Contemporary Drift:
The Tenses of the Present and the Afterlives of Genre

By

Theodore Jacob Martin

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Stephen Best, Chair
Professor Carol Clover
Professor Colleen Lye
Professor Kent Puckett

Spring 2011

Abstract

Contemporary Drift: The Tenses of the Present and the Afterlives of Genre

by

Theodore Jacob Martin

Doctor of Philosophy in English

University of California, Berkeley

Professor Stephen Best, Chair

What do we mean, this dissertation asks, when we talk about "contemporary literature"? Far from being a fixed category of literary history, the contemporary is always on the move. Just as the "now" when I am writing this abstract is different from the "now" when you are reading it, the contemporary does not so much delimit history as drift across it. So what does it mean to call ourselves contemporary? In "Contemporary Drift," I argue that "contemporary" is more than a name for novelty—it is also an untimely connection to the past. We can best grasp this paradox of contemporary life, I suggest, by reading it through the historical dynamics of genre. More drag than drift, genres stay the same even as they change over time; they are recognizable precisely to the extent to that they're repeatable. The iterations of genre interrupt the fragile immediacy of the contemporary. Reconsidering the fates of the historical novel, the realist novel, the detective novel, and the noir film, I claim that genre shows us what it means—and what it takes—to see ourselves in history.

The way we consolidate a sense of the now is intimately connected to larger issues of literary history: how we construct canons, how we distinguish historical periods, how we lay claim to the continued relevance of the past. My project thus aims to reorient our literary present by looking not at new forms but at *renewed* forms. Each chapter of my dissertation engages the recent "afterlife" of an older genre in order to show how it conjures a complex image of the contemporary. These reanimated genres insist on the present's singularity yet inevitably invoke its continuity with the past. I consider the strange figure of the speaking dead that links classic film noir to the nostalgic repetitions of neo-noir; the entangled politics of waiting, reading, and race that structure the detective fiction of Colson Whitehead, Michael Chabon, and Vikram Chandra; the tension between the distant gaze of periodization and the everyday details of realism staged in the work of Bret Easton Ellis and J.M. Coetzee; and the modes of anachronism that shape historical novels by John Fowles and Tom McCarthy. These ostensibly outdated genres show how the present can encompass days, decades, even centuries. In doing so, they suggest that being contemporary means always being just a little out of date.

Contemporary Drift

THE TENSES OF THE PRESENT AND THE AFTERLIVES OF GENRE

In loving memory of my father and my grandfather.

And for Annie, whose presence I couldn't bear to be without for even a moment longer.

Acknowledgements

It's hard enough to keep up with the times, and harder still to keep up on the slippery time of dissertation writing, which makes writing a dissertation on contemporary times seem either doomed or deranged. If those fates were even temporarily cheated, it was only with a whole lot of help. The members of my dissertation committee deserve more thanks than I can concisely express. Stephen Best was particularly hard to please, and that has made him a particularly strong dissertation director. Starting with the very first document I gave him, Stephen homed in on every page that drifted into opacity, on every idea that remained half-baked, on every sentence that slacked off. To say that he made the grounds of this dissertation more solid, its argument more sophisticated, and its expression more lucid would simply be to state the obvious. Colleen Lye has guided, supported, and generally looked out for me since I first set foot at Berkeley. She made sure I knew I belonged here from the beginning, and her early words of encouragement have inspired me all the way to the end. Between then and now, Colleen has taught me what intellectual rigor really is, asking the most piercing questions, leveling the most demanding critiques, and always pushing me to replace pyrotechnic style with substance. Kent Puckett has been an intellectual inspiration, a scholarly influence, a wise guide, and a friend. He read my work with more care than I could have asked for, took it more seriously than I assumed it deserved, and was instrumental in helping me transform a mess of chapters into an actual project. Kent's capacity for critical engagement and intellectual generosity is a model that I can scarcely hope to emulate; I'm honored just to have the chance to try. And Carol Clover has been as involved an outside reader as one could have. She charitably agreed to be part of this committee when she could have easily demurred, and she has remained a vocal part of it, offering me astute advice and welcome enthusiasm every step of the way.

Many more thanks are due to the many other colleagues and mentors who generously read drafts of these chapters and talked with me about the project. Thanks to Namwali Serpell, who offered me not only her unmatched expertise on contemporary literature but also her friendship; to Kevis Goodman, who took some of her highly precious time to give me a much-needed perspective on the longer history of studying the present; and to the participants in Colleen's dissertation working group—Chris Chen, Swati Rana, Audrey Clark, Marcelle Maese-Cohen, and Andrew Leong—who were unselfish readers and unhesitant critics. Finally, I must express my gratitude to Marshall Brown: my correspondence with him was an enlightening and ultimately a transformative experience.

More impersonal but no less sincere thanks are due to Berkeley's Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities and the English Department Block Grant Selection Committee for generously funding separate years of dissertation work

The dear friends I made at Berkeley also doubled as brilliant interlocutors. I can't imagine having written a word of this dissertation without so much selfless help in confronting personal challenges and scholarly dilemmas all at once (nor without so many good times in between). Margaret Ronda has been a cherished friend, a close confidant, and an inspiring colleague from basically the first moment we met. Tobias Menely is the

most demanding conversation partner I've ever had, and I love him for it. Cody Marrs is an inimitable scholar and a true friend. Tom McEnaney got me through the last and toughest year of grad school, refining my taste in bourbon while also becoming an irreplaceable companion (if not an eerie doppelganger). Ben Boudreaux, devil's advocate par excellence, has never for the eight years I've known him hesitated to speak his mind, and he's made me a better and more thoughtful person in the process. Josh Gang is just old school. And Ayon Roy, who has had a significant influence on my intellectual life (and who now has greater things in store), will always have a place in my heart.

My absurdly wonderful family has given me more me love, laughs, and support than one has any right to expect from one's family. My parents never flinched—and even smiled—when I told them twelve years ago that, if I could be anything in the world, I wanted to be an English professor. Twelve years later, my uncle Rick still makes every family gathering an occasion to grill me about what I'm working on, which gives me the challenge as well as the pleasure of having to think seriously about what, exactly, I *am* working on. My grandfather Lou teased me constantly about my uncertain future as an academic; although he passed away just months before I finished my degree, I have no doubt that he always believed I would succeed—mostly because he was one who showed me the essential joy of having ideas and expressing opinions in the first place. I look up to my younger brother and sister easily as much as they've, quite unnecessarily, looked up to me. My mom Fran, the strongest person I know, inspires me every day—and she knows, surely, that everything I've ