something nearly inseparable from the semiotic 'signal soup' of postmodern life" and the individual now seems to have become "theoretically obsolete."[205]

Besides Lacan, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault are two other major French theorists who emerged during the 1960s and who have been considered as central to postmodern theory. It might seem overly simplistic to just group their theories together, but Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut make a plausible case to regard all three as "carrying out a radical critique of subjectivity."[206] For Ferry and Renaut, what unites Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault are their challenges against "the idea of the subject as consciousness."[207] Instead of being focal points of reason and of agency, for Foucault individuals are not masters of but subject to the forces outside of themselves, to the *épistéme*, "the universal system knowledge of the period;"[208] for Derrida, individuals are subject to the "internal outside"[209] of language; similarly, for Lacan, the "subject is only represented in discourse through a signifier, which is to say that the subject is immediately absent from it so that language simultaneously and indissolubly indicates both the birth and the death of the subject."[210]

The Subject in the City

The human subject has been a central aspect of urban studies in the past, and the fragmentation of the human self could be said to be especially relevant for inhabitants of metropolitan areas. The complexity of the urban environment, coupled with the individual's isolation have frequently been identified as factors which make it difficult for the individual to find his self or to situate himself in the city. As Louis Wirth argued in 1938, in large cities, the

> multiplication of persons in a state of interaction under the conditions which make their contact as full personalities impossible produces that segmentalization of human relationships which has sometimes been seized upon by students of the mental life of the cities as an explanation for the 'schizoid' urban personality.[211]

[203] Descombes: 120-21. Descombes himself is critical of the critique of the subject in his essay. His statement quoted here is a useful summary of the consequences of a critique of the subject.
[204] Cornell: 145.
[205] Allen: 2, 28.
[206] Ferry / Renaut: 15.
[207] Ferry / Renaut: 16.
[208] Ferry / Renaut: 85.
[209] Ferry / Renaut: 86.
[210] Ferry / Renaut: 197.
[211] Wirth 1938: 71.

The same still seems to be the case today, and because of the ongoing process of urbanization some argue that the mental problems of city dwellers have intensified. As Hal Niedzviecki writes in a description of the differences between contemporary urban and rural environments, in the small town "[t]he nobody can be somebody just by existing. The roles – town drunk, town loon, town rabble-rouser, town gossip, town genius – provide identities that would otherwise have to be carefully maintained and retooled and projected" (HImS: 156-157). Because of the anonymity of the Metropolis, in order to be someone, the urban subject constantly has to present his story to others, while small town residents are "protected from the perpetual necessity of narrative reinvention" (HImS: 157). Does this necessity for 'narrative reinvention', combined with a knowledge about the non-reliability of narratives makes the contemporary urban subject especially susceptible to a postmodern de-stabilization of the self? While Wirth is already deeply concerned about the complex, transitory and superficial relationships of city dwellers and about their changing roles, postmodern suggestions about the very nature of the self and of language would further strengthen the schizophrenia of the contemporary city dweller. Fredric Jameson gives a good summary of how Lacanian (postmodern) schizophrenia can be understood:

> It is because language has a past and a future [...] that we can have what seems to us a concrete or lived experience of time. But since the schizophrenic does not know language articulation in that way, he or she does not have our experience of temporal continuity either, but is condemned to live a perpetual present in which the various moments of his or her past have little connection and for which there is no conceivable future on the horizon.[212]

Mike Featherstone presents a related argument in *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (1991). He draws on fellow sociologist Scott Lash, who puts forward the thesis that modernism can be understood as a period in which processes of *differentiation* dominated while the postmodern can be characterized as a period in which these processes are reversed and in which *de-differentiation* is dominant.[213] Featherstone takes up Lash's thesis about cultural and sociological processes and extends it to the realms of personal experience and of aestheticization. As Featherstone points out, since Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, one "distinguishing characteristic of aesthetic judgment of taste" has been "disinterestedness."[214] It is this kind of distance to direct experience which could be said to characterise the famous modernist flaneur who strolls through the metropolis, "looking at objects from a detached, contemplative point of view, without direct immersion."[215] Might the flaneur's grandchild, the contemporary de-centred urban subject be characterised by a loss of that disinterestedness? "In the same way Lash […] speaks about de-differentiation," Featherstone suggests, "it may also be useful to refer to de-distantiation or instantiation – that is, the pleasure

[212] Jameson 1983: 119.
[213] See Lash: 5-12.
[214] Featherstone 1991: 71.
[215] Featherstone 1991: 71.

from immersion into the objects of contemplation"[216] – to describe the postmodern city dweller.[217] It is this 'de-distantiation' which corresponds to Jameson's 'perpetual present' and which might leave the urban individual in a state of schizophrenia if the capacities of distantiation and of reason are missing. In the end, then, the postmodern urban subject can be seen as "structurally overtaxed" in the city and "metaphysically isolated" in general.[218]

Some have heralded this as a way of setting free the person and the self. Without the responsibility and restraint to be a unified subject, they suggest, one can now rejoice in "unfettered freedom."[219] In a world in which the subject can only be conceived of with and within irony, R. S. Bourne states that "nothing is really so serious as we think it is, and nothing is quite so petty."[220] If life is "not fixed in predestined formulas or measurable by fixed, immutable standards" as in a life based on religion and / or metaphysical truths, it might be "fluid, rich and exciting."[221] If you are free of a stable identity, optimistic postmodernist theorists might argue, you can do whatever you wish.

Writing in the 1910s, Bourne furthermore suggested that "the function of the ironist is not to make fun of people, but to give their souls an airing."[222] What if this airing cannot be stopped any more, however? Some people propose that this is what is happening to the postmodern subject, and that this can have negative rather than positive consequences. As Paul de Man sees it,

> The moment the innocence or authenticity of our sense of being in the world is put into question, a far from harmless process gets underway. It may start as a casual bit of play with a stray loose end of the fabric, but before long the entire texture of the self is unravelled and comes apart.[223]

David Foster Wallace is even more explicit and pessimistic. In his dystopian view of contemporary society,

> in the absence of any credible, noncommercial guides for living, the freedom to choose is about as 'liberating' as a bad acid trip: each quantum is as good as the next, and the only standard of a particular construct's quality is its weirdness, incongruity, its ability to stand out from a crowd of other image-constructs and wow some Audience.[224]

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[216] Featherstone 1991: 71.

[217] These characterisations of the modern and the postmodern city dweller are, as Featherstone himself clarifies and discusses at length, of course, simplifying abstractions. Hence, they should be taken as possible points of orientation instead of being taken as accurate descriptions of reality. Featherstone notes, for example, "that many of the features associated with the postmodern aestheticization of everyday life have a basis in modernity" as "late-twentieth-century spectacles and simulated environments in malls, shopping centres, department stores, theme parks, 'Disneyworlds', etc. […] have features in common with the department stores, arcades, world fairs, etc. described by Benjamin and Simmel and others" (Featherstone 1991: 77).

[218] I am here borrowing a phrase used by Habermas to describe the postmodern subject. He speaks of the "metaphysisch vereinsamte und strukturell überforderte Subjekt" (Habermas 1985: 346).

[219] Sedgewick: 18.

[220] Bourne: 140.

[221] Bourne: 136.

[222] Bourne: 142.

[223] de Man 1983: 215.

[224] Wallace: 79.

The Urban Subject in Literature

Another way of approaching the history of the urban subject, which will be especially fruitful for the discussions to follow, is to shed some light on the question of the subject in the city as it is portrayed in urban literature. One way of grasping the changing notions of the city dweller in literature is to view the development of urban literature as one that features a change of agency from the individual to the city. In Jane Augustine's opinion, the "city in pre-twentieth-century novels written in English is almost always wholly *topos*, a place, a locale" in which individuals with definable selves display a "freedom to act and to dominate a situation."[225] She sees a decisive shift in the development of urban literature, motivated by the ever more complex reality of cities, in the novels of Henry James and Theodore Dreiser. In the texts of these writers,[226] she argues, "the city becomes less a topos, and more anthropoid – 'man-like,' 'resembling the human being.'"[227] Leaping fifty years ahead to Saul Bellow's *Seize the Day* (1956), Augustine puts forth the thesis that, in this text, readers are introduced to a "human protagonist, Tommy Wilhelm, [...] far more formless and malleable than [James's] Lamber Strether"[228] and "even more stunted, paralyzed and helpless to make choices governing his or her life"[229] than Dreiser's Carrie. What had been a growing complexity around the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century has now developed into "a world of miscommunication and madness."[230] The epitome of this development in urban literature is, according to Augustine, Alison Lurie's novel *The Nowhere City* (1965). In Lurie's text, Augustine sees Los Angeles as "a kind of arbitrary, obsessed, living, thinking being," while the people who play a part in the novel "are reduced to pawns and semblances of inorganic materials poured by builders into pre-shaped molds."[231]

A corresponding sketch of a history of the self in urban literature is presented in Jonathan Raban's essayistic study *The Soft City*. Raban notes that the main characters of Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* (1864/65), Mr. and Mrs. Boffin, seem to undergo a "miraculous transformation" of personality in "their sudden rise, from being servants to being plutocrats."[232] In the end, however, according to Raban, the novel propagates an essential and natural identity. He argues that

[225] Augustine: 73.
[226] Augustine refers specifically to James's *The Ambassadors* (1902) and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900).
[227] Augustine: 74.
[228] Augustine: 78.
[229] Augustine: 79.
[230] Augustine: 79.
[231] Augustine: 80.
[232] Raban: 73.

> Dickens achieves his boldest and most brilliant effects when he forces his own vision of the stubborn permanency of identity, good and bad, against the quicksilver life of radical change and reversal which the characters themselves believe that they are leading.[233]

Moving into the middle of the following century, Raban sees a very different idea of identity at work in Ralph Ellison's novel *The Invisible Man* (1952). In this novel, the main character at one point ponders about another character, Rinehart, who, Raban suggests, "seems to the narrator to embody all the baffling characteristics of the city itself."[234] One of the introspective passages from *The Invisible Man* reads as follows:

> The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the Rascal was at home. Perhaps *only* Rine the rascal was at home in it. It was unbelievable, but perhaps only the unbelievable could be believed. Perhaps the truth was a lie.[235]

In contrast to Dickens' times, Raban argues, for the inhabitant of the Western metropolis in the latter part of the 20th century there is no essential and natural self any more. On the contrary, "the vacancies seem overwhelmingly blank, the performances florid and strident" and the "invisible man's awful suspicion that, beneath the disguises, there may be nothing at all, a rind without a heart, a reality of lies, is one that comes disturbingly easily and often to the city dweller"[236] of the 1970s.

James Donald advocates a similar development with a somewhat different focus in his study *Imagining the Modern City*. He draws less sharply defined boundaries between realism and modernism, already observing "frenetic activity and social illegibility"[237] in the nineteenth century city as it appears in urban literature. He also describes it as already having the quality of "a cast of mind," that is to say being moulded in people's imagination. At the same time, he emphasises that the realist novels of Dickens are an example of the search for order, for the "subterranean networks of community beneath the unreadable and irrational surface"[238] and acknowledges that nineteenth century urban literature features "a type of personality that is recognizable," in other words, a definable self, "and pedagogically urban"[239] in its liberal openness generated by the urban environment's heterogeneity. In Modernism, Donald argues, "the type of personality that is recognizable" turns into a problematic entity. The differences between 'inside' and 'outside', which Charles Taylor put at the centre of his analysis of the development of the concept of the self, become, according to Donald, less and less trustworthy:

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233 Raban: 74.
234 Raban: 69.
235 Ellison as quoted in Raban.
236 Raban: 71.
237 Donald: 127.
238 Donald: 127.
239 Donald: 127.

> In the city dweller's psychic space of projection and introjection, the danger was that the boundaries between self and environment, like those between past and present, or male and female, become uncertain and unreliable.[240]

In his study *The City in Literature*, Richard Lehan draws very clear lines between modernism and postmodernism when it comes to the subject in urban literature.[241] In contrast to James Donald, he does not see the challenge to the notion of the subject in modernism but in postmodernism. Modernist authors, he claims, portray an urban environment "with human consciousness confronting an unmade universe, a universe without creator."[242] According to Lehan, this human consciousness is, to various degrees and in various shapes, part of the texts of "James, Eliot, Woolf, Faulkner, and Hemingway, but their characters all define themselves and their worlds in terms of it."[243] It is postmodernism, for Lehan, that marks the step away from a discernible personal consciousness in urban literature. The self is now "part of a system, [...] collapsed into culture and thus inseparable from discourse"[244] in a postmodern urban world of signs in "free floating signification"[245] which destroy any possibility of meaning. Lehan sees evidence of this new postmodern literary approach to the city in the writings of John Barth, Robert Coover, Don DeLillo, and Thomas Pynchon.[246] In a statement echoing Jane Augustine's line of thought and emphasizing his point of the self having collapsed into culture, he also asserts a change of agency from the individual to the urban environment: "the city becomes a state of mind: it thinks us and not the other way around."[247]

Notwithstanding the differences that can be observed in these critics, a common tendency amongst them with regards to the subject and the city in urban literature is obvious. All four draw attention to the fact that the subject becomes less definable and less discernable from realist novels to postmodern ones, with the end result resembling Peter Currie's 1987 statements about the subject in postmodern literature. In "The Eccentric Self," Currie argues that "[r]ecent American fiction" is "a highly deterministic fiction in which the 'human' [sic] subject is paradoxically constrained in the

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240 Donald: 136.
241 The lines he draws are much too distinct, one might argue. He asserts, for example, that "Critics no longer argue about whether postmodernism is merely a realignment of modernism; I think most would agree that postmodernism creates a totally different kind of reality, whether we are talking about the city or the literary text" (Lehan, 266). This is a statement that certainly would not be agreed on by 'most,' as Lehan has it.
242 Lehan: 267.
243 Lehan: 267.
244 Lehan: 267.
245 Lehan: 266.
246 Lehan argues that Pynchon "is central to these cultural and literary changes: he systematically undercuts the mythic, historic, aesthetic, and moral elements of modernism, creating a series of 'flattened' characters who lack subjectivity and find the past emptied of all but 'stencilized meaning" (Lehan: 267).
247 Lehan: 267.

freeplay of the text, constructed in the discursive order rather than 'free' in an existentialist sense" and "a creature at the mercy of the monarchical Signifier."[248]

Whether the development of city narratives – or Western literature in general – can be generalized in this way is debatable. As already argued above, many critics have suggested that all-encompassing interpretations which lead straight from realism to postmodernism are overly simplistic and do not pay tribute to the plurality which urban narratives present both in theme and form. As Gerd Hurm points out in the conclusion of his study *Fragmented Urban Images*:

> There [...] is no one-directional development from modernist to postmodernist forms that might be casually linked to an increasing fragmentation and heterogeneity in the modern American city. The history of the modern city contains different answers for different groups.[249]

Even though I see the flaws of the simplified and idealized model of 'one-directional' development that has been outlined in this section, this has been done because the urban narratives that will be considered in this analysis specifically write against the postmodern ideas that many critics see as established in contemporary experience as well as in contemporary literature.

Unstabe Footings: *Ditch*

Hal Niedzviecki's novel D*itch* (2001) tells the story of a young Toronto man whose life to a great extent resembles the postmodern self as it emerges from the considerations above. Its main character, Ditch, is not a stable subject. At many points during the narrative, his legs cause him trouble. They are, for example, "not quite trembling, but not still either, as if struggling to support him" (D: 175). In another instance, he "pulls at his boots, stumbles backwards into the closet" and "falls down there in the vestibule dragging at a handful of laces, closing his eyes with his head against the soft wood of the door" (D: 25). In yet another episode, his "feet jerk, working the pedals. He doesn't feel them" (D: 140). Ditch, obviously, is not grounded. He is unsure of who he is and he is unsure of the world. Another telling passage reads:

> He stumbles, opens his eyes. Houses orbit past, green lawns splayed. His wet knees in someone's grass. He's holding his ears. […] He gets up, staggers a few steps, falls. His head hits the fire hydrant. […] He drags himself to his hands, his knees. (D: 194)

But there is a problem with his legs, a problem with Ditch's world. "It all seems so simple […]. Just get up," (D: 194) the novel's main character tries to assure himself. But he cannot. As Gerhard Schulze characterises the condition of the subject in postmodern times: "Falling, we put a board

[248] Currie: 67.

[249] Hurm: 329. Heinz Ickstadt also calls for a more differentiated view of literary developments, stating that "such a linear history of genre is highly dubious" since there "is always a continuing of, or a returning to, preceding models of narration" (Ickstadt 1991: 168).

underneath our feet in order to feel that we are on secure footing."[250] But this does not work for Ditch. The void of postmodern existence is all too real for him and the board does not support his weight. He is lost, unable to stand, because, as the narrative argues, "we don't know who we are." (D: 194)

While Ditch is an unstable urban subject from the very beginning of the novel, the text itself initially also features many gaps, but readers can still understand what is going on: Ditch is a 23 year old who cannot find his place in the world, who does not know what to do about his future. He drifts through the city of Toronto and through repetitive days. His mother Barbara was left by her husband when Ditch was only two years old and lives a life of self-control and repressed depression. After their old and lonesome upstairs neighbour and tenant Mr Knudtsen dies, a young woman called Debs moves into the now vacant apartment. She has run away from something in the United States, produces amateur porn photographs which she puts up on her website, and starts a relationship with Ditch. With Debs' move into Ditch's and Barbara's house, uncertainty starts moving into the narrative. The gaps in the story get wider, chronology is mixed up, and one can easily draw a parallel to Fredric Jameson's depiction of the postmodern subject in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. "If, indeed," Jameson writes,

> the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but 'heaps of fragments' and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory.[251]

It also becomes difficult enough to describe a life or a character coherently in such a work of cultural production, one could add. And *Ditch*, the novel named after its main character and tracing a period in his adolescent life, can be read as an example of this kind of a 'heap of fragments'. Reality is slipping away from the characters and from readers of Niedzviecki's novel. The text is saturated with statements by characters and comments by the narrator which call the past and the present into question. What Debs tells Ditch is "all just stories to him" (D: 91). To Barbara, "everything seems so impermanent, ripped apart and stitched back together" (D: 97). When Ditch and Debs leave the city, their "destination isn't real" (D: 135) to him. In the end, Ditch might have been tortured and sexually molested in a basement somewhere in the United States, but it is also possible "that whatever happens next doesn't happen" (D: 218). Then again, "'It wasn't a dream. It was real'" (D: 179). And then, yet again, "[a]t a certain point, he thought he imagined it" (D: 188).

[250] Schulze 1994: 79. ["Im freien Fall schieben wir uns ein Brett unter die Füße, um wieder das Gefühl zu haben, auf festem Grund zu stehen", translation: ls].
[251] Jameson 1991: 25.

And in the end, does Ditch return to Toronto or has "he never really left" (D: 226) the city? Various interpretations are possible, but they all rest on a highly unstable narrative.

A Schizophrenic Teflon Existence: *Glamorama*

Instability of the human self and the loss of individuality have been topics in Bret Easton Ellis' texts since his early publications, in which characters keep getting mistaken for someone else by other characters. In his 1987 novel *The Rules of Attraction*, for example everyone always loses their I.D.s, and when the character Sean is approached by a female student at a party on the Camden College campus, the following scene ensues:

> 'Have we met?' she asks. If she's joking, it's just too dumb.
> 'No,' I say. 'Hi.'
> 'What's your name?' she asks, trying to keep her balance.
> 'It's Peter,' I tell her.
> 'Oh, really?' she asks, looking confused. 'Peter? Peter? That's not your name. [...] Like, I could have sworn your name was Brian.'[252]

Sean's reaction – "I'm thinking of throwing up but do some bonghits instead, then flee. Deal with it. Rock'n'roll"[253] – as well as his playful response to the woman's faulty memory are typical for how most characters in *The Rules of Attraction* behave when they are confronted with their confused and instable senses of themselves. They party and try to have fun.

More problematic and possibly harmful or destructive results of not being sure of yourself are much more prominent and at the fore in *American Psycho* (1991). Its main character Patrick Bateman is ever more lost in the postmodern world of late capitalism than the confused twenty-somethings of Camden College. In Alex E. Blazer's words, he "cannot differentiate between products and people, consumption and affect: he's flat, superficial, and ultimately unfathomable. His character is a mask covering a void; his identity is an aberrational reaction to the abyss of being that founds his existence."[254] He and other people are repetitiously mistaken for someone they are not, individuals have become interchangeable, as the following passages illustrates. At first, Patrick Bateman and his friends are not sure about the identity of other people.

> 'Guys, guys,' I [Patrick Bateman] say. 'Who's sitting with Paul Owen over there? Is that Trent Moore?' [...]
> 'Isn't that Madison? No, it's Dibble,' Reeves says. He puts on his clear prescription eyeglasses just to make sure.
> 'No,' Hamlin says. 'It's Trent Moore.'
> 'Are you sure?' Reeves asks.[255]

[252] Ellis 1987: 17-19.
[253] Ellis 1987: 17-19.
[254] Blazer.
[255] Ellis 1991: 88-89.

Later, Bateman himself is mistaken for someone else by the people whose identity he was not sure about – and it does not seem to matter much to him:

> Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam [...] but for some reason it really doesn't matter and it seems a logical faux pas since Marcus works at P&P also, in fact does the same exact thing I do, and he also has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses and we share the same barber at the same place, the Pierre Hotel, so it seems understandable; it doesn't irk me.[256]

The atrociously violent acts Bateman carries out against other people, though, can be read as a reaction to the loss of identity, making Patrick Bateman "the postmodern, pop cultural subject carried to its logical conclusion, its apocalyptic apotheosis,"[257] as Blazer argues. Details such as a restaurant called "Subjects" provide further evidence that the question of the self and of identity is an important theme in *American Psycho*, and the first few pages of *Glamorama* indicate that the same is true for that later text. Before Victor Ward, the novel's first person narrator, makes arrangements to meet his girlfriend at a place called "Doppelganger's" (G: 6), the following dialogue is presented in the opening scene of the novel. Victor is engaged in last-minute preparations of a club that is to be opened the next day, and there are discussions about the club's interior design.

> '[...] Yaki Nakamari or whatever the hell the designer's name is [...] mistook me for someone else so I couldn't register the complaint [...].'
> 'Baby, George Nakashima designed this bar area,' JD quietly corrects me. 'Not, um Yaki Nakamashi, I mean Yuki Nakamorti, I mean – oh shit, Peyton, get me out of this.'
> '*Yoki* Naka*muri* was approved for this floor,' Peyton says.
> 'Oh yeah?' I ask, 'Approved by who?'
> 'Approved by, well, moi,' Peyton says.
> A pause. Glares targeted at Peyton and JD.
> 'Who the fuck is Moi?' I ask. 'I have no fucking idea who this Moi is, baby'
> (G: 5, original emphases).

On a superficial level, this dialogue shows the characters' bad memory for names and Victor's lack of knowledge about the French language. On another level, though, it also indicates what one reviewer has picked out to be the central theme of the novel: the loss of self in the postmodern urban environment: "In a culture in which image - and therefore, images - is all-important, the author wants to say, meaningful identity is obliterated and everyone becomes soulless and interchangeable."[258] This reading seems to be underlined when the same misunderstanding happens again a short time later ("'Nobody knows this?' 'Nobody knows but moi.' 'Who's Moi?' 'That means me, Victor'" (G: 51)).

Other elements in the book also point to Victor's uncertainty about his self. He is often at a complete loss and confused about where he has allegedly been only days beforehand, who he

[256] Ellis 1991: 89.
[257] Blazer.
[258] Mendelsohn.

knows, what kind of things happened to him in the past. He is constantly approached by people telling him about having seen him at venues he has no recollection of having visited at that time. In his life in general, he seems to be a person, who – as during the club opening – is "pushing through the darkness totally awake and people just dimly rolling past, constantly moving on to someplace else" (G: 167). When people first start to mention having seen Victor in locations he does not remember having been to, readers could suppose that he might just have been confused with someone else. In the glitzy world of fashion and of New York's clubs, where people are shells and where only surfaces matter, is this so surprising? The instances occur so frequently during the course of the narrative, though, that readers start to suspect that there is more behind this. To mention just a few examples of many: one of the club's security guards claims to have met Victor: "'We shook hands last week in South Beach,' Abdullah tells me." Victor denies having been there the week before, but Abdullah seems very sure and has a detailed memory about the incident: "'Yeah man, you were in the lobby of the Flying Dolphin, getting your photo taken [...]. You were surrounded by clams'" (G: 11). Later, a casual acquaintance of Victor says that she saw Victor at a fashion show: "'Victor, I'm positive you were at the Calvin Klein show. I saw you in the second row next to Stephen Dorff and David Salle and Roy Liebenthal. I saw you pose for a photo on 42nd Street, then get into a black scary car'" (G: 18). Victor "consider[s] this scenario" and replies: "'The second fucking row? No way, baby'" (G: 18). More significantly, on the same day, his part time affair Alison, someone who must know him quite well and is not likely to mistake him for someone else, is also sure that he was "in South Beach" (G: 25). But Victor again denies having been there. Later, during the opening of the club, Alison tells Victor about a "little conversation" they supposedly had "[a]bout ninety minutes ago" which "upset [her] very much." Victor once more has no recollection of this conversation. He does not remember it at all: "'When?' I'm shouting out. 'What the hell – [...]. Baby, I don't know what you're talking about'" (G: 154).

Do these uncertainties about his personal history portray Victor as a fragmented postmodern subject who is unable to "unify the past, present and future" in his "own biographical experience or psychic life"?[259] As Madan Sarup argues in accordance with what has been said above, in postmodern thought, "the signifying chain snaps" and "we have schizophrenia in the form of a rubble of distinct and unrelated signifiers" which results in the "fragmentation of the subject" who can no longer pursue "projects over time, or think cogently about the production of a future significantly better than time present and time past."[260] Some anecdotes Victor does not remember

[259] Sarup: 97.
[260] Sarup: 96-97.

from his personal history could be attributed to memory loss, possibly due to heavy drug use.[261] The same could be true for his confusion about whether things are filmed or not. The reader cannot be sure. In any case, Victor is a highly unreliable narrator, and there are ample reasons to read him as a schizoid postmodern individual.

What is more, Victor does not only seem to live a disjointed life that only knows the present and has no, or little, connection to past and future. He also leads a depthless life, a life neither grounded on a stable foundation nor in any kind of personal depth – another feature many theorists have identified as characteristic of the postmodern or contemporary western urban experience. Cornel West, for example, suggests that the North American middle class has created a society in which "a lot of people live a Teflon existence, where a lot of people have no sense of the ragged edges of necessity."[262] And Gerhard Schulze joins in with his thesis that in affluent societies, where there is no need to care for the most basic needs, life is strongly oriented towards internal, yet fleeting experiences of (aesthetic and superficial) pleasure. In addition, the pleasure-seeking subject is caught in an ever more sped up search for new experiences. In this sped-up race for superficial pleasure, according to Schulze, "nothing is inevitable, everything could also be different" and people have only constructed their "patterns of everyday aesthetics," their social milieu, and their "fundamental semantics." But the "ground on which they believe to stand" is one they have "invented themselves"[263] and these inventions or constructions, according to Schulze, are not stable, for "you can always re-invent new ways of ordering the world. Patterns of everyday aesthetics can break apart or fuse, the structure of the milieu constantly transforms, and the fundamental semantics of today can all of a sudden be discarded in favour of another one."[264] For Harvie Ferguson, likewise, contemporary identity is characterised by "a vortex of disconnected experiences." As Ferguson has it, personality and

> self-image are no longer fixed from within but easily adapt themselves to the continually changing circumstances of time and place. […] Identity, in such a world, cannot be a function of interior self-expression or the outcome of a process of actualization; there is no interior to express or to actualize.

[261] For example, Victor does not remember a woman he had supposedly dated in college. When asked about her, Victor says: "Listen, unless you have a photo – no dice, man" (G: 115) although it is obvious in the novel *The Rules of Attraction* that they had a close relationship. He also tells an acquaintance "the Klonopin I'm on affects long-term memory" (G: 250).

[262] West: 219.

[263] Schulze 1994: 119. ["Nichts ist zwangsläufig, alles könnte auch ganz anders sein, doch das Kollektiv suggeriert eine Selbstverständlichkeitsvermutung, an die sich die Menschen nur allzu bereitwillig klammern. In Form von alltagsästhetischen Schemata, sozialen Milieus und fundamentaler Semantik haben sie den Boden, auf dem sie zu stehen glauben, selbst erfunden", translation: ls]

[264] Schulze 1994: 119. ["die Ordnungserfindungen lassen sich jederzeit umerfinden. Alltagsästhetische Schemata können auseinanderbrechen oder zusammenfließen, die Milieustruktur transformiert sich ständig, die gegenwärtige fundamentale Semantik kann plötzlich in eine andere übergehen", translation: ls].

All that is left for the individual is the superficial pleasure of the moment and of the aesthetics of the surface. The "post-modern is […] the age of glamour,"[265] Ferguson declares.

Victor Ward's life in New York corresponds very well to what West, Schulze, and others have postulated about the contemporary postmodern existence of Western middle class urbanites. In the New York presented in the first part of *Glamorama*, everything revolves around surfaces, appearances, styles, and looks. Aesthetic experiences are what Victor and his co-characters are after. He and his acquaintances judge the state of the world solely by outer appearances and by how much pleasure they can possibly get out of an experience. What Victor is worried about, preparing for the opening of a nightclub, is the condition of the croutons that will top the salads to be served. When his subordinate JD tells him: "The croutons are in excellent shape and we're all incredibly relieved," he is satisfied (G: 105). A comment such as "Can you believe how fucked up the world is at this moment?" is triggered not by a pressing social or political problem, but by a question of musical taste: One of "the DJs we interviewed today actually wanted to play 'Do the Bartman,' [...] He said it was 'unavoidable.' He said it was his 'signature' song." (G: 114).

But in the world of models and nightclubs portrayed in *Glamorama*, is a focus on surfaces and appearance not to be expected? After all, it is the very job of a model to sell an appearance, to promote a certain style. True, but what is striking about the first part of *Glamorama* is that there seems to be no world outside of the professional world of modelling. Douglas Kellner characterizes some features of a postmodern identity in the following way:

> Postmodern identity [...] is constituted theatrically through roleplaying and image construction. While the locus of modern identity revolved around one's occupation, one's function in the public sphere (or family), postmodern identity revolves around leisure, centered on looks, images, and consumption.[266]

A professional model is the perfect personification of such an identity. His very function is to play roles, to convey constructed images, to promote consumption through his looks. Victor Ward has clearly moved from playing a role and wearing a mask to personifying the role and the mask. "[I]f the subject is on the way out, it is going out in style," Gail Faurschou suggests about the contemporary, surface-driven self.[267] For Victor, this seems to be an apt description. In his world, only surfaces, appearances, and style matter. When he visits friends in his free-time, he exhibits his focus on surfaces by scorning one of them for his laziness in caring for his looks: "And Jesus, Aztec – cut your toenails! Where are your fucking morals? What do you even do besides going to fucking

[265] All: Ferguson.
[266] Kellner: 153.
[267] Gail Faurschou: 79

poetry readings at Fez? Why don't you go to a fucking gym or something?" (G: 93) The fact that Victor appeals to his friend's "morals" when actually talking about questions of appearance is a clear indication of his complete focus on the surface of things. Ethics, for him, is not a social or political question of doing the right thing or not. Ethics, in the New York of *Glamorama*, is the question of looking right or not.

Accordingly, almost throughout the whole narrative, Victor Ward displays a strong disinterest in politics and social questions – these are things he does not need to worry about and consequently does not. Before the opening of the nightclub in New York, for example, one of his co-workers approaches him, wondering "why we don't have a whatchamacallit' [...]. Then, after much finger snapping, 'Oh yeah, a cause!'" (G: 9). His problem to even find the expression for 'cause' already indicates that charity or politics is not something present in the speaker's mind. Victor's very negative reaction to this suggestion shows an even greater dislike for political questions. He replies:

> 'A cause?' I moan. 'Oh God [...]. No thank you.'
> 'Victor, shouldn't we have a cause?' JD says. 'What about global warming or the Amazon? Something. Anything.'
> 'Passé. Passé. Passé.' I stop. 'Wait – Beau! Is Suzanne DePasse coming?'
> 'What about AIDS?'
> 'Passé. Passé.'
> 'Breast cancer?'
> 'Oh groovy, far out,' I gasp before slapping him lightly on the face. 'Get serious.'
> (G: 9-10)

In this dialogue, the qualifying adjectives Victor uses are worthy of some attention. Clearly, neither breast cancer nor AIDS or global warming are things that are 'passé' in terms of their relevance in the world. However, 'passé', 'groovy', and 'far out' are adjectives usually used referring to the aesthetic quality of things; and this is the way in which Victor applies them. His request to "[g]et serious" at the end of the dialogue renders this even more obvious. Seriousness in Victor's terms does not refer to social questions but to being earnest about the aesthetics of cool, about his own 'everyday aesthetic experiences'.

Ellis makes sure that his readers are aware of this attitude by including other similar comments in the narrative, such as a strongly ironic response to a reporter who asks Victor if he would still be so concerned about his aesthetics "if it is at the expense of something else" (G: 57):

> 'Yeah, I wanna give this all up and feed the homeless. I wanna give this all up and teach orangutans sign language. I'm gonna bike around the countryside with my *sketchbook*. I'm gonna - what? Help improve race relations in this country? Run for fucking President? Read my lips: Spare me.' (G: 57)

Closely related to the focus on surfaces, as has been argued above, is the need for instant and sped-up sensual gratification in the game of urban existence that "is fast and leaves no time to pause and

think and draw elaborate designs."[268] The urban environment of *Glamorama* is one dominated by an increased speed and also by the transitory natures of places and relationships. The night-club that is prepared for its opening, for example, is only expected to last "what – four weeks?" (G: 11). Styles go in and out of fashion in rapid sequence. There are no relatively stable fashion trends any more. Instead of a year, a trend only lasts for one night. What is constant is frequent change in the mysterious loop of what is in and what is not: "It's a kitsch-is-cool kind of night and there are tons of chic admirers" (G: 31). In accordance with the sped-up nature of life, relationships also take less time to develop: "'That's La Tosh. We go way back. I've known him for weeks'" (G: 100).

Layers of Unreliability: *Manhattan Loverboy*

A few pages into the first chapter of Arthur Nersesian's *Manhattan Loverboy*, its first person narrator Joseph recounts the following experience:

> One day, while davening at the base of the Wailing Wall, I smote myself on the chest. It made a hollow sound. I did it again and again, harder each time, until everyone around me quit wailing and moved away. I didn't pay attention – I was on to something.
> What was that sound? It was something important, I knew that. But what? Then it all became clear. It was an absence of identity. It was the great gap in my soul that could never be filled. (MLB: 17)

This is not the first explicit clue that the nature of the self and a quest for identity are some of the central themes of the text. At the very beginning of the narrative, Joseph reports how, as an orphaned child, he is welcomed by his adoptive parents Mr. and Mrs. Ngm with the statement, "'We'll try to love you, Joey, but we should explain that you're something of a substitute" (MLB: 11). His new father informs him that his wife is "barren." His new mother points out that her husband is "inadequate" (MLB: 11) and tears open a seedless tangerine to illustrate her point. "This tangerine is Mr. Ngm," (MLB: 12) she tells Joseph. Instead of providing Joseph with a place to feel at home at and instead of providing him with a sense of belonging, "Mr. Ngm rarely" comes "home after that day, and Mrs. Ngm" keeps "dashing out of rooms as" Joseph enters them. "They treated me very well, but not like parents," their adoptive child observes. "Their sense of inadequacy" (MLB: 12) is passed on to the new member of the family. Joseph cannot develop roots in this immediate family environment, and his feelings of rootlessness are reinforced as he does not have any knowledge of his origins. "I clearly remember the day my preschool teacher asked what everyone's heritage was," he tells the readers. "Young as they were, my classmates bleated out: 'I'm Irish,' 'I'm Afro-American,' 'I'm Vietnamese,' etc. But I, little Joseph was left dumb. I was the rootless orphan" (MLB: 12).

[268] Kellner 1992: 153.

All of this leaves Joseph with a deep desire to define his identity, to feel at home, to know about his origins. The first strategy he employs in his quest for identity is to delve into the study of the past, spending "more and more time in dark deserted libraries, searching through history books for my face, my race" (MLB: 12). He continues these studies through his university education, acquires "a vast knowledge of history" (MLB: 13), but never finds himself "within the photos or descriptions of these worldly books" (MLB: 12). Because Joseph's scholarly quest for identity does not lead to satisfactory results, he turns to a different strategy, that of intuitive self-definition and self-creation. Wandering the streets of New York's East Village one night during his college years, he is suddenly approached by "a boy in his late teens hidden under a huge, floppy fedora and clad in a baggy, out-of-date suit" (MLB: 14), asking him whether he is Jewish. Joseph, having decided he "might as well" give his "allegiance to a culture worthy of my respect," decides "to play on a hunch" and answers "Yes" (MLB: 14).

Even though other Jews do keep him at some distance or openly reject him, Joseph now takes on the new first name Levi, changes his minor from philosophy to Hebrew and experiences some degree of fitting in and belonging. "There were little things," he says,

> odd signs, that revealed to me my kinship with the thirteen great tribes. I craved gefilte fish, matzoh, and sickly sweet wines. Flatchki (tripe) and platski (potato pancakes) were delicious, and knishes were always a treat. Saturdays were a kind of natural sabbath. And I adored the tumbling sounds – *scholum, yehuda*, and *menachem* – like big drums rolling down a stairwell. Soon, I found myself wandering in this great Jewish mist, a hazy history that unfolded forever backward. (MLB: 15)

As the passage quoted at the beginning of this section reveals, however, Joseph's attempt at acting as if he were Jewish does not provide him with a secure sense of identity and does not ultimately fill the gap he perceives within himself. In his attempt to define his identity by acting as if he were a Jew, he leaves New York, travels to Israel, where he is "having a good time" and is "really enjoying" himself, but where the "more spiritual thing" (MLB: 16) of feeling a sense of belonging and of identity does not take place. "Israel had been good to me," Joseph concludes, "but it didn't bring resolution" (MLB: 19). He therefore decides to move back to Manhattan and to pursue an M.A. degree with the aid of a "strange and wonderful graduate program" (MLB: 17) he gets a scholarship for. Having resettled in New York, Joseph takes one last step in his active quest for an identity – (once more) claiming to have found himself, "I was a man without consonant," he claims, and changes his name into "Joey A-e-i-o-u" (MLB: 19). This change to a name consisting only of vowels represents various things. Firstly, Joseph rejects his personal history, his foster parents, whose name 'Ngm' consisted only of consonants. He also consciously distances himself from his foray into the Jewish community, whose language, Hebrew, in its written form, does not know any vowels. What is more, with this refutation of Hebrew, the language Jesus spoke and the language

of the Old Testament, he might also be said to move away from seeking an identity based on metaphysics and religion. The way Joseph's story progresses suggests yet another reading of the name. If we pronounce it "ey, you," might it not signal a constant appeal to others for orientation, a continuous plea that is always deferred?

Joseph is relentlessly on a search for his identity. When he changes his name to consist of vowels only, he claims to have found himself "[i]n New York" (MLB: 19). The city, however, does not grant the stability Joseph might have been hoping for. Significantly, just before he decides to take on the new name, he is in a new apartment, inherited from an uncle, and finds a secret hiding place: "While taking a dump one morning," Joseph notices "that the toilet wasn't fastened to the floor – it could be lifted up and swung sideways." Moving it to the side, he sees the hiding place "created by [his] adoptive father's furtive brother," and inside, comes upon "an old New York City Subway map" (MLB: 19). Joseph is on a search for stability, but what he finds are directions about how to get from one place to another. As we learn in the exposition, the very first apartment Joseph rented in Manhattan and lived in for three years was actually a "stairway" sectioned off, a "discontinued passage in a large loft building" which had been advertised "as a 'mini-triplex-studio'," the three small landings functioning as kitchen, bedroom, and bathroom and exit respectively (MLB: 13-14). Resembling the circulation of subway trains and the stairways he resided in for three years, Joseph's life in Manhattan remains a constant movement from A to B, without ever really getting anywhere as all the stations he tries to get to prove to be 'discontinued passages.'

The fact that Joseph is awarded with the "B. Whitlock Memorial Fellowship for Academic Achievement in History" (MLB: 19) without having applied for it is a first sign that the active part in shaping his identity is in the process of being taken away from Joseph. Even though he does not end his attempts to give his life some direction, throughout much of the rest of the narrative, rather than being the man at the steering wheel of his own life, Joseph seems to have turned into a playball of people and forces he and the readers can for a long time not explain. In the final term of his graduate programme, for example, he loses his scholarship. The "Whitlock Memorial Fellowship, which had sustained me through a year and a half in the costly program, had, without rhyme or reason, been rescinded" (MLB: 21). Because Joseph then angrily and aggressively confronts his benefactor, the Wall Street businessman Andrew Whitlock, his "academic records," including his "baccalaureate transcripts," are "seized, pulled, and probably shredded" so that he cannot "even transfer to another school" (MLB: 31). With the end of his support for Joseph's academic career, Whitlock's control over Joseph's life does not end, however.

Instead of reinstating Joseph's scholarship, Whitlock first hires him as an "efficiency man" (MLB: 40) for his company without putting him to any specific tasks and then, against Joseph's explicit wish, makes him try his luck as a stand-up comedian. While this might sound like an improbable chain of events, the things that happen to Joseph only get stranger from then on. After Joseph's unsuccessful attempt at doing stand-up comedy, Whitlock secures him a proofreading job with a prestigious law firm where the first person narrator soon develops a crush on Amy, "a young associate […] on her way to being the youngest partner in the firm" (MLB: 67). Amy is at first not interested in Joseph the person but in Joseph the inhabitant of a spacious Manhattan apartment where she might sublet some space. Before the two meet for the first time in a non-professional setting, in Grand Central, Joseph spots her from a distance and she seems "truly statuesque" to him. "She seemed to be standing on a pedestal, a Goddess Diana in her modern-day temple of Ephesus" (MLB: 74). He himself is apparently no match for her. Feeling the pressure a hopeless lover experiences before approaching "the queen," he makes himself even more unattractive by "farting incredibly" and uncontrollably before they actually meet, by "hyperventilating" and "weeping" when she accuses him of being eight minutes late until finally, "I started twitching and hiccupping through the tears. But the dam, as it turned out, had not completely been broken until it happened. […] I involuntarily peed in my pants. A trickle ran down my right leg, along the marble floor, into a large, yellow puddle" (MLB: 74-75).

Amy still decides to move into Joseph's apartment, and, together with Whitlock, with whom she turns out to be friends, subsequently expands and intensifies the external control which is exerted over Joseph's life. Even though the latter makes some efforts to keep in charge of his destiny, these attempts fail and his private space is invaded. Whitlock gets Joseph high on cocaine in order to make him sign a sublease agreement with Amy, Amy moves into the apartment and has a dividing wall put in. Joseph unsuccessfully sues Amy, trying to make her leave his apartment. Accusing Joseph of harassment, Amy successfully sues him and gets a restraining order issued for her neighbour only to tell him, on the very same day, that she originally moved in with him because she hoped that maybe they would then "become closer" and turn into "lovers" (MLB: 116). On hearing this, Joseph passes out and wakes up in a hospital bed, his "entire corpus" apparently "wound up in toilet paper," his legs in casts, his face "bandaged" and feeling "swollen" (MLB: 118).

The intrusion into Joseph's living quarters by Amy has now been succeeded by an intrusion into his body. As she tells him, she "took the liberty of having some elective surgery done" on him. "Like the apartment, I had you completed before I moved in," Amy declares, and informs Joseph that he's had "nine operations" (MLB: 121). "As part of the torso-proportioning," Joseph has

apparently been subjected to a ""bone accentuation"" in his legs so that he is "average height now" (MLB: 121). What is more, his face is "different," his eyes are now "almondine, the nose, retrouseè, the cheekbones […] reinforced," his "chin […] clefted, the jawbone strengthened," the "ear lobes connected to" his "jaw," the "balding field of" his "scalp was seeded with a new crop of hair, the skin sanded" (MLB: 122). To complete this makeover and in an attempt to make it total, Amy has Joseph "scheduled for one more" operation – "a pupil-fusion," which shall provide him with brilliant "blue eyes that actually glow in the dark" –, starts calling him by a different name – "I decided that you'd make a good Bane. I plan to call you Bane during the length of our relationship" (MLB: 128) –, and tries to make him get a regular job.

For the rest of the narrative, agency and control seem to continuously swing back and forth like a pendulum between exterior forces and Joseph. On the one hand, for example, he does respond to the changes in his outer appearance by changes in his personality. "My thoughts have been taking on a new and sensible turn," he tells Whitlock and Amy after he has recovered from his operations. "'I've been thinking in short, declarative sentences. And worse, I … I … […] I've secretly been considering a ca…ca…' the word was obscene, the phrase had turned men into machines. I dreaded saying it, but there it was, 'Career!'" (MLB: 134). On the other hand, however, Joseph jettisons Amy's plans to have him trained as a refrigeration technician by not showing up for the classes he is supposed to take. A confusing and complex chain of events ensues. Joseph agrees to have the eye operation performed on him as Amy tells him that she cannot get sexually intimate with him before his eye colour is changed to blue. He subsequently sexually abuses her, turning her affection for him into repulsion, accepts almost half a million dollars from Whitlock for promising to stay away from Amy. After confirming the fact that he was apparently born in Tokyo at a time when Whitlock had been there as well, he tries to make sense of what has been happening to him in the past months:

> FACT: I WAS MYSTERIOUSLY BORN IN TOKYO WHILE WHITLOCK WAS THERE. AND THEN MYSTERIOUSLY PUT UP FOR ADOPTION.
> FACT: I WAS MYSTERIOUSLY GIVEN A WHITLOCK SCHOLARSHIP EVEN THOUGH I NEVER APPLIED FOR IT.
> FACT: THE GRANT WAS SUDDENLY CUT AT MY TWENTY-THIRD BIRTHDAY.
> FACT: MY ADOPTIVE FATHER WAS NEVER VERY PATERNAL.
> QUESTION: WHY WOULD AMY, A JUNIOR PARTNER AT ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S BIGGEST LAW FIRMS, NEED TO MOVE IN WITH A NUTCASE LIKE ME? (MLB: 177)

These events leave Joseph as perplexed as readers will be at this point in their reading experience. "All roads pointed to one answer: **?**" (MLB: 177), the first person narrator observes. In what follows, Joseph's and the readers' questions and confusions are answered and solved. Twice. The first set of answers provided in the text later turns out to be yet another deception, the second set of answers finally seems to merit Joseph's and the readers' trust in having figured out what has

been going on and why. In the very end, however, readers have to acknowledge that these apparently reliable answers are dubious, questionable, and uncertain as well.

What Joseph and the readers are first told by a board of trustees (sic!) is that Joseph is Whitlock's son, that he is supposed to gain a seat on the board of the multinational and apparently unsurpassably powerful Whitlock corporation, that he was "manufactured" in Tokyo "as a stipulation, a voucher to a corporate agreement" (MLB: 182) of the Whitlock corporation with the Japanese government who asked for a Japanese presence on the company's board in order to let it expand into Japan's market. The odd things that have happened to Joseph, he is told, were actually "[c]haracter assessment tests" to see if he was incompetent or not (MLB: 182). One of these tests, Joseph learns, was to see how he would handle wealth. "That money I gave you," Whitlock tells him, "was in fact the last test. […] How did you handle it? Anything that happens here will be incumbent upon its full return" (MLB: 183). After an initial bout of mistrust ("I refuse to believe this! […] You're all a cartel of out-of-work actors." (MLB: 185)), Joseph is won over to believe the stories he is told. They "really make complete sense" to him, tears of relief and joy at having discovered who he truly is start coming to his eyes (MLB: 189), and he gives the money back to Whitlock.

As soon as he does so, however, it turns out that he was fooled yet again. The board indeed consisted of people who were hired to pretend that there was a board which Joseph would belong to as soon as he would return the money to Whitlock. The moment he does so, Whitlock punches him "in the solar plexus" and Joseph goes "down hard" (MLB: 191). And not only Joseph's meeting with the board of trustees was a staged event. As he learns from Amy, "Whitlock had planned all this long ago. He wanted to drag you along much further. He wanted to get deep inside your head. He had a screenplay writer working on this. Planting clues and stuff. He wanted to string you along for years" (MLB: 193). What Whitlock hadn't anticipated, according to Amy, was that he would fall in love with her and that Amy would fall in love with Joseph. When it turned out that he had paid Joseph to stay away from Amy at a time when the latter had already left the former anyway, Whitlock "ransacked" Joseph's place in order to get his money back. Since he could not find the money, "he realized he had to pull the plug on this early" and bring "this delusional torture" (MLB: 194) to an end somehow. A few pages before the text ends, the delusion seems to finally end for Joseph and for readers when Mr. Ngm, Joseph's adoptive father shows up at Joseph's place, confirms some of the things Amy has told Joseph, and tells him that his parents "were a young couple from the midwest somewhere" who "were killed in an auto accident" (MLB: 197).

At this point in Joseph's story, many of the novel's unresolved and confusing occurrences and questions seem to finally be heading towards some kind of closure. Joseph finds out who his real parents were at last and Mr. Ngm starts showing some emotion towards his adoptive son. But then there is another serious disruption in the narrative. The story jumps ahead some fifty years into the future, and a man interrupts the first person narrator with the exclamation, "All I asked was "Did you make love with her?"" (MLB: 200). As we now learn, what we have read thus far is what Joseph – in retrospect and many years after the actual events – remembers or chooses to relate to his listener.

This renders the first person narrator even more unreliable than he had already been. Throughout the main narrative, there had already been ample signs which suggested that Joseph might have been a first person narrator who should maybe not be counted on. Amongst other things, he frequently lets the readers know how many drugs he consumes. He for example announces at one point that "I started drinking coffee and doing some drugs to help me think more clearly" (MLB: 115). What is more, his environment also perceives him as someone who might not have a clear idea of what is going on around him at all. As Amy tells Joseph when they have one of their discussions about their relationship, "I hardly think your criterion of reality is anything to judge anything by" (MLB: 136). That Amy might be right in her assessment of Joseph's limited to non-existent epistemological abilities is a possibility the reader also has to consider. While there are some statements on the final pages of the novel which hint at the possibility of giving the subject some stability because of its corporeality, everything else about Joseph's urban existence and experiences ultimately remains up in the air and cannot be grounded in a secure reality. After the narrative has jumped fifty years ahead on its final four pages, and as readers are probably still trying to come to terms with this sudden and unexpected turn, the addressee of Joseph's story suggests to him with some justification that "No one could remember all those tiresome details" and – considering the improbable events that have been recounted in the previous 199 pages – supposes that his "senility must have embellished" (MLB: 200), that much of the story springs from Joseph's imagination. When Joseph angrily bursts into an accusative monologue directed towards his listener, the latter calls it a "paranoid pablum" and Joseph himself admits that what he has related was made up of "Alzheimerish" statements (MLB: 201).

How the System Shapes Identities: *Look At Me*

Jennifer Egan's novel *Look at Me* focuses extensively on human identity and personality. And two of its main characters lend themselves especially well to a reading in support of postmodernist ideas

of the contemporary subject: Irene Maitlock and Aziz. We first get to know Irene as a reporter working for the *New York Post* who would like to write a story about Charlotte Swenson and her life after the accident which broke nearly every bone in the latter's face. The first conversation between Charlotte and Irene includes one of the most explicit hints that the novel is concerned with questions of identity. Identity, Irene informs Charlotte, is also what she is interested in as a reporter:

> I'm interested in the relationship between interior and exterior,' she said, 'how the world's perceptions of women affect our perceptions of ourselves. A model whose appearance has changed drastically is a perfect vehicle, I think, for examining the relationship among image, perception and identity, because a model's position as a purely physical object – a media object, if you will – […] is in a sense just a more exaggerated version of everyone's position in a visually based, media-driven culture (LAM: 74)

If this monologue sounds odd coming from a newspaper reporter, it is so for a reason. As it later turns out, Irene actually is not a journalist but an academic. A private detective has hired her to pose as a reporter and approach Charlotte in this guise in order to get information on her former lover Aziz, who has disappeared from New York without a trace. Not knowing that Irene has made contact with her under these false premises, Charlotte later hires her as her ghost writer for the internet project her life will be featured in. Eventually, though, Charlotte finds out that she has been deceived and confronts Irene with this new knowledge. The latter then confesses that she is an adjunct professor of comparative literature at a New York university, working on cultural studies, "[s]pecifically, the way literary and cinematic genres affect certain kinds of experience. […] For example, the Mafia. How do cultural notions of the so-called wiseguy affect the way people like John Gotti dress and move and speak?" (LAM: 279) This deception and performance of Irene does not make her into a postmodern character at all, of course. After all, there is a true Irene who is now supposedly discovered and who has only been hiding behind a mask she has consciously chosen. If anything, one could at this point classify Irene with Erving Goffman (see above) as a typically modern character – convincingly having taken on a role in a public performance as a journalist, but not having been taken in by this performance herself. As the narrative progresses, however, Irene is starting to lose herself and her self in another narrative. The narrative of the successful and important ghostwriter replaces the narrative of the poor academic who loves her unemployed composer husband. From a position of someone who analyses contemporary culture from a (critical) distance as a cultural theorist, she has moved to a position *within* and shaped *by* the culture she had tried to analyse before. On the last page of the novel, her transformation is complete:

> As the first 'new new journalist,' Irene Maitlock is something of a legend […]. Her company, miglior/fabbro.com, has prospered unfathomably, and she's a celebrity in her own right. I saw a picture of her recently on the arm of Richard Gere. She looks so different, thanks to her much chronicled makeover; without the name, I wouldn't have recognized her. (LAM: 415)

Even more so than Irene, the mysterious terrorist character Aziz (aka Z, aka Michael West), Charlotte Swenson's former lover, is an almost exemplary postmodern subject in that he completely succumbs to the environments he lives in. Having come to the United States from an Arab country with a group of other men in order to carry out a terrorist act at an unspecified time in the future, Aziz and his companions inhabit a small and dingy apartment in a New Jersey suburb of New York City. Aziz is filled with compassionate hate against the USA, but the country also fascinates him. At "the end of each endless day" of working at a gas station, he makes his way "up the rungs of a swerving fire escape" to look "at Manhattan from the roof of the building where he and nine other men shared two rooms" (LAM: 342) and perceives the city as a "ravishing silhouette." To Aziz, "Manhattan shimmered like a single thing, a beaten piece of gold or some mythical animal flicking its pink feathers in the sun" (LAM: 342-43). Overwhelmed and attracted by the gigantic city he is observing from afar, he is still mainly guided by "a grim and patient will to destroy it" and, together with his fellow future terrorists, is "amassing drums of nitroglycerine and ammonia and fertilizer in a nearby family's basement" (LAM: 343). But the culture he has entered is having its effects on him:

> At night, they watched TV. Aziz and his gaunt compatriots crammed together onto a foam-rubber couch […]; they huddled like pigeons, craving the anesthesia that issued from that screen, the tranquilizing rays: cars animate as human faces; breakfast cereals adrift in the whitest milk Aziz had ever seen; juice erupting from phosphorescent oranges. And girls: ribbony girls whose hair floated and danced, girls who winked at each occupant of the foam-rubber couch individually, eliciting a chorus of exhausted sighs. (LAM: 343)

For the longest time, the two competing discourses of fascination / attraction and hate continue to exist side by side in Aziz. On his second exploratory day trip to Manhattan, for example, he accidentally witnesses the arrival of a beautiful woman he knows from television at an up-scale department store. As he peers "through the store windows, the rage that lived inside him like a second beating heart awoke with a jerk that stirred his lower parts, rousing him. Exciting him." But the excitement is not only caused by his hate for American culture. "Rage and desire were a pair, joined somewhere deep within him," we are told, and Aziz cuts "short his search that day, consumed by a need to return to Jersey City and stand behind the blue plastic shower curtain […] and masturbate" (LAM: 346).

The place 'deep within him' is, however, not a site of a conscious debate about what is right and what is wrong or about what American culture is like. The place 'deep within' Aziz is a site where discourses clash, the American meta-narrative slowly drowning out the anti-American terrorist one. Aziz is not an agent. He is created by the discourses he moves within and into. Unable to steer his personality in one direction or another, he is "aware of the rage waving like a flag near his heart"

(LAM: 343) and in Manhattan, he is "guided by a pulse from within the city's depths" (LAM: 351). Aziz does not have an active part in where he is going or what is going on inside of him. He is "a machine of adaptation, listening, memorizing, his mind gnawing like a mass of termites at the heft of all he didn't know" (LAM: 237). When he decides to infiltrate or rather enter the club scene of New York, for example, he adopts a new name, the letter Z, copying a doorman who calls himself G (see LAM: 352, 355), and derives everything from his clothing to his language from observing his surroundings, having collected people's garbage, having studied what they wear, listening to "listless chat and repeat[ing] phrases to himself before the bathroom mirror" (LAM: 355). The way Aziz is shaped becomes especially clear in how Aziz first consumes, then uses, and finally intends to actually live and create what he sees on television. Having moved from New York to a smaller city in the American Mid-West, Rockford, Ill., and having shed his skin once more to now become Michael West, a high-school teacher, he still "hadn't yet developed an individual voice; his phrasing and diction were copied from TV and the people around him. His grammar was cautious, studied" (LAM: 118-19). But the voice he copies will soon have taken over that human being who once was called Aziz, "eventually a voice, too, would come. It always did" (LAM: 119) for him, because, as we are told,

> Michael West had a gift for languages and accents – more than a gift, he could not resist them. They acted upon him like magnetic fields, unmooring his speech from the landscape of his own past and reconfiguring it in the image of his immediate surroundings. […F]or Michael West, the past was gone, pulverized into grains of memory too fine to decipher, or to leave him with any sense of loss. (LAM: 119).

And so, in the end, he "thought in English, dreamed in English" and the "other languages were gone, his past was gone and so was his rage, it had vanished" (LAM: 313) and has made room for a "plan to go to Los Angeles and *make movies*" (LAM: 313, original emphasis).

4 Writing Against Postmodernism

> [P]erhaps the most significant question now is: what is to come after postmodernism?
> (José Lopez / Garry Potter, "After Postmodernism: The New Millennium")

> What lies beyond postmodernism? Of course, no one knows; we hardly know what postmodernism was.
> (Ihab Hassan, "Beyond Postmodernism")

In this second major part, the present study will carry out a critique of postmodern theory, but this is of course by no means an original endeavour. Doubts about the postmodern and its implications can be observed at early stages of postmodern theorizing, both from within the movement and from its opponents. In the preface to the fundamental 1983 essay collection *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Hal Foster already notes that the plurality advocated by postmodernism might lead to "indifference" and that postmodernism might be "dismissed as relativism."[269] But then, can relativism so easily be dismissed? Richard Sheppard suggests that "whatever one thinks about the macroproblems of postmodernity, its discontents, and the significance of those discontents, it leaves us, via postmodernism and poststructuralism, with several specific problems,"[270] which Sheppard states he "can only set out and certainly not solve."[271] The debate, Sheppard acknowledges, "is bewildering in its complexity and to every answer there seems to be an objection, equal and opposite" – "there are no easy answers."[272] And there never have been, one might add. In a survey of conceptions of truth through Western thought, Felipe Fernandéz-Armesto suggests that today's postmodernists are basically descendants of the ancient relativist philosopher Protagoras, whose theses Plato tried to but never could quite logically disprove. As Fernandéz-Armesto recounts, we read, in Plato's dialogue dealing with Protagoras how, "[a]fter whirling around all day in a vortex of circular arguments, Socrates dismissed them all as 'wind' and postponed the discussion to a morning which, in surviving texts, never comes."[273]

If I engage in my own 'whirling around in a vortex of arguments' – with heavy borrowing from other thinkers – in what follows, it is not with the hope to at last ultimately set to rest the age-old conflict between relativism and truth-centred discourses. But it is with the understanding that relativist postmodernist doubts about the human subject and about language cannot simply be

[269] Foster 1983: xi.
[270] Sheppard: 370.
[271] Sheppard: 370.
[272] Sheppard: 371.
[273] Fernandéz-Armesto: 204.

glossed over, partly because they have so widely been promoted in the humanities recently, and partly because, as Fernandez-Armésto has rightly stated, there seem to be good arguments in favour of relativism. In the present section, I will therefore first survey arguments that can be raised against postmodern theory. I will then provide an overview of alternatives to postmodern positions which have recently been presented by various thinkers. At the end, I will present and develop a short argument on which alternative, to me, seems to make the most sense.

4.1.1 Criticisms against Postmodernism

Postmodern Theory and Political Action

One thing postmodern theory is often criticized for is that it does not have a politically empowering potential. A recent example of this kind of an evaluation is Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* (2003). Eagleton had already been quite critical of much postmodern (or post-structuralist) thought in his *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983).[274] With *After Theory*, he devotes a whole book to rejecting many notions of postmodernism. Eagleton does acknowledge some theoretical developments of the past decades, such as post-colonial studies and "the discourse of gender and sexuality" as "precious achievements of cultural theory."[275] He also concedes that "[m]any of the ideas of" cultural theorists "remain of incomparable value" and that some postmodernist thinkers "are still producing work of major importance."[276] But he accuses contemporary cultural theory of not paying enough attention to social and political problems such as poverty,[277] and, even more importantly, of failing to offer tools and theories for effective political and social change. "Instability of identity is 'subversive'," Eagleton paraphrases postmodern theory, and adds the comment: "a claim which it would be interesting to test out among the socially dumped and disregarded."[278] With these assessments, Eagleton repeats what many people have said before him. Habermas's famous claim that postmodern thought is deluded when it considers itself subversive rests on the argument that postmodernist theory does not pose challenges to the economical, the social, and the political systems which are in place. Marc Chénetier makes the same point when he states, "As for me, I hold with […] Fredric Jameson, Charles Newman and Gerald Graff, that we

274 See Eagleton 1983, especially 127-150.
275 Eagleton 2003: 6.
276 Eagleton 2003: 1.
277 Eagleton remarks, e.g., that in "some cultural circles, the politics of masturbation exert far more fascination than the politics of the Middle East" and that the body, while "immensely fashionable" as an object of contemplation, is all too often only seen as "the erotic body, not the famished one" (Eagleton 2003: 2).
278 Eagleton 2003: 16.

would be wrong not to consider the utmost favors this very notion does to the powers that are."[279] And Hans Bertens tells us why. If all meta-narratives are to be mistrusted, then any vision of a better future (be it on the micro- or the macro-level) as well as any reason for acting one way or another cannot be legitimised. As Bertens writes,

> [t]he politics of postmodernism, whether it be cultural politics, micro-politics, or a more traditional macropolitics, has not yet been able to formulate an answer to the problem of legitimation. To claim universalism for freedom and equality is to invoke essentialism or to force things that have no ultimate legitimation down everybody's throat […].[280]

How can the political aims of certain groups be promoted if the concept of a definable self is contested? This tension is most visible in feminist and in post-colonial theory. In both areas, two similar strands can be identified. One challenges the entire system of classification in terms of discernible selves forming a group, the other emphasizes the need to belong to a definable group if you want to achieve meaningful things in politics. In feminism, the former strand, in Terry Eagleton's words, aims at "a troubling and subverting of all such sexual straightjacketing"[281] while the latter is observable in essentialist theories, feminism's "recourse to the notion of a 'natural' femininity"[282] that attributes certain essential (and often essentially positive) characteristics to the female. From this position of feminist essentialism, postmodern thought is accused of being a "male power play"[283] since, instead of helping women to get more power or to receive justice for social wrongs, the category 'woman' itself is questioned and done away with. As Somer Brodribb argues, "[a]ccording to Kristeva, 'women exist' is an essentialist statement, but nothing *is*, negation *is*, and is a higher form of being than woman."[284] For her, this is "[s]trange timing: the subject is now annulled by ungenerous and disingenuous white western wizards while women's, Black and Third World liberation movements are claiming their voices."[285]

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[279] Chénetier: 7. It should be noted that many postmodern theorists have engaged in their respective fields hoping for exactly the opposite. A large number of them thought and still think that attacking master narratives and engaging in deconstructive analyses would result not merely in interesting literary interpretations but would constitute subversive political action and challenge 'the powers that are.' As Hans Bertens suggests, many postmodern theorists and artists saw "deconstructionist anti-representationalism" as "the liberationist strategy *par excellence*. From this perspective, representation implies an inevitable surrender to those forces who have successfully colonized the real. In its attempt to attack and undermine representation, anti-representationalism is then always politically subversive" (Bertens 1996: 99). Some recent examples of such reasoning can be found in Marjorie Garber et al.'s essay collection *The Turn to Ethics* (2000), in which some contributors voice their reservations against a turn to ethical questions because they fear that the political – which they see as a major component of deconstructionist thought – might therefore be neglected. Judith Butler, e.g., notes that she "worried that the return to ethics has constituted an escape from politics" (Butler 2000: 15). Another contributor, John Guillory, suggests that "[i]f there has been a 'turn to ethics' in a number of disciplines, this event raises the question of what one turns *from* to arrive at the ethical." His answer is "that the inevitable answer to this question, at the present moment, is the *political*. The turn to ethics is a turn away from the political" (Guillory: 29, original emphases).

[280] Bertens 1996: 111.

[281] Eagleton 1983: 24.

[282] Müller: 28.

[283] Brodribb: xx.

[284] Brodribb: xxii, original emphasis.

[285] Brodribb: xvii.

This last statement of Brodribb already makes clear that the same problems arise in postcolonial theory. One line of postcolonial theory contests the notion of a definable self and puts this very claim at the centre of it arguments. The 'post' in this version of the post-colonial points to a world in which the colonial period is not replaced by a balance of power between discernible groups but with a world of 'hybrid' identities, which would necessarily lead away from the colonial order. Another line of thought attributes definable selves to the members of colonized groups. The post-colonial utopia is then a world in which the formerly oppressed groups are given a voice and political, social, and economic power. As a consequence, these ethnic or oppressed groups need to be comprised of individual members who share an at least partly common identity and who possess a somehow definable self. A denial or a radical questioning of a coherent self, an embrace of a fragmented and contingent notion of identity would lead to a relativism in which political campaigns and action in favour of a certain group are no longer possible. As Simon During puts it, "the concept of postmodernity has been constructed in terms which more or less intentionally wipe out the possibility of post-colonial identity" since, for him, postcolonialism is guided by "the need, in nations or groups which have been victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity uncontaminated by universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images."[286] Likewise, Kumkum Sangari argues, "postmodern epistemology [...] universalises the self-conscious dissolution of the [American and European] bourgeois subject"[287] in a depoliticised intellectual environment and suggests that "the crisis of meaning in the West"[288] should be received with caution and should not readily get incorporated into post-colonial theories.[289]

Besides postmodernism's difficulty in the face of social questions and its de-stabilization of the subject, the 'crisis of meaning' Sangari speaks of is another problematic trait when it comes to political action. For if language cannot be trusted, how can you express your needs, your problems, and your desires, and how can other people ever understand you? Brodribb therefore polemically and angrily writes that "[t]he Master wants to keep the narrative to himself, and he's willing to

[286] During: 125.
[287] Sangari: 143.
[288] Sangari: 147.
[289] Of course, theorists who favour a critique of the essential self have identified this problem and have tried to solve it by weakening the radical claims of postmodernism. To quote but a few examples of many attempts to reconcile postmodern theory and political action, Jane M. Jacobs states that "the fractured and contingent nature of identity is undeniable" but follows this by proposing that "so too is the necessity of temporary fixings of identity around […] essentialised notions" (Jacobs: 162) for political and social purposes. Similarly to Jacobs, Linda Hutcheon is concerned about how to combine social action with postmodern ideas of identity. According to Hutcheon, postmodernism does not destroy the subject but rather decentres and thereby situates it, recognizing "differences - of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and so on" (Hutcheon 1988: 159). Hutcheon, like Jacobs, does recognize the paradox of a radical critique of epistemology and the situating of anything. For her, this paradoxical tension is a defining part of postmodernism.

explode the whole structure of discourse if we start to talk"[290], and David Harvey cautions that "to accept the fragmentation, the pluralism, and the authenticity of other voices and other worlds poses the acute problem of communication and the means of exercising power through command thereof."[291]

Postmodernism Institutionalised

Michael W. Nicholson has argued that, "for the most part the postmodernism debate remains an intellectual in-house affair, a sort of academic *incurvatus in se*."[292] Whether this is true might be contested, since, as I have tried to argue above, a relativist worldview seems to have spread through many parts of non-academic society during the past decades as well. Nevertheless, Nicholson's statement points towards an important feature of postmodern theory which has been highlighted by various observers. In many English departments in North America, postmodernist assumptions have apparently become as institutionalised as New Criticism once was. Linda Martín Alcoff, for example, remarks that denouncing identity "has become the litmus test of academic respectability, political acceptability, and even a necessity for the very right to be heard."[293] And, according to Alcoff, to "reclaim the term 'realism,' to maintain the epistemic significance of identity, to defend any version of identity politics today is to swim upstream of strong academic currents in feminist theory, literary theory, and cultural studies."[294] So is the story of postmodernism one of appealing to current academic fashion? Has postmodern theory turned into the new orthodoxy? This partly seems to be the case, and it is a case strongly argued by Lena Petrovic who tells the illustrative story of one of her students who attended a "seminar on the modern novel" in Edinburgh in 2001. Her student, she recounts,

> read a paper on *The Heart of Darkness* and scandalized practically all the participants by saying that the story was, among other things, about western imperialism. […] They denounced his reading as a misreading […]. The meaning, presumably, consisted in its being a sum of formal devices, whose purpose was to subvert referentiality, forestall closure and precipitate the reader into abysmal indeterminacy of irresolvable aporias.[295]

In Petrovic's somewhat polemical words, students at many institutions of higher education have in recent years been taught to "confuse a thorough, comprehensive, responsible reading of what in

[290] Brodribb: xviii.
[291] Harvey 1989: 49.
[292] Nicholson: 300, original emphasis.
[293] Alcoff: 313.
[294] Alcoff: 312.
[295] Petrovic: 61.

itself was a problematization of a closure […] with the sin of interpretative closure – and then to confuse this confusion, this intellectual frivolity, with sophistication."[296]

A similar view of postmodernism – not mainly as a theoretical position within the humanities but as a story of institutionalisation and of generational conflict – emerges from a recent interview with Frank Kermode. As he recalls, as far as poststructuralist ideas were concerned,

> around about 1968 to 1970-odd, in London, one of the joys of it, I see now, was that we were a minority, we were people who were doing something new and anti-institutional; that the very Department in which we were holding these [theory] seminars was not interested in what we were doing.[297]

Part of the joy of participating in the movement, then, was that it was oppositional to what was established. "Later, of course," Kermode goes on to remark, "the theoretical approach […] to the study of literature was institutionalized; so in fact, in order to stay outside institutionalization, you have to take a position, a rather uneasy one like my present one, which is to *oppose*."[298]

For a theoretical position that attacks authorities, having turned into the standard way of doing things is of course problematic and, to a large degree, paradoxical. But postmodernist ideas of the world and of literature have not only turned into an institutionally supported way of writing papers and talking about cultural production; the institutions have also borne their own individual authorities. The anti-canonical rebels of the past have not only made it into English departments, some of them have themselves become canonical.

Postmodernism Relativized & Postmodernspeak

Mark Shechner puts forth a related kind of criticism towards postmodernism at the beginning of his essay "American Realism, American Realities." He starts out the essay by retelling the experience of seeing the film *My Left Foot* together with a colleague of his and with his wife, who is not an academic. While his wife has been moved to tears by the movie, Shechner's colleague "was unmoved, allowing as how the film was skilfully done but not, in her view, significant" since it did not "raise any interesting issues."[299] Shechner then identifies these 'interesting issues' as poststructuralist concerns with constructed realities and representations, and qualifies these as

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[296] Petrovic: 62.
[297] Kermode 2003: 57.
[298] Kermode 2003: 57, original emphasis. For a similar assessment of how and why theoretical trends develop, see Sconce, who argues that "[m]uch of the debate about 'the new nihilism' embodies these tensions between 'older' and 'younger' cultural producers and critics, a fiction that indicates a competition for prestige and legitimization" (Sconce: 357). See also Guntermann, who takes the oppositional attitude of much postmodernist theory to be one of its fundamental principles (Guntermann: 75-77).
[299] Shechner: 27.

"ideas that are currently in fashion"[300] in English departments. His argument here, in short, is that what is being taught and thought at universities is often being done in an ivory tower not connected to everyday experience. In addition, by calling poststructuralist theories 'trends' and 'fashion', he also suggests that the 'interesting issues' at stake in the classroom do themselves follow certain ideologies and are constructed themselves. Other theorists have argued along similar lines. When Brian McHale, e.g., writes that "postmodernism exists discursively, in the discourses we produce *about* it and *using* it,"[301] he makes just this point, and Vera Nünning states that "[j]ust like other literary epochs and movements, postmodernism is a construct rather than the 'objective' designation of an entity or a category 'out there'."[302] To emphasize this point from a perspective which is more critical towards postmodernism than McHale's or Nünning's, Marc Chénetier argues that, as far as literary postmodernism is concerned, the "narrowness of the scope of the literary corpus used by theoreticians of 'post-modernism' could suffice […] to explain the superficiality of their conclusions."[303] One could therefore, with Lena Petrovic, make the case that, in the end, there really "is no postmodern literature, there is only postmodern interpretation of literature"[304]

Such 'postmodern interpretations of literature' are almost always accompanied by a certain jargon, and another feature postmodern theory is often accused of is its sometimes rather cryptic style – in the eyes of some critics in order to either assume an elitist pose[305], or to hide the fact that nothing new is actually being said and that postmodern critique often employs non-justified and sloppy methods. Richard Sheppard blows into this horn when he notes that during "the 1980s a large number of academics bought into poststructuralism, producing tortuously prolix texts that wasted a lot of readers' time."[306] Alan Bilton adds to this that "the impenetrable prose of much theoretical writing […] resembles the bureaucratic terminology satirised in many"[307] contemporary novels, and John Rajchman asserts that

[300] Shechner: 28.
[301] McHale 1992: 1, original emphases.
[302] Nünning: 235.
[303] Chénetier: 16.
[304] Petrovic: 60. Gerhard Schulze gives this argument his own twist by stating, in essence, the same thing about the world at large and about how people have tried to come to terms with it in the past. There is no postmodern world, there is only a postmodern interpretation of the world, he argues. But the same, for Schulze, who is less critical towards postmodernism than other theorists dealt with in this section, is of course true for other schools of thought as well. As Schulze sees it, in a generational circle, views on the world which emphasize its inherent chaos and philosophies which try to impose an order on it keep replacing each other throughout the history of Western philosophy. He writes: "Das Auf und Ab des umherirrenden Bewußtseins, jenes kulturgeschichtliche Wechselbad zwischen Aufgehobensein und Orientierungskrise, ist nur eine Endlosschleife kollektiver Gefühlsumschwünge. Unberührt bleibt der Sachverhalt selbst. Nicht unsere Haltlosigkeit verändert sich, sondern die Art und Weise damit umzugehen" (Schulze 1994: 80).
[305] See Denis Donoghue, who argues: "I think Deconstruction appeals to the clerisy of graduate students, who like to feel themselves superior to the laity of common readers" (Donoghue: 41).
[306] Sheppard: 364.
[307] Bilton: 12.

> Postmodern theory exemplifies what it is about. […] Postmodernism is theoretical cannibalism; it is the supermarket approach to ideas. One jumbles together the different theoretical idioms available without commensurating them into a single coherent language.[308]

One of the most biting critiques of the style of postmodern theories is provided in the short ironic essay "How to Speak and Write Postmodern" by Stephen Katz. Katz's suggestions include such pieces of advice as "you need to remember that plainly expressed language is out of the question" even for things that could be plainly expressed. Such a way of speaking would be considered "too realist, modernist and obvious."[309] He also remarks that "saying the wrong thing is acceptable" in postmodern theoretical discourse "if you say it the right way." That is, you need to "use as many suffixes, prefixes, hyphens, slashes, underlinings and anything else your computer […] can dish out" in combination with "a series of well-respected names that make for impressive adjectives or schools of thought" such as "Foucauldian" and "Derridean."[310]

Reasoning Humanity's Way Out of Reason?

One might argue that the tendency to write in a cryptical, confusing, or if you will, poetic style reflects the skepticism of postmodern writers and theorists regarding logic and communication. And yet, they cannot and do not simply go without either trying to say something meaningful or without making arguments in support of their views. Which leads directly to another point of criticism against postmodern notions, i.e. the disappearance of the subject and of reason and the unreliability of language to assert anything. For in fact, in arguing its cases postmodern theory makes use of the very concepts it fiercely attacks. One could say, for example, that what is happening in much postmodern theory is that those who propagate it are trying to reason humanity's way out of reason, which is, of course an untenable paradox. You can either believe in reasoning and therefore try to reason with your readers. Or, if you do not believe in reasoning, then it does not make sense to present an argument. What is more, if language is not a system of (somewhat) stable meanings, how can you use it to argue in favour of a specific (postmodern) argument? In Raymond Shusterman's words, such "attempts seem […] doomed by the dialectical

[308] Rajchman 1991b: 125. Rajchman adds that "A typical feature of postmodernist writing in America is to substantiate every idea by reference to some (still preferably European) authority, with little or no attention to coherence among them. The validation of the ideas of theoretical authorities is not central to their postmodern use. Rather, theory becomes an arena of authority which comprises a number of diverse vocabularies that be brought to bear in describing events or trends" (Rajchman 1991b: 124). See also Jürgen Habermas, who has argued: "Die methodologische Vernunftfeindlichkeit mag mit der historischen Unschuld zusammenhängen, mit der sich Untersuchungen dieses Typs heute im Niemandsland zwischen Argumentation, Erzählung und Fiktion bewegen" (Habermas 1985: 353).
[309] Katz: 93.
[310] Katz: 94. The Postmodernism Generator presents a similar – and humorous – critique of "Postmodernspeak" on the internet. It automatically creates random texts which appear on the screen in postmodern lingo, and which are followed by the remark: "The essay you have just seen is completely meaningless and was randomly generated by the Postmodernism Generator" (Bulhak 2000). For a detailed description of how the generator works, see Bulhak 1996.

dilemma that to discourse about 'the other of reason' or 'the other of language' is already to inscribe that other within the ambit of reason and language."[311] Some postmodern theorists themselves are acknowledging this insolvable paradox. As a critic notes:

> Baudrillard has unveiled the groundlessness of theory, like Nietzsche and Bataille before him, but he has managed to fashion a space for a different sort of 'theory,' one that is fatal, ironic, even absurd in its abandonment of the timeworn project toward truth or production. His is a 'theory' obsessed only with reiterating the impossibility of theory. Thus, to read and study the theory-fiction of Jean Baudrillard is in fact 'to proceed without believing in it, to sanction a direct fascination with conventional signs and groundless rules.'[312]

Why one would continue to produce 'theory-fiction' one does not believe in, or why one should read any of it if it is absurd, fatal, ironic and if it only ever re-iterates the impossibility of theory remains dubious. It seems clear, for one thing, that if one continues to produce theory, one should acknowledge that theory is by no means impossible. As E. D. Hirsch has pointed out almost thirty years ago in an early response to the relativist intellectual fashion which was then starting to take hold in literature departments of the United States, it "is logically inconsistent to write scholarly books which argue that there is no point in writing scholarly books."[313] Despite many claims to the contrary, what might lie behind such paradox reasonings is the conviction that one is in possession of a deeper understanding of reality and of how things work, or as Hilary Putnam puts it, that one "believes that in some deep pretheoretic sense" one's "picture is the way the world *is*."[314] In other words, very often, "the very person who strongly denies that there is any such property as truth, and who waves the picture at us to call our attention to its various attractions, […] does not recognize that" his ideas of how things are "is only a picture" as well.[315]

What is more, the pictures about the past being waved at us, are often rather narrow and simplistic. For many postmodern theorists, and for even more of their followers, this is, to say it with Alex Callinicos, a "tendency […] embarrassing for self-proclaimed philosophers of difference."[316] The past, be it the literary or the philosophical one, is often constructed in the best straw man-fashion.[317] As early as 1980, Umberto Eco rather politely pointed out about the supposedly postmodern crisis of representation:

> [I]t seems to me that the definition of this crisis began with Parmenides, continued with Georgias, caused Descartes no small amount of concern, made things awkward for everyone thanks to Berkeley

311 Shusterman 1989: 620.
312 De Boer. The quote from Baudrillard at the end of De Boer's quote is taken from Baudrillard 1990: 17.
313 Hirsch: 13.
314 Putnam 1990a: 32, emphasis added.
315 Putnam 1990a: 32.
316 Callinicos: 27.
317 See, for example, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, who claim the following: "When postmodernists mock the idea that the human mind mirrors nature or that historians write about the past as it actually happened, they are knocking over the straw men of heroic science and its history clone" (Appleby et al.: 246-247).

> and Hume, and so on, down to phenomenology. […] Those who rediscover the crisis of representation today seem to have charmingly vague ideas about the continuity of the discussion.[318]

Many others have attacked postmodern theory on these grounds. Alan Wilde, e.g., states that "the conception of humanism to be found in a good deal of current criticism is far too unhistorical, unshaded, monolithic, and too inattentive – in spite of an insistence on difference and particularity – to times, places, and mentalities incommensurate with our own"[319]. Likewise, Nicholson states, "what an analysis of the postmodernism debate reveals is that the questions that constitute the debate are the perennial questions that have exercised philosophers and theologians throughout history"[320]. And one of the most elaborate and substantial collections of criticisms against this simplifying tendency in postmodern theory comes from M. J. Devaney's excellent study *'Since at Least Plato …' and Other Postmodernist Myths*, in which she takes up many simplistic arguments made by postmodernist theorists, including assumptions about (19th century) realist literature.[321] Devaney here observes that the questionable "idea that prior to the development of postmodernist and poststructuralist theory, writers, critics and philosophers in the west universally believed we could have unmediated access to the past is widely shared by theorists of postmodernism."[322]

In keeping with Putnam's suggestion about the picture of the world cited above, these simplifications of postmodern theorists could also be seen as leading to or rather resulting from a narrow or shallow conception of what it means to engage in philosophical debate in general. This is a point Paula Moya makes when she states that the "reason postmodernists deny the possibility of objectivity is that they have an impoverished view of what can count as objective."[323] What, in a postmodernist's view, does count as objective and as true? Is it that mysterious union of the word and the world he permanently attacks? Is it the idea of a god-like understanding of the world? So despite the constant emphases on difference, despite a focus on the subtleties of language and of existence, are postmodernists maybe actually the ones who think in absolutes, who desire these absolutes? The constant references to these absolutes might be interpreted as such a desire. And when Umberto Eco speaks of a "religiosity of the void" which has replaced both "Marxist" and "liberal optimism,"[324] the term religiosity is not only to be understood as indicating the fervour with which the void is promoted. It also speaks of a desire for the sacred and for absolutes. Hilary Putnam also believes this to be the case and suggests:

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318 Eco (1980) 1986b: 127.
319 Wilde, A. 1987: 9.
320 Nicholson: 301.
321 Devaney: 115-152.
322 Devaney: 141.
323 Moya 2000: 12.
324 Eco (1979) 1986b: 94.

> The contemporary tendency to regard interpretation as something second class reflects, I think, not a craving for objectivity but a craving for absolutes – a craving for absolutes and a tendency which is inseparable from that craving, the tendency to think that if the absolute is unobtainable, then 'anything goes.'[325]

Another kind of criticism which has been directed against postmodernism is that it fails to see that it might, really, be a continuation of modernist poetics and modern thoughts, and that, at the most, it has radicalised thoughts and poetic practices already present in the 'modern era.' Various writers have raised their voices, claiming that we are still experiencing a modern, and by no means some kind of postmodern time. Richard Sheppard argues about modern and postmodern aesthetics that, "over and over again, writers oppose modernism and postmodernism without realizing that their characterizations of the latter phenomenon apply equally well to the experimental wing of the former phenomenon."[326] And Callinicos observes about postmodernist skepticism towards communication and language:

> A conception of reality of ultimately Nietzschean provenance which was fairly widespread among the intelligentsia of *Mitteleuropa* at the end of the last [i.e. the 19th] century and which is often present in the work of major Modernist figures such as Hofmannsthal is presented as peculiarly *Post*modernist.[327]

[325] Putnam 1984: 131.
[326] Sheppard: 365-66.
[327] Callinicos: 12, original emphasis.

4.1.2 Alternatives to Postmodernism?

After this survey of some of the criticisms that have been mounted against postmodernism, it is time to see what has been and what can be proposed as alternatives that would take us 'beyond' postmodernism. Some, of course, claim, that postmodernism, for better or for worse, is here to stay. Despite of all the criticisms that have been directed at theories of the postmodern, Zygmunt Bauman, for example, claims in *Postmodernity and Its Discontents* that the "process of thorough and relentless 'undercertainization'"[328] cannot be reversed and has culminated in personal freedom coupled with a postmodern lack of stability. There is no way back, for "numerous reasons, the restoration of modern certainty is not on the cards,"[329] Bauman argues. To him, one important advantage of this is that postmodernism has lead to more peaceful and tolerant communities on the small and on the large scale. While "one hears again and again that 'If there is no God, everything is allowed'," for Bauman, history is "fraught with mass murder committed in the name of the one and only truth" and, on the other hand, it

> is hard to point out […] a single case of a cruel deed perpetrated in the name of plurality and tolerance. The intrepid conquerors of the infidels, the cardinals of the Holy Inquisition, the commanders of religious wars were no more notorious for their relativism and love of plurality than Hitler or Stalin.[330]

The big disadvantage Bauman associates with freedom is that it may come with a high degree of anxiety for the individual.[331] Since freedom "is our fate,"[332] however, Bauman suggests that we had better make the best of it. Others take a somewhat different route in their attempts to rescue postmodern thought by proposing a reinterpretation, redefinition, or a cleansing of the term, which, in their opinion, has been misused and misunderstood.

Reinterpretations of the Term Postmodernism

Nicholas Zurbrugg has recently argued that "postmodern culture is repeatedly misrepresented as an era of cultural and theoretical confusion neutralizing the more positive energies of cultural modernism and accelerating the supposed 'death' of aura, authoriality, avant-garde integrity, and

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328 Bauman 1997: 203.
329 Bauman 1997: 200.
330 Bauman 1997: 200-201. While Bauman has a point here, one should also note his use of extreme examples, which suggest that he might fall under the criticism Putnam and Eco have put forward against the typical use of absolutes and totalities (see above).
331 Bauman also acknowledges another disadvantage of our, in his eyes, placeless and rootless postmodern age. Introducing a social element into his analysis, he likens those who have the ability to move around as they like to tourists, but concedes that there are also those who cannot financially afford to take part in the postmodern chase for fleeting aesthetic satisfaction. This group of people, to Bauman, are "vagabonds," people who "see their plight as anything but a manifestation of freedom" and are the "waste of the world that has dedicated itself to tourist services" (Bauman 2000: 22).
332 Bauman 1997: 203.

referential reality."[333] In Zurbrugg's eyes, this misrepresentation is unjustly based "upon the more extreme assertions of Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Peter Bürger and Baudrillard" and "culminates in the mythology [of] cultural exhaustion and entropy."[334] What gets lost along the way or is unduly discredited for Zurbrugg are "the more rewarding forms of postmodern creativity – particularly postmodern multimedia creativity."[335] When Zurbrugg speaks of 'postmodern creativity' and specifies it as 'multimedia creativity', however, he basically argues that postmodernism has less to do with philosophical positions on the nature of the subject, on epistemology, and on language. For him, it seems, advances in technology and the new forms of expression they allow are what makes our time a postmodern one. Postmodernism, in his eyes, is defined by "innovative postmodern technological practices,"[336] not by a skeptical worldview. It is on such a technology-based understanding of the contemporary that he praises "the technological confidence and flair of pioneer American postmodernist such as John Cage" and calls for "highly challenging conceptual and creative initiatives"[337] or "positively innovative discourses-in-progress."[338] In the framework Zurbrugg proposes, the subject as an agent is by no means lost. "Significantly," he argues,

> both Barthes and Baudrillard have gradually acknowledged that postmodern technological practices may well be surprisingly compatible with the very notions of singularity, originality, subjectivity, and creativity which their earlier writings [...] dismissed, displaced or deconstructed beyond recognition.[339]

What is not clear, however, is why the creativity Zurbrugg is promoting and calling for should be considered a specifically postmodern one. Have artists of all ages, and especially modernist artists, not incorporated new technologies into their artistic production(s)? And does only this incorporation of new technologies into the process of creating art without an accompanying aesthetics, without the proclamation of goals, visions, aims, utopian or dystopian scenarios qualify an artwork to be called postmodern?

A different re-interpretation of postmodern philosophy is presented by Christopher Norris, who calls it a "part of my project […] to reclaim Derrida from the large number of mostly 'literary' commentators who've read him in a very different way,"[340] i.e. from people who read him as a radical relativist. Norris, for example, argues that Derrida's claims about Rousseau's oeuvre "would be worthless […] were they not backed up […] by textual close-reading and conceptual exegesis of

[333] Zurbrugg: 121.
[334] Zurbrugg: 121-22.
[335] Zurbrugg: 122.
[336] Zurbrugg: 133.
[337] Zurbrugg: 122.
[338] Zurbrugg: 142.
[339] Zurbrugg: 126.
[340] Norris 2003: 83.

the highest analytical order."[341] Derrida's 'logic of the supplementary', for Norris, is "the questioning of preconceived truth-claims, values, and properties." The French theorist, Norris argues, "does so always as the upshot of a reading that respects both the intricate detail of the text […] and also the need for argumentative rigour in the strictest philosophical sense of that term."[342] As Callinicos has argued, if one follows Norris, then deconstruction could be said to be "a form of close reading bearing a strong resemblance to the methods of analytical philosophy"[343], and it it not clearly postmodern.

Another re-interpretation of postmodernism is presented by Hans Bertens, who argues in favour of what he labels "bourgeois postmodernism."[344] This bourgeois postmodernism, to him, "is postmodern difference, the untheoretical, bourgeois version of différance."[345] In his opinion, one can reject "the postmodern notions of language, of the subject, and so on" and still "see the increased acceptance of difference as postmodern."[346] For Bertens, the "bourgeois postmodernism that I am thinking of here does not so much deconstruct the Enlightenment home as refurbish it," he asserts, "and throw it open – at least in principle – to all those who, because of their difference"[347] had no part in the modernist project. If one follows either Norris or Bertens, however, one would have no need for calling for a radical break or a new era, call it postmodern or something else, or would one?

An attempt to salvage the term postmodernism from a very different direction while almost completely re-interpreting its meaning can be found in Peter Augustine Lawler's *Postmodernism Rightly Understood* (1999). As Lawler asserts,

> Postmodernism rightly understood is not postmodernism as it is usually understood. All postmodernists rightly reject the systematic or reductionist rationalism of modern thought. But, properly understood, postmodernism is not antifoundationalism or a celebration of endless self-creation out of nothing.[348]

For Lawler, who associates Modernism with pragmatism, or with not attempting "to understand the world but to change it,"[349] postmodernism "is the return to realism" paired with the "acknowledgment of the limits of human understanding" and "the indestructibility of the good that

[341] Norris 1996: 236.
[342] Norris 1996: 243.
[343] Callinicos: 77. Callinicos critically adds that such an interpretation of Derrida's texts "certainly accords ill with the natural response particularly to Derrida's more extravagantly literary texts" (Callinicos: 77). Norris himself admits that "some of Derrida's more recent work would have to be read as going against some of the claims I'm making for his early work", adding that he "of course" has his "favourite texts" in Derrida's oeuvre (Norris 2003: 83).
[344] Bertens 2002: 10.
[345] Bertens 2002: 11.
[346] Bertens 2002: 10.
[347] Bertens 2002: 10.
[348] Lawler: 1-2.
[349] Lawler: 1.

is human life or liberty."[350] Drawing on the writings of novelist Walker Percy and historian Christopher Lasch, Lawler argues that this 'good that is human life' is accessible by a non-Cartesian, non-elite and common sense approach to life. Realism, for him, is "the realism of one's own judgment concerning the significance of one's own personal experiences."[351] Ultimately, according to Lawler, this kind of "reason or realism points in the direction of the possible truth of religion, meaning biblical religion"[352] – "[s]ome sort of Thomism," he maintains, "may actually be the most plausible way of accounting for what we really know."[353] It is almost needless to say that such a re-definition of postmodernism makes little sense in the light of almost everything else that has been written on the debatable term. If anything, it will contribute to a further confusion about what people mean when they talk about postmodernism. What is more interesting about Lawler's 'postmodernism' is that he bases his rejection of relativism on the dogma of 'biblical religion' – a path taken by quite a number of other opponents of the postmodern as well.

Religious Alternatives to Relativism

No doubt, the kind of fundamental truths about the world advocated by many shades of the world's religions would, if accepted as true, easily lead away from a relativist understanding of the world. Two rather sophisticated criticisms of postmodern theory from a Christian standpoint are Floyd F. Centore's Neo-Thomist *Being and Becoming* (1991) and Michael W. Nicholson's *A Theological Analysis and Critique of the Postmodernism Debate* (1997). They are sophisticated because they display a broad and in-depth knowledge of postmodernist theories and theorists and do engage in an intellectual debate with their central arguments. In both cases, the rational arguments presented against postmodernism are convincing, but neither Centore nor Nicholson finally stick to the

[350] Lawler: 2.
[351] Lawler: 186.
[352] Lawler: 186.
[353] Lawler: 9. Albert Borgmann's *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* mounts an argument with many similarities to Lawler's. Like Lawler, he suggests that what is usually understood as postmodern should actually be relabelled 'hypermodern'. A legitimate approach to the world that could carry the name postmodernism would, for Borgmann, oppose hypermodernism and the losses of foundations and directions that come with it. He specifically advocates "the proper alternative I propose to call postmodern realism. It is," as he goes on to explain, "an orientation that accepts the lessons of the postmodernist critique and resolves the ambiguities of the postmodern condition in an attitude of patient vigor for a common order centered on communal celebrations. What can invigorate the attitude and provide a center for celebration is reality" (Borgmann: 116). The reality Borgmann talks about here and also calls "elaborate reality" (Borgmann: 119) is, as he says himself, nothing much different from "'natural' or 'traditional'" concepts of common-sense reality. This reality, for Borgmann, can still be accessed in places where "hyperreality and its mechanical supports have left openings" (Borgmann: 119). What his suggestions boil down to is, in the end, the rejection of technology and of theoretical outlooks on life in a move towards a kind of premodern state where there is a common understanding between people on a local level and where you mystically and mysteriously have access to a 'true reality' of the thing in front of you which gives coherence and meaning to life. For a diametrically opposed position, see Jameson 1991, who suggests that postmodernism "is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good" (Jameson 1991: ix).

rational. In the end, they both take a non-rational turn towards religious truths. After painstakingly pointing out how postmodern theory is logically flawed, they both turn towards truths based on Neo-Thomist and evangelical theology, respectively. One of Centore's arguments in favour of turning to religion reads as follows: "Even Freud was not opposed to dogmatism in principle. What he opposed was the combination of being dogmatic and being wrong simultaneously."[354] And yes, it may "be the case that a certain amount of dogmatism is *necessary* to the preservation of the good life in the good society. It would certainly seem to be necessary for social stability."[355] But this, of course, does not give (rational) credibility to Centore's attempt "ultimately to resolve, in principle at least, all of the paradoxes and puzzles [of the Western philosophical tradition] on the basis of an old insight into the nature of reality."[356] Needless to say, if you approach philosophical questions with a strong and dogmatic conviction of what is really true, you will not have much trouble to explain the world. "Such a metaphysics is […] unapologetically 'logocentric,' considering God as the eternal *logos* who gives unity, structure, and purposeful flow to the cosmos,"[357] as Michael W. Nicholson states.

Realism(s)

In various attempts to reject postmodernist theories, theorists have also recently been working with the term realism, while, at the same time, typically stressing the fact that they do not reject all of the doubts and questions postmodernist theory raises about the subject and about epistemology. Historians Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, for example, promote what they refer to as *practical realism*. While holding on to the notion of "human agents able to use language,"[358] they acknowledge that "[c]ontemporary understanding of how knowledge is created now prompts calls for a different, more nuanced, less absolutist kind of realism than that championed by an older – we would say naïve – realism."[359] So while they concede that "[g]rammar may be deeply embedded in the human mind," they also argue that "words result from contact with the world"[360] and that they can enable human beings to "give a reasonably true description of its contents."[361] Other contemporary realists sound much the same and develop their arguments along similar lines. Knowledge might be shaped by our language, our cultural environment, our finality and

[354] Centore: xii.
[355] Centore: xii.
[356] Centore: xi.
[357] Nicholson: 319, original emphasis.
[358] Appleby et al.: 251.
[359] Appleby et al.: 247.
[360] Appleby et al.: 248.
[361] Appleby et al.: 250.

imperfection as human beings, the typical argument goes, but this does not mean that all knowledge about the world is impossible. Paula M. Moya, who advocates what she calls *postpositivist realism*, has the following to say:

> postpositivist realists are not naïve empiricists; they do not hope to flip the poststructuralist critique on its head and return to an uncritical belief in the possibility of theoretically unmediated knowledge. [...] Postpositivist realists assert both that (1) all observation and knowledge are theory-mediated and that (2) a theory-mediated objective knowledge is both possible and desirable.[362]

Joe Frank Jones, likewise, in promoting *modest realism*, suggests that "any claim that reality is 'just there' for humans to talk about is wrong" but also asserts that "any radical claim that socially constructed realities are the best we can do is wrong."[363] And José Lopez and Garry Potter introduce *critical realism* to their readers, an attempted fusion of hermeneutics (of which postmodernism, for them, is as a radical variant) and science. In their words, "[r]ealist ontology generates an account of science which socially situates it but where human interests are not opposed to objectivity. Objectivity is to be striven for but this does not mean denying the particularities of the perspective from which our attempts at such are made."[364]

Naturally, this short survey of realist answers to postmodernist challenges has been superficial at best. The theories mentioned above follow various lines of arguments. They also, in some cases, pay more or less attention to the fact that realist approaches to the world did never really disappear from the world of philosophy. For quite some time, most realist philosophers have not been the naïve epistemologists both postmodernists and some of their opponents imagine them to have been. One contemporary philosopher who does not fall into this kind of a reductionist trap and whose work, at the same time, shows that realist thinking had never really disappeared is Hilary Putnam. Since I consider his stance on human knowledge and on epistemology to be an especially relevant one, his theories shall be given some more room and consideration in what follows. Even though his terminology differs from the proponents of realism mentioned thus far, he suggests that we take a similar route between a naïve realism and relativism. Putnam proposes a path in between what he calls metaphysical realism and what he labels internal realism. "The metaphysical realist," according to Putnam, "insists that a mysterious relation of 'correspondence' is what makes reference and truth possible" and "the internal realist, by contrast, is willing to think of reference as internal to 'texts' (or theories)."[365] Putnam's internal realist does not give up on realities completely, however. He does not discard realities that are exterior to texts or theories. As he puts it, "[d]enying that it makes sense to ask whether our concepts 'match' something totally

[362] Moya 2000: 12.
[363] Jones: xiv.
[364] Lopez / Potter: 12.
[365] Putnam 1990b: 114.

uncontaminated by conceptualisation is one thing; but to hold that every conceptual system is therefore just as good as every other would be something else."[366] Putnam rejects both of these kinds of theories. "In short," he proposes "a view in which the mind does not simply 'copy' a world which admits of description by One True Theory" but his "view is not a view in which the mind *makes up* the world either." For Putnam, "the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world."[367]

How do we orient ourselves in such an environment, though, in which neither the world nor the mind exist as ultimate reference points? Putnam at this point in his argument proposes rationality and moral values as the pillars on which realism stands. "The picture I propose," he argues,

> is not the picture of Kant's transcendental idealism, but it is certainly related to it. It is the picture that truth comes to no more than idealized rational acceptability. […] All I ask is that what is supposed to be 'true' be *warrantable* on the basis of experience and intelligence for creatures with 'a rational and sensible nature.' [368]

He follows this suggestion by pointing out that "the picture I have just sketched *is* only a 'picture.' If I were to claim it is a *theory*, I should be called upon at least to sketch a theory of idealized warrant; and I don't think we can even sketch a theory of actual warrant […], let alone a theory of idealized warrant."[369] The same, according to Putnam, is true for the concept of the rational itself, which has undergone various changes throughout history.[370] As he asks at the end of his book *Reason, Truth and History*, "[i]s there a *true* conception of rationality […] even if all *we* ever have are our *conceptions* of"[371] it? And again, his answer remains a vague one. Drawing on his rejection of relativism,[372] he finds, in this very rejection, hope that the "fact that we speak of our different conceptions of *rationality* posits a *Grenzbegriff*, a limit-concept of the ideal truth."[373] The fact that he remains so vague does worry him, but it does not make him desperate since "there is nothing wrong with vague predicates," which is "another fact that 'realism' ignores or misrepresents." In the end, then, "[r]ecognizing such facts as these is part of what might be called 'rejecting "realism"' " – but to Putnam it is rejecting realism "in the name of the realistic spirit" because "reviving and revitalizing the realistic spirit is the important task for a philosopher at this time."[374] At this point in his argument, moral values play a decisive role. Putnam's statement about the importance of the realist

366 Putnam 1981: 54.
367 Putnam 1981: xi, original emphasis.
368 Putnam 1990a: 41, original emphasis.
369 Putnam 1990a: 42, original emphases.
370 See the survey Putnam provides in Putnam 1981: 150-200.
371 Putnam 1981: 216
372 See Putnam 1981: 119-124.
373 Putnam 1981: 216.
374 Putnam 1990a: 42.

spirit is a moral statement, an argument about what is good and what is not. He proposes "to ask not how rational is goodness, but why is it good to be rational."[375]

In order to explain this latter proposition of Putnam, let us turn to two other theorists for now. In their study *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism* (1985), Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut present critical readings of Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu, and Lacan. One central tendency they detect in all of these theorists' writings is "a general antihumanism"[376] which has political motives, but which is also the result of "the questioning of the metaphysical foundations of *traditional naïve humanism*."[377] This questioning of metaphysical foundations, for Ferry and Renaut, is a feature of recent French philosophy which "must not be lost"[378] completely as "we cannot today […] simply return to the values of the philosophy of the Enlightenment."[379] What they propose, therefore, is a return to humanism that does not depend on metaphysical assertions or certainties, "a *nonmetaphysical humanism*."[380] Drawing on Kant, they dismiss absolute truth (metaphysics) but also re-introduce the concept of truth "by virtue of being a regulating principle of thought" that can "constitute a *horizon* of meaning for human practice."[381]

But what can we base this humanism or a version of realism on? As Zurbrugg remarks, "one finds that even the most affirmative currents in contemporary cultural theory fail to exemplify their claims"[382] – but so has philosophy since its very beginnings. The existence of foundations, it seems, cannot be ultimately proven either philosophically or scientifically. So the decision to be made is

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375 Putnam 1981: 174. Much of Putnam's philosophical career could be seen as one long journey in search of a justification for not discarding realism into the philosophical dustbin. On this philosophical journey, he has not been afraid to change his mind about central issues, and in one of his most recent publications, *The Threefold Cord* (1999), he moves away from his earlier conceptions of realism to make a case for what he calls a "second naiveté" (Putnam 1999: 21) or "direct realism […] without the metaphysical baggage (e.g., the mind 'becoming' its object, though only 'potentially', or the mind taking on the 'form' of the object perceived 'without its matter')" (Putnam 1999: 24). This naïve realism has, according to Putnam, dominated philosophical discourse from Aristotle up to the 17th century, and replacing it with theories that included intermediary phenomena in the mind has left Western philosophy in a cul-de-sac where the connection between the mind / language and the world cannot be properly described or explained. When Putnam proceeds to justify his 'direct' or common sense realism in *The Threefold Cord*, his argument consists largely in showing the weaknesses of others' ideas about realism (see, e.g. Putnam 1999: 21-41) and he openly concedes that his own approach is "not a 'scientific' picture" (Putnam 1999: 48). Except for the fact that there is, on the other hand, "nothing in our commonsense realism about both perception and conception that is 'antiscientific' in the sense of *standing in the* way of serious attempts to provide better models, both neurological and computational, of the brain processes upon which our perceptual and conceptual powers depend" (Putnam 1999: 48, original emphasis), what capacities of the mind his common sense realism is based upon remains largely unclear and as vague as the presumed foundations of 'internal realism'. In the end, then, the argument he presents is, again, largely based on the kind of ethical spirit in favour of realism and rationality present in his earlier writings.
376 Ferry / Renaut: xxiv.
377 Ferry / Renaut: xxviii.
378 Ferry / Renaut: xviii.
379 Ferry / Renaut: xvii.
380 Ferry / Renaut: xviii.
381 Ferry / Renaut: 224, original emphasis.
382 Zurbrugg: xvii.

indeed a moral one. A moral choice between believing in a realist version of the world and promoting antirealism or irrealism. While this might sound like a simplistic answer to one of the main problems of past and current philosophical debates, other thinkers who, in some cases, have spent most of their lives pondering the questions posed by anti-foundationalist critics of 'humanism', of the 'Enlightenment' and of 'realism' resort to similar explanations. Sokal and Bricmont work from a 'hope' that there are foundations in the world they cannot finally prove. "To take a phrase from Einstein," they tell their readers, "one must imagine the Lord is subtle, but not malicious."[383] And Habermas has recently admitted that it is necessary to *believe* in a "democratically enlightened common sense"[384] as the foundation to make sense of the world without resorting to science or to religion. People, for Habermans, are necessarily defined by a "pre-scientific self-image of subjects who are agents when it comes to communication and actions."[385] Why, then, spend so much time thinking about realism, if it all boils down to a question of belief, one might ask. And indeed, here we run into a most serious problem. If we accept the fact that foundations cannot ultimately be proven to exist, why, then, prefer one belief over another, and why, then, is another dogma not as good as the one we propose? Are we not back on the road towards relativism now? Suffice it to say for now that proposing that human beings are beings who are to some degree rational and who have access to the world somehow constitutes a different kind of dogma than either claiming that every detail of existence is pre-decided by a divinity or that nothing can ever be decided. The dogmas suggested here do not lead into uncritical acceptance of the aforementioned foundations.

The first major part of this study has attempted to depict how a contemporary postmodern condition is presented in several North American literary works. After having reviewed various criticisms against postmodernism and various alternatives, the second major part will now proceed to outline some possible solutions to counter the discontents of postmodernity that have been developed and offered in the literary texts. My analysis will deal with the issue of the rational human agent after a discussion of the other large concern of postmodernity – language and the possibility of relating something meaningful about the world.

383 Bricmont / Sokal: 71.
384 Habermas 2001: 41 ["demokratisch aufgeklärte[r] Common Sense", translation: ls].
385 Habermas 2001: 44-45 ["vorwissenschaftlichen Selbstverständnisses von sprach- und handlungsfähigen Subjekten", translation: ls]. See also Hassan 2003 and Purdy 2000 for their versions of this kind of a foundation to their rejections of postmodern theory and postmodern life styles.

4.2 Back To Reality

> Realism, you cry, in 2003, *realism*?
> (Ihab Hassan, "Beyond Postmodernism: Toward an Aesthetic of Trust.")

Hilary Putnam, whose approaches to realism were sketched on the preceding pages, is a realist within the realm of philosophy. One should, of course, not simply equate philosophical realism – which is itself a field with numerous and varying theories – with realist modes of writing in literature or with Realism as a period of literary history. One could argue that the former is concerned with epistemological and ontological questions, while the latter follow a certain poetics in order to promote their specific view of the world. This is a point strongly argued by M. J. Devaney, who warns us that

> [t]he reductivism of a number of recent accounts of literary realism seems in part to be precisely the result of assuming that there is, or ought to be, a connection between philosophical meanings of the word 'realism' and the definition of literary realism – hence, the commonly articulated notion in theories of postmodernism that metaphysical and epistemological realism underwrite literary realism. But there is no such one-to-one correspondence. The idea that there is dies hard, however, among literary critics who are at pains to contend it.[386]

On the other hand, many advocates of realism in contemporary literature and many literary theorists do not discuss the question of realism on a fundamental philosophical level, side-stepping the question whether it is possible to refer to 'something out there'. Instead, they draw attention to questions such as the form realist texts (should) adopt, which themes are typically presented in a realist mode, what kinds of authors typically employ a realist technique. When Jonathan Franzen calls for 'tragic realism' in contemporary literature, for instance, he is not concerned with whether there can be realism at all. This is something he seems to take for granted when he suggests that a novel "can *preserve* something," namely "a tradition of precise, expressive language; a habit of looking past surfaces into interiors; maybe an understanding of private experience and public context as distinct but interpenetrating."[387] Franzen's specific 'realist' interest when writing a novel lies less in re-establishing reality as a category but rather in pointing towards a reality which, in his opinion, is being neglected in the mass media and by "the upbeat techno-corporatism under which we live."[388] He wants to create and take a position of "distance from the rhetoric of optimism that so pervades our culture,"[389] and to "preserve[] access to the dirt behind the dream of Chosenness" and to "the sorrow behind the pop-cultural narcosis."[390] Robert Rebein sees similar motivations at work in a, as he terms it, 'dirty realist' attitude of much contemporary literature. This 'dirty realism',

[386] Devaney: 123.
[387] Franzen 1996: 90, original emphasis.
[388] Franzen 1996: 91.
[389] Franzen 1996: 91.
[390] Franzen 1996: 92.

for Rebein, is more clearly focused on social issues than Franzen's 'tragic realism.' "Dirty Realism," Rebein writes, "refers to the impulse in writers to explore dark truths, to descend, as it were, into the darkest holes of society and what used to be called the 'soul of man'" and into the "intense worlds of war, drug addiction, serious crime, prostitution, prison."[391] Many observers of contemporary literature also cite minority and 'ethnic' literature as a site of realist writing. Winfried Fluck (who also discusses realism on a more fundamental level) remarks that ethnic writing often tries to tell an alternative (hi)story, tries to re-situate previously marginalized groups, and therefore by and large needs to follow a realist programme in order to make it possible for readers to reconnect to the social realities and experiences narrated.[392] One could categorize these kind of realisms with Raymond Williams as attitudes of "facing up to things as they *really* are, and not as we imagine or would like them to be."[393]

The philosophical question whether realism is possible at all does not feature in many approaches to the issue of realism, however. Just like Tom Wolfe did in 1989 in his much discussed call for realism,[394] many proponents of realist literature today take it for granted that such a literature is possible and a matter of aesthetics rather than of philosophy. But is it important to pay attention to philosophical convictions which might motivate the production of literary texts at all? Some argue it is not. "The problems with many accounts of realism and anti-realism," M. J. Devaney maintains,

> seem to me to arise from the need or desire to construct a 'grand narrative' that would explain the existence of different modes of fiction. That is, most theorists and critics are not satisfied merely to define anti-realism, say, as a mode that 'liberates the representation of experience from known conditions and measurable states' and leave it at that […], but also want to read some general underlying philosophical sensibility into such a representational mode.[395]

And while Devaney is suspicious of this 'need or desire' for a 'grand narrative', in the face of postmodern challenges to any claim of realism, it seems to me to be necessary to pay attention to the philosophical sensibilities of postmodernism as well as to argue in favour of the possibility of a 'grand narrative' of philosophical realism if one intends to defend realism in literature. In the present intellectual climate, it might not be enough, as Devaney suggests, to define realism with Raymond Tallis, who proposes to see realist literature as presenting "a world recognizably *bound* by

391 Rebein: 43.
392 See Fluck 1997: 56. In Fluck's words, this kind of realism needs to be "auf Konsensbildung und die Nachvollziehbarkeit sozialer Erfahrung, auf die Autorität einer 'shared experience' und eine wirkungsästhetische Struktur des Wiedererkennens angelegt sein" (Fluck 1997: 56). For similar assessments, see, e.g., Th. Mason Junior and Heinz Ickstadt 1998a: 175.
393 Williams 1985: 259, original emphasis.
394 See Wolfe.
395 Devaney: 130.

the same laws as that of the author. Realism is bounded by external, non-literary constraints."[396] It is not enough to put forth this (to some extent very useful) definition because a postmodernist might then simply claim that there are no such things as 'non-literary constraints' since there is nothing 'external' to fiction in any case. So when it comes to the question of realism in contemporary writing, the two fields of literature and philosophy should not and cannot be separated. A realist philosopher is in need of a language that is at least somewhat representational. A realist writer must assume that there are some kind of ontological, social, or personal realities 'out there' and that one can express something at least partly true about these external realities. As Andrzej Gąsiorek points out, "to be a realist in art is implicitly to be some sort of realist in epistemology, since the belief that art can represent reality rests on a prior conviction that the world can be known."[397]

What will be at stake in the following theoretical considerations are fundamental questions of literary realism – on the one hand, the question why it is necessary to assume that a reality can be referred to, and, on the other hand, the question whether and how it is possible to say something about a personal, social, or ontological reality in a (literary) text at all. These questions beg answering in the context of postmodern skepticism about the representational potential of language, and they are questions which are present in the novels discussed in this study. In his 1992 reflections on recent literary realisms, Winfried Fluck has argued that the "striking loss of cultural authority which literary realism underwent in the 70s and 80s was not primarily caused […] by the fact that critics and readers did not dare to admit their ongoing interest in realistic representation"[398] just because it might have been en vogue to not endorse a realist position. At the bottom of the move away from realist writing, Fluck sees "a lack of arguments and concepts which would allow" readers and writers "to make a case for realism in an intellectually respectable fashion."[399] In what follows, I will attempt to make just this case – a case for realism, first from a philosophical point of view, and then from a literary perspective.

396 Tallis: 190, original emphasis.
397 Gąsiorek: 184.
398 Fluck 1992: 66.
399 Fluck 1992: 66.

The Paradoxes of Postmodern Philosophical Positions On Language, Truth, and Reality

In a recent critique of deconstruction, Garry Potter argues:

> Derrida is correct to assert that there is no 'transcendental signified' to guarantee meaning. That is, he is correct if, by transcendental signified, it is taken to mean a mysterious word/thing fusion, arising spontaneously in the moment of utterance. [...] Yes, meaning is fluid and language is an open system. But not only signifiers are systematically maintained in the institutionality of social convention; *signifieds are as well.*[400]

As this quote makes quite clear, a naïve belief in a direct connection between signifier and signified or signifier and referent does not have to be assumed according to a theoretical stance critical of deconstruction. Potter accepts the historical, subjective, and always partly unfathomable qualities of signs and of language as constituents of the same. On the other hand, he quite reasonably argues that there is some amount of justified and reasonable social agreement on the meaning of a sign beyond its signifier that would merely point towards other signifiers. Without such an understanding of language all communication would have broken down long ago. And it is a simple point but one of the strongest arguments against many postmodernist theorists that they themselves, by using language, to some extent all work from such an understanding. They write for an audience of readers who, they must assume, will somehow understand what they are saying. They may employ essayistic, playful, and cryptic techniques. They may again and again feel the need to point to the indeterminancy of language. In the end, there must be some agreement that will make at least some readers reach a common understanding of their texts.

Some passages from a recent interview with Derrida may serve as an example of this. He says: "in my own case – I mean, theoretically – I have *tried*, the best I could, to avoid being inconsistent; I try to write and to say and to teach in a certain way which prevents me, as much as possible, from, let's say, contradicting myself and changing. I try."[401] He also does not subscribe to a position that would level all forms of writing and all genres to the same plane of non-referentiality when he asserts that there "are, of course, types of narrative by historians which I never try to reduce to literature – that would be silly, and people who are under the illusion that things are that silly confuse literature and what is not literature."[402] What is more, he also works from a position that sees a common and intersubjective understanding of a certain term at a certain point in time. Talking about his studies of Heidegger and his specific interest in the term *das Unheimliche*, which to Derrida is central in understanding the German existentialist philosopher, he makes a

[400] Potter: 187, original emphasis.
[401] Derrida 2003: 26, original emphasis.
[402] Derrida 2003: 27.

pronouncement that is telling about great amounts of postmodern theory and its inherent paradox character. Derrida says that his approach has been to try to "understand what *das Unheimliche* means in the German epoch, the first part of the twentieth century" in order to find out why it is "the best name, the best concept, for something which resists consistency, system, semantic identity."[403] The project of pointing towards the inconsistencies of life and of language, then, as can be clearly seen in this statement, *has to* itself work from an implicit understanding of language as a structure that maybe is not clear and easily definable, but that still can carry meaning and some kind of systemic semantic identity – in a social contract at a certain point in time.

As Derrida himself admits, in his daily life, "everything I oppose, so to speak, in my texts, everything that I deconstruct – presence, voice, living […] and so on – is exactly what I'm after […]. I love the voice, I love presence"[404] In his theoretical work, he highlights différance and the problems of communication.[405] In "my life," Derrida admits, "I do the opposite. I live as if, as if it *were* possible for the letter to reach its destination or somehow to be present with voice, or vocal presence. I want to be close to my friends and meet them and, if I don't, I use the phone."[406] Derrida's own description of his life in the year 2003 strikingly resembles the life of a deconstructionist which Walker Percy imagined in 1990. Percy writes:

> A deconstructionist I would define, usually, as an academic who spends all day lecturing and writing about his belief that texts have no referents, are literary games, but who leaves a message, a text, on his wife's telephone machine that he would like a pepperoni pizza for supper.[407]

As Percy poignantly adds, "A pizza is a referent."[408] And in some way or another, all of the attempts at communication that are carried out around the planet time and time again each day work from a similar understanding of language. It is not even necessary to imagine the letter to be 'present with voice' – all that is really needed for communication to work is to assume that letters do under normal circumstances reach their destination and that (oral or written) attempts at communication can lead to some kind of common understanding.

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[403] Derrida 2003: 35.
[404] Derrida 2003: 8.
[405] See, for example, his comments in his interview with Henri Ronse (published in *Positions*, 1972) in which he suggests that one should not read his essays and books as containing a "'logical order'" (Derrida 1972: 4). As he tells his interviewer: "In what you call my books, what is first of all the question is the unity of the book and the unity 'book' considered as a perfect totality, with all the implications of such a concept. And you know that these implications concern the entirety of our culture, directly or indirectly" (Derrida 1972: 3). As he does in many other texts, Derrida in this interview on the other hand also suggests that his work is to be situated both "inside and […] outside of philosophy" (Derrida 1972: 6), and he paradoxically stresses that he does "not at all believe in what today is so easily called the death of whatever – the book, man, or god" (Derrida 1972: 6).
[406] Derrida 2003: 9.
[407] Percy: 5.
[408] Percy: 5.

Inconsistencies and the indetermined character of language, of systems of signification, cannot be brushed aside that easily of course – and the novels under scrutiny in this study do not do so. They display an awareness for the fuzzy and problematic traits of language, of representation. They describe a world in which orientation is difficult to come by. They depict urban characters whose lives are very much influenced by the relativist postmodern zeitgeist that has been portrayed above. They also, however, exhibit the need to reintroduce or to hold on to the possibilities of making sense, of communicating, of understanding, of gaining knowledge, and of being situated not in a purely 'made-up' and fragmented world.

If the term reality is used here, it is done so acknowledging that it is a highly problematic term. It is a term, however, which cannot be dismissed either. In the preface to his study *The Exploded Form* (1980), James M. Mellard argues that a "truly adequate new realism," which would replace modernist or postmodernist fiction and theory,

> must come with a new cultural epistemological framework, must acknowledge two conditions of our contemporary existence: that consciousness and its governing structures are inextricable aspects of any human 'reality,' and that any 'reality' we therefore define is provisional and, finally, indeterminate.[409]

But if 'any "reality" we define is provisional and indeterminate,' then how are we ever to distinguish such a 'reality' from a fantasy? Granted, literary or philosophical realisms will most likely never describe reality truthfully, but they have to aspire to do so. The reality a novelist and / or his characters and readers define might always be provisional. To accept that it is, finally, indeterminate, however, is to wave goodbye to realism. A look at a passage from Richard Rorty's well-known essay "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing" (1978) shall further underline this argument. Towards the beginning of his essay, Rorty distinguishes between two strands of how, in his conception, truth has been defined in the history of philosophy. He explains:

> The first tradition thinks of truth as a vertical relationship between representations and what is represented. The second tradition thinks of truth horizontally – as the culminating reinterpretation of our predecessors' reinterpretation of their predecessors' reinterpretation.... This tradition does not ask how representations are related to non-representations, but how representations can be seen as hanging together. The difference is […] between regarding truth, goodness, and beauty as eternal objects which we try to locate and reveal, and regarding them as artifacts whose fundamental design we often have to alter.[410]

Of these two traditions, Rorty clearly favours the second and posits Derrida's work as "the latest development"[411] in this strand, and as the most radical one, which finally disposes of "the Platonic

[409] Mellard: xii. Mellard, seeing much of the literature written up to 1980 as belonging to the modernist period and as following a modernist aesthetic, observes a potential for a new realism in postmodernism. He writes: "The mode of the post-modern 'novel' will probably be a new realism" (Mellard: 12).
[410] Rorty 1978: 143.
[411] Rorty 1978: 144.

ideal of the Last Reinterpretation"[412] inherent in many of the 'vertical' conceptions of truth. My own argument in favour of realism or of a realist approach to literature in what follows does not reject Rorty's horizontal level *per se*. Truth, and to a much greater extent, goodness and beauty are subject to reinterpretations and renegotiations. My argument also, however, largely rests on the idea that there can be no reinterpretations or negotiations of truth and of reality if the vertical level of philosophical realism is rejected.[413] To say it with Hilary Putnam, what "makes speech more than just an expression of our momentary subjectivity is that it can be appraised for the presence or absence of this property – call it 'truth,' or 'rightness' […] or what you will."[414] The spoken and the written word, then, also always have to be appraised, to some extent, for the presence or absence of their correspondence to reality, be it a social, political, mental, or ontological one. Regardless of the huge problems involved when dealing with the categories of 'truth' and 'rightness' and 'reality', this is a view that the novels discussed here do share.

How Philosophical and Literary Realisms Connect

As we shall see, these philosophical considerations are important for literary texts and for literary realisms as well. For Winfried Fluck, the "loss of authority of realism in literature" since the 1970s "reflects a corresponding loss of authority of that intellectual system in whose service realism stood in the United States for most of the 20th Century, the liberal tradition."[415] As Fluck writes, authors such as Raymond Carver and Walter Abish "no longer want[ ] to offer a representative version of reality but" are "content to explore and represent a decontextualized surface."[416] Similarly, in a 1970 interview, Ronald Sukenick proposes that the novel needs to be re-invented on the formal level since "in its realistic forms it's just lost its credibility."[417] What is rejected by Sukenick is the realistic mode of writing or the kind of characters or subjects that emerge from 19th century realist literature. Sukenick's statements in the interview under consideration here are important in this context because he argues in a way which is typical of the antirealist position across the board. While, at first glance, Sukenick seems to attack representation and truth claims in general, he actually only replaces one kind of truth claim and one kind of realist position with his own, seemingly more

412 Rorty 1978: 145.
413 The phrase 'truth, goodness and beauty' is, of course, most often associated with Platonic idealism. If it is used here, this shall not signal an argument in favour of a realism influenced by Platonic ideas. Rorty himself does not think of the 'vertical' tradition in strictly Platonic terms. He identifies both Immanuel Kant and the realist philosopher Hilary Putnam as part of the vertical tradition, for example: "Neo-Kantian philosophers like Putnam, Strawson, and Rawls have arguments and theses which are connected to Kant's by a fairly straightforward series of 'purifying' transformations" (Rorty 1978: 143).
414 Putnam 1990b: 106.
415 Fluck 1992: 66.
416 Fluck 1992: 85
417 Sukenick 1970: 59.

credible and more accurate claims about representation and about truth. He attacks the truth value of traditional notions of character, claiming that "[m]aybe there aren't real characters" and that "[m]aybe people are much more fluid and amorphous than the realistic novel would have us believe."[418] He does, however, argue in favour of this kind of fluid character because, for him, it is a more accurate and truthful description of reality. What is more, for him it is a reality which might "allow other organizations [of the subject] to arise."[419] When Sukenick rejects the realist mode of writing, it is in large parts due to his impression that realist writings create an illusionary world people can escape to. His prose is supposed to represent a more accurate version of current reality to his readers. Sukenick's anti-realist argument, as any anti-realist argument, in the end, entails a philosophical realist position in itself. It is not a logically impossible position, of course; it is however illogical to label it 'anti-realist' or to use it as an argument against the notion of realism in general.

John Barth has identified the problems which Sukenick and others run into. To truly reject realism in art and in literature, you have to go beyond a position that merely rejects 19th century literary realism (or what is perceived as such) in order to replace it with some kind of superior contemporary version of realism. Barth's solution to this problem is to promote an "'irrealist' view of reality […] – not antirealism or unrealism, but irrealism."[420] With irrealism, other than with anti-realism, fiction and literature in general are to be freed from any references to events, to the contemporary world, to things out there. Barth suggests to "regard fiction as artifice in the first place,"[421] i.e. to place it in the realm of aesthetics. This might be a position that is theoretically possible to take. If you take Barth's position to its logical conclusion, however, if you embrace an irrealist position, then all you do in your text may in the end be considered as irrelevant.[422] In his 1992 observations about neo-realism, Malcolm Bradbury stated that he agrees "with Vladimir Nabokov when he observed, in his comments on the writing of *Lolita*, that 'reality' is 'one of the few words that mean nothing without quotes.'"[423] Leaving aside the problematic question why, if you have to put quotes around *reality*, you would not have to do so with all other words as well, it

418 Sukenick 1970: 62.
419 Sukenick 1970: 66.
420 Barth 1971: 4.
421 Barth 1971: 15.
422 It should be noted that Barth himself had moved away from this position less than ten years later, at least as far as poetological statements in interviews are concerned. In a conversation with John Hawkes, he notes that he has "at times gone farther than [he] want[s] to go in the direction of a fiction that foregrounds language and form, displacing the ordinary notion of content, of 'aboutness'" and that he wants his "stories to be *about* things: about the passions which Aristotle tells us are the true subject of literature" (Barth / Hawkes: 17, original emphasis).
423 Bradbury 1992: 13 (quoting Nabokov (1955: 312), whose version differs ever so slightly: "one of the few words *which* mean nothing without quotes"; emphasis added)).

needs to be emphasised that reality – like any word – means nothing with *only* quotes around it either.

It would be a misunderstanding to take what has been said so far as an argument which intends to reverse postmodernists' attempts to collapse historiography and "autobiography into fiction" by 'collapsing fiction into strictly referential writing.'[424] Fiction is, of course, quite different from writings which deliberately attempt to make factual statements about the real world. My argument shall not be understood as an attempt to deny fiction its particular qualities which make it different from non-fictional writings. On the other hand, even if we consider fiction, it makes little sense, if any, to simply discard of reality, of meaning, of signification, and of reference. They remain necessary concepts. It is true that, as Sabine Sielke puts it, "every cultural representation of the world *has* to be ironic"[425] because a representation of reality never comes without a distortion or, if you will, without an ironic distance to what is actually 'out there'. Without the presupposition that language has referential and realist qualities (as vague as they may be), however, fiction would collapse into itself.[426]

Of course, the question *how* we may have access to a reality is indefinitely harder to answer than *why* it is *necessary* to assume that language can represent a reality. We have identified the *need* for realism, but what are we to do with the antinomies of realism, as Hilary Putnam calls them in *The Threefold Cord* (1999). Putnam correctly points out that the notion of a realist language is ultimately tied to the notions of how a human being perceives and / or experiences the realities we communicate about. It can, indeed, be seen as the same problem once removed. As Putnam

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424 Woodward: 276. This quote is taken from an essay on autobiographies by Kathleen Woodward. In this essay, Woodward states that in "the United States the poststructuralist emphasis on the ultimate fictionality of autobiography dominated much criticism in the eighties" (Woodward: 276). To support this argument, she describes Paul de Man's ("Autobiography as De-facement") and Paul John Eakin's (*Fictions in Autobiography*) takes on autobiography as an "annexation of autobiography to the larger body of fiction" (Woodward: 277). She does acknowledge that Eakin's and de Man's "arguments regarding autobiography are more subtle than I am suggesting" (Woodward: 277n); in Eakin's case, however, she rather distorts than simplifies his position. His study focuses on the fictional aspects of autobiography but does not 'collapse autobiography into fiction.' As Eakin himself points out, "I have emphasized the presence of fiction in autobiography, yet in speaking of self as artifact I have not meant to confuse autobiography with other works of the imagination. I regard the self finally as a mysterious reality, mysterious in its nature and origins and not necessarily consubstantial with the fictions we use to express it" (Eakin: 277). Woodward, thus, uses – at least as far as this one critic she identifies as poststructuralist is concerned – the same grave simplifications which many postmodern theorists have been accused of in their views of literary and philosophical history.

425 Sielke: 257, original emphasis.

426 At the end of his study *The Subject in Question* (1982), David Carroll provides a very similar account of why, without referential qualities, fiction and language would collapse into themselves. He writes: "The subject of fiction is never totally itself, no matter how visible it makes itself, no matter how self-reflexive its figures and self-generated its products. […] The inevitable necessity to supplement blindness with insights of figures who know the direction and of the ideal [i.e. with meaning beyond the pure form of the text] opens the frame of fiction up to the outside, to problems of history, representation, and form which have from the start informed it and prevented fiction from figuring itself successfully as a totally integral, self-generated, and self-sufficient subject – from becoming the ideal subject all formalisms have as their project to make it" (D. Carroll: 200).

explains, "[t]he 'how does language hook on to the world' issue is, at bottom, a replay of the old 'how does perception hook on to the world' issue."[427] If we accept the Cartesian dualism (or separation) of mind and world, then, Putnam argues, we must conclude that "our cognitive powers cannot reach all the way to the [external or worldly] objects themselves."[428] If there is no "form of magic" with which we "can have referential access to external things," must we then, as Putnam does, furthermore conclude that "[n]o conception that retains anything like the traditional notion of sense data can provide a way out; such a conception must always, in the end, leave us confronted by what looks like an insoluble problem."[429] It is an insoluble problem that while we have identified the need for realism, we also have to attest that we might not be able to explain how this realism could work since mind and language are separated from the world?

Suffice it to say at this point that, as has been argued above, an ethical choice involved in accepting realism is of central importance. A moderate realism which accepts its limits but still maintains that there can and have to be some amounts of truth, of verisimilitude, and of representative grounding to our usages of language – be it in fictional or in non-fictional texts – "may always be hotly contested, because there is no definitive access to The Truth. But such attempts are more useful than dogmatic prescriptions, postmodern deconstructions and pragmatic relativism."[430] So in any case, and as weak or convincing as these arguments might be perceived to be, what the following analyses will be largely based upon is that it is, as Putnam states,

> of course true that such general terms as *reality, reason* (and one might add *language, meaning, reference* ...) are sources of deep philosophical puzzlement. Yet the solution is not simply to jettison these words. The notion that our words and life are constrained by a reality not of our own invention plays a deep role in our lives and is to be respected.[431]

Towards "Centripetal Polyphony" (den Tandt)

As early as 1987, Alan Wilde pointed out in *Middle Grounds* that the literary texts of Pynchon, Barthelme, Max Apple and others "had fallen victim to an easy but inadequate habit of categorizing the fiction of the last few decades as either realistic *or* experimental."[432] Much of the literature of the 1980s, Wilde says, belongs to a "class of works whose mood is, instead, one of interrogation: a questioning of, among other things, the validity of certainties – both those that take the world for

[427] See Putnam 1999: 12
[428] Putnam 1999: 10.
[429] Putnam 1999: 18.
[430] Cruikshank: 224.
[431] Putnam 1999: 9, original emphases.
[432] Wilde 1987: 3, original emphasis.

granted and those that set it at naught."[433] In his recent introductory book to contemporary American fiction, Alan Bilton closes his analysis by stating that, while the writers he has discussed (DeLillo, Ellis, Coupland, Auster and others) may not ultimately be "concerned […] with the authentic or the eternal" they still find meaning in "the search for such things."[434] Robert Rebein joins this chorus of critics by pointing out "that some sort of revitalization of realism has taken place."[435] For him, the project of realism has today "been taken forward by a new breed of ethnic writer – Native American, Chinese American, Latino/a, and so on"[436] by incorporating "postmodernism's most lasting contributions" and going "on to forge a new realism that is more or less traditional in its handling of character, reportorial in its depiction of milieu and time, but is at the same time self-conscious about language and the limits of mimesis."[437] Ansgar Nünning sees such tendencies as being present in English literature of the 1980s and 1990s to a greater extent than in US literature.[438] Winfried Fluck writes that the "experimental postmodern text […] seems to be characterized on all of its levels by such movements between what appears to be mutually exclusive" – "between fiction and reality […], between romance and realism."[439] Likewise, Martin Klepper argues for a view that would incorporate the resurgence of the realist mode and of non-fragmented narratives into the postmodern movement in literature.[440] If, for Klepper, the incorporation of reconstructive elements into literary narratives can be observed in writers such as DeLillo and Pynchon, for other critics, such as Daniel Grassian, this is a feature of the fiction of a younger generation of writers. He argues: "the work of [Bret Easton] Ellis, [Jay] McInerney and [Tama] Janowitz […] mark[s] an important transition from the previous generation of American postmodern writers such as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon and Robert Coover,"[441] whose texts for

433 Wilde 1987: 22. See also Heinz Ickstadt, who presents a similar argument about the writings of Walter Abish, Marilynne Robinson, Paul Auster, and Don DeLillo. For Ickstadt, these authors' texts can be understood as "spielerisch-reflektierte Versuche einer Vermittlung zwischen 'realistischen' und 'postmodernen' Funktionsmodellen des Erzählens […] durch die das Alltägliche zugleich als vertraut wie auch als fremd, als 'heimlich' und 'unheimlich' erfahrbar wird" (Ickstadt 1998a: 189).

434 Bilton: 246.

435 Rebein: 17.

436 Rebein: 19.

437 Rebein: 20.

438 Nünning maintains: "Zwei der markantesten Tendenzen, die für den zeitgenössischen englischen Roman charakteristisch sind, stehen im Zentrum der folgenden Überlegungen: die Rückkehr zum Erzählen sowie die darin zum Ausdruck kommende Synthese aus Tradition und Innovation, die – so eine der zentralen Thesen – zu den Markenzeichen des englischen bzw. britischen Romans der Gegenwart zählen und ihn relativ deutlich vom zeitgenössischen amerikanischen Roman unterscheiden" (A. Nünning: 190). For realist tendencies in British fiction, see also Bruno Zerweck, who argues: "Das wichtigste Merkmal der von 1980 bis heute andauernden [...] Phase ist [...] die Verbindung der experimentellen Suche nach neuen Ausdrucksformen mit dem Beharren auf den Möglichkeiten literarischer Repräsentation" (Zerweck: 1).

439 Fluck 1992: 69.

440 Klepper writes: "Ob es dabei um eine neue realistische Literatur geht, um einen neuen Pragmatismus, um den Postkolonialismus oder um den Feminismus – stets steht jetzt ein rekonstruktives Element im Vordergrund." These reconstructive elements are, according to Klepper, presented on the basis of the "fließenden Charakter von Natur und Gesellschaft, den die Postmoderne betont hat" (Klepper: 372).

441 Grassian: 12.

him "revealed a general mistrust of the epistemological authority of the interpretative novel largely because the complexities of contemporary society made all interpretations of reality arbitrary and therefore simultaneously accurate and absurd."[442] Suggesting the term 'hybrid fictions' for this 'new' kind of literature, Grassian asserts: "If modernists tried to write about situating themselves and constructing foundations or codes while postmodernists tried to write about dislocating themselves and fragmented or competing foundations, the hybrid fiction writers" such as David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers, and Douglas Coupland "argue that both viewpoints are oversimplifications. If one tries to construct exact foundations, one becomes prey to totalitarianism or fundamentalism, but if one rejects foundations, one risks chaos."[443] For Grassian, much contemporary American fiction is still indebted to "both modernism and postmodernism"[444] while at the same time aiming at being more "directly relevant" to their readers "with more emotional substance and social application."[445]

In his essay "Pragmatic Commitments: Postmodern Realism in Don DeLillo, Maxine Hong Kingston and James Ellroy," Christophe den Tandt, introduces a similar model to approach some contemporary literature. His suggestion is to read some contemporary texts as acting out a dialogue between realist techniques or attitudes and skeptical, relativist ones. Den Tandt argues that a "new corpus plays off the discourse of classical realism against postmodern devices – metafiction, particularly."[446] Many contemporary authors, he adds, "produce dialogized texts" since they "acknowledge the impossibility of developing a voice of cognitive authority designating the real in monological fashion"[447] but still claim to produce a version of the real. They acknowledge "the difficulties in assessing the contours of the real, yet perform[ ] the epistemological equivalent of a salvage operation" by exploring "how far referentiality stretches in a field of discourse that otherwise does not lend itself to totalizing documentary representation."[448] For den Tandt, another way to conceptualise this dialogue is to speak of "[c]entripetal polyphony"[449], suggesting that one adopt Bakhtin's distinction between "centripetal"[450] and "centrifugal"[451] forces of language. While language, because of its inherent fuzziness, possesses semantically centrifugal qualities, people's

[442] Grassian: 10.
[443] Grassian: 17.
[444] Grassian: 17.
[445] Grassian: 16.
[446] Den Tandt: 124.
[447] Den Tandt: 124. With much justification, Den Tandt also points out that 'classical realism' is often used as a reductionist term. He stresses that many "nineteenth century realist works – naturalist novels, particularly – are remarkably heterogeneous in their use of literary discourse" (Den Tandt: 124).
[448] Den Tandt: 127.
[449] Den Tandt: 134.
[450] Bakhtin: 270.
[451] Bakhtin: 272.

desires to understand each other and to communicate result in a need for a common understanding of words, sentences, texts, and the world. Such a common understanding would not be possible without endowing signifiers with somewhat clear meanings and attributing a semantically centripetal quality to language.

Photos, Printouts, and Conspiracies: *Glamorama*

The questions of possible lies, trust, and of truthful representation are at the very heart of Ellis' *Glamorama*, a novel that explores "how far referentiality stretches"[452] in contemporary culture and literature. As I have shown above, many elements of Ellis's novel suggest that representations cannot be trusted in contemporary culture. Both for the characters within the narrative as well as for the readers of the novel, what they are being told and what they are shown cannot, it seems, be depended. Victor Ward is a naïve, and often confused and drugged first person narrator, which makes him unreliable. What is more, photos and movies are manipulated all through the narrative, and many times throughout the text, it is not clear whether a film is being shot or whether the action portrayed is actually taking place. At the same time, however, the representational potential of language, of photos, of film, and of a narrative are not written off completely. As I will argue, the promise of texts and of various media to convey meanings and to faithfully depict events, thoughts, and ideas are re-emphasized. The characters of the novel rely on their ability to communicate with these means, and so, in the end, do the readers of the text.

In the first part of *Glamorama*, for example, Victor's boss Damien accuses Victor of having an affair with his own lover Lauren because a photo of the two has appeared in the newspaper. When Victor denies that the picture shows him, readers cannot be sure what his reasons are. Does the photo in fact not show him but someone else? Has it been manipulated? Does Victor not remember having been with Lauren? Does he merely want to pacify his boss and his girlfriend Chloe? Victor tries to convince Damien that the newspaper "photograph's a lie," that it "was faked," that it "looks real but it's not," and that it "must have been altered" (G: 171). But Damien and Chloe do not believe him. The latter trusts the newspaper to depict what has actually happened, and Damien has no doubts that the picture is a truthful representation as he also has the "originals" and has had "them checked out." "They weren't altered, fuckhead," (G: 171) he tells Victor before firing him. As fragmented and as media-created as the urban reality of *Glamorama* appears to be, some characters are thus clearly shown to not have lost trust in the photograph as a medium with the power to represent.

[452] Den Tandt: 127.

The same is true for some of those involved in the conspiracies that Victor gets entangled in. On his way to London on the QE II, Victor meets an English couple who introduce themselves as Stephen and Lorrie Wallace, friends of his father's. He also meets and starts flirting with a woman who first calls herself Marina Cannon (G: 197) and later Marina Gibson (G: 208)). What is interesting is that both the Wallaces and Marina are notably apprehensive about having their picture taken with Victor in the dining room of the ship. A "photographer who has been combing the room interrupts" the four of them to ask if they would like him to take a picture. Victor does: "'Great idea,' I say loudly, chapping my hand together." The others are less enthusiastic: "'No, no,' the Wallaces insist, shaking their heads. 'Perhaps after dinner,' Lorrie says" (G: 216). When Victor does not take no for an answer, their objections do not stop but get more forceful:

> 'Well, damnit,' I say. 'Come on, guys. Oh, just take it,' I tell the photographer. 'Just do it.'
> 'Victor, *please*,' the Wallaces say in unison.
> 'I'm not feeling very photogenic right now,' Marina adds improbably.
> (G: 216, original emphasis)

In the end, the photo is taken, but before it is developed and delivered to Victor, it has obviously been altered:

> The couple sitting at the table in the Queen's Grill are people I've never seen before, who don't even vaguely resemble the Wallaces. The man glowering at me is much older than Stephen; and the woman, confused, looking down at her plate, is much dowdier and plainer than Lorrie.
> Marina has turned her head away so her face is just a blur. (G: 228)

For some reason, then, Marina and the Wallaces, or someone, must have thought it dangerous for the four of them to be in a photo together. The only reason for this is that a picture is believed to show something that has actually happened and that someone did not wish Victor's acquaintance with the three to be recorded.

Much later, Victor comes upon the character Bentley who is, with the help of his computer, altering a whole array of photographs:

> Bentley starts tapping keys, landing on new photos. He enhances colors, adjusts tones, sharpens or softens images. Lips are digitally thickened, freckles are removed, an ax is planted in someone's outstretched hand, a BMW becomes a Jaguar which becomes a Mercedes, [...] more blood is spattered around a crime-scene photo, an uncircumcised penis is suddenly circumcised.
> (G: 357)

Victor concludes that Bentley is "erasing people" and "inventing a new world, seamlessly" and Bentley himself tells Victor: "'Were you there or were you not? [...] It all depends on who you ask, and even that really doesn't matter anymore'" (G: 357-58). Does it really not matter anymore, however? Does the increasing "computerized electronic imaging of photography" in contemporary society truly constitute, as Robert G. Dunn suggests, "a Baudrillardian development threatening to

undermine the veracity of the still picture completely"?[453] It does not, as Bentley is only able to 'invent a new world' by manipulation precisely because manipulation of pictures is *not* regarded as the norm in a world where there is a social contract to trust photographs. By manipulating pictures in order to make people believe that what they are looking at has actually happened, Bentley himself works within an epistemological framework that makes a difference between the truthful and the invented, a framework in which representation is trusted to a certain extent.[454]

Reading the novel *Glamorama* in terms of conspiracy fiction is a useful approach to grasp the tensions within the text – both on the level of the content as well as, more importantly, on the level of narrative structure and perspective. Conspiracy fiction usually features one group or more working against each other or someone else in secret and it is the objective of the reader and / or one of the characters to find out what is going on. *Glamorama* can clearly be placed within such a framework. Throughout the narrative, the first person narrator Victor encounters individuals, factions, and groups whose actions and objectives are hidden to him and to the readers. There is Victor's father, a US politician running for the senate who might or might not be responsible for Victor's abduction and replacement at the end of the novel. There is the mysterious character Palakon, who asks Victor to travel to Europe, and who might or might not be working for his father, for the United States, and / or for the Japanese government. There is Bobby Hughes, head of a group of supermodel terrorists, who might have ties to the Japanese as well, to the Arab world, and to Palakon, and whose goals are never revealed. There is Jamie Fields, who might be a member of Bobby's terrorist group or a double agent for the CIA, and who, when she dies, claims that she is not Jamie Fields at all.

In conjunction with den Tandt's suggestion to read some recent novels as playing 'off the discourse of classical realism against postmodern devices', the genre of conspiracy fiction also offers an intriguing approach to *Glamorama* as far as the narrative structure and the novel's epistemological tensions are concerned. It is possible to read *Glamorama* as a narrative conspiracy, featuring what one may call narrative factions and authorities – groups and individuals whose (narrative) aims are never completely revealed, who can be read as interacting in a dialogue of "centripetal" and "centrifugal" semantic forces.

[453] Dunn 1998: 101.

[454] Representation via photographs is for very good reasons only trusted to a certain extent, of course. What is argued above does not mean to suggest that a photograph is an unproblematic medium which captures 'reality' in a 'mysterious picture/thing fusion'. A picture is of course a mediated image of the world.

A passage which has above already served as an example of the semantic confusion the text creates shall serve as an example of how these various discourses and narrative authorities simultaneously work in and on the text. As has been mentioned above, in chapter 6, part one, of *Glamorama*, Victor finds himself in a diner, where, in the background, a camera team is making preparations to film something. As the chapter starts, the reader can clearly distinguish between Victor's actions and those of the movie makers. At the end of the chapter, however, the distinction between the filmic and the non-mediated is much less clearly defined. All of a sudden, a director talks to Victor, who takes this as his "*cue* to leave" the diner. "Outside," Victor perceives "more light, some of it artificial," which

> opens up the city, and the side-walks on 14th Street are empty, devoid of *extras*, and above the sounds of faraway jackhammers I can hear someone singing 'The Sunny Side of the Street' softly to himself and when I feel someone touch my shoulder I turn around but no one's there. […] 'Disarm' by the Smashing Pumpkins starts playing on the *sound track* and the music *overlaps* a *shot of the club* I was going to open in TriBeCa and I *walk into that frame*, not noticing the black limousine parked across the street, four buildings down, that *the cameraman pans to*. (G: 167-68, emphases: ls)

One intriguing feature of this passage is that it can be read as presenting a polyphony of narrative perspectives and authorities. The first person narrative, which would, in its most simple version, be limited to what Victor experiences, to his field of vision, is transgressed. In addition to what Victor sees on his way along the sidewalk, we all of a sudden also get the additional perspective of the camera and of what it records. Paradoxically related in the first person, we are told that "the music overlaps a shot of" a club, and that this is a "frame" Victor walks "into" – the narrative paradox being that, if the first person narrator *walks into* a frame, it cannot have been *his* frame of vision that the text presented before. In David Punter's words, "by the time we get to 'Disarm' the scene has translocated, it has moved to the other side of the camera," but this translocation is not grammatically or semantically accompanied by a clear and sharp shift of the narrative perspective. The "world of the 'director'" or the cameraman, is not located "within or around but somehow adjacent to the quotidian world of"[455] Victor Ward. This translocation, split or doubling of the narrative perspective is repeated again when Victor states that he does not 'notice the black limousine parked across the street, four buildings down, that the cameraman pans to.' Victor's frame of vision (in which the limousine does not appear) is accompanied by another narrative frame, that of the camera (which does record the limousine).

To try to put this into a systematic framework which makes use of the conspiracy metaphor and which tries to give an account of the various narrative authorities of the text, one could then make the following case: The first narrative authority of *Glamorama* is Victor Ward, the novel's unreliable,

[455] Punter: 68.

yet authentic first person narrator. In addition, there are various other characters and groups in the novel whom I would tentatively also like to include in this framework as narrative factions, as they make Victor do things such as crossing the Atlantic, as they manipulate films that are shown to him, and present him and the readers with impostors - thus taking on an active part in shaping the story. Other narrative factions of the text are the film teams with their directors and writers who seem to make Victor and other people act according to scripts, who are sometimes present and sometimes absent, and who sometimes themselves turn into actors within the narrative. All of these narrative factions and authorities create a complex polyphonic conspiracy text concerned with narrative and representation, a conspiracy text in which realist and anti-realist discourses clash. The tension between the two cannot ultimately be decided in favour of one or the other. But does referentiality stretch endlessly in *Glamorama*? In my opinion it does not. The centripetal forces remain strong ones in the end. Even though Victor might not be a trustworthy narrator, the end of the novel presents him as a unique and authentic voice. Even though almost everyone seems to deceive each other throughout the novel by not telling the truth or by manipulating film and other media, the very actions of lying and manipulating can only make sense in a framework that assumes that there can be a correct representation. The ever-present cameras, film teams, and scripts could be read as literally and metaphorically representing a world in which the distinction between the real and the fake does not apply any more. But the cameras, according to Victor, are not always around; buildings are actually blown up, people are actually suffering and dying; and the fact that directors and script writers are involved in the film making process suggests that even the films are not floating systems of signs but are creations of people who act as agents.

In addition, could the problematic category of the (implied or real) author be another narrative authority in a reading of *Glamorama* as a conspiracy text concerned with epistemological questions? In an interview with John Casey and Joe David Bellamy, Kurt Vonnegut talks about what one of his mentors tried to teach him about being an author and about writing a text. "We must acknowledge," Vonnegut says of the lessons he was taught,

> that the reader is doing something quite difficult for him, and the reason you don't change point of view too often is so he won't get lost; and the reason you paragraph often is so that his eyes won't get tired, so you get him without him knowing it by making his job easy for him. He has to restage your show in his head – costume and light it.[456]

In this quote, Vonnegut could be said to describe the narrative authority the author holds and a certain ethics of how this authority should be employed. According to the conservative narrative ethics Vonnegut outlines, the reader is not to be confused. He shall not 'get lost' when he 'restages

[456] Vonnegut: 197.

the writer's show in his head.' Clearly, though, an author might of course also consciously choose to subscribe to a different narrative ethics when composing his text.

In *Glamorama*, there is ample evidence for a narrative authority playing with the first person narrator Victor and with readers, creating confusion, inserting intertextual references, and incorporating overt symbolism. As in the diner scene quoted above, for instance, confetti appears out of nowhere and without explanation many times during the narrative, signifying the fragmentation as well as the glitter Victor and others encounter in their postmodern urban environment. Another example is that, towards the end of the first part of *Glamorama*, the sentence "*We'll slide down the surface of things* ..." is repeated over and over (G: 149, 150, 152, 154, 157, original emphasis), strongly suggesting that there is something wrong with the world of surfaces Victor inhabits and, at the same time, moving the text closer to a filmic rendition by creating the impression that there is a sound track to the narrative. The sentence is a quote from the U2 song "Even Better than the Real Thing" (U2), which, in its chorus ("You're the real thing / Yeah, the real thing / You're the real thing / Even better than the real thing") can be read as playing with the distinction between reality and fiction. The narrative is also made to resemble a movie watched in the theatre when Victor has the distinct impression of popcorn scent in the air after having witnessed the brutal killing of another character (G: 420). Finally, in a case of intertextual irony, Victor's phone call with his sister during which she does not recognize him, resembles a similar unsuccessful phone call in Ellis's earlier novel *The Rules of Attraction*, in which Victor did not recognise a person on the other end of the line. The narrative meta-authority thus makes fun of Victor while at the same time presenting him as deeply troubled.[457] Characters in *Glamorama* manipulate photographs, other media, and each other. The author does the same to readers by presenting his misleading and confusing text. By still working with a representational idea, e.g. of photographs, or by emphasising the distinction between the authentic and the fake (Victor) in the end, the text and its narrative factions simultaneously promote and question radical skepticism, but hang on to the ability to meaningfully communicate – within the book and from text to reader.

[457] When Victor calls his sister Sally, he finds out that she views Victor as an impostor and has accepted his impostor in his place. Sally does not recognise Victor on the phone: "'Sally?' I'm breathing hard, my voice tight. 'Who is this?' she asks suspiciously. 'It's me,' I gasp. 'It's Victor. [...] Sally, it's really me, please – ' [...]. The sound of the phone being passed to someone else. [...] 'Hello?' the voice asks again. 'This is Victor Johnson,' the voice says. 'Who is this?' Silence" (G: 476) In the corresponding passage in *The Rules of Attraction*, Victor calls a Camden college dorm and does not recognise the character Lauren, with whom he had been in a relationship months earlier and who still loves him: "I [...] wanted to get in touch with Jaime. When I called Canfield, a girl with an unfamiliar voice answered the phone. 'Hello? Canfield House.' 'Hello?' I said. There was this pause and then the girl recognized my voice and said my name, 'Victor?' 'Yeah? Who is this?' I asked, wondering if it was Jaime [...]. 'Victor,' the girl laughed. 'It's *me*.' 'Oh yeah,' I said. 'You. [...] Listen, is Jaime Fields in? Room 19, I think.' [...] The girl on the phone wasn't saying anything. 'Hello? Anyone there?' I tapped the phone against the floor. 'I'd like to buy a vowel, please.' The girl finally said my name, really whispered it, and then hung the phone up, disconnecting me" (Ellis 1987: 229-230, original emphasis).

Meta-Fiction Subverted: *Look At Me*

In ways similar to the ones just described, within the text and from text to reader, Jennifer Egan's novel *Look At Me* also makes a case for discourses that are founded on truth and on faithful representations. Like Victor Ward, the main character and first person narrator of Egan's text, Charlotte Swenson is a model who exists in an urban world dominated by superficialities and surfaces. But she is a very different person. Victor lives in a perpetual spectacular presence and does not reflect on himself or on what he says to people. Charlotte is his opposite. Hardly confused about where she came from, where she presently is and where she is going, Charlotte lives a conscious life and regularly reflects upon her actions. If she deceives people, she consciously does so, and thus clearly takes language to be a medium with which a truthful representation is in principle possible. When Charlotte lies, it is, as she puts it,

> with good reason: to protect the truth – safeguard it, like wearing fake gems to keep the real ones from getting stolen, or cheapened by overuse. I guarded what truths I possessed because information was not a thing – it was colorless, odorless, shapeless, and therefore indestructible. There was no way to retrieve or void it, no way to halt its proliferation. Telling someone a secret was like storing plutonium inside a sandwich bag; the information would inevitably outlive the friendship or love or trust in which you'd placed it. And then you would have given it away. (LAM: 69)

In this justification for Charlotte's frequent lies, language emerges as an enormously powerful medium. And if characters are deceived in the textual universe of *Look At Me*, it is because they have decided to trust someone who in turn has consciously decided to lie to them. When Charlotte finds out that this is what happened to her with her ghost writer Irene – who turns out to not be a reporter, as she had first claimed, but an academic –, she gets angry at Irene (see LAM: 281-82). Like Bentley and Victor of *Glamorama*, but in a much more conscientious way, Charlotte acts on the basis of an epistemological framework that makes a difference between the factual and the invented. And while, in this framework, representation is trustworthy only to a certain extent in *Glamorama*, it is, if accompanied by trust and by truthful intentions, very dependable in *Look At Me*.

There are many instances in the narrative which could be cited in support of this hypothesis, and some substantiate it rather vehemently and explicitly. Towards the end of the novel, for example, Charlotte is getting closer to the character Anthony Halliday. After just having had sex with him, Charlotte reports to readers:

> [A]s I floated toward sleep, Anthony's arms loosely around me, I found that I couldn't relax. An object was lodged in my chest, caught there; a fist-sized object that had to be expelled, an object consisting of words, a very small handful of words. I didn't want to say them. I was afraid to.
> 'I love you,' I whispered into his doomed, unconscious ear. 'I love you, Anthony Halliday.'
> There, I thought, it's gone. I said it and it's done, it's gone.
> But of course it wasn't gone. It was indestructible. (LAM: 338)

What are we to make of this? Language and Charlotte's feelings for Anthony Halliday have apparently fused into a single entity for her. But it is not a chain of lone signifiers which is lodged

in her chest. Quite the contrary. The words she utters reflect a personal truth, they signify and refer. Why else would they carry such weight? Why else would they be infused with so much importance and have such grave consequences? They are, finally, described as 'indestructible' – as far removed from the notion of *différance* as one can imagine them to be.

What remains problematic, of course – and in this, *Look At Me* most resembles *Glamorama* – is the general uncertainty about the narrative we are presented with, created by the meta-fictional characteristics of the novel discussed above. But – again much more explicitly than in *Glamorama* – throughout the narrative, the meta-fictional elements seldom appear unquestioned or unchallenged. Through the constant objections of Charlotte, we are, for example, reminded that what the internet company Extra/Ordinary.com is saying about her life does not always correspond to what actually happened. What is more, these objections of Charlotte do also not merely deny the authenticity of what is being said about her, about how her life is constructed by Irene Maitlock and Thomas Keene. Charlotte usually also presents an alternative story – the story of how things really happened.[458] With language it *is* possible to make a distinction between what is true for a person / about a person's life and what is not, we are thus reminded. The meta-fictional elements of *Look At Me* do make the text an unreliable one. To a certain extent. Because they are corrected and explicitly marked as deceptive time and again by an authoritative and reliable first-person narrator, it is not the reliability of the first person narrative that is subverted, but, on the contrary, the meta-fictional elements themselves are destabilized in order to make way for stability. In *Look At Me*, while meta-fictional elements break into the narrative and render it unreliable, these meta-fictional elements themselves are in turn subversively broken and rejected by the dependable voice of the first person narrator.

Quotes, Metaphors, and Explanations: *Noise*

In contrast to *Glamorama* and *Look At Me*, there are no meta-fictional elements and hardly any uncertainty about what is happening in Russell Smith's novel *Noise*. The text still presents a commentary on the question whether language is a dependable tool for communication, however. Towards the end of Russell Smith's novel *Noise*, its main character James Willing is on the phone with a police officer who says he will transfer his call. To this James responds, "I know that I *will* get cut off, because transferring calls is a myth, it doesn't work and it never has worked" (N: 242, original emphasis). After having threatened the police officer about possible media coverage about the poor quality of public service, James is put on hold and promised to be connected to another

[458] See, e.g. the discussion about including a homeless person in Charlotte's narrative (LAM: 262).

officer. As predicted by James, this does not actually happen, though. His final comment – "'Transfer your call my ass, [...] what a *fiction*" (N: 242, original emphasis) – is not only telling in its display of James's anger. What his statement also shows is that he makes a distinction between fictional and non-fictional statements. He expects the person he talks to on the phone to communicate earnestly with him. He expects a verbal statement (i.e. 'I will transfer your call, sir.') to correspond to a non-verbal reality (i.e. the call actually getting transferred).

This is the case even though James displays a tendency to think of the world in a metaphorical way, using imagery from the artificial and the technological world or experiencing his life in terms of pop culture narratives. As he travels the highway outside of Toronto in a rented car, for example, he describes the vehicle as a "rocket ship with air-locks and computers" which glides "smoothly across lanes," (N: 135-36) giving him pleasure: "He accelerated, decelerated, felt he was cutting through highway like a ship with a sharp prow. The competing lanes fell away on either side" (N: 136). The artificial and the technological clearly are attractive to the main character of *Noise*. During dinner in a restaurant with his family in his home town New Munich, James has the strong desire to visit the adjacent lounge to have a drink. While his mother tells him about a bed and breakfast place "with a garden with the most beautiful rambling rose, and hedges, and those wooden archways" (N: 187), he sees the entrance to the lounge as a "passageway [...] glowing like a highway tunnel or nightclub entrance" (N: 187). At an earlier occasion, the character Nicola catches James's attention because of her artificial hair colour: "Radioactive red hair in matted tendrils [...]. What colour? [...] Magenta. That was it. Not on the spectrum; something electronic. Magenta" (N: 24).

Likewise, riding his bike James feels "like a bullet" and talks to himself in Star Wars quotes: "'Red leader.' he muttered, ratcheting through gears with both indexed shifters, 'we have liftoff'" (N: 204). When he notices that a conversation with Nicola might take an unfavourable turn, the "warning lights on his cockpit dashboard, his Head Up Display, began to flash. [...] Danger. Warning. [...] *Low altitude, pull out, jettison fuel.* [...] *Abort, pull out*, *eject, eject now* ..." (N: 110-11, original emphasis). Similarly, when James decides to approach the character Alison, he sees himself as a fighter pilot about to fly a dangerous manoeuvre:

> Action, he decided, was called for. He snapped his cockpit hood shut and said into his helmet microphone, *Red leader, I'm going to engage*. He tightened his fists as if gripping two joysticks - one throttle, one for rockets, the red buttons the revolving machine guns - and moved alongside her. *Red four*, came the answer in his headset*, rrroger that, we are go for engagement.* [...] He [...] put his arm around her waist; she leaned her head against his shoulder. [...] *Red leader, he said into his radio, we have contact*. He could hear the joyous crackle of static. *Outstanding, red four, outstanding*. (N: 178, original emphasis)

One way of interpreting this behaviour could be to see it as an expression of James seeing himself from a distance. Are his experiences ironically broken and mediated since he describes them in

terms of something else, in terms of the world of technology? In the last example, an additional aspect is added that allows interpretations that reach even further. James verbalizes his experiences and feelings with the help of patterns not only referring to technology, but taken from a fictional context. Does this correspond to an aspect of the postmodern urban experience as described by Mike Featherstone? Featherstone says

> a de-contextualization of tradition and a raiding of all cultural forms to draw out quotations from the imaginary side of life are found amongst the young 'de-centred subjects' who enjoy the experimentation and play with fashion and the stylization of life as they stroll through the 'no place' postmodern urban spaces.[459]

Other scenes in *Noise* seem to fit into this interpretative frame as well. James and his friends often communicate in quotes taken from pieces of popular culture such as movies or songs. Talking to himself before confronting Nicola in order to obtain photographs from her, James imitates a scene from a James Bond movie: "'Make no mistake, Mister Bond', he said in a Russian accent, 'I want that microfilm. And I intend to get it'" (N: 218). In a phone conversation with his friend De Courcy, the two insert a spontaneous quoted dialogue:

> 'But seeing as this is a forty-four magnum -'
> 'The most powerful handgun in the world -'
> 'And it will blow your head *clean off* -' (N: 189, original emphasis)

After talking to a New York publisher on the phone, James evokes a Western movie scene:

> He narrowed his eyes and turned down the corners of his mouth. 'You and me, pal, we're goin' downtown, and then you're goin' to the big house for a very lawng toime.' [...] He pointed and growled, 'You are goin' down. I don't care who you know, I don't care who your daddy is, whose dick you're suckin awn: You. Are. Goin. Down. (N: 85)

To interpret these remarks solely in terms of non-originality of experiences and of language is an an explanation that would be too narrow. They are not uttered by 'young de-centred subjects' and they certainly do not take place in 'no place postmodern urban spaces' where all people do is to 'play with fashion and the stylization of life.' Inserting quotations and metaphors into dialogues with friends or into descriptions of personal experiences may serve many different functions. Firstly, this way of talking is a community-building tool and a way to find out who belongs to the same community. As Justin Kaplan points out, quotations might be used "like the Biblical Shibboleth, as passwords and secret handshakes, social strategic signals that say, 'I understand you. We speak the same language.'"[460] If the other person does not recognize the quote or does not react to it, it means they do not share the same knowledge and the same experiences. The community building aspect of talking in quotes is exemplified in James's and De Courcy's

[459] Featherstone 1992: 267-68.
[460] Kaplan: ix, as quoted in Garber: 16.

telephone conversation quoted above. It functions as a phatic element, assuring the communication partners of their common cultural background.

Another way to look at this kind of communicative behaviour is to see it as an example of using conventionalised linguistic patterns, such as every language necessarily features and consists of. A simple case of this, which will sound like gibberish to those not familiar with the expressions used, but which makes perfect sense, is a conversation James overhears at a hip Toronto hairdresser's:

> 'And we did K.'
> 'E and K or just K?'
> 'A little E.'
> 'There's no little E, girl […]. Now get back to work.' (N: 211)

Even though this dialogue might be incomprehensible to some parts of the English-speaking population, it really only is a simple case of two people reassuring each other that they belong to a group of people who use a specialized jargon and of one of them relating information about the previous night's events to the other. As soon as you know that K and E stand for of the party drugs Ketamine and Ecstasy, the dialogue makes complete sense. All it does is to code the information that is to be reported in a certain jargon.[461] The same can be argued for more complex semantic phenomena such as James's evocations of pop culture narratives such as the Star Wars movies. When he refers to his actual feelings and thoughts with the help of images taken from fictional narratives, these narratives do most likely shape what he is experiencing. On the other hand, by recalling past experiences or complex emotional situations with the help of only a few words, he also might be said to simply code his at least partly authentic current feelings and thoughts.

While making his characters talk in quotes might be said to hint at Smith's awareness of the inescapable conventionality of language,[462] it does not mean that he embraces postmodern theories about the disconnectedness of language and the world. Language, for James Willing, does not grant access to final truths or to beauty and to other mysteries of being. When asked by Alison why he has chosen to be a writer, James recalls a time when he "had had an interest in words and

[461] The following examples shall attest to how many specialized ways of expressing oneself the English language features, and how exclusive some of these uses are. Even though the web site *Acronym Finder* offers 42 possible meanings for 'K', Ketamine is not amongst them (cf. Mountain Data Systems). On the other hand, the White House Office of National Drug Policy's online service "Street Terms: Drugs and the Drug Trade. Drug Type: Ketamine" offers 19 expressions with which one may refer to Ketamine, but "K" is not amongst them; the closest matches are "Special 'K'" and "Vitamin K."

[462] Smith's awareness of this feature of language is made rather explicit in his earlier novel *How Insensitive*, in which the main character Ted Owen rejects a feminist's argument that patriarchism is inherent in translation because patriarchy is characterised by domination and translation is as well. To this, Ted Owen replies: "'But in that *all* writing is a re-writing, surely, all writing a layering of influences, previously written phrases, then surely all writing is a form of translation, of digestion? I mean you're never going to get away from the palimpsest of intertextuality'" (HI: 175, original emphasis).

writing and music and saw them as somehow linked" (N: 173). He now can no longer see this connection and argues that writing is "just a skill [...]. That's all writing is. It's just a specialized skill. That's all it is" (N: 173-74). "Music, though," James goes on, "[m]usic is something else" (N: 174). Early on in the narrative, James's roommate De Courcy asks him what he likes about music. James reacts in a passionate way: "'What do I *like*?' James leaned forward, almost spilling his wine. 'What do I like? I don't like it, it's everything. It's as if - some of the music I like, it's so good that I can't imagine humans ever wrote it. I don't know where it came from'" (N: 59).

For James, music is a way to possibly express metaphysical truths and to create beauty. But even if language is devalued in the exchange above in comparison to music, it is important to note that it is not discarded. If writing is 'just a skill', it remains a skill with which one can express and categorize ideas. For James, it is a skill with which one *can* transcend the signifier, capture the world, and earnestly communicate. During the novel *Noise*, James is not "learning to read the city as a post-modern text," as Derek Czajkowski would have it.[463] It is true that "Smith creates" an urban "complexity that mirrors the complexity of his characters' lives."[464] To therefore see the city of *Noise* in terms of a postmodern text would, however, be misleading. Czajkowski observes an attitude of "conflation of high and low culture in Smith's thought, and consequently, in his work" and calls this a "contemporary view […] where the old hierarchy of cultures has broken down," a "postmodern view."[465] In response, one has to state that to read a collapse of hierarchies in Smith's *Noise* constitutes an incomplete interpretation of how the Canadian novelist sees the (cultural) world. He might propose that "a silk tie" can give "one the same aesthetic experience as a Matisse or a Picasso"[466] and that silk ties are just as worthy of the interpretative gaze of the intellectual as a high modernist painting is. But he clearly maintains a hierarchy when it comes to those who can understand how a silk tie might be connected to a Picasso painting and those who do not have a clue about aesthetic traditions. In a conversation between De Courcy and James, in which De Courcy advises James against getting involved with Nicola, he presents the following reason to the latter: "Nicola … the difference between you and Nicola is that she doesn't know *why* she likes things. She can't explain it. […] And explaining things. Is what you do. Only too well" (N: 64, original emphasis).

[463] Czajkowski: 79.
[464] Czajkowski: 79.
[465] Czajkowski: 86.
[466] Czajkowski: 86.

Intersubjective Realities: *Suicide Casanova*

Like *Glamorama*, Arthur Nersesian's novel *Manhattan Loverboy*, which has been discussed at length above, can be characterised as a narrative in which the narrator and main character Joseph seems to be as much a subject to his own personal confusions as to external powers. *Glamorama* promotes realism to some extent by taking the reader outside of Victor's confused head in part 5 of the novel (G: 443-463) and by thereby confirming some of the elements of Victor's first person narrative that one might have dismissed as delusions otherwise. There is no such release from the first person narrator's daydreaming, drugged, paranoid and possibly hallucinating mind in *Manhattan Loverboy*. One could not construct an argument in favour of the kind of realist spirit argued for in this study from within the text of *Manhattan Loverboy*. To do this, one would have to approach it from a metatextual position and claim that the novel presents a realist account of what might go on in the deluded mind of a turn of the millennium inhabitant of a North American metropolis.

A text that does generate such an argument in favour of realism from within the text is Nersesian's 2002 novel *Suicide Casanova*. It speaks in support of discernible realities through its use of a third person narrative perspective, which adds reliability to the dominant first person narrative and provides the reader with additional or corrected information if necessary. It also does so by emphasizing that characters have a history which can be retraced with the use of language. The narrative starts on a specific date, "April 13, 2001" (SC: 17), two months after the character Cecilia died. It then chronicles the life and character development of her husband Leslie, the novel's protagonist and its principal narrator. While the story is set in the year 2001, it also frequently jumps back to various episodes from Leslie's and from other characters' pasts. Sometimes these retrospective passages correspond to or directly explain what is going on in the present, and sometimes they present seemingly non-related occurrences and developments which then often reconnect to the narrative present later.

On various levels and in different narrative strands, the text employs typical traits of the mystery genre, both within the narrative, in which some characters and the readers know vital things which other characters do not, and in a dialogue between the narrative and the reader. Characters and their motivations as well as their histories, how characters relate to each other and what their common histories are, or how and why Cecilia has died – all of these things are smaller or larger mysteries to readers at first and are explained bit by bit as the narrative develops. Readers, for example, do get the information that Cecilia passed away in some kind of violent act as Leslie recalls some details of the scene of her death on the second page of the text:

> For the first time, I am recalling her beautiful face, minutes dead. Lana's drool and lipstick still slobbered around her mouth. Her blue lips, that red flush rising up from the black leather neck collar

> which was still dug deep into her throat. Her eyes, shocked, bulging up from death, eternally astounded as she gagged on that little red ball. (SC: 18)

The first person narrator leaves us with this graphic yet limited information for the time being, however; his attention shifts from memory back to the present in the very next instant. The passage quoted above is followed by a description of Cecilia's room. "I draw back the drapes in her office just a bit so that a poker of sunlight stabs across the wall, illuminating her oak bookshelf" (SC: 18), Leslie reports. But it is not until the end of the novel that the actual death of Cecilia has been fully illuminated by the light the first person narrative sheds on what has happened.

Just as central in the text as the question of how Cecilia died are questions of the self and of identity in general, though. Much of what the novel has to say about the self seems to point into a postmodern direction in which the self changes like a chameleon, in which everyone only ever wears a mask when relating to other people, and in which the subject is not self- but other-determined. An early example of the self as an ever-changing and non-definable entity is presented as Leslie looks through Cecilia's things and comes across the film "*Teacher's Pet*, a porn flick starring the great seventies diva, Sky Pacifica" (SC: 19, original emphasis) with whom Leslie had once been involved. He recalls watching her movies before he ever knew her and reminisces not only about her body but, more importantly, about the elusive quality of her face. "[I]t was," Leslie remembers,

> her face that stole the show – I simply couldn't get a fix on it. It seemed to change constantly, reflecting and refracting at various angles as if made of fleshy sequins. Sky epitomized pornography by being not just *one* drop-dead knockout but, at different angles, reminiscent of all of them. Early in her career she was thin, later she grew curvaceous. She was brunette, but at times would go blond. (SC: 19, original emphasis)

In addition, Leslie recalls, Sky "used three separate professional identities early in her career" – "Blue June," "Sarah Moreau," and "Sue De Grace" (SC: 20). In Leslie's eyes, not only professional identities of an actor on the screen change, however. For him, the subject in general changes his or her identity without much difficulty – depending on the role he or she finds himself in at a particular moment in time, or depending on where life has led the subject.

Again, Sky seems to be a case in point. As Leslie watches the movie starring his former lover, whom he hasn't seen in years, the "divining rod in" his "pants is" his "first erection in some time, and it's pointing to the past" (SC: 22) – a past in which Leslie had been infatuated with Sky Pacifica, and in which he went through pains to try to meet her face to face. In the present and in the wake of his wife's death, Leslie falls back into the infatuation he once felt for Sky and again goes through pains to seek her. As he soon learns from a private detective, Sky now lives in "Suffolk County, Long Island, in the small town of Borden" (SC: 34). "[P]inned down like a dissected frog in the waxboard of the suburbs" (SC: 48) of New York, "dear Sky, porn queen, has melted away" and has

been replaced with "Jeane Lindemeyer, soccer mom," a persona Leslie tellingly labels the "flav of the day" (SC: 35). Do people choose a role and an identity like a flavour of ice cream? In *Suicide Casanova*, this seems to be the case. Leslie works as a lawyer and tells himself and the reader that after "seventeen years in the intrigues of corporate law, all social interaction is a performance" (SC: 147) to him. He informs the doorman of his apartment building that the people he "'brown-nose[s] all day, they're fucking phonies'" (SC: 188). His world is one in which the people he associates with will

> plan a sailing trip on the high seas, or a mountain-climbing expedition with an entourage of luggage-carrying natives, or witness a natural phenomenon halfway around the world, volcanoes, eclipses, etc., but for them it's like some interactive cybermovie or a week in a futuristic theme park. (SC: 89)

Wherever the wealthy inhabitants of present-day New York seem to go, they are "hermetically protected, and surgically transplanted back into their twenty-first-century world without any real risk or aura of experience" (SC: 90). What is more, the characters of *Suicide Casanova* frequently wear masks in their social interactions. When Leslie travels to Los Angeles in 1979 to meet Sky, he poses as a photographer. In 2001, he decides to approach Sky's / Jeane's daughter Kate pretending to be the fashion photographer "Perry Cruz" (SC: 93) and plans to then abduct Kate in order to force her mother to meet him again and have sex with him. While the abduction fails, he is able to convince Kate that he actually is Perry Cruz when he first meets her.

When Leslie returns from his first trip to Long Island under the guise of Perry Cruz, he takes himself "out on a date to a nice new restaurant called Anthropomorphi's" (SC: 126). With this quasi-reference to Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, in which a restaurant called 'Subjects' ironically suggests that the human subject is at stake in the book, Nersesian shows that similar things are at stake in *Suicide Casanova*. The restaurant's name, which can either refer to anthropoids or to something that is stylised in a way so as to resemble a human being, is a fitting description of how Leslie sees human beings. In their social interactions, for Leslie, people stylise themselves in order to appear as if they were human when they actually are not. What they are closer to are anthropoids, beings or animals directed by their biology and by inexplicable instincts rather than by a critical and rational mind or a free will. Again and again, this is emphasized in Leslie's first person narrative. He states that he knows he "will not be able to control" himself when it comes to trying to get in touch with Sky / Jeane (SC: 35). He calls himself the "desperate animal that I am" (SC: 186). He tells a woman he has met in a bar and has pretended to care for that in relationships between human beings sex, i.e. a physical and biological aspect of how humans relate to each other, is "all we really have" (SC: 329). Finally, society, for Leslie, is a community of "fellow scumbag[s]" (SC: 36) who "never really make any choices" (SC: 311) because what people think of as a choice is predestined by the environment. In Leslie's opinion, society only functions because its members

are controlled by moral standards ("People need their dirty habits, if only to shame them into their clean habits," SC: 31) and by drugs such as Prozac (SC: 46).

What emerges from all of this, it could be argued, is a postmodern urban subject who is on the one hand characterised less by a stable interior sense of self than by the roles he or she plays and whose stability, where it can be found, is not self- but other-determined, by biological predispositions, societal pressure, and drugs. But this would be a misreading of the text. It is important to keep in mind that the above theses about the self are related by a first person narrator. While the text does not indisputably prove him wrong, taken as a whole it offers other convincing ideas about human nature. Some of the counter-examples which speak against Leslie's conception of the self can be found in the history of Leslie's and Sky's / Jeane's relationship. While Leslie frequently question's a human being's capabilities to, amongst other things, love someone else or to make rational choices and decisions, Jeane displays the ability to do both of these things. After initially using Leslie when she is still involved in various sex trades and addicted to drugs, she makes the conscious decision to change her life when she gets pregnant in the early 1980s, returns to New York, moves in with Leslie and falls in love with him. When her love is not requited by Leslie,[467] she is unhappy but she is not helplessly caught in a situation beyond her control. Instead of being determined by her feelings, she rationally decides to get together with the much older hot dog vendor Eddie, telling Leslie that "I need a father for my baby, and I need someone to love me. So I'm marrying him" (SC: 288).

As far as realism is concerned, one thing that is important about these feelings and decisions of Jeane is that the retrospective passages of the narrative are, for the most part, not narrated by Leslie, the first person narrator, but by a third person narrator clearly marked as not being Leslie. Even though this narrator sometimes seems to see the world through Leslie's eyes,[468] he at other times moves towards a more omniscient position by reporting on events at which Leslie was or is not present and by providing the reader with extensive information about episodes of Leslie's past life which the latter does not remember.[469] In *Manhattan Loverboy*, readers can trust the narrative much less when it comes to things that happen outside of Joseph Aeiou's mind. The narrative reality presented in *Suicide Casanova* is less subjectively tainted and more reliable for an intersubjective community. It is presented from a more objective point of view in the novel, and readers can make

[467] Jeane repeatedly confesses her love for Leslie and he rejects her every time (see SC: 264, 289, and 341-42).
[468] When Leslie goes on a business trip, for example, readers only learn about what has happened in Jeane's life when Leslie does so as well after returning to New York (see SC: 285-86).
[469] When Jeane and Leslie talk about what happened in their past, the first person narrator Leslie does not remember that he initially made Jeane leave his apartment when approached him for help after having gotten pregnant (SC: 309), an episode which is described in detail by the third person narrator (SC: 199 – 211).

some justified observations about the narrative world outside of Leslie's head, about some objective reality 'out there' within the text. When, after Leslie and Jeane have made love with each other, the third person narrator writes, "Jeane hugged and held him and no one else. She never wanted to hold another man again" (SC: 251), readers can therefore be much more confident that this is what actually happens than they could ever be about anything which Joseph Aeiou relates to us about, e.g., Amy in *Manhattan Loverboy*.

What is more, the intersubjective narrative reality of *Suicide Casanova* is not only more accessible for the readers of the novel than it is in *Manhattan Loverboy* – it is also more accessible for the characters of the novel who try to orientate themselves within the narrative reality. The roles people take on, the masks they wear, do not make them free-floating, ephemeral, and fleeting, do not render them inaccessible to the reader or to other characters around them. Sky Pacifica's change from porn star to suburban housewife, for example, does not mean that she is disconnected from her past. It remains a reality for her and forms her historical and coherent identity.

What is true for people, the novel repeatedly advocates, can also be true for places. While the narrative often speaks of the masks people wear and of what things appear to be on the surface, it also stresses the fact that there is or might be something underneath, such as historical roots which still have an influence on the present. This is especially evident when Leslie looks at and talks about Times Square. "The once bushy center of New York has now been entirely defoliated," Leslie observes. "Fresh-faced youngsters fill the street with banners of encouragement and greetings," where "[t]wenty years ago, they would've been shanghaied by pimps and chicken hawks," where they would have encountered rows and rows of adult entertainment shops. But for Leslie, "you can cut the leaves and even the branches, but the" sleazy "roots" of Times Square "are still down there" (SC: 31). Moreover, not only past identities of people and places are accessible for the characters in *Suicide Casanova*, present identities are as well. With the help of a private detective, Leslie can, for example, easily locate Jeane on the vast continent of North America and receives an "information form" which "lists her home address, home phone number, work address, a short profile of her husband Eddie, and several details about his business. Subsequent pages give a brief description of the two children along with where they go to school" (SC: 34). Language, thus, does not necessarily have to consist of a labyrinth of free-floating signifiers. In the narrative universe of *Suicide Casanova*, it has the power to transmit reliable information about the narrative world.

In addition, after Leslie makes a threatening phone call to Jeane pretending to be Jerry Cruz, all that keeps her from finding out about where he called from is that he used a public phone. When

he does not use this precaution due to being high on drugs in a subsequent phone call, Jeane has no such difficulties. She traces the call and reaches Leslie's answering machine. She also recognizes his voice and hears his name being voiced by a woman in the background. An utterance, the narrative thus argues, may be tracked back to its sender. Unless the sender protects himself, manipulating the regular channels through which language is sent in the communicative process, we can identify both channel and sender. Even though this is a minimal aspect of the communicative process between people and would not necessarily imply that two people understand each other, it still stands in opposition to the radical postmodern conception that language always constitutes quotes without any stable context, as it suggests that a voice can under normal circumstances be located.

In *Manhattan Loverboy*, one mystery seemed to inevitably follow the next and some could not finally be explained satisfactorily. In contrast, the mysteries in *Suicide Casanova* are all resolved in the end. All the questions the narrative prompts the reader to ask (e.g.: How did Leslie meet Sky Pacifica? How come he thinks of her daughter as partly his daughter as well? How did Sky turn into Jeane Lindemeyer? How did Cecilia, Leslie's wife die? etc.) are answered during the novel. Instead of emphasizing a skeptical outlook towards our ability to comprehend the world, as a postmodern urban novel would, the novel can be read as arguing the opposite. Life and people, according to *Suicide Casanova*, might be strange and full of twists, and many things seem incomprehensible at first – but they can finally be retraced to their origin, they can be explained, and the world is not beyond being understood by human beings.

4.3 'Hello,' I say. 'It's me': The Return of the Subject

> After all the postmodern dust has settled, what traces remain of the self [...]?
> (Calvin O. Schrag, *The Self after Postmodernity*)

The movie *The Truman Show* (1998) depicts a media-controlled space. Its central character, Truman Burbank, has been living in an artificial environment for all of his life. At the beginning of the film, however, he himself has no idea that this is the case. What he thinks of as his seaside home town is in fact a giant studio in which everything – from what happens in Truman's life to the weather – is created by the producers and creators of the TV show Truman unknowingly is the star of. His wife is an actress who has been cast to play his partner. The man Truman thinks of as his father has not actually died when Truman was a young boy. He was simply an actor who had been written out of the story. In Truman's world, everything seems real, but it is fake and mediated. Can it therefore be conceived of as a postmodern environment? Yes and no. Yes – the film initially seems to suggest that it could be possible for us to live in a completely media-created environment without noticing it. And no – an important distinction in the movie is that there is an (inauthentic, fabricated) inside and an (authentic and non-fabricated) outside world. What is more, the movie makes a strong argument in favour of the rational, critical, and creative human agent in the character of Truman. Even though he has only ever been exposed to the mediated grammar and text of the giant TV studio, "*The Truman Show* […] shows us a character who […] challenges – and ultimately escapes from – a contrived world that is an invention of media," as Ken Sanes puts it in his analysis of the film.[470] Truman's attempt to escape his inauthentic and fake environment is initiated by a sudden and short breach in the pervasive text that surrounds him. Early on in the film, his car stereo system all of a sudden picks up a TV show crew talking to each other about where he is going via radio. His skepticism about his surroundings and his wish to travel beyond the boundaries of his small world is not affected by the numerous attempts to keep him in place and to influence him into staying. When he visits a travel agency in order to book a flight to the Fiji Islands, for example, this move of his has been anticipated by the producers of the show, and posters have been put up which strongly discourage travellers to go anywhere by plane. Wouldn't a truly text-determined individual now have to change his mind about flying? Wouldn't a postmodern subject have to be determined and guided by the environment which again and again tries to convince him that there is nothing wrong about his world and that travelling is inadvisable? Truman's reaction is a different one. He emerges as an active agent who can make up his own

[470] Sanes (b).

mind. Despite the posters on the wall, he asks for a ticket to the Fijis. When none is being sold to him, he manages to temporarily escape his permanent surveillance, overcomes his fear of the water, sails towards the edge of his world, finds out the truth about his situation, and – confronted with the choice to stay in his comfortable state of delusion or to enter the real world – steps outside of his multi-media confinement.

Truman Burbank's story has been retold in such detail at the beginning of this chapter because it represents a challenge to postmodern notions of the subject. Yes, the world around us, and the urban world in particular, is largely media-created. Yes, it is sometimes hard to find out what is authentic and what is not. But this does not mean that we have to "agree that we are now at a point in history that is the end of modernity"[471] and of humanism, as some would have it. For in all of the mediations surrounding us, we do not necessarily get lost or lose our selves. The human subject is capable of critical and rational thinking and of agency. This is one of the central messages of *The Truman Show*, and it is partly what the novels under consideration here tell their readers. How they go about this shall be shown on the following pages.

The Body as an Anchor and the Despotic Gaze of the Other

Towards the end of Russell Smith's novel *Noise*, James Willing sits at the bar of a restaurant and notices a woman and a man he identifies as "marathon-running poststructuralists" (N: 230) wearing "grad student uniforms of jeans and fleece outdoor tops" (N: 229). Listening in on their conversation, he hears the following exchange:

> 'I really don't think that after Foucault,' said the bearded guy loudly, as if addressing a conference, 'you can think that the body even exists, given the fragmented and mediated perceptions we have of it, I mean we don't even have a self any more –'
> 'Wait a minute,' said the pale woman. 'My body doesn't exist?'
> 'We can no longer afford to think so.' And he downed his beer conclusively.
> The woman was touching her arm. 'Wow.' She was feeling the bones and muscle, twisting her wrist under her sleeve. 'Cool.' (N: 232)

James's reaction to this dialogue is to exclaim "'Jesus fuck'" (N: 232) in disdain for what he had to hear. When he later leaves his place at the bar to sit down at a table with his date Nicola, he steps on the male grad student's foot. The man is obviously hurting, "hopping" (N: 233) in pain – and James drives home his point, saying "'It's funny that it hurts, doesn't it [sic]? I mean considering – '" (N: 233). Some readers might view James's reaction as trivial and the text's portrayal of

[471] Snyder: vi. It should be noted that this quote, taken from the "Translator's Introduction" to Vattimo's *The End of Modernity*, does not necessarily represent the view of Snyder himself, who hints at the fact that he does not agree with some of Vattimo's ideas (cf. Snyder: viii).

poststructuralist ideas as gravely exaggerated. In retrospect, Russell Smith himself has stated that he would probably change it to something more subtle.[472] But is it really a cheap shot, and does it gravely misrepresent postmodern ideas about the self?

As postmodernism has been understood in this study, the oft-cited attack on the Cartesian ego has not been an attack on Descartes' argument for "mind and body as distinct and separable substances,"[473] as Calvin O. Schrag puts it, but rather as a contestation of the mind's ability to reason and to acquire knowledge. This is not to say that corporeality has not been an important issue in some postmodern thinking. Edith Wyschogrod, e.g., even identifies one of two important "strands of postmodern thought" as one that is concerned with corporeality.[474] However, instead of closing or narrowing the gap between Descartes' substances, a postmodern anthropology would have to, as I see it, replace the Cartesian "ghost in a machine" with "a machine without a ghost"[475] – a machine one could not have any knowledge of, reflect critically upon, or move into one direction or another.

An argument from Derrida's *Of Grammatology* may serve as an example of how this kind of a postmodern concept of the body and its connection to the mind could be developed.[476] Commenting on Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions,* Derrida shows that Rousseau "needs signs because things themselves don't satisfy,"[477] because things have no *presence.* In a telling passage of Rousseau's text, he describes how he tries to get ever nearer to his beloved 'Maman', Madame de Warens. In her absence, he touches and kisses objects she had touched. When Madame de Warens is actually present, however, Rousseau is still in need of supplementary signs. "I was guilty of extravagances, which only the most violent love seemed capable of inspiring," Rousseau confesses. "At table one day, just when she had put a piece of food into her mouth, I exclaimed that I saw a hair in it; she put back the morsel on her plate, and I eagerly seized and swallowed it."[478] Taking this passage as an example, Derrida argues that through Rousseau's use of supplements, "a necessity is announced" – a necessity which can be generalised as "an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of

[472] Smith in a conversation with the author in Toronto, April 2003.
[473] Schrag: 46.
[474] Wyschogrod: 53.
[475] Schrag: 101.
[476] With my remarks about Derrida and Rousseau, I follow a line of argument presented by Jonathan Culler in Culler: 8-12.
[477] Culler: 10.
[478] Rousseau: 119. ["Quelquefois même en sa présence il m'échappait des extravagances que le plus violent amour seul semblait pouvoir inspirer. Un jour, à table, au moment qu'elle avait mis un morceau dans sa bouche, je m'écrie que j'y vois un cheveu: elle rejette le morceau sur son assiette; je m'en saisis avidement et l'avale"; translation as in Derrida 1967: 152.]

the thing itself, of immediate presence, or originary perception."[479] Other people, then, or objects cannot be present to a person except through signs, which always are deferred. "Immediacy is derived."[480]

In Jay McInerney's novel *Model Behavior* (1998), this kind of mediated experience is presented as a contemporary urban reality. The novel's main character Connor McKnight experiences sex with his girlfriend, the model Philomena, in terms of an absence instead of a presence. The presence McKnight misses encountering his partner is made up for by conjuring signs, memories, as supplements:

> Meditating on the strange fact that while you were making love to Philomena you were actually fantasizing about a previous fucking. [...] This has become almost a habit, conjuring a previous sexual episode in the commission of a current one, as if the memory possessed a vivacity somehow lacking in the physical present. As if, say, the breast of Philomena, delectable as it might seem in the flesh, was only truly eroticized in the imagination. But why isn't the flesh enough?[481]

While McKnight's experiences and Derrida's reading of Rousseau point towards the incapability of the subject to finally feel or know the presence of *another* person or of objects, it is not such a long distance from there to a denial of one's own body. One need only, as Francis Barker does in a study on the body, add the Cartesian mind-body dualism to the argument, positing the physical aspect of the human being at a distance from the mental, in order to arrive at one's body as a deferred, mediated, non-present object as well. If we accept Descartes' notion of the self, Barker argues, "the modern body assumes its parenthetical status." The "flesh is de-realized," and "representation […] is separated from it and puts in train a mode of signification for which, to borrow a word from Derrida, the body has become supplementary."[482] The body, thus, is dominated by the mind and by discourse. Its presence is denied. "The carnality of the body has been dissolved and dissipated until it can be reconstituted in writing at a distance from itself."[483] In Roland Barthes' words, the

[479] Derrida 1967: 157.
[480] Derrida 1967: 157.
[481] McInerney: 11.
[482] Barker 1984: 62-63.
[483] Barker 1984: 62-63. For other examples of postmodern theorists who see the body as a disappearing phenomenon, see, e.g., Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, who pose the question whether "[i]f, today, there can be such an intense fascination with the fate of the body, might this not be because the body no longer exists?" and claim that "*[s]emiotically*, the body is tattooed, a floating sign, processed through the double imperatives of the cultural politics of advanced capitalism: the *exteriorization* of all the body organs as the key telemetry of a system that depends on the *outering* of the body functions […] and the *interiorization* of ersatz subjectivity as a prepackaged ideological receptor for the pulsations of the desiring-machine of the fashion scene" (Kroker / Kroker 1988b: 20-21, original emphases). The body, or "what we experience as the body," they propose, is "only a fantastic simulacra of body rhetorics" (Kroker / Kroker 1988b: 22). As John Rajchman suggests, this was also a central message of Lyotard's exhibition *Les Immatériaux* (Beaubourg museum, Paris, 1985). In the first part of the exhibition, "each path was to demonstrate a different kind of artificial extension or replacement of the body. […] In the world of 'Les Immatériaux,' everything starts in the body and ends in language" (Rajchman 1991a: 109). For another argument along similar lines, see Faurschau.

body, "the thing that seems the most real to you is doubtless the most phantasmic. Perhaps it is even only phantasmic."[484]

Against these kinds of theorizations, some theorists have claimed that the human body might be an anchor against the complete dissolution of the human subject in the face of postmodern deterministic and relativist challenges. Heinz Günter Vester, for instance, observes that a turn towards bodily experience is one feature of a search for personal stability in our fragmented (post)modern time.[485] David Harvey makes a similar comment, observing that there has been a movement towards the body as "the irreducible basis for understanding" the world in order to counter theories which attacked "all previously established categories for understanding."[486]

The intellectual environment of the contemporary city has above been described as reflecting a postmodern zeitgeist which challenges "the whole network of abstractions."[487] In the novels considered in this study, is there a turn towards the body as a site of resistance against the fragmentations of postmodern life? An example of how a focus on corporeality as the *only* anchor of a non-postmodern urban subject remains problematic is Joseph A-e-i-o-u, the main character of Arthur Nersesian's novel *Manhattan Loverboy*. As has been mentioned above, Joseph talks about having undergone massive plastic surgery at the request of his colleague, neighbour, enemy, and lover Amy. According to Joseph, in these operations, his legs are artificially lengthened, his face is subjected to an almost complete makeover, his body fat is massively reduced (MLB: 121-121), and, finally, his eye colour is changed to blue (MLB: 150-153). The changes in his body are real enough for Joseph at first, and not only his close relations, but also a whole "surgical theatre" of "middle-aged nurses who" fill its "spectator pews" (MLB: 124) attest to and witness the change of Joseph from ugly duckling to a "'tall, thin, and handsome'" man (MLB: 122). Later, however, Amy and Whitlock inform Joseph that, even though the changes in his body and in his self-perception did partly occur, they were not due to any operations whatsoever. Towards the end of the novel, when Joseph confronts Amy and Whitlock about the surgery that was carried out on his body, the following dialogue ensues:

> 'There were no operations,' Amy replied, repressing a smirk.
> 'What?'
> Since birth, you had this self-concept of being small and ugly.'

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[484] Barthes 1980: 365.
[485] Vester writes: "Die mühsame und verzweifelte Selbstsuche, die über das kognitive Ich gerade aufgrund der Körperverdrängung und –distanzierung nicht vorankommen will, sucht sich mit Hilfe der Körperthematisierung, der Rückgewinnung des Selbst über den Körper, einen neuen Zugang zum Selbst" (Vester 1986: 194).
[486] Harvey 1999. At times, as Harvey observes, this return to the body was also interpreted as part of postmodernism, as it seems to suit a postmodern understanding of politics which sets the local against the global or universal (Harvey 1999).
[487] Harvey 1999.

> 'But look, the scars!' I showed her my wrist and ankles.
> 'Those are only scars. Your height hasn't changed, nothing really changed. You were given a facial and haircut.'
> 'How about the weight loss?'
> 'The weight loss was due to the so-called rehabilitative workouts afterwards, and the special diet. […] Be real […]. Do you really think I would force you to have an operation, or, for that matter, that doctors would operate on a non-consenting patient?' (MLB: 187)

A similar confusion surrounds the question whether Joseph had sexual intercourse with Amy or with someone who pretended to be Amy when his eyes were covered with bandages because of the surgery that might or might not have taken place. Amy first leaves Joseph because he sexually abused her (MLB: 155). Later, she tells him that he did not make love to her but to a "'sex surrogate'" who claimed that he was "'wonderful'" (MLB: 189). Finally, however, she shows him "the love hickey" he "implanted" above one of her breasts to tell him that "that night you and I fucked, that was real" (MLB: 194). Joseph, though, is now not convinced of either story any more. As he tells his father, "I first thought I had made love to Amy and then I thought I hadn't, and then I learned I did, but still wasn't sure" (MLB: 198).

Unless a stable mind can report of a stable and trustworthy corporeal existence, the body and biological 'facts' are worth little in the effort to rescue the self from a 'post-Cartesian' non-existence. One has to seriously question the body as *the* site of valid selfhood, as an anchor providing stability in the postmodern age. Could it not be just another linguistically constructed fictionalisation of the self? "There remains the ultimate paradox," as Richard Shusterman points out, "that every attempt to theorize the body as something outside our linguistic structures self-refutingly inscribes it in those structures."[488] Closely related to this is the problem that how a body is thought of in a particular society might determine what is seen as a genuine body and self. Is how we experience our body determined by the traditions, the expectations, the discourse of our environment – and therefore not at all an expression of a potent self? Frank Lüdeking tends towards this point of view when he writes:

> The gaze of others, which reaches us from 'the outside', is a despotic gaze. We come to desire to fulfil its expectations, and we react to it by adjusting to our environment with the means of mimicry. This is how the body turns into a dependent variable. In order to keep up the fiction of integrity, we willingly shape our body according to the norms of society.[489]

[488] Shusterman 1989: 622.
[489] Lüdeking: 219 ["Der Blick der anderen, der 'von außen' auf uns fällt, ist ein despotischer Blick. Seinen Erwartungen zu genügen, wird unser sehnlichster Wunsch, und wir reagieren auf ihn, indem wir uns des Mittels der Mimikry bedienen und unsere Erscheinung unserer Umgebung anpassen. So wird der Körper zur abhängigen Variablen. Um die beruhigende Fiktion seiner Integrität nicht zu gefährden, formen wir ihn bereitwillig nach den Normen der Gesellschaft", translation: ls.]

For Lüdeking, the "gaze from the exterior has a defining influence on the interior of our body. [...] The body, our own body, one could claim for the sake of the argument, is always a body belonging to the other."[490]

These kinds of apprehensions towards the body as a valid site of internal experience are present in Alex Shakar's *The Savage Girl* and in Jennifer Egan's novel, whose title, *Look at Me*, is a telling one in the present context. In the accident we learn about at the beginning of Egan's novel, Charlotte Swenson is badly injured, breaks "virtually every bone" in her face and subsequently undergoes reconstructive surgery, "during which eighty titanium screws" are "implanted in the crushed bones of" her "face to connect and hold them together" (LAM: 3-4). The mask, which she has had to present to the outside world during her professional life as a model, one could argue, has now become an integral part of her body. Charlotte wonders who she is and who she was. She comes to the preliminary conclusion that her body did not and does not provide an answer to this question in and out of itself. What has always dominated the appearance of her face is the gaze from the exterior world. When she looks into the mirror after her plastic surgery, she does not recognize her reflection as her own. "I'd spent as long as an hour staring through the ring of chalky light around my bathroom mirror," she recounts and has to admit: "I still didn't know what I looked like" (LAM: 32). This is not different from her life before the accident, however. She apparently never knew what she looked like, her body always having been created by the look of the other. "I'd held up old pictures of myself beside my reflection and tried to compare them," Charlotte tells the reader,

> [b]ut my sole distinction was that in addition to not knowing what I looked like now, I had never known. The old pictures were no help; like all good pictures, they hid the truth. I had never kept a bad one – this was one of my cardinal rules, photographically speaking. One: never let someone take your picture until you're ready, or the result will almost certainly be awful. (LAM: 32)

Charlotte's body is not a site which provides her with a stable identity because she has always shaped her self to please the gaze of the other and continues to do so after the accident. When she goes to her first photo shoot after the reconstruction of her face, the photographer comes into the makeup room to look at Charlotte and "approvingly" comments: "There's something new in your face, Charlotte." To this, the first person narrator responds by pointing out that "[t]he whole face is new." The photographer's answer is: "No, but see, it's real now, you know? […] It's like all that prettiness has burned off, and you're left with something deeper. Just the very bare essentials" (LAM: 141). It is the gaze of the other which defines the 'reality' of Charlotte's face depending on how well she corresponds to the aesthetic which is en vogue at the time. In the model world she inhabits, the real is defined by fashion photographers, not by a correspondence with a personal

[490] Lüdeking: 219 ["Der Blick von außen wirkt also bestimmend auf das Innere unseres Körpers zurück. […] Der Körper, unser eigener Körper, so könnte man zugespitzt sagen, ist immer der Körper der anderen", translation: ls].

identity or with something above, beyond, or beneath the verbal and aesthetic realms. In a combination of keeping up the subjugation to the gaze of the other with satisfying the desire for 'real people' and real experiences, Charlotte eventually joins forces with an internet company called "Extra/Ordinary.com" (LAM: 318), which builds a commercial web site around her 'real' life. Her apartment, her face, her life, are now constantly accessible on the internet, making Charlotte more famous and rich than she had ever been before – but also making her more artificial and more dependent on, more geared towards the despotic gaze of the world wide virtual environment. As she herself sees it, "I was still a model, after all. I was modeling my life" (LAM: 262).

In Alex Shakar's novel *The Savage Girl*, similar things are taking place. The character the novel is named after, an urban savage apparently living a primitive existence within the urban jungle, clothes herself in an eclectic cosmopolitan hotchpotch of punk and anti-fashion:

> Her pants are from some defunct Eastern European army, laden with pockets, cut off at the knees. Her shins are wrapped in bands of pelt, a short brown fur. Her feet are shod with moccasins. There is a metal barb about the size of a crochet needle stuck through her earlobe, and a length of slender chain hangs from her scalp, affixed in four places to isolated locks of hair. (TSG: 3)

Are the lifestyle and the garments of the 'savage girl' an attempt to escape the despotic gaze of the other? This is never explicitly explained in the novel, but one could argue that while she does not conform to fashion standards, her exterior is still dependent on the social norms around her, especially if she consciously decides to make an anti-fashion statement. She remains caught in the very system she opposes, for without fashion, there is, of course, no anti-fashion, and anti-fashion always has to react to what is in style. In any case, when the trendspotting company Tomorrow Ltd. turns the savage girl's anti-fashion into the latest fashion hype, she has ultimately been swept up in the postmodern game of image and body commodification. As Julia Emberley remarks,

> [w]hile anti-fashion my have sporadic and intermittent success at exposing the dominant and repressive fashion discourse of 'life-style', the reproductive tendencies of post-modern late capitalism effectively neutralize and dissolve its potential through an inevitable re-creation process.[491]

Another character of *The Savage Girl*, the only somewhat successful fashion model Ivy van Urden, resembles both the urban savage just described and Charlotte Swenson of *Look At Me*. Having developed a mental disorder for reasons which are never completely disclosed, and foreshadowing the fate of the 'savage girl', she "believes herself to be a cavewoman high priestess kidnapped from her prehistoric time by people called the Imagineers" (TSG: 15). While she does try to ultimately escape the gaze of the other by attempting to commit suicide, she later again succumbs to the system by accepting to be the model who promotes the new savage look which is modelled after

[491] Emberley: 59.

the savage girl. Her mental condition, a serious personal problem, merely functions as an aesthetic surface helpful in advertising within the capitalistic system dominated by images. "Crazy is good. Crazier the better," the advertising mastermind Chas Lacouture states. "Schizos are in" (TSG: 122), he furthermore suggests, and his assessment proves to be correct. Ivy's life soon turns into a glossy and attractive "photo essay" with the title "I'm *So* SCHIZO!" in "the fragrant new issue of *Mademoiselle*" (TSG: 178, original emphases). In the text that accompanies the photos portraying Ivy as psychotic, primitive, and glamorous at the same time, Ivy is characterized in the following way:

> For Ivy, being a star is a matter of life and death. 'My image is the drain magnet in the glamour continuum! I have to get famous as fast as possible!' she says, checking her reflection in a pocket mirror. 'And money. I need money. A lot of money, fast. Take another picture of me,' she tells our photographer, Giambattista. She pushes out her hip, tosses her hair. 'Like this.' (TSG: 179)

Ivy turns into a star by welcoming the despotic gaze which both shapes her and feeds off her mental imbalance. In addition, like Charlotte Swenson, she eventually moves towards subjecting herself to the epitome of the despotic gaze of the other – a life monitored by web cams and broadcast around the planet twenty-four hours a day.

A turn towards bodily experience *alone* therefore does not necessarily constitute a turn away from skepticist theories concerning the status of the subject in our contemporary world. It is not enough to argue that the body is a biological and physical fact which cannot be ironized out of existence. What is needed in addition is that the body does not conform to the gaze of the other, that it does not merely function as a machine. In short, another capacity of the human being needs to be involved, the mind.

'Under the halogen lights, tears flashed on his face': *Existing-as-Embodied*

A way out of this impasse is suggested by Calvin O. Schrag. In his attempt to reconstitute *The Self after Postmodernity* (1997), Schrag proposes that the mind-body dualism of Western philosophical history ought to be rethought. More specifically, he calls for a re-evaluation of the body in theories about the self. The body, Schrag argues, has, especially since Descartes' *cogito*, mainly been seen as "an object among other objects, an extension of material substance"[492] and has been "placed at a distance from consciousness,"[493] the latter constituting the true and valid site of individuality and the self in modernity. "Descartes' metaphysical dualism, which defined mind and body as distinct

[492] Schrag: 47.
[493] Schrag: 53.

and separable substances,"[494] Schrag observes, comes with a hierarchy, in which the mind is superior to the body. In Schrag's opinion, if a self is thought of in such a Descartian way, you more easily arrive at a postmodern anti-humanism than if you hold a position that would question Descartes' dualism. As Schrag points out, not all thinkers since Descartes have shared the view of a strict separation between the mind and the body. William James, for example, argued in his *Essays in Radical Realism* (1912) that the "world experienced (otherwise called the 'field of consciousness') comes at all times with our body as its centre, centre of vision, centre of action, centre of interest."[495] And Maurice Merleau-Ponty contended that

> the psycho-physical event can no longer be conceived after the model of Cartesian physiology and as the juxtaposition of a process in itself and a *cogitatio*. The union of soul and body is not an amalgamation between two mutually external terms, subject and object, brought about by arbitrary decree. It is enacted at every instant in the movement of existence.[496]

In Schrag's "account of the role of the body in the experience of selfhood,"[497] a similar interpretation emerges. He calls for a deconstruction of "the concept of the human body as a machine"[498] that is distant from the self and for a move towards a new way of speaking about and of conceptualising the body. Schrag proposes that we move from saying and thinking that we *have* "a body" to a notion of "*being* embodied" or "existing-as-embodied,"[499] mainly because quotidian human experience suggests an "intimate connection of mind with body."[500]

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[494] Schrag: 46.
[495] James 1912: 170.
[496] Merleau-Ponty: 88-89. Other philosophers who did expressly not agree with Descartes on the separation of mind and body are, e.g., Hobbes and Sartre, the latter declaring the body to be "within the limits of the situation as a synthetic totality of *life* and *action*" (Sartre: 346).
[497] Schrag: 44.
[498] Schrag: 51.
[499] Schrag: 51, emphasis added. A similar argument is mounted by Richard Shusterman, who asserts that in order to overcome postmodern views of the self "[we] may just have to listen to it [the body] more attentively; we may even have to overcome the language-bound metaphorics of listening to the body and learn how to feel it" (Shusterman 1989: 622). In *After Theory*, Terry Eagleton is also adamant that human beings are embodied and do not only exist in a mental realm. For him, however, the concept of being embodied is part of a materialist and ecological worldview. For Eagleton, instead of grounding the individual in his personal existence, thinking of the human species as embodied ties the human being to the collective. The human body, he states, "belongs to the species before it belongs to me" (Eagleton 2003: 165-166).
[500] Schrag: 51. For various points of view on the question of the body's relation to the self from a psychological perspective, see the essays in Bermudéz / Marcel / Eilan (eds.). *The Body and the Self*. For positions similar to Schrag's, see especially Naomi Eilan's Essay "Consciousness and the Self" (337-357) and Bill Brewer's "Bodily Awareness and the Self" (291-309). Eilan sums up her thesis arguing that "an explanation of perceptual consciousness rests on an explanation of what it is for an organism to be a subject of experience" (337); Brewer contends that "we are not related to our bodies as a sailor is present in a ship" and that "the subject of normal bodily awareness is itself a subject of both mental and physical properties" (303). For another defence of a common sense, anti-Cartesian position on bodily existence, see Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*. The points argued for above against the body as postmodern text do not imply that analysing the body with the help of a textual or discursive approach could not also lead to some fruitful results. In "A Tale of Inscriptions / Fashion Statements," e.g., Kim Sawchuk employs the metaphor of intertextuality to interpret the contemporary fashion world in its relation to the body. The various influences on the body could then be seen as discourses which "involve the body, produce the body as a textured object with multidimensional layers, touched by the rich weave of history and culture" (Sawchuk: 65). This, however, does not entail that the body would therefore necessarily have to be placed at a distance from the mind or that embodied existence would have to be discounted as inauthentic.

Manfred Frank provides a more systematic explanation of why it is not unreasonable at all to think of our existence as embodied. Those who assume that the mind and the body are strictly separated, Frank argues, run into an insoluble problem when trying to explain that there still are connections between mind and body. To illustrate this, he makes three statements, which, he assumes, are generally often agreed on:

1. Mental phenomena are non-physical phenomena.
2. Mental phenomena can be the cause for things to happen in the physical realm (when frightened, we turn pale, being in love makes our heart beat): psycho-physical phenomena.
3. The realm of physical phenomena is a causally closed system (i.e. only physical things can cause physical things to happen […]).[501]

To sum up Frank's argument: It is clear that either statements 1 and 2 are not compatible with statement 3, or that statements 1 and 3 are not compatible with statement 2. Since it is counter-intuitive and speaks against common experience to reject statement 2, and since accepting statement 3 would lead to a materialism in which the human subject would be reduced to either existing completely separated from the physical world or to being a part of the physical world, bereft of agency, is it therefore not plausible to assume that there is a connection between the physical and the mental realms? And would it therefore not make sense to include both the body (the physical realm) and the mind (the mental realm) when defining who or what a human subject is? And if there were such a connection, would it then not make sense to regard our existence as both situated in the mind *and* the body rather than as only situated in the mental realm?

Noise: Tears In a Drag Queen's Eyes

Even though James Willing of *Noise*, in his relations to other people, puts on a performance most of the time and could thus be said to conform to the despotic gaze of the other, in his most intimate and in decisive moments, he is presented as a person whose body is not detached from his mind and not responding to how people think he should look. While he does have the ability to control his outward image, there are instances in which the connection between the mind and the body, or rather his *embodied existence* is made obvious. One such occasion is a conversation towards the end of the novel during which James's friend De Courcy asks him about what he is going to do about his "career" and his "lovers" (N 246). When James replies that he is unsure, explaining that he has "made some mistakes recently'," De Courcy looks "at him in a significant way," stating "'Yes you have.'" This judgment makes James "blush" (N: 246) with guilt. As he explains his decision to brake

[501] Frank: 167 ["1. Mentale Phänomene sind nicht-physische Phänomene. / 2. Mentale Phänomene haben kausale Wirkung im physischen Bereich (Schreck macht uns blaß, Verliebtheit läßt das Herz schlagen): psychophysische Phänomene. / 3. Der Bereich physischer Phänomene ist kausal geschlossen (d.h. nur Physisches kann Ursache von Physischem sein)", translation: ls].

off his liaisons with both Nicola and Alison to De Courcy – "'They're just too tiring. Nicola wants to marry a water quality something engineer. Alison wants to go to the Agency and become a dominatrix or something. I never want to go to those clubs again'" –, his bodily reaction shows that this rational explanation does not represent his entire attitude towards these past relationships. His body's reaction is complementary to what his mind expresses via words. James, then, is not depicted as a 'ghost in a machine' or as a 'machine without a ghost' but, in Schrag's terms, as a self that *exists-as-embodied* – his self is defined both by his mind and his body, one of which would be incomplete without the other.

De Courcy, James's homosexual roommate, is portrayed in a similar manner in the novel. He appears to be as focused on surfaces as James, and his behaviour is often cliché-like. He might, therefore, at first sight appear like a flat and cut-out character who, in addition, is very much defined by the gaze of the other. His outer appearance changes radically with the environment he moves in and with what people expect from him. De Courcy changes his outfits and thereby his external personality frequently and radically. When James sees De Courcy at the beginning of the novel, he is wearing "sort of New England casual clothes" and seems to be in a mode of "total concentration and sympathy" (N: 26) towards the poets participating in a reading. James also remembers having seen De Courcy "dressed as a farmer on a trip to a cottage, with a baseball cap and a plaid jacket," dancing "in Cuban drag," or having "grown a moustache for his short-lived job at a bank" (N: 26). Throughout the course of the narrative, De Courcy keeps up this habit of changing his outer appearance. There are, however, sides of him that point to a deeper humanity of his. In his most intimate and in important moments, De Courcy's body and his mind are one. As James, frustrated with past relationships, utters: "I've settled it. I'm out of the women business" (N: 254), De Courcy calls this an "excellent choice" and takes it as a hint that his companion might be interested in going into the 'men business'. He puts "his hands on James's shoulders, and lean[s] forward as if to kiss him" (N: 254). James strongly rejects De Courcy's attempt at getting physically intimate, leaving the latter "red and stiff, swinging his arms in the centre of the room" (N: 254). For De Courcy, this attempt was more than the expression of a physical attraction to James. He tells him: "I'm in love with you. [...] Yes. Very," (N: 254) and is visibly devastated. James looks "up quickly" and notices "that De Courcy's chin [is] puckered and" that "there might even be tears in his eyes" (N: 255). While the two obviously do not share the same sexual orientation, they do share the human experience of living an embodied life in which the world is experienced in a union of body and mind, in which they express themselves both through an exchange of words and of body language. This, for them, is a connection that all the irony they can muster at other times, does not and

cannot deconstruct. Most importantly, their bodies are, in these intimate moments, not responding to the gaze of the other but take part in the expression of genuine personal experiences.

Glamorama: An Android Techno-Body Horrified

In his essay "Die Sorge um den Körper in der heutigen Kultur," Richard Shusterman argues for a re-evaluation of bodily experience that has many similarities with Calvin O. Schrag's position. Like Schrag, Shusterman calls for a view of the body not as "estranged and objectified […] in terms of an exterior mechanism"[502] but as a "vital dimension of individual experiences and actions,"[503] adding that it would be helpful to distinguish between a somatics of external representation ("Somatik der Darstellung"[504]) and a somatics of experience ("Somatik des Erlebens"[505]). Maintaining that there is no accurate line between these two categories, Shusterman still points out that some things we do with our bodies – such as putting on make-up or having plastic surgery – clearly are rather geared towards external representation, while others – such as yoga or massages – do not primarily aim at improving the mechanical abilities or outer appearance of the body. People engage in the latter activities in order to feel well internally and experience themselves or their selves as living beings.

The distinction Shusterman proposes might appear like a very basic one, but it proves eminently useful in analysing contemporary culture as well as the texts under scrutiny in this study. Following Shusterman, many contemporary obsessions with the body can be construed as postmodern practices aimed not at experiencing one's body as part of a stable self but as shaping the machine (without the ghost) according to the superficial and ever shifting, unstable trends of fashion. In many ways, Victor Ward, the first person narrator of *Glamorama*, can quite aptly be described as being obsessed with Shusterman's somatics of external representation. At central points in the narrative, however, Victor also reveals himself to be strongly affected by a somatics of experience.

One bodily experience Victor does engage in from the beginning is sex. For Victor, sexual intercourse is an intense encounter with people of the other and of his own sex, but the intensity goes only skin-deep and does not express itself in emotional involvement; his body functions like a machine without a ghost, determined by outer impulses, and focussed on surfaces. The extended sexual intercourse he has with two other characters, the super model terrorists Bobby and Jamie,

[502] Shusterman 1994: 249 ["entfremdet und verdinglicht [...] als äußeren Mechanismus", translation: ls].
[503] Shusterman 1994: 250 ["lebendige Dimension individuellen Erlebens und Handelns", translation: ls].
[504] Shusterman 1994: 246.
[505] Shusterman 1994: 247.

in part 4, chapter 28, for example, starts with Bobby "admiring the tans" Jamie and Victor "acquired on [a] yacht." On Bobby's cue, Victor likewise cherishes the outer appearance of his own body: "I look down at the cock I'm jerking off and past that, at my thickly muscled legs" (G: 335). What follows is a prolonged sexual intercourse between the three characters described on no less than five and a half pages (G: 334-40). In detail, Victor describes actions and bodily reactions, from time to time commenting on physical features. Not once on these five and a half pages does Victor refer to his feelings, however. He does not seem to be emotionally involved in the sexual act at all and the passage reads as though Victor were motivated by a somatics of representation alone, as if a porno movie were being shot during which the actors only ever tried to appear in an advantageous and aesthetically pleasing manner in front of a camera. Similarly, when Victor has sex with his (ex-)girlfriend Chloe at a later point in the narrative, Victor tells the readers that they are doing so because "we have to stick to the script" (G 409). They have sex as if / because they are part of a movie being shot, taking cues from, being determined by others – and again, Victor tells readers nothing about what is going on inside of him.

Sex, for Victor, is thus not experienced in terms of *being embodied*. Can he therefore be described as an "android techno-body," a category Karlheinz Lüdeking suggests for people who are "exclusively engaged in leisure activities," and "preferably give[ ]" themselves "to sex and dancing"?[506] Is Victor one of "these frozen figures" with "flawless skins" and "blank stares" for whom "there is not pain, nor fear," as Gail Faurschou describes postmodern fashion subjects? According to Faurschou, "nothing moves, and nothing could move these invulnerable figures bereft of affect and expression."[507] This at first seems to be the case, but as it turns out, fear and pain are the very things which affect and move Victor very much. Situations of distress, and suffering let him react in an embodied manner. Allucquere Rosanne Stone, discussing the consequences of virtual reality for the body, points out that, on the one hand, cyberspace "developers foresee a time when they will be able to forget about the body"[508] or to freely construct virtual bodies that are, in Shusterman's terms, purely geared at a somatics of expression. On the other hand, however, she maintains that

> it is important to remember that virtual community originates in, and must return to, the physical. No refigured virtual body, no matter how beautiful, will slow the death of a cyberpunk with AIDS. Even in the age of the technological subject, life is lived through bodies.[509]

The same is true for the outwardly beautiful model Victor, who proves to be as physically situated and inwardly affected as the cyber creatures Stone discusses. After Victor has found Bentley

[506] Lüdeking: 220 ["der androide Technokörper [...], der sich ausschließlich in Freizeitbeschäftigungen ergeht, er widmet sich mit Vorliebe dem Sex und dem Tanzen", translation: ls].
[507] Faurschou: 85.
[508] Stone: 113.
[509] Rose, A: 133.

manipulating photographs so that they will show him at events he has never been part of, his confusion and anguish make him "breath[e] erratically" (G: 358). Towards the end of the narrative, his girlfriend Chloe starts bleeding from her vagina after having been poisoned by Bobby. Victor at first does not "want her to see how scared" he is (G: 429). He tries to control his outer appearance so as not to display his terror but does not manage to do so. Chloe soon dies a most painful death, and Victor reacts both on the mental and on the physical level, experiencing the horrible event as embodied. "Bursting into tears," he "hurl[s] the phone away" (G 429) when he cannot get a connection to someone who might help her, and as she dies, he is "holding Chloe," whose "eyes fix on" his, and cries (G: 430). In an earlier central scene of the novel, Victor accidentally witnesses the torture and slaughter of another character. At first, he takes the person who is tortured as a mannequin, but all of a sudden the "mannequin springs grotesquely to life in the freezing room, screeching, arching its body up [...]. Bunched around the wheels of the table legs are white towels spotted heavily with blood, some of it black" (G: 283). The violence and the suffering of this other character make Victor step out of the world of surfaces in which everything around him seems to only be a movie being shot: "There is, I'm noticing, no camera crew around. I drop the Evian bottle, startled" (G: 284). The bodily pain of another human being causes Victor to break away from his state of postmodern, non-corporeal surface existence to acknowledge his own and the other person's bodily existence as real and as morally significant. Supermodel terrorism in *Glamorama* is therefore not, as Niels Werber has it, without any content and only judged for its style on a level of superficial aesthetics. It is not stripped of everything but its surface elements. "The terrorism of pop culture," Werber argues, is one of no consequences and fails to provoke because of the position of ironical distance to everything and anything, which can be observed in the affluent Western urban generation of twenty-somethings. "No explosion, no serial killer, no overdose, and no porno can" shake the postmodern beings, Werber claims, "because everything only consists of pretty combinations" of superficial elements that are only judged according to their stylistic potential, while questions about real-life consequences never arise.[510] Victor's reaction is of a basic character, but it is the genuine expression of a moral sense, and it involves both his body and his mind acting together. Victor is horrified and afraid and experiences the torture of another by existing as embodied: "I'm in the bathroom [...] vomiting until I'm just gagging up spit, retching. When I'm through I lie there in a fetal position, [...] breathing erratically" (G: 284).

[510] Werber: 66. ["Der Terror der Popkultur gehört zur Reservatenkammer eines unterhaltungssüchtigen *Juste-milieu*, dessen ironische wie routinierte Distanz sich von keiner Explosion, keinem Serienkiller, keiner Überdosis (>OD<) und keinem Porno provozieren läßt, weil alles nur aus hübschen Kombinationen besteht", translation: ls.]

As Victor's simple and immediate reactions to the killing are of such a strong nature, one could cite them in a refutation of claims that every kind of personal experience is dependant on the linguistic environment one has grown into and on the linguistic norms one has internalised. Personal experiences, according to the latter position, are in reality only "stereotypes of internalised linguistic conditioning."[511] It has to be doubted that an internalised linguistic conditioning could lead to a reaction as strong as Victor's. In his fetal position, Victor resembles an infant in a pre-linguistic stage. Could he say how he feels and why? Possibly not. Does this mean that his feelings are not 'real' or are insignificant for him as a person? Definitely not.[512] What is more, Victor's fetal position also suggests the possibility of starting anew from a turning point, of being re-born. It is clear that not only his body, his machine has been involved in the experience. An ethically aware Victor Ward responds to Bobby's assertion: "Shhh [...]. It's okay, Victor, it's okay," by saying: "'It's not okay [...]. It's not okay, Bobby'" (G: 285).

Billboards Will Not Provide the Answer: The Body is Not Enough

Experiencing one's body as embodied rather than seeing it as one object amongst many others which cannot truthfully be experienced is a first step away from a complete deconstruction of the subject. But it has to be accompanied by an awareness of the distinction between subject and object, or between one subject and another subject, as Michael Pauen maintains. "First of all," Pauen explains, "it is important that subjectivity rests on differentiating between 'interior' and 'exterior'," i.e. one needs to have a sense of being an individual and unique 'I', and how this 'I' is separate from others and from the world around one. As Pauen clarifies: "I have to *de facto* be able to differentiate between my own states of consciousness and external objects and states of consciousness."[513]

Another important aspect of situating the individual is brought to the fore by Joe Frank Jones, III, in *A Modest Realism* (2001). Jones builds a sound argument in favour of defining a person as being grounded in his or her very own physical history. There are, in his opinion, definite physical

[511] Frank: 224 ["Stereotypen verinnerlichter Sprachkonditionierung", translation: ls].
[512] Cf Frank. As he explicates, "[w]ollte der [sprachanalytische] Nominalist geltend machen, dass, wenn ich nicht sagen könne, in welchem (Genre von) mentalem Zustand ich mich gegebenenfalls befinde, anders gesagt: wenn ich die Wahrheitsbedingungen für die Proposition nicht angeben könne, die meinen Zustand ausdrückte, ich mich in gar keinem mentalen Zustand befinde, so wäre das zweifellos lächerlich" (Frank: 249). For an extended and detailed discussion of why Frank sees some aspects of self-awareness as independent of linguistic environments and norms, as pre-linguistic, see Frank 206-251 ("Ist Selbstbewußtsein ein propositionales Wissen?"). To unduly condense his point, his main argument is that being in a certain state of mind or of emotion always pre-supposes a pre-linguistic self-awareness.
[513] Pauen: 106, original emphasis ["Wichtig ist zunächst, daß Subjektivität eine Unterscheidung von 'innen' und 'außen' oder von 'Eigenem' und 'Fremdem' voraussetzt. Ich muß also *de facto* meinen Körper und meine eigenen Bewusstseinszustände von externen Objekten und Bewusstseinszuständen unterscheiden können", translation: ls].

limitations to a strong constructivist view of identity. What does not change, according to Jones, is the physical history of the world in general, and, more specifically, of the human subject. While not denying that almost all physical situations can lead to differing interpretations by people involved, Jones maintains that "consistency, coherence, *and* permanence and other non-essentialist characteristics of material experience"[514] should not and cannot reasonably be excluded when it comes to describing a situation or a person. In the case of a person with male sex organs, for example, it cannot plausibly be suggested that this person has female sex organs. In the case of a man suspected of having raped a woman and of having killed her afterwards, there is a non-debatable physical history independent of, for example, what memories this person has of the event. As Jones states, it "is true that he raped and killed her or it is not."[515] This, it should be pointed out, does not mean that the persons in question would then have to be defined as 'male' or as a 'killer' in metaphysically essentialist ways. Jones suggests using "physical object characteristics" and the physical history of a person "as base level falsifiers." He argues that "[r]emembered events and objects are suspect, but at the same time subject to the requirement that they not violate the material permanence and coherence to which ordinary objects conform," adding that this "is to suggest no global or essentialist theory of either the world or human personality."[516]

It has above been argued that Victor Ward is an unreliable first person narrator and that he might be described in terms of a schizophrenic postmodern character as he seems to live in a perpetual presence, not remembering having been to places where other people claim to have met him, and as he might imagine the camera teams following him and other people around. If we read the end of Ellis's *Glamorama* with both Pauen's argument about the nature of subjectivity and Jones's line of reasoning about unique physical histories in mind, it emerges that Victor might not have been so schizophrenic after all and might not have been quite so drugged and deluded as to forget all the places he has been to and the people he has supposedly met.

Before her violent death described above, Victor's ex-girlfriend Chloe tells him that she is pregnant and that he is the father of her child. According to Chloe, "the only person" she has "been with since" she broke up with Victor is Victor himself. "Four weeks ago? Remember? That day you came over" (G: 412), she reminds her former boyfriend. Victor is not sure where exactly he was four weeks before. "Four weeks ago I was on a ship in the middle of an ocean," he recalls, but then

[514] Jones: 36.
[515] Jones: 39.
[516] Jones: 40-41.

reconsiders: "Four weeks ago I was in London at a party in Notting Hill. / Four weeks ago I was meeting Bobby Hughes. Jamie Fields hugged me while I stood screaming in a basement corridor" (G: 412). Victor is sure about one thing, however: "Four weeks ago I was not in New York City" (G: 412). He therefore begins to suspect something which will also throw a new light on the fact that he was repeatedly supposedly seen in places he has not been to: "Four weeks ago an impostor arrived in Chloe's apartment. Four weeks ago on that Sunday he undressed her" (G: 412). Is this another deluded theory of Victor? Is a narrative authority who presides over Victor's first person narrative trying to spread ever more confusion in the reader's mind? Or is Victor trying to deny the possibility that he fathered a child? All of these answers are possible and cannot be disproved, but there is more textual evidence in the rest of the novel which supports Victor's assumption that there really is a doppelganger of his.

The fourth part of *Glamorama* ends with a fight between Victor and Bobby (during which Victor manages to kill his adversary) and with an explosion on board of an airplane which causes it to crash "[o]nto a forest situated just seventy miles outside of Paris" (G: 440). As far as content and tone of the narrative are concerned, it very much corresponds to the preceding 400+ pages. In light of the change in tone and content which marks the beginning of part five of the novel, one is tempted to read the final chapters of part four as the catastrophe or the turning point in a five act narrative. Bobby, the super model terrorist, who has raised so much havoc throughout the second half of *Glamorama* is now finally dead, and the bomb on board of the air plane results in the death mainly of people "under thirty," the surface oriented generation Victor Ward is a member of. The symbols of this generation – such as "hundreds of CDs and fashion magazines […] and entire wardrobes of Calvin Klein and Armani and Ralph Loren" – have been reduced to debris scattered across a forest (G: 441).

As we leave Victor in part four of *Glamorama*, he is "'badly bruised'" (G: 436) in a literal sense from his fight with Bobby and in a metaphorical sense from all the confusion and violence he had to endure. He has seen people tortured and killed, has witnessed the death by poison of his girlfriend and of an unborn child when they were ready to renew their love and relationship, has been subject to the seemingly arbitrary plans of mysterious forces and factions and feels that he cannot trust anyone any more. As we meet Victor again at the beginning of part five of the novel, he appears in a radically different context. For one thing, we are back in New York. The scene is a peaceful one and shows Victor walking through a park. In addition, the distinction between film and reality seems to have been re-established. There are "clusters of Japanese NYU film students shooting movies" (G:445), but the cameras are now again part of the background. They do not intrude into

Victor's reality any more, and he is easily able to avoid them. Finally, Victor himself has also drastically changed. The insecure, paranoid, and driven Victor Ward seems to be a person from a distant past. "'No more drinking binges,'" he tells his personal trainer, "'I've cut down on partying, law school's great, I'm in a long-term relationship. […] I've stopped seriously deluding myself and I'm rereading Dostoyevsky'" (G: 446). Significantly, this renovated Victor smiles to himself when the song "'New Kid in Town'" plays on a stereo while he is walking through Washington Square Park. We still read a first person narrative told by a first person narrator called Victor. But he is indeed a '*new* kid in town'. He is a doppelganger of Victor, who has not only taken his place in New York, he has also taken over his position as first person narrator. If readers might have suspected this from the beginning of part five, it is confirmed when they witness Victor's doppelganger telling another doppelganger, who has replaced the character Lauren Hynde, "'God, I don't recognize anybody,'" voicing his trouble to remember all of Victor's acquaintances and friends. The Lauren Hynde replacement, whose real name is Eva, advises him to "'check those photo books that were given to'" him and to "'memorize the faces'" (G: 462).

For other characters, Victor's doppelganger apparently looks so much like Victor and is so convincing that no one, not even his most intimate relations (e.g. Chloe) can tell the difference – with two decisive exceptions. Because they are aware of their unique subjectivity and of their unique physical history, both Victor and his impostor know that they are separate individuals, as similar as they may look. The original Victor's awareness of his unique interior is emphasized when the narrative voice returns to him in part six of *Glamorama*. Victor is held hostage in a hotel in Italy but manages to phone his sister, trying to convince her of his identity: "'Sally?' I'm breathing hard, my voice tight." Sally, however, does not recognize his voice, and in an ironic move she is not aware of, makes him talk to his doppelganger:

> 'Who is this?' she asks suspiciously.
> 'It's me,' I gasp. 'It's Victor. [...] Sally, it's really me, please – ' [...]
> The sound of the phone being passed to someone else. [...]
> 'Hello?' the voice asks again. 'This is Victor Johnson,' the voice says. 'Who is this?'
> Silence. (G: 476)

The fact that the fraud Victor Ward is as convincing as and even more successful in New York than his authentic counterpart does not mean that origins and the self do not matter. It means exactly the opposite. Bret Easton Ellis does not put the authenticity of the self into question. It is re-introduced and forcefully emphasized. At the very end of *Glamorama*, it is obvious to the reader that there is a true Victor Ward sitting in a hotel in Italy and that his copy in New York is a fraud.

And the very fact that one can make a distinction between the original and the copy is one moral of the novel *Glamorama*.[517]

As the novel *Glamorama* ends, Victor Ward has reached the stage of a self that transcends postmodern ideas of the subject, but only on a very fundamental level. He is still to a large extent caught within the discourses that defined him throughout the book. He very much resembles Jean Baudrillard imagining himself in a non-virtual environment and explaining his decision not to travel to the Persian Gulf, after having been offered to go there for *Les Presses de la Cité*. Baudrillard states: "I live in the virtual. Send me into the real, and I don't know what to do."[518] Victor really does not have many choices of action before him, but it is telling that his desire for orientation leads him to imagine that the world of the media could provide him with answers. He fantasises about taking a path that would lead him across the mountain he sees in a mural, "and a bridge strung across a pass through the mountain will take you to any point beyond that you need to arrive at, because behind that mountain is a highway and along that highway are billboards with answers on them – who, what, where, when, why" (G: 482). Victor is, then, still almost solely looking for orientation in the mediated world of billboards, for rules and answers that he hopes the world of the media would provide him with.

In *The Image*, Daniel J. Boorstin suggests that the 'unreality' the world seems to consist of for many people has its foundation in the extravagant expectations these people bring towards life and towards the media. "We expect anything and everything"[519] from life, he writes. And we expect the same from the media. As Boorstin has it, by "harboring, nourishing, and ever enlarging our extravagant expectations we create the demand for the illusions with which we deceive ourselves. And which we pay others to deceive us."[520] If we do not turn away from these expectations, we are, according to Boorstin, "so accustomed to our illusions that we mistake them for reality. We demand them,"[521] in the same way Victor does at the end of the novel *Glamorama*. He still demands his answers from the illusions and the fabrications of the media he used to feed and feed off. He dreams of billboards with answers on them and has only left Baudrillardian virtuality on the limited

[517] It is ironic that the doppelganger Victor presents a critique of the surface and stresses the authenticity of the self as well. In a conversation with his agent, Victor II turns down the offer to play a part in *Flatliners III* by telling him "Bill . . . I don't think . . . [...] I'm not. That's not me" (G: 455). The addressee of this statement does not take him seriously at first, believing that Victor is putting on a performance: "'Stop, in the name of love, before you break my heart,' Bill says. ' Just give me a high-pitched warning scream when you read lines like that to me again.'" But the doppelganger Victor answers him "'It's not a line, Bill [...]. I'm in law school now and I don't want to do the movie'" (G: 455) – while it actually is a line he recites according to a script he is to follow.
[518] Baudrillard 1991: 188.
[519] Boorstin: 4.
[520] Boorstin: 5.
[521] Boorstin: 5-6.

level of his most direct and personal (bodily) experiences. While it is possible to read him as a unique and embodied subject, as an authentic self, Victor is still lacking the capacity to critically reflect on the confusing reality he had to face during the narrative. If you base your subjecthood on an embodied existence and on nothing else, the questions 'who, what, where,' and 'when,' can be answered only when it comes to a specific situation of one person at a specific point in time. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty states, "[b]odily existence, which runs through me, yet does so independently of me, is only the barest raw material of a genuine presence in the world."[522] Without the mind's ability to order, categorize, and rationally perceive and analyse the world, the body as a site of genuine experience ends in a corporeal solipsism which leaves the subject without orientation, without power, and devoid of agency. And this is not only true for the complex mediated world of films and scripts Victor is faced with. It is true for the world in general, since, as Merleau-Ponty says,

> the sensory functions by themselves do not cause me to be in the world: when I become absorbed in my body, my eyes present me with no more than the perceptible outer covering of things and of other people, things themselves take on unreality, behaviour degenerates into the absurd, and the present itself, as in cases of false recognition, loses its consistency and takes on an air of eternity.[523]

"What we need first and now is to disillusion ourselves,"[524] states Boorstin. Victor has done so on a very basic level. Some of the other characters in *Glamorama* are one small step beyond this. Victor's doppelganger and his non-authentic partner are aware of the fact that they present other people with an illusion. And the reader discovers that he has been caught within an illusion himself when the 'I' which presents the first person narrative in part five of the novel turns out to be a different Victor, turns out not to be the same person who has related the story before. But the novel does not provide many more answers – neither on billboards nor on old-fashioned paper – about the complex and confusing narrative of *Glamorama*.

'Just That Extra Edge of Consciousness': The Rational Agent

So is this it? Do we have to settle for this small and personal amount of disillusion? Or can we, as Boorstin suggests, "sharpen our vision" and "clear away the fog"[525] on a larger scale? What is there to be said in favour of the rational agent who is able to critically reflect on the world? What is there to be said against the subject's disappearance in language games and in discourses?

[522] Merleau-Ponty: 165.
[523] Merleau-Ponty: 165.
[524] Boorstin: 5.
[525] Boorstin: 6.

The argument for the rational agent which follows here has in parts already been anticipated above, but it is worth repeating. To begin with, is it not curious that those who keep arguing against reason, still reason with us? In a somewhat polemical way, John Schad points out that the idea of the rational agent has never really disappeared from poststructuralist and postmodern theory, as "the very people who brought us 'The Death of the Author' have also had the nerve to bring us 'The Life of the Theorist,'"[526] and that, e.g., Foucault "declares that he 'writes in order to have no face' and yet admits that 'I have always wanted my books to be fragments from an autobiography.'"[527] Justin Cruikshank makes the same argument when he rejects Rorty's view of the contemporary ironist and her position in her binding yet contingent vocabulary. "The very notion of a self recreating its final vocabulary," Cruikshank remarks,

> posits an essence for the self as an *active poetic re-worker* of language games. Without such poetic ability to enrich itself, the self would be a passive automaton, unable to inflict or feel humiliation, and able only to be programmed, or determined, by the prevailing norms of its language game.[528]

If the self is, as Anderson maintains in his death notice of the subject, "a lie" and "a social construction of reality"[529] and if he therefore advises his readers to "think about the self" and "to consider this subject, however elusive it might seem; to wrestle with it deeply"[530] – then who is supposed to be doing the 'thinking', the 'considering' and the (deep!) 'wrestling'? Who or what could be doing all these (deep) things if not a rational agent? Yet another example is Hal Foster, who, echoing Hutcheon's and others' call for a strategic essentialism, remarks that "[a]ll of us […] need some narrative to focus our practices" because without "this guide we are likely to remain swamped in the double wake of post/modernism and the neo/avant-garde." Not wanting to go too far, Foster therefore calls for "situated stories, not *grands récits*."[531] How can there be a 'situated narrative', however, without the concept of a narrative? Is the concept of a narrative itself not a *grand récit*? And how can there be a situated / strategic subject without the meta-narrative concept of a subject? How can there be an agent who acts strategically in a certain situation without the meta-narrative of the agent? And, finally, how can anyone decide what to do without the meta-narratives of non-determination and without the concept of rationality?

The fact that theorists arguing within the context of the postmodern make the kind of claims Foster and Anderson have made is not surprising since a truly deconstructed subject would not be able to reflect on anything rationally and would not be able to act freely any more. The ways out of this

[526] Schad: 173.
[527] Schad: 173-74.
[528] Cruikshank: 221, original emphasis.
[529] Anderson 1997: xi.
[530] Anderson 1997: xii.
[531] Foster 2003: 180.

impasse or cul-de-sac of postmodernism cannot be found within postmodern theory, however. A position which denounces the 'traditional' subject in favour of a more fluid and chaotic one who, however, still has the power to (re-/)"create" its(s)elf, who can choose to be strategically situated, or who has the capacity to enjoy the freedom that comes with chaos only re-positions the subject and still relies on the categories of rationality and of agency.

As was the case in the above discussion on realism, another position, which would correspond to and resemble that of Barth's irrealism, would deny any kind of rationality and agency to the subject in favour of linguistic systems and systems shaped by powers in which the self just floats around. If this position is taken, though, as was the case with irrealism, one must ultimately recede from any kind of active behaviour as an agent. The same is true for making rational arguments. As Hilary Putnam puts it,

> [t]he argument is that the relativist cannot, in the end, make any sense of the distinction between *being right* and *thinking he is right*; and that means that there is, in the end, no difference between *asserting* or *thinking*, on the one hand, and *making noises* (or *producing mental images*) on the other. But this means that (on this conception) I am not a *thinker* at all but a *mere* animal. To hold such a view is to commit a sort of mental suicide.[532]

To deny any kind of rationality or agency to the subject is futile since it leads to relativist determinism.

In the following, it will therefore be claimed that, as Alex Callinicos argues, it "is in any case [the] orientation, that of the radicalized Enlightenment, of using reason to understand, to control and to change the forces of which the *Aufklärer* had not dreamt, that provides the only appropriate guide through modernity"[533] and through our contemporary world. As has been pointed out above, many theories that argue against postmodern relativism and in favour of rationality display an awareness of difficulties of defining reason and agency. They do not propose to uncritically take reason for granted in order to escape the contemporary crisis. As scholars indicate in the terms they give to their approaches, these are, for instance, supposed to be modest (Jones's *Modest Realism*) or critical (Lopez' and Potter's *Critical Realism*). A quote from Mark Johnson's *The Mind In the Body*, a study which follows a similar path, sums up this position of moving away from relativism but at the same time not falling prey to naïve foundationalism. Johnson argues that

> we ought to reject the false dichotomy according to which there are two opposite and incompatible options: (a) Either there must be absolute, fixed value-neutral standards of rationality and knowledge, or else (b) we collapse into an 'anything goes' relativism, in which there are no standards whatever, and there is no possibility for criticism.[534]

[532] Putnam 1981: 123, original emphases.
[533] Callinicos: 173.
[534] Johnson: 196.

Johnson, in other words, maintains "that there exists a large middle ground between the two extremes of foundationalism and relativism."[535] We might conceive of this middle ground by acknowledging that "the self can be understood as [partly] structured in and through discourse" but "without being thoroughly reduced to it."[536] What this middle ground could be based on besides discursive influences is, of course not ultimately definable. But even if complete independence from discourse, from the environment, from outside forces might not be possible, the category of independence has to be upheld. Even if infallible rational thought might not be possible, the category of rational thought has to be upheld. As Ferry and Renaut remark, "the subject seems irremediably finite (thus destined endlessly to confront this obscurity we might well call the unconscious) but nevertheless *extended* toward that demand for autonomy." An "absolute, perfectly transparent, self-mastering subject," might be an "illusion"[537] since human beings cannot escape their finite existence, their limited perspective on the cosmos, and, in conceptualising the self, the discursive medium of language. But the 'self-mastering subject', a pre- or non-discursive site of agency and reason, has to be set at one end of the spectrum in order for one to be capable of occupying a middle ground. What is promoted here is that, as Putnam maintains, as rational agents, we have the capacity to "make an effort to be impartial; we try to adopt what Popper calls 'the critical attitude', and actively seek evidence and argumentation we might overlook, even when it bears against our own views."[538] And "even if we only approximate" these things "in our own lives and practice,"[539] we need to hold on to the notion of "just that extra edge of consciousness,"[540] as Raymond Williams has termed it.

We may not be able to fully explain the nature and the sources of the subject, of agency, of rationality. But if we do not keep them as meta-narratives, we can just go home and despair in or enjoy a solipsistic and relativist seclusion. It is *not*, as David Gary Shaw argues,

> the best we can manage […] to cling to our sense of agency and self, even as we acknowledge our subordination to the great controlling structures, which leave us as marionettes attached to discourse's strings: Pinocchios wishing we were the 'real distinguished thing,' happy in our chains at best.[541]

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[535] Johnson: 196. For others who have presented similar arguments, see, e.g. Hilary Putnam's *Reason, Truth, and History* (1981), Richard Bernstein's *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (1983), or Robert G. Dunn's *Identity Crises: A Social Critique of Postmodernity* (1998).

[536] Dunn 1998: 198. Dunn is right in stressing the fact that the self needs to be conceptualised as having prediscursive characteristics which will allow it to be a rational agent. Such a self, however, is not necessarily tied to the pragmatic philosophies of Mead, Peirce, and Wiley, as Dunn seems to suggest (see Dunn, especially 200-230). While it might be a necessary foundation of such philosophies, this would be true as well for almost any philosophical school.

[537] Ferry / Renaut: 189.

[538] Putnam 1981: 163.

[539] Putnam 1981: 164.

[540] Williams 1985: 24.

[541] Shaw: 2.

We have good reasons to "feel that we are actors" – not "even though our theories don't justify the prejudice,"[542] but because the opposite position is fraught with at least as many paradoxes and aporias as well. What is more, Hilary Putnam was above cited with the proposition that we should "ask not how rational is goodness, but why is it good to be rational."[543] It makes sense and is morally right to conceive of ourselves as actors even though we must acknowledge the fact that we cannot ultimately explain the source of our freedom.

Most of the above points, it must be acknowledged, could be said to belong to the kind of defensive humanism Wylie Sypher develops at the end of his *Loss of the Self* (1962). "The passionate inwardness [of romanticism] is done," Wylie argues, "yet a disturbed and disturbing zone of existence persists, minimal though it be. It must be man's, irreducibly."[544] To Sypher, this "is a humanism […] gloomily qualified."[545] It is a humanism whose arguments in favour of the subject are solely based on the negation of theories trying to deny the subject agency or rationality. It does not offer its own convincing positive evidence which would prove the abilities of the subject to be an agent and to be rational.

This kind of evidence is, of course, hard to come by. But some such positive and less defensive arguments in favour of agency and of rationality come from the field of linguistics, where the question of whether and to what extent language pre-configures thought has been a much debated issue. At the bottom, most arguments revolve around the question whether, as human subjects, we have the rational ability to 'step out of' our languages, to look at what we say, do, and experience from a position that is at least to some degree independent of how language structures our world both lexically and grammatically. Does our language do "our thinking for us"? "If Aristotle had spoken Nootka (an American Indian language)," would we "have a different logic"?[546] These are some of the typical questions asked by linguists interested in the relationship between language and thought – and the debate is far from resolved. Some studies lean towards the view that the way we see the world is, to a very large extent, determined by the language which surrounds us and which we use.[547] While not denying that the subject is very much influenced by language in his or her view of the world, other studies do make some suggestive points in favour of the rational subject. In *Writing Science* (1993), a text concerned with lexicogrammatical features of scientific language, M.

[542] Shaw: 2.
[543] Putnam 1981: 174.
[544] Sypher: 155.
[545] Sypher: 155.
[546] Stubbs: 359.
[547] See, e.g., John A. Lucy's studies of the use of number marking systems of the languages English and Yucatec (Lucy 1992b).

A. K. Halliday and J. R. Martin, e.g., on the one hand voice the opinion that "language is not passively reflecting some pre-existing conceptual structure; on the contrary, it is actively engaged in bringing such structures into being" and call on their readers to "abandon the naïve 'correspondence' notion of language, and adopt a more constructivist approach to it."[548] On the other hand, they also grant the subject the ability to rationally reflect on language use and on the world. In their study, one of their contentions is that scientific language, through its heavy use of nominalization, implicitly suggests that processes can be treated and are in the end experienced "as if they were things."[549] When nominalization appears on such a regular level as it does in scientific language, Halliday and Martin argue,

> the effect is to reconstrue the nature of experience as a whole. […] It holds reality still, to be kept under observation and experimented with […]. This is a very powerful grammar, and it has tended to take over and become a norm. The English that is written by adults, in most present-day genres, is highly nominalized in just this way.[550]

At the same time, for Halliday and Martin, this does not lead to a deterministic and immobile view or experience of the world. Even though they take much care to avoid making outright statements about the subject's rational ability to step beyond language and change the grammar he or she is embedded in,[551] they do argue as much by stating that a scientist can come up with new lexicogrammatical ways of explaining the world. What has happened in the past, they point out, is that there were human agents – "the creators of scientific discourse" – who "developed powerful new forms of wording" which "have construed a reality of a particular kind – one that is fixed and determinate."[552] As science is moving more and more to conceptualising reality as dominated by processes instead of objects, however, Martin and Halliday expect scientific language to slowly adapt to its users' "deepest theoretical perceptions" by "back[ing] off from its present extremes of nominalization and grammatical metaphor and go[ing] back to being more preoccupied with processes and more tolerant of indeterminacy and flux."[553] So language need not completely determine our view of the world – the 'deepest theoretical perceptions' of a person can differ from what the lexicogrammar of a language suggests. And grammar can change and be changed in order

[548] Halliday / Martin: 8.
[549] Halliday / Martin: 15.
[550] Halliday / Martin: 15.
[551] When Halliday and Martin discuss the fact that Newton uses more nominalizations in his scientific writings than Chaucer did, they do not go so far as to claim that Newton *decided* on changing his grammar as a conscious agent. Most of their comments on the development of language in general provide an impersonal account of what happened because they justifiably shy away from giving a reductive and simplistic picture of language and the changes it goes through. I.e., instead of saying, 'Newton took this verb and made it into a noun,' they write, "one can sense the change of direction that is being inaugurated in Newton's writing" and "the grammar undergoes a kind of lateral shift" (Halliday / Martin: 13).
[552] Halliday / Martin: 20.
[553] Halliday / Martin: 20.

to fit our perception of reality more than a previous grammar would have.[554] We are, then, as Michael Stubbs states in a comment on Halliday's and Martin's claims,

> not stuck with the grammatical categories of our language, since the potential of the grammar can be taken up in consistently different ways, and the development of science shows that the resources of the grammar can be used to interpret the world from different points of view.[555]

Even though the relationship between language and thought still "constitutes a puzzle of huge fascination and baffling complexity" and even though "many points are unresolved," the field of linguistics has provided, for Stubbs, some hope for Williams's "extra edge of consciousness."[556]

The Rational Subject in the City

Surfaces, Centres, Music, and *Noise*

In a *Canadian Literature* editorial, Eva-Marie Kröller comments on some of Russell Smith's statements on Canadian literature: "Smith's description of the urban novel suggests that he has a cloning of his own and perhaps Douglas Coupland's books in mind, that is, novels preoccupied with the semiotics of 'cool'."[557] While her observation that a 'semiotics of cool' is a central element in Smith's texts is quite correct, Kröller leaves the question of why Smith displays this 'preoccupation' open. A similar stance is taken by Jacques Leclaire, who argues, "Smith views Toronto [...] as a playground" where "budding artists and moneyed bohemians" engage in "a carnival" of "compulsive pleasure-seeking."[558] Brett Josef Grubisic proposes a different reading of Smith's "magpie's affinity for glittery surfaces" in a review of Smith's book *Young Men* (1999). He argues that this "affinity for glittery surfaces" is "twinned with a parodist's disdain for them" and later stresses that Smith repeatedly "gives his readers access to an ostensibly glamorous world and then shows it to be vacant."[559] Grubisic, however, also claims that Smith's characters are comparatively flat. He argues: "Smith is so quick with the witty phrase and this season's fabric that sincerity and the nuance of commonplace humanity elude him altogether."[560]

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[554] A similar argument emerges from Halliday's comparison of scientific texts in English and Chinese (Halliday / Martin: 124-132). It is one of Halliday's conclusions that "[a]ny language […] is capable of being evolved as a resource for doing science." His addition that "the greater the cultural distance, as in any other such semogenic operation, the more work there is to be done" (Halliday / Martin: 53) is yet another example of avoiding to explicitly grant the subject rational agency in shaping a language, but at the same time, it is implicitly clear that there needs to be a somewhat rational agent involved in using the 'culturally distant language' in a way which makes it fit for scientific discourse.
[555] Stubbs: 370.
[556] Williams 1985: 24.
[557] Kroeller: 5.
[558] Leclaire: 87.
[559] Grubisic.
[560] Grubisic.

For James Willing of *Noise*, putting on a performance in order to create the impression that he is in tune with 'the season's fabric' is an important part of his character indeed. On the very first page of *Noise*, James's tendency to create a surface that seems genuine is introduced to the reader. In the opening scene of the novel, he is alone in his room and annoyed by the noise and heat surrounding him:

> He put his sweaty arms over his head as he had seen Arab mothers do on the news and wailed. *Keening*, he thought, is what we're looking for, and although he wasn't entirely sure about the proper pitch and length of a true keen, he made an educated guess, adding non-Western ululations for authenticity. (N: 7, original emphasis)

In this incident, James' irritation is real, but his action is only a quote to which he adds parts in order to make it appear 'authentic'. As the story progresses, it is made obvious that, in his public life in Toronto, he goes one step further by impersonating someone he is not. James is passionate about classical music, for example. But he has been secretive about this passion since he first moved to Toronto and always lowers the blinds of his apartment before he unpacks his box of scores to practice on his violin (N: 18-21). To the outside world, James is "the hippest," listening to "[a]mbient industrial" music. The editor of a city magazine sees him as a "hipster" with no longing for "bourgeois pleasure" (N: 14). James's public persona is completely convincing. No one seems to suspect that beneath the sarcastic restaurant critic there is a musician who is not that focused on the surface but is very interested in probing beneath it and at getting to the centre of things.

Throughout the novel *Noise*, Russell Smith makes explicit and implicit references to these centres of things, indicating James' interest in exploring the very core of issues and of people. For example, he expresses the opinion that it is important to consider the origins of musical pieces, to be informed about the composers of these pieces, to go beneath the mere surface of sound, in order to fully appreciate them (N: 57). Arguing strongly against a non-educated, purely eclectic approach to music, which, in James's view, has even spread to "highly educated, middle class people," he says to his friend De Courcy:

> 'Have you ever been with someone, been talking to someone, and you hear a piece of music in a commercial or on a radio or in a movie, and they say, oh, that's so pretty, what is this? And it's like the "Ode to Joy" from Beethoven's Ninth, or "Für Elise," or the toreador song from *Carmen* or something and they just haven't a clue.' (N: 59)

During the conversation in which James makes this comment, he and De Courcy open a bottle of wine that is "[f]lashy and smooth on the outside, well dressed" but also features "a dark brutal core" (N: 61). Later, James is fascinated by the video performance of his love interest Nicola, which shows her dancing in a see-through dress that allows the viewers to also see her pudenda. He is transfixed by this, "longing to see the red blur [i.e. menstrual blood] again, in slow motion, between the images of sea" (N: 103). To top it all, James puts the musical instrument, which is so much at

the centre of his life, and one sexual centre of the female body into close connection. He tells De Courcy, "'[t]he violin [...] is incredibly sensitive. It's like a very beautiful and very neurotic girlfriend. All you want to do is . . . is get on her good side. You know? Or, no, it's not even a girlfriend. It's more like a clitoris'" (N: 55). In a fitting manner, the story of James Willing reaches its end in the short story "Team Canada" included in the collection *Young Men* with the shared excitement of James and his new girlfriend about her first orgasm reached through masturbation while James was not there. She has gotten in touch with a central part of herself, with the joys of her physical femininity.[561]

There is no explicit philosophical discussion of the question of the nature of the human core, of the nature of James' core in *Noise*. The core is treated as a given, intuitively present, not explicable, but there, as the following examples illustrate. In the conversation with De Courcy quoted from above, James also tells his friend: "'I am deep down, fundamentally, basically uncool'" (N: 61). Towards the end of *Noise*, James makes similar comments, declaring that he will change his life: "'I'm not going to do this shit any more, this what's new what's going on shit, I'm not cut out for it. It's not me [...], it's been a mistake all along. This hip stuff'" (N: 247). These utterances of James reveal two things about him. The first is that he is aware that he has been putting on a performance in order to correspond to his surroundings and to fit in. The second thing is that there is something very present beneath James' superficial performance. Another example shows this as well. When James tracks down Nicola to get a hold of photographs she shot for a magazine piece he wrote, he finds himself talking to her in a voice he does not associate with his own: "It seemed to James that somebody else was talking. Probably Raoul" (N: 220). What is the significance of these two short sentences? First of all if James makes the observation that "somebody else was talking," then there needs to be an original self which does not find its way to the surface in this instance. Secondly, there needs to be an agency within him that can make this self-reflexive observation.

This self-reflexive agency within James is also present in the permanent indecisiveness and in the lack of certainty about himself he exhibits. During the course of the novel, James is constantly unsure about things and about the motivations for his actions. He could, for example, never tell whether his music teacher is "perhaps half joking or perhaps not" (N: 19). He is not "sure why," but joins Nicola in laughing (N: 37). He "inexplicably" wants to "vomit on" the shoes of the new owner of his apartment building (N: 77). He feels "himself blushing and" is not "sure why" (N: 165). He does not know "what he want[s]" while watching some women dance and thinking about

[561] Smith 2000: 177. It might of course be argued that Smith is here presenting a male gaze on the female body and on female identity.

his love interests (N: 152). All of these examples point towards two basic conclusions. On the one hand, being constantly unsure about things is a sign of an uncertainty about one's self and about the world. On the other hand, the very fact that James notices his uncertainty and observes himself points towards a desire to understand and towards an agency that is able to take note of the inexplicability of things.

The personal core of James, thus, is presented as something that is partly defined, and partly vague. He is intuitively sure about who he is and, at the same time, displays a curiosity for knowledge, wanting to explain things,[562] and, in all of this, is at home in the city with music and noise. The fact that the city and his music do not stand in opposition for James is exemplified in a description of his feelings while listening to music:

> There was a Shostakovich String Quartet, a new recording, and a new weird Richard Catherell orchestral suite, which would require a good hour of quiet, late at night. The Shostakovich had a clean Malevich painting on the cover, all angles and precision, so impossibly, romantically clever und urbane it made James want to just fly away, rocket through the roof of the Victorian house and into the stratosphere of steel-spectacled Russian intellectuals he knew he would never find, or just give up, just lie down and cry. (N: 18)

As James's praise for the urbane in the quote above suggests, even though he loves music so much, he also needs the noise of the city to function. As one reviewer put it, "[t]hroughout, Toronto's relentless noise threatens to destroy James' life, but it also energizes it."[563] Smith's text promotes a fusion of two spheres which have traditionally been seen as different environments, and which were not to be fused.

Commenting on Stephen Leacock's *Sunshine Sketches of a Little Town* in his essay "The City in Canadian Poetry," Eli Mandel proclaims: "It is true. Once we were at 'home' in the world, in the definable, local place." For Mandel, this "'deep and unbroken peace' of the small town at the turn of the century, before the great move to the city began, before urbanization, before the megalopolis, before parkways and thruways" is closely connected to the absence of noise, to a time "before traffic and jackhammers and subways and noise."[564] He then quotes a passage from Leonard Cohen's poem "Montreal 1964" to show that this yearning for a quiet environment is not only a phenomenon of the early 20th century but is also present in later Canadian texts:

> Can someone turn off the noise?

[562] See, for example, the thoughts of James while listening to speakers at his brother's graduation ceremony. What is invoked here, is an intellectual environment in the tradition in the enlightenment tradition: "He had heard, of course, about the great marathon orations of the Athenian Areopagus, the length of theatrical entertainments in Elizabethan England, and had always piously wished for such seriousness in contemporary life. Apparently the Douglas-Lincoln debate had lasted some eight hours, with an unchangingly huge, entranced audience; now, there was real democracy, real intellectual life." (N: 182).
[563] Doyle.
[564] Mandel: 128.

> The streets yearn for action nobler than traffic
> red lights want to be flags
> policemen want their arms frozen in loud movies:
> ask a man for the time
> your voice ruined with static:
> What a racket! What strange dials![565]

Towards the end of his essay, Mandel relates the concept of the creative opportunities of open space in Canada: "Our space is the emptiness between the cities and the stars, or even the emptiness in the modern city itself. If Montreal burns in the fires of time and poetry, Toronto is a void, an abyss."[566] Smith's text offers a different reading of the city. It is not empty spaces within the city that provide James Willing with creative energy, but a fusion of noise and music in the semi-pastoral environment of suburban Toronto that is close enough to the business of the city to feed off its energy. For when James tries to write in his new and quiet environment, he finds out that he needs the noise of the city to function. It is only when he decides to put on a CD and when he hears the "shattering sound like glass, a siren, and chest-hollowing" (N: 266) coming through the speakers of his stereo system that he is able to truly relax, feel at home, and be creative.

'Identity Rights' and the Mysterious Speaking Subject: *Look At Me*

If James Willing's true self stays vague to some extent, Charlotte Swenson's is even more vague in Jennifer Egan's *Look at Me*. Yet, it is, at the same time at least equally present and, apparently, non-fragmented. As has been suggested above, identity is a major theme of the novel, and it is, for some characters, portrayed as typically postmodern in the subject's dependence on discourses and language. Is Charlotte Swenson, the model with a reconstructed face, in a different position? Mediation and constructedness, having always been part of her life since she started modelling, become ever more part of who she is throughout the novel, or rather of who she appears to be to the outside world. This last qualification is a necessary correction. For Charlotte, even though she has spent her time in a world of surfaces, these surfaces never constituted the essence of the world and of people around her. A recurring motif in the book is, for example, the notion of a shadow self. For Charlotte, it expresses something about what is beneath the outer shell people present to the world, it allows a glimpse onto an inner truth of people. Charlotte's agent Oscar, for instance, appears to be a "triumph of pure-self-invention" and convincingly creates the impression that he has "been raised by East Coast bluebloods" even though his background is Caribbean. "Oscar had begun his life as someone else, but who that was seemed impolite to ask, when Oscar had taken such pains to efface him," Charlotte relates to the readers. But once in a while, she manages to

[565] Cohen: 35.
[566] Mandel: 136.

look beyond this artfully crafted new persona and sees Oscar's shadow self. "After the accident," she says,

> I had lost the power to see people's shadow selves, but as my vision improved, and as the fog burned off whichever cerebral lobe I required for this visual archeology, the shadows had slowly been returning. Oscar's was a portrait of sheer grief, a face so anguished it resembled a death's head. Not that Oscar himself looked anything like this; he had a lively, beautiful face and perfect white teeth […]. It was only occasionally, when he dragged on a cigarette, that I glimpsed the other – a nagging, flickering presence. I had been studying people's shadow selves for many years, but Oscar's still had the power to shock me – so gaping was its contrast to his apparent self. Yet this was often the case in the fashion world, where beauty, the best disguise of all, was so commonplace. (LAM: 34)

This ability of Charlotte to sometimes glance people's past or partly buried selves speaks against notions of a subject who would solely be defined by surfaces and appearances – but it does not yet dispose of the postmodern suggestion that people might still be completely shaped by discourses. So what if there are additional layers beneath the immediate appearance of a human subject. Could these hidden layers not also be exclusively shaped, defined, determined by language, by the environment, by our personal histories? They could, of course. Additional layers of personality do not debunk the general deterministic argument that we are not masters of our fate to a certain degree and that we cannot observe the world from a critical distance.

In the very last chapter of *Look At Me*, these very notions – agency and a critical distance from the environment – are strongly and almost explicitly argued for, however. The short chapter is separated structurally and formally from the rest of the novel in two decisive ways: Its five pages alone comprise part three of the novel, and the first person narrative switches into the present tense, signalling the immediacy with which readers now have access to Charlotte's life and to her thoughts. At the beginning of the final chapter readers are presented with an odd statement the first person narrator makes about herself: "That woman entertaining guests on her East River balcony in early summer, mixing rum drinks in such a way that the Bacardi and Coca-Cola labels blink at the viewer haphazardly in the dusty golden light – she isn't me" (LAM: 411). But the present tense first person narrator soon explains:

> The breach between myself and Charlotte Swenson had its antecedents well before Ordinary People's now legendary debut and the attendant tsunami of controversy, hysteria, opprobrium from pundits who swore it would be the end of American life as we knew it, and of course, history-making numbers of subscribers; before the rocketing fame of the 'Ordinary Thirty,' the original American subjects, many of whom […] are brand names today – before any of that, I had begun to feel, as I went through the motions of my life, that I was someone other than that woman, Charlotte Swenson, in whose skin I had lived for so long. (LAM: 412)

Charlotte Swenson has, for most of her life, been defined by others, by their expectations and their gazes. As the expectations and gazes start to dominate her life more and more, they help the I in the body of Charlotte Swenson realize that the true self cannot be found in comprehensive adjustments to the expectations of others or in giving one's self up into the ever-present gaze of

the other. On her internet page, visitors can read up on Charlotte Swenson's biography, they are shown films of decisive events in her life, and take part in her day-to-day existence. But it is not the first person narrator Charlotte Swenson who is shown to them so completely; it is only the perfected version of the mask she had worn most of her life. In such a way, the self, the I that speaks in the present tense, cannot be grasped. Now that every square-inch of Charlotte is illuminated so that the cameras can observe her every move, it becomes clear to the speaking and the thinking self that it is not situated in these places which can be illuminated and looked at by others. "I was a ghost sealed within the body of a fame-obsessed former model from whom I had to strenuously guard my moods and thoughts, lest she find some way to cannibalize and sell them" (LAM: 413), the voice of the self reports. The speaking 'I' therefore proceeds to sell the "Identity Rights" (LAM: 414) of Charlotte Swenson to ExtraOrdinary.com. The famous model is from then on only a computer-generated simulacrum. And the true self lets us know:

> As for myself, I'd rather not say very much. When I breathe, the air feels good in my chest. And when I think of the mirrored room, as of course I still do, I understand now that it's empty, filled with chimeras like Charlotte Swenson – the hard, beautiful seashells left behind long after the living creatures within have struggled free and swum away. Or died. Life can't be sustained under the pressure of so many eyes. (LAM: 415)

This I, this true self, it seems, cannot be ultimately identified, described, and it cannot be gazed at by an audience. "Even as we try to reveal the mystery of ourselves," the first person narrator suggests, "to catch it unawares, expose its pulse and flinch and peristalsis, the truth has slipped away, burrowed further inside a dark, coiled privacy that replenishes itself like blood. It cannot be seen, much as one might wish to show it. It dies the instant it is touched by light" (LAM: 415). The self as it emerges in *Look At Me* thus remains ultimately vague, but it is mysteriously there. It is present, it is an agent, a thinking and feeling subject with the ability to communicate in a unique voice, representing a unique self. The fact that the final chapter is narrated by a first person narrator in the present tense, the separation of the true subject from the artificial and mediated product Charlotte Swenson, and the concluding sentences of the novel highlight this status of the self. As the first person narrator tells us at the very end of the text,

> [o]nce or twice a year I still call my old voice mail, just to see if the outgoing message is still the one I recorded myself. My hand shakes as I dial the phone, and I wonder who will answer.
> 'Hi, it's me,' comes her childish, cigarette voice from the digital void. 'Leave a message, but keep it short.'
> 'Hello,' I say. 'It's me.' (LAM: 415)

In a manner similar to what happens in *Glamorama*, the main character of *Look At Me* has been duplicated. But as in Victor Ward's case, the copy is not her equal. It cannot and does not replace the unique voice of the true self. The authoritative voice remains with the first-person narrator who speaks of herself as I and who manages to keep a critical distance to a world defined by mediation.

Escape Routes from Technological and Cultural Determinism: Hal Niedzviecki

Hal Niedzviecki's *Ditch* was presented as a novel with a very much other-determined protagonist above. Ditch is a character who has literally lost his footing; both his legs and his rationality fail him. He does not navigate his way through the city of Toronto and through his life. He *is steered* through life by forces he does not understand and cannot control. What, then, is the place of Niedzviecki's work in this chapter on authentic human experience and on the human being as a rational agent? Above, I have suggested to include meta-textual authorities in a reading of Ellis' *Glamorama*. I will here go a step further and include the actual author in my discussion. What will be at stake in the following discussion of Niedzviecki's aesthetics is not a correct or incorrect interpretation of his texts, however. Rather, the role and the function of the author in the narrative framework – a role Niedzviecki implicitly, yet extensively problematizes in his book of cultural criticism *We Want Some Too* (2000) – will be discussed.

One of many contemporary phenomena Niedzviecki introduces in the non-fictional *We Want Some Too* is the idea of the cyborg, and instead of limiting his analysis to the purely theoretical, Niedzviecki has met and talked to an actual person who, one might argue, comes as close to being a cyborg as anyone can at this point in time. Steve Mann is a professor at the University of Toronto who has invented and who dons the WearComp (i.e. a wearable computer), which consists of "a pair of sunglasses that double as a monitor, a mainframe in your pocket, and wiring under your blazer." While this equipment performs "all the usual functions of the home computer," it comes with the extra "bonus of cellular phone, vid-phone, options for visual and audio recordings, and […] portability" (WWST: 163). Steve Mann himself estimates that it – or similar pieces of technology – will become part of our daily lives in the future. "We'll evolve towards WearComp as an evolution," he tells Niedzviecki, "and at some point in time we will feel naked without it. That'll happen" (WWST: 163).

To show what this has to do with the notion of the rational agent, it is helpful to take a small detour away from Niedzviecki's texts and to focus on some of the ideas presented in Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1964) as well as in Steve Mann's own *Cyborg* (2001), a book co-authored by Niedzviecki. One of McLuhan's central theses in *Understanding Media* is that new technologies and new media such as the printing press, the telegraph, the telephone, and television to a very large extent shape the social environment in which people live. The worldview of these people is then equally affected. The much-quoted 'extensions of man' need therefore not to be

pictured with an autonomous rational subject in the centre who simply gains new or improved sensual qualities. The extensions are, rather, changes to the sensual and mental make-up of the individual. They are changes which happen to the individual and he or she cannot do much to escape them or to give these changes the direction he or she wishes for. In McLuhan's opinion,

> technological media are staples or natural resources, exactly as are coal and cotton and oil. Anybody will concede that a society whose economy is dependent upon one or two major staples like cotton, or grain, or lumber, or fish, or cattle is going to have some obvious social patterns of organization as a result. […] Cotton and oil, like radio and TV, become 'fixed charges' on the entire psychic life of the community. And this pervasive fact creates the unique cultural flavour of any society.[567]

According to McLuhan, most people are caught unawares by these changes brought about by new media,[568] and the changes are often so pervasive that they are almost impossible to step out of or away from. While Lewis H. Lapham declares McLuhan to be a predecessor of much postmodern thought[569] – which holds true to some extent – there is one important point in which the Canadian media theorist differs from his more radical postmodern successors, who presumed the mediated or the textual world to be all-pervasive. For McLuhan, media are only *almost* all-pervasive. Those with a critical eye, a special knowledge about society and the media, and the right intellectual tools might not be able to live apart from the societal changes which occur when a new mass medium takes hold. In McLuhan's view, they can however still transcend or step out of their mediated environments to some extent. He grants such a capability to Alexis de Tocqueville, for example, "a highly literate aristocrat who was quite able to be detached from the values and assumptions of typography,"[570] which, according to McLuhan, shaped the United States early on. "That is why," McLuhan asserts, "he alone understood the grammar of typography. And it is only on those terms, standing aside from any structure or medium, that its principles and lines of force can be discerned. For any medium has the power of imposing its own assumptions on the unwary."[571] In his own time, a period dominated by new media such as television, McLuhan also sees the possibility for individuals to escape complete control of mental life by the media. De Tocqueville was an exceptional intellectual of the 19th century, and McLuhan presents himself as his contemporary equivalent,[572] while also granting the "serious artist" the power to 'stand aside' from a medium.[573]

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567 McLuhan: 21.
568 He suggests, e.g., that the "electric technology is within the gates, and we are numb, deaf, blind, and mute about its encounter with the Gutenberg technology, on and through which the American way of life was formed" (McLuhan: 17-18).
569 See Lapham's "Introduction" to the 1994 MIT Press edition of *Understanding Media.*
570 McLuhan: 15.
571 McLuhan: 15.
572 McLuhan tells his readers, "I am in the position of Louis Pasteur telling doctors that their greatest enemy was quite invisible, and quite unrecognizable by them" (McLuhan: 18).
573 Cf. McLuhan 18: "The serious artist is the only person able to encounter technology with impunity, just because he is an expert aware of changes in sense production."

A combination of the intellectual and of the 'serious artist' facing a cityscape strongly shaped by media is the position in society claimed by both Mann and Niedzviecki. In *Cyborg*, Mann envisions a McLuhanesque scenario in which the (wearable) computer is about to instigate social and mental changes on a broad scale. "Why should you care about the wearable computer?"[574] he asks his readers, and goes on to answer,

> Not because it is some dangerous new bugaboo with the potential to destroy all life on the planet with the flip of a switch, but for precisely the opposite reason: Because it is everywhere, as ubiquitous as it is invisible, permeating our consciousness, altering fears, desires, and ways of being. […] You should care because […] soon our lives will be dramatically changed by the wearable computer. But the world will look pretty much the same – *and most of us won't even notice*.[575]

With this echo of McLuhan's ideas, Mann concludes his "Prologue" and makes his debt to the Canadian theorist even more explicit at the beginning of the "Introduction" by directly quoting him. "The computer [is] the most extraordinary of man's technological clothing; it is an extension of our central nervous system,"[576] Mann lets McLuhan announce, and while the latter was speaking metaphorically, the former has quite literally made the computer into an extension of his nervous system in a long-term scientific experiment / art project by wearing his WearComp device for months at a time. "In my everyday existence," Mann reports, "I live in a videographic world: I see the entire world, even my hands and feet, through a camera lens."[577] He then makes an important distinction, which sums up much of the impetus behind his project. Initially inviting his readers to imagine him as living his "entire life as a television show" he right away points out that what he is doing is actually quite different. "[U]nlike the passive television watcher," Mann asserts, "my goal is not to tune out of reality. In fact, the device I wear […] has quite the opposite effect: equipped with WearComp, it is up to me how and what I see, how and what I choose to focus on or exclude."[578] Mann is trying to use this very technology to preserve his personal freedom and independence. He intends to remain in the position of an active agent by taking a decided part in the process of shaping the reality the new technology will result in. As he suggests,

> I am part of the [corporate] Flesh Machine, and yet, I believe the Flesh Machine is also only a part of me. The cyborg is a necessary response, as we realize that the only way to protect ourselves against consciousness invasion is to use the tools of the machine against itself.[579]

While his wearable computer does shape his grammar of experience, he, e.g., also uses it as a means of controlling the visual input he exposes himself to. "Perhaps the key differences in the cyborg age," Mann asserts, "will not so much be our right to access information but our right to

[574] Mann / Niedzviecki: xi.
[575] Mann / Niedzviecki: xi-xii, original emphasis.
[576] McLuhan in Mann / Niedzviecki: 1.
[577] Mann / Niedzviecki: 3.
[578] Mann / Niedzviecki: 3.
[579] Mann / Niedzviecki: 215.

disseminate and exclude information on our terms and as we see fit."[580] By making his software non-dependent of the software grammar a company such as Microsoft offers,[581] by turning himself into a private web broadcaster who shows his audience images not altered or exclusively used by large media companies and governments,[582] or by letting his camera-eyes tune out billboards on city streets,[583] Mann has implemented his theoretical stance into a liveable strategy.

If we now return to Hal Niedzviecki, it is clear that he has not only mentioned Steve Mann in *We Want Some Too* because the two happen to live in the same city or because he happened to co-author Mann's book *Cyborg*. The reason he talks about Mann is that their (and McLuhan's) ideas on how to preserve the self in an ever more mediated environment resemble each other very closely. If Mann is more concerned with the grammar of technological devices such as the wearable computer, Niedzviecki's focus is on mass media and on increasingly fake and mediated environments dominated by capitalist enterprises, which the contemporary Western urban population finds itself exposed to.

As the discussion of *Ditch* above has shown, Niedzviecki sees the subject in serious trouble in the contemporary (urban) world, and he underlines this in his non-fictional texts. "We live in a *faux* land where everything is narrative, story, entertainment," (WWST: 167) Niedzviecki suggests in *We Want Some Too*. In his introduction to a recent anthology of Canadian city writing, he observes that the urban world of "the new Canada" is a "place where the challenge is no longer to explore the discovered wild, but to examine the fallacies and dangers of exploration turned inward to the cloistered confines of consciousness" shaped by "post-industrial reality."[584] To Niedzviecki, mass culture – that is the media and corporate capitalism – permeate our realities and our selves to such an extent that it is likely that we lose ourselves in the streams of images presented to us and in the flood of products poured out over us. Ours is an "anonymous, arbitrary world of mass culture. We are creatures of our times, guilty of irony and sarcasm" (WWST: 318), Niedzviecki argues. "We are

[580] Mann / Niedzviecki: 221-222.
[581] See Mann / Niedzviecki: 216-219.
[582] From 1994 to 1996, Mann "continually broadcast what [he] saw in [his] everyday life to the World Wide Web" (Mann / Niedzviecki: 129), attracting up to 30,000 visitors to his web site every day. Amongst other things, this experiment was, in Mann's opinion, "a clear challenge to the way things are done in the industrial complex: Control over broadcast communication was subverted" (Mann / Niedzviecki: 131). It also worked against the increasing secret surveillance which, in Mann's eyes, is becoming more and more pervasive. He writes, "the only way to break out of the surveillance system is to negate its secretive power over us by destroying the surveillance monopoly. The 'self-surveillance' I and others have practised (allowing others to see us) builds a sense of community that subverts the panopticon gaze" (Mann / Niedzviecki: 144).
[583] Mann states that "WearComp allows us to walk down a busy street and not be assaulted by the ever-growing barrage of advertisements" and concludes that this "suggests that one might be in the community without being consumed by it" (Mann / Niedzviecki: 222).
[584] Niedzviecki 1998: xx.

the lost people, our lives in orbit around some awesome planetary imagination" (WWST: 180). It is "not that life is a movie but that the discourse of life now takes place on the level of movies, of entertainment" (WWST: 193). For Niedzviecki, it is more than likely that we, like his novel's main character Ditch, might get lost in this kind of a world.

This, of course, provokes the question where there might be room for a stable, active, and rational subject in the narrative instabilities and uncertainties of *Ditch* and in the 'faux' post-industrial world of the Canadian city. In Niedzviecki's theoretical texts, he locates this rationality and stability in the creator of the respective text and in the story he tells. If the world is confusing, a confusing text may as well be called a realist depiction. Niedzviecki positions himself as the "serious artist" McLuhan granted the power to escape domination. In the independent artist, or rather in an oppositional community of independent artists, Hal Niedzviecki sees the potential to open up a "space to express our reality, our truth, our malaise-ridden hopeful indifference" (WWST: 325). On "a journey through the hinterlands of pop in search of our way home" (WWST: 320), he locates within the artistic subject the power to assert "an alternative reality, a collective and personal truth different from the dominant conception of the way things are" (WWST: 323), different from the unstable pseudo-stability corporate and media culture impose on their helpless victims. Our means to express ourselves can still work. The subject and the language it uses, Niedzviecki maintains, are not as helpless and non-grounded as they may seem to be. And Ditch, in his instability, is not who we all have to be. As an artist, Niedzviecki argues, "inspired by the vigilance of Steve Mann's wearable cameras, informed by the grainy accessibility of the home movie, we sense that the truth in our lives is up to us to record, overdub, edit, and project" (WWST 195), – "we have the right to make our own movies, free of the trappings of mass culture; […] we have the right to use the language of plunder to allude not to pop and its celebrities, but to ourselves and who we feel ourselves to be in our world" (WWST 194). In Niedzviecki's eyes, the independent artist does not only have the right to do these things, he also and most importantly *is able* to be a creative and rational agent communicating to others.

In his latest book of non-fiction, *Hello, I'm Special* (2004), Niedzviecki seems to take back much of what he proposed in *We Want Some Too*. He now states that, in *We Want Some Too*,

> I wrote of a world of independent cultural creators determined to find some way to rebel against corporate culture. I believed that I was one of those rebels, a pop-influenced semi-slacker determined to reinvent mass culture to serve individuals and communities in an era of expanding global commonality and shrinking locality. But, looking back at that book and what I've since seen happening in our world, I realize that I was far too optimistic. How much of what I thought of as fruitful rebellion was really narcissistic I'm Specialness? How much of my own work has been about exuding a pretense of cool as opposed to truly challenging institutions and norms? (HImS: xviii)

At one point in his analysis, he focuses on what he calls "a huge therapy industry" – consisting of self-help book authors and "accredited professionals" (HImS: 95) – telling people in North America that their self-esteem is what they need to work on in order to be successful and happy. According to Niedzviecki, the "therapists are essentially pop culture's missionaries, trying to convert us to the ideals of self-reliance, reinvention, individuality." What is problematic, paralysing, and harmful about this kind of therapeutic advice, Niedzviecki suggests, is that it "inevitably puts the burden on our shoulders: Your problems, your self, your needs." The question always seems to be, "What can *you* do to make your life better?" The "focus is turned away from the system and how it works, and aimed back at the individual: Oh, you aren't the movie star you wanted to be? Well, honey, you just didn't try hard enough" (HImS: 95-96, original emphasis). By asking the individual to strive to be an original artist in *We Want Some Too*, Niedzviecki to some extent argued from a similar premise.

Can there be "a collective and personal truth different from the dominant conception of the way things are" (WWST: 323) if, for example, "the Clear Channel corporation owns a staggering twelve hundred radio stations in the United States, an estimated 60 percent of the rock / pop market" (HImS: 102)? What is spreading around the world, according to Niedzviecki, is a "[g]lobal monoculture" which changes "not just what we eat and how we look, but also how we *think*" (HImS: 107, original emphasis). Niedzviecki now sees less space for the independent artist, and thinks of the system as even more powerful than before. So what can you do? Is there nothing but "the pop paradox: a wrapping of locality and individuality, but the box is filled with cheap, generic gifts" (HImS: 108)? When Niedzviecki writes in 2004 that the "cultural industries extend their dominance over the mental landscape, changing our expectations and lives without our noticing or objecting" (HImS: 110), he still argues along a content based theory of experience resembling McLuhan's technology based theory of what shapes human beings. In the time that has passed since the publication of *We Want Some Too*, he has come to see that the industry might have usurped the individual's need for individuality and an authentic reality and might have incorporated it into its own system. As movie-goers flock to their local theatres to watch the authentic 'One' take on *The Matrix*, Niedzviecki observes, "we pay the corporation to give us the feeling of defying their – our – world. Ersatz rebellion mixes with passive entertainment and ends up occupying the space where real active voice and dissent once had the chance to make a difference" (HImS: 115) Alternative culture seems to him to conform to this scenario to a large extent.[585]

[585] Niedzviecki provides a number of examples of how cultural production which sees itself outside of the system or the mainstream actually conforms with the ideologies of the system itself and can therefore, in his opinion, only be called 'ersatz rebellion'. Many products of independent culture, such as PeopleCards – "each pack containing '7 real people, 1 real artcard, 0 celebrities'" (HImS: 120) –, in Niedzviecki's eyes merely mimic the pop cultural system instead

The possibility to be an individual who is not determined by the system is Niedzviecki's central focus in *Hello, I'm Special*. But a distinction has to be made when it comes to individuality. Two different things are at stake: (i) For Niedzviecki, to express yourself authentically and to position yourself / to be recognized as an individual within a world of mass conformity is what is necessary in order for people to feel a sense of purpose and of leading a meaningful life.[586] (ii) On a more fundamental level – and in a sense that Niedzviecki does not discuss extensively – to consider oneself an individual presupposes that one is able to maintain some degree of independence from the system, that the human capacities of rationally and creatively commenting on and observing the system from a critical distance are still in place. While the meaning of life (i) is certainly not a problem to be brushed aside, it is quite independent of the latter question (ii). Such a critical distance to the system does not necessarily entail that a human being feels a purpose of his or her existence, but it is central to a rejection of postmodern conceptions of the self as they have been sketched above.

It is in this more fundamental sense (ii) that Niedzviecki stays true to his earlier proclamations. He, for instance, discusses the case of the strictly non-commercial Canadian West coast artist George Sawchuck, who does not sell his large wood sculptures to anyone in order to keep the capitalist system at a distance from his life, and who yet agreed to have his photograph appear on billboards across Canada in a campaign for a long distance phone company. Niedzviecki muses: "Can a straight-talking logger with socialist sensibilities who reinvented himself as an artist shill long distance without being compromised?" His answer is that "[p]erhaps that's what true individuality is all about these days – an ability to shift and change and take advantage of circumstances without abandoning a core truth and confidence" (HImS: 211). Niedzviecki asks: "If everything is allowed, if everyone is special, if conformity and individuality are equally encompassed into the system that consumes and regurgitates all human activity as a form of (pop) product, then is genuine identity essentially doomed?" (HImS: 213) It is, if difference from others is seen as the source of the meaning of life and if individuality, or non-conformism is not accompanied by a critical distance to the system itself – a critical distance Niedzviecki assumes by

of challenging it, claiming a share of celebrity status for ordinary people instead of questioning the celebrity cult itself. There has been, Niedzviecki observes, a "recent trend in indie culture to parallel or mimic mainstream notions of celebrity, turning indie into amateur" (HImS: 120) and he suggests that in "the paradoxical world of the new conformity, the urge to turn the ordinary into the celebrity has become a motif in independent culture" (HImS: 121).

[586] About recent trends towards conservatism, he for example suggests that the "new traditionalists represent a wider movement that encompasses the many of us who can't help but feel the vacuity of our times; neo-traditionalism thrives on the collective post-millennial sense that something is missing in contemporary technological society – some purpose and connection that our ancestors seemed to have, but we most obviously lack" (HImS: 147). In Niedzviecki's opinion, something that would give meaning to the lives of his contemporaries is "the comfort of knowing that they have a place in the world" (HImS: 170).

writing a study that tries to analyse the system. And a critical distance which Niedzviecki might not be able to explain, but which he refuses to rule out and to hope for. On the last page of his book, he writes:

> Is there a middle ground, a way to be powerful without being susceptible to the suction of the system? I went looking for a way to enact that miniature triumph, that personal rebellion. I did not find it. And yet I persist. After all, rebellion implies change, possibility, newness. And at the heart of humanity is this urge for new experience, new patterns, expanded truths. (HImS: 235)[587]

The Boopleganger and Postirony: *The Savage Girl*

Alex Shakar's *The Savage Girl* features a minor character who used to be the kind of artist Hal Niedzviecki envisions in his earlier work of cultural analysis, *We Want Some Too*, an artist who uses the means of capitalist media culture to subvert the system itself. As the novel's main character Ursula van Urden recalls, her mother, a plastic surgeon, was once approached by a "performance artist" who asked her to make her look like the cartoon character Betty Boop, "she wanted to have the exact same proportions as the cartoon character – her face, her body, everything." These "operations were going to be a publicity stunt for the Postfeminist Movement," Ursula tells her colleague Javier. The woman's "life-character would be known as the Boopleganger, and her mission would be to disrupt media events," (TSG: 37), to use the means of the media in order to challenge them. Since Ursula's mother was a very good surgeon and developed a passion for the project, the artist received exactly what she had asked for. Eleven operations were carried out, and the "result of it all – the Boopleganger […] was, well, something less than human, more than cartoon" (TSG: 37). The result was someone who actually looked like Betty Boop, and a former 'postfeminist' performance artist who was less than happy with the changes in her outer appearance in the end, who stayed at home depressed instead of using her new freaky looks to subvert media events, as she had originally planned. Ursula's mother had created a walking quote of pop culture. She had completely changed the outer appearance of another human being and had made her into a living symbol of corporate mass media instead of turning her into a living challenge to contemporary society. Both Ursula's mother and the artist, the later Niedzviecki would probably argue, had to experience how pervasive the pop culture really is and how it cannot be challenged from within. But is the plastic surgeon therefore really a "'postmodern Frankenstein,'" (TSG: 37) as Ursula calls her mother? Would a postmodern Frankenstein's creation not rather be a person who is not her self any more on every level? This clearly does not happen in the Boopleganger's

[587] For a similar, yet more skeptical view of the human subject to keep a critical distance to the technology that surrounds us, see Mark Kingwell, who writes about the speed our culture seems to be characterized by due to technological advances: "Our quick vehicles do not cause our panic, our wretched drivenness. The motor of speed, the transcendental impulse, lies buried not in the engine or the microprocessor but within each one of us" (Kingwell: 48).

case. On some level of her self, she does not feel at home in her new body. There therefore seems to be a component of her self which plastic surgery has not reached and changed. If you look like Betty Boop all of a sudden, you do not turn into Betty Boop. If you change your surface, a part of you remains a rational agent who can at least still make the decision to stay at home. The short anecdote Ursula relates to Javier about her mother tells the story of two creative agents. The Boopleganger was an active agent when she approached Ursula's mother to change her outer appearance. Ursula's mother herself was a creative agent when she planned and carried out the surgery and emphasized her status as an active agent when she urged the woman to continue with the operations in spite of her patient's emerging doubts. Her patient, in turn, was an active agent again in the end by deciding to sue her surgeon and to force her to quit her business. If these characters were driven to their decisions by forces external to themselves, as one might argue against the case developed here, there is no indication for this in Shakar's novel.

What this short anecdote says about the human self in an aside has its equivalent in one of the main storylines of the novel. As has been stated above, one of the big projects of the trendspotting agency Ursula works for is to promote a new and innovative product called Diet water, an artificial water-like fluid which "passes through the body completely unabsorbed" (TSG: 44). The advertising campaign that Tomorrow Ltd. creates for this product is modelled after the savage girl, a woman living an archaic life style within the city. The billboards and commercials for one of the most non-natural products one could conceive of are based the images of nature and of urban tribalism. They are based on what the leader of Tomorrow Ltd. Chas Lacouture calls 'postirony'. It should be clear from this connection between postirony and the business world that the postirony Chas promotes is not a step back to earnestness or a strategy to subvert the world of marketing. It is, on the contrary, another turn of the ironic or postmodern screw. As Chas explains to business executives, "[b]y 'postironic' I don't mean 'earnest.' Innocence lost cannot be reclaimed so simply. This is more than a simple backlash. Postirony is ironic earnestness. Postirony is omnipotent slavery. Postirony is giddy terror. Ladies and gentlemen, postirony […] is *schizophrenia*" (TSG: 140-41). Postirony is the ironic rejection of a culture of irony, in a supposed, phoney spirit of earnestness – a spirit which is only put on in order to manipulate people into buying products of no use. In Chas's vision of the future,

> postirony will schizophrenize the cultural unconscious, leading to an explosion in delusion-maintenance industries, throwing imaginative space open to privatization and ushering in the era in which you marketers will come fully into your own, inheriting the mantle of influence from churches and states, becoming the spiritual guides of the masses, caretakers of a new, ahistorical, mystificatory mindset, cultivators of a worldwide amusement park of fantasies and denial. (TSG: 142)

With a lot of justification, theorists of the postmodern might claim that what Chas is proposing here is what they have said all along about the contemporary age.

This begs the question, of course, where the rational agent can be found in all of this schizophrenia. Where is the rational agent in the repeated and endless turns of the ironic screw which gives consumers faux earnestness and rebellion against the capitalist system in the name of this very system? He or she is, of course, the person with the screwdriver. Chas Lacouture, the expert in the trendspotting agency who, apparently, is still able to spot trends and to devise a scheme to sell the products he wants to sell. For who could 'cultivate' the 'worldwide amusement park of fantasies,' who could take care of the 'mystificatory mindset' Chas is alluding to? Who could decide on the best strategy to sell a product? Who could exploit the fact that "virtualism and the concept of elective affinities will lead to radical individualism, or the creation of multiple consumer identities within a single person" (TSG: 142)? Who could do all this if not a rational, active, and creative agent? While Shakar's novel *The Savage Girl*, on the one hand renders hopes for a postironic age in Middle City as destined to be disappointed, a subtext of the novel makes a case for the old categories of reason and of agency.

5 Conclusions: 'Kind of post-whatever thing'?

> 'Kind of post-whatever thing,' said one of the men.
> 'More like neo,' said Jason Katz, who wore a red bow tie that glowed with little red lights. 'Neo whatever.'
> 'Neo whatever. Exactly.'
> (Russell Smith, *Muriella Pent*)

> 'Are you being sarcastic?' 'No.' Pause. 'You figure it out.'
> (Bret Easton Ellis, *Glamorama*)

Early on in Alex Shakar's *The Savage Girl*, the lifestyle of the 'savage' woman living in the urban jungle is portrayed as a possible way out of the meaninglessness of life that has taken hold of the novel's main character Ursula van Urden. Pursuing the savage girl, Ursula walks the streets of the city, and readers are invited along:

> The streets are empty, so she has to hang far back and stick close to the buildings to avoid detection. Up ahead, the savage girl moves warily, catlike, responding with her whole lithe body to every change […]. She walks as though the city were alive with spirits, gurgling from sewer grates, rustling in stray leaves of newsprint, alerting her to dangers and guiding her along on her mission through the night. Her world is in love with her, will do anything for her, generating no end of meaning, dressing every last inch of itself up with significance. (TSG: 55-56)

Whether the savage girl's world is indeed infused with meaning and significance or whether this is a projection of her pursuer, this meaning seems to be lost for Ursula, much of the novel suggests. But this hypothesis undergoes a re-evaluation in the text's final chapter. Shakar's book is divided into three main parts. Part one is called "Smirkers" (TSG: 1) and comprises the first 128 pages of the narrative. Part two is called "Savages" (TSG: 129) and takes up 132 pages. The final part is named "Cyborgs" (TSG: 263) and only consists of one single chapter of eleven pages. It is tempting to read these headlines as a dialectical movement, from the thesis of the disillusioned nihilist via the antithesis of a non-enlightened human being living in harmony with the world to the synthesis of the cyborg who would in this case be characterised by both reflexivity and a meaningful existence.

In the last chapter of *The Savage Girl*, the narrative has for the first time left the urban environment of Middle City. At the beginning of the chapter, Ursula "closes the station door behind her and crosses the small clearing, settling her pack on her shoulder. The rain forest greets her with its thick, sweet aroma of orchid and plum" (TSG: 265). Has she travelled the path towards the natural state of being which she assumes the savage girl has tried to follow? Has she left her irony-drenched urban home behind in pursuit of a pre-modern existence in harmony with nature? At first, this actually seems to be the case. For Ursula, we read, "[l]ooking up" into the trees of the rain forest

"induces the same feelings in her that it has every day for the last ten months, a mixture of dizziness, humility, sadness, and hope" (TSG: 265). But as the sentence continues after a dash, we also learn that neither civilization and the capitalist system nor her self-reflexive nature have truly left her. They might have been pushed into a corner of her mind for some time, but they are both part of the world that surrounds her and part of who she is. She is sad because the rain forest "is disappearing" due to logging, but more importantly, because for Ursula, despite "all the reality it represents, the teeming life around her might as well be a painted backdrop" (TSG: 265). The rain forest only *represents* reality for her; the distance to her surroundings is there to stay for Ursula, it seems, whether she is in the city or somewhere else. And yet, even though she has not bridged the distance to a purely natural existence, engaging in a project to "save as many species as possible" (TSG: 268) together with other activists, Ursula finds hope because "a place like" the rain forest, because nature "is actually possible" (TSG: 265). In working on filling a contemporary ark with specimens that might otherwise be lost, killed by human 'progress', Ursula has found some reconciliation with a nature that does not provide her with the meaning of life she is yearning for, but which she still experiences as nurturing.

Others, who seriously try to leave Western civilization and the city behind, are also shown to be unable to do so, whether they are aware of it or not. As Ursula gathers small rain forest creatures for the "giant freezers at the Ark, Inc. headquarters," (TSG: 268) she sees "a Yanomama tribesman making his way toward her, carrying a bow in one hand and a red, blue, and yellow macaw in the other." This man at first appears like an authentic and original inhabitant of the woods. "He holds the dead bird out for balance as he steps over a fallen tree. He is naked, his genitals darker than the surrounding skin. His face and body are painted with the serpentine patterns of the Patahamateri tribe" (TSG: 268). But it turns out that he rather corresponds to a city dweller's expectations of what such a person would look like. Ursula addresses the man as "Walter," a name not impossible but certainly unexpected for a member of a Brazilian rain forest tribe. When the following dialogue ensues between the two, the sense of incongruity grows. Walter invites Ursula to a tribal ceremony, and this is how the conversation unfolds:

> 'What's the ceremony?' Ursula asks.
> 'We're honoring the spirits of dead tribesmen.'
> 'Why? Has anyone in your tribe died?'
> 'Well . . .,' Walter says, shifting uncomfortably on his haunches, 'not *recently*. We are contacting *past* members. *You* know . . .'
> 'Oh, you're honoring the *real* Patahamateri,' Ursula says. She knows this is a bit cruel, but she can't help it. (TSG: 269, original emphases)

As readers might have guessed from the savage's name, Walter's tribe turns out to be a group of Westerners trying to escape the urban postmodern world Ursula has left behind temporarily as

well. But even in the Brazilian rain forest, they can still not escape the capitalist system they hate so much, and just as they were in the cities they have left, they are caught in a system where they are sold illusions, experiences, things claiming to be original even if they are not, simulacra of rituals. "That the real Yanomama are at least making a bit of money off this whole charade is the only indisputably good thing about" the presence of the new settlers, the text proposes. As the Native Brazilians dwell in their run-down housing projects, watching television, "hunting for free pornography" on the internet, and "prostituting themselves to the loggers," the

> only remaining bright spot in their lives is when one of the neo-Yanomama like Walter emerges from the jungle seeking authentic folklore, herbal remedies, food sources, and, especially, ritual ceremonies. The villagers, dressed in T-Shirts and poorly made cutoff jeans and skirts, gather round the naked, painted American or European, and when they've finished laughing their heads off, the naked white man tells them he wants to buy a ritual, and the oldest among them nods sagely, negotiates a price, and then explains the appropriate chants and movements. Whether he is giving him actual ceremonies or just making them up off the top of his head is anybody's guess. (TSG: 270)

But does it matter if the ceremonies are made up or not? You can, of course, find meaning in arbitrary ceremonies as well, if you are willing to accept anything as divine revelation or as a ritual that gives meaning to your life, if you, that is, naively submerge and immerse yourself into a system or meta-narrative set up to satisfy your needs and desires. But if this is the case, the ceremonies Walter buys from the Yanomama are no different from a visit to a mall in a North American city. Whether you drink Diet Water or take part in a faux simulacrum of a ceremony, you keep moving in a consumer society based on the notion of the spectacle, where fulfilment is to be found in momentary exhilaration but not in a stable connection to a meaning of life or to a metaphysical truth. "If there is any realism left here," Fredric Jameson wrote of contemporary cultural production in 1983,

> it is a 'realism' which springs from the shock of grasping that confinement [of one's own mind] and of realizing that, for whatever peculiar reasons, we seem condemned to seek the historical past through our own pop images and stereotypes about that past, which itself remains forever out of reach.[588]

This, it appears, is just the situation that people who seek meaning and direction find themselves in at the end of Shakar's novel *The Savage Girl*. They seek meaning and depth in ancient rituals. But these rituals have become a commodity and the way the tribe dresses is reminiscent of Western pop images of life in the wilderness. In the end, the native Brazilians play the same role Western companies are so often argued to play in the (post)industrialized world – they do not sell products any more, they sell experiences, life styles, and images. The meta-narratives which provide the Neo-Natives with meaning or stability are only narrations sold to them. The postmodern reality as it has been described in the first parts of this study is what also emerges from this initial reading of the end of Alex Shakar's novel. But the chapter "Cyborgs" does not stop at this point.

[588] Jameson 1983: 118.

As we have seen, even though Ursula enjoys the natural environment, she does not truly connect to it. And even though she has decided to return to Middle City, she does not like that place very much either. Thinking to herself that people there will liken the jungle to a hell they would never want to live in, Ursula silently responds, bemoaning the lack of solidarity and community in urban environments. "Hell," she thinks, is actually

> the Middle City metropolitan area and ten thousand other metropolitan areas just like it, ground zeros of densely packed buildings, each surrounded by a hundred-square-mile radius of flat suburban sprawl, as though our race had been so filled with the fear of a nuclear apocalypse that, like a return of the repressed, we'd ended up acting out the devastation of it by other means, making our lives a living monument to death. (TSG: 271)

But Ursula still hangs on to her decision to return to the urban environment as the jungle is even less of a home for her. Invited to stay with neo-Patahamateri, she finds it tempting, but ultimately "knows this isn't her tribe" (TSG: 273). Her tribe, she is "*pretty sure*," consists of other people like her, a "tribe of scattered, isolated individuals, a tribe that doesn't yet know it is a tribe" (TSG: 273, emphasis added).

It is significant that Ursula is only 'pretty sure' about this and that there is no further description of 'her' tribe other than that it will be a group that offers community and solidarity to Ursula. Is it a group of people who, like Ursula, are disillusioned with the world due to knowing too much? As readers, we can only be 'pretty sure' about what she means – and the same is true for the various utopian thoughts going through Ursula's mind as the novel closes, thoughts which represent an attempt at finding a synthesis between the tensions the novel has built up. If we at this point return to Jameson's notion that the postmodern is decidedly non-utopian, one has to state that, despite all the despair about human destiny portrayed in Shakar's novel, the final chapter could be read as distinctly non-postmodern, for there are more than enough utopian thoughts going through Ursula's mind. But they are as vague as they are numerous. Too numerous and too vague, one might argue. As Ursula prepares for heading back to the city, she imagines that she will be able to "carry back the memory of" the jungle:

> And living in whatever anonymous apartment she finds for herself – surrounded by walls thick enough to isolate her from but not quite thick enough to block out the presence of neighbors she'll never know – she'll remember the *shapono* [i.e. a traditional village in the jungle] and remember that once there were people who were never alone, who spent their lives in the company of their tribe, and that this gave them strength, and a deep understanding of their interdependence, and yes, sometimes even happiness. (TSG: 271)

Is this a premodern, a romanticist, or a contemporary ecological view of what kind of things can give meaning to a human being's life, mixed with a dose of communitarianism? It might be any one of them, as readers do not hear much more about it. They do hear more about what Ursula is

planning to do upon returning to the city. She plans to return to being an artist. Using material she has collected during her stay in the rain forest – "cloudy cocoons, diaphanous webs, blood-red root systems, pale fungal threads" – she intends to create an installation:

> The webs, she imagines, will ensnare. The cocoons will pacify. The roots and threads will connect the webs to the cocoons. It will be a system by turns breathtaking and baleful, but not, in the end, incomprehensible, not inescapable. From an outside vantage point […] the work will be wholly graspable in a single insight, a single moment of recognition. In this way she believes, it will be empowering. In this way, it will give people the courage to go on trying to understand and master all those other forces acting on them that at first seem too pervasive and too insidious ever to take on. (TSG: 273)

Reading this intensely utopian passage, we are again at a loss in how to categorize what Ursula is planning to do. The project envisaged contains elements of the premodern, the romanticist, and the ecological. It also, however, has a strong resemblance to modernist aesthetics – in a general way in the notion of providing coherence to the world through works of art, and in a particularly Imagist way in intending the work of art to trigger a momentary insight, an epiphany. All of this, however, is to be achieved, it seems, in order to direct people towards understanding the world through rational inquiry – a notion connected to enlightenment philosophy and to the empirical as well as the social sciences. But we are not yet at the end of Ursula's utopian fantasy cocktail of things that might provide meaning to existence and explain the world. Another passage shall be quoted at length since it will further highlight the odd combination of approaches to the world Ursula dreams up. It is a combination that makes her utopia, depending on your point of view, interesting or questionable:

> Until recently Ursula didn't think people could assemble their own religions and go on to invest in them even the slightest amount of actual belief. But observational evidence, it seems, is proving her wrong. Perhaps what she's been witnessing is the birth not only of a new religion, but of a new *kind* of religion, an ironic religion – one that never claims to be absolutely true but only professes to be relatively beautiful, and never promises salvation but only proposes it as a salubrious idea. A century ago there were people who thought art was the thing that could fuse the terms of this seemingly insuperable oxymoron, and no doubt art is part of the formula. But maybe consumerism also has something to teach us about forging an ironic religion – a lesson about learning to choose, about learning the power of consequences, for good or ill, of our ever-expanding palette of choices. Perhaps, she thinks, the day will come when the true ironic religion is found, the day when humanity is filled with enough love and imagination and responsibility to become its own god and make a paradise of its world, a paradise of all the right choices. (TSG: 274)

Just what has yet been missing from the utopian thoughts quoted above is now thrown into the mix as well. Metaphysics (religion), postmodernism (irony and consumerism), some intuitionism (love, responsibility), plus the Nietzschean idea of the superman (humanity becoming its own god). And this curious mix is supposed to lead to what? A 'paradise of all the right choices' – which is what, exactly? Floating through Ursula's mind is a jumble of past strategies to cope with the world, and the actual utopian society remains undefined or hazy at best. This, of course, provokes the question whether Shakar or the text are making fun of Ursula. Is this another irony of *The Savage*

Girl, telling us that while you can still have utopian thoughts, they do not really make much sense? Just like the search for meaning of the neo-Patahamateri is ridiculed, is Ursula ridiculed here as well? Or is what we have just read an earnest proposition, a serious wish for some kind of, not yet defined but hoped for, better future?

Both readings are possible, depending on the reader's own judgement, depending on his or her attitude towards utopian thoughts in our contemporary world. Sure, what Ursula is dreaming up is exaggerated, one might argue, and she mixes some things that do not fit together. But does she not recognize this herself when she calls her ideas an 'insuperable oxymoron'? Moreover, one could claim in defence of Ursula, even though her utopia is far from being clearly defined in all its details, is it not, in general, more important that Ursula harbours utopian thoughts at all, as jumbled as they may be?

On the other hand, some might point out, all the things Ursula mixes in her mind have been tried, tested, and rejected in the past. How can it then make sense to just throw them all together as unsystematically as Ursula does? Is she not proving herself to be deluded in thinking that it would? We might here, then, be presented with a case of postmodern nostalgia as Linda Hutcheon conceives of it. To clarify her notion of nostalgia, the Canadian critic invites her readers to

> think of the difference between contemporary postmodern architecture and contemporary *revivalist* (nostalgic) architecture; the *postmodern* architecture does indeed recall the past, but always with the kind of ironic double vision that acknowledges the final impossibility of indulging in nostalgia, even as it consciously evokes nostalgia's affective power.[589]

In postmodern cultural production, according to Hutcheon, "nostalgia itself gets both called up, exploited, *and* ironized."[590] And is this not exactly what Ursula or rather the narrative of *The Savage Girl* is doing?

Whether you prefer the one or the other of these interpretations of the final pages of *The Savage Girl*, or whether you think that maybe the book leaves this question open, what makes the novel, in any case, move away from or beyond postmodernism is that, in my reading, Ursula, at least to some extent, is a self-conscious character not completely entangled in and determined by the webs of contemporary culture. With reason, with reflective thinking, the character's innocence might be lost, and what we might be left with in our search for meaning could turn out to be an enlightened agnosticism. But if this agnosticism is based on the reflections of a rational agent, then you are not really confronted with a postmodern version of the world any more.

[589] Hutcheon 1998, original emphases.
[590] Hutcheon 1998, original emphasis.

There is an important distinction to make between different kinds of serious impasses the human being might run into. Michael W. Nicholson was quoted above with the assessment that "[t]he Minotaur at the heart of the postmodernism debate is a mix of relativism and nihilism."[591] It may serve to point out that people's despair about the world might be motivated by two very different kinds of appraisals of the contemporary period. Nihilism can be read in the sense of a denial of a grande purpose which may guide humanity in general and the individual human being in particular. Relativism can be taken as the philosophical attitude which denies any kind of foundations to both language and the idea of the rational subject. This proposition might constitute a misreading of Nicholson because either term can also refer to what has been proposed as the definition of the other. But if we thus misread him, it will still be a productive kind of misreading, as it helps to differentiate between two major cul-de-sacs of human existence. Most parts of the utopian thoughts in Ursula's mind are directed against nihilism, i.e. against the sense of the absence of a purpose of life, of a denial of "the ultimate happy ending of human history"[592] or of a particular human life.

More important in a rejection of the postmodern as it has been understood in this study, however, is a discussion of relativism, i.e. the rejection of language as an appropriate tool to capture and to talk about life and the world, and the denial of the human subject's ability to figure as a rational agent in the world. I have above argued against this kind of relativism and have presented the case that the novels I have looked at do the same. Confronted with "a world awash with relativism," which "has seeped into our culture" and "threatens to become our faith,"[593] many of my novels' characters are shown to possess "just that extra edge of consciousness"[594] which conserves their status as rational agents. In addition, in numerous ways, the novels also argue in favour of 'just that extra edge' of realism which makes it possible for us to communicate about the world.

Repeatedly, it has above also been suggested that such an understanding of the world and of language can, in the novels considered, be detected both on the level of the narrative presented as well as in a dialogue between reader and text. In this context, it is interesting to note the similarities between Alex Shakar's views of the contemporary world and of works of art, and Hal Niedzviecki's. I have above argued that even though Niedzviecki presents a postmodernist narrative in his novel *Ditch*, he strongly argues in favour of the rational and creative potential of himself and others in

[591] Nicholson: 310.
[592] Mautner: 388.
[593] Lawson: xi.
[594] Williams 1985: 24.

their capacities as artists and as analysts of the contemporary. Questioned about the work of art Ursula is intending to produce in an interview, Alex Shakar advocates a very similar stance. In his reading of his own text, "the installation she's planning will transmit" Ursula's understanding of how the capitalist system of Middle City works "on an emotional, visceral level, and in so doing give people the courage to go on trying to understand and master all those other forces acting on them."[595] Shakar then also states: "I think it's true that I take this as kind of a mission statement as an artist myself. Good art at its best," for the author of *The Savage Girl*,

> can lift us up outside the ideologies we inhabit and give us a bird's eye view of them, allowing us to see how they have shaped us, informed us and limited us. I'd argue that this is something only good art can do – political essays and sociological studies can do part of the job, but a work of art, by connecting with us aesthetically and emotionally, can really hit us where we live and show us on every level of consciousness what's at stake in our own day-to-day engaging with the world around us.[596]

Whether his own novel actually manages to do so or not, in positing himself as an engaged artist and in claiming that art may help people to step out of the discourses which, according to postmodern theory, are all-pervasive, Shakar himself takes a decidedly anti- or 'post-postmodernist' stance.

Alex Shakar's statement encapsulates the essence of what, facing the postmodern zeitgeist, has been brought forth against postmodern theory in this study. The 'ideologies we inhabit' might in the present age indeed appear enormously potent. Egan's, Ellis's, Nersesian's, Niedzviecki's, Shakar's, and Smith's narrations of the present-day experience show that much of the theory of "postmodernism serve[s] to capture the spirit of the contemporary age."[597] But as I hope to have shown, there are many reasons why 'believing' in language and in rationality is neither an unwise nor a naïve position to hold. Relativist challenges against language and against the subject are not without their merits, but they are in no way superior to the moderate philosophically conservative discourses they attack. If taken seriously the former come with paradoxes that are at least as grave as the paradoxes that accompany a moderate theoretical position which holds on to the notions of the rational agent and of the realist potentials of language. Most importantly, radical relativist ideas stand in sharp contrast to the only feasible ways of living, of arguing, and of writing literature.

Still, to assume a foundation without being able to prove it leaves us in a not too comfortable situation. But the novel, as Carlos Fuentes points out, is of course a literary medium which is perfectly suited for these kind of tensions, and for the dialogues they engender. "[I]n dialogue," Fuentes suggests, "no one is absolutely right; neither speaker holds an absolute truth," and he goes

[595] Shakar 2001a.
[596] Shakar 2001a.
[597] Lopez / Potter: 3.

on to state that, as far as novels are concerned, "[t]here is no final solution. There is no last word."[598] In a dialogue with postmodern realities within their narrative realities, as well as in an exchange of ideas with other novels and with theorists, the literary texts I have looked at in this study are cautiously optimistic that, on a philosophical level, radical skepticism and utter chaos should not and need not have the last word. By writing books which to some extent all aim at describing the contemporary world, the authors show that they are also – at least cautiously, if not confidently – optimistic that literature, that the art of writing fictional texts is one way of talking about the world and making sense of it.

[598] Fuentes: 244.

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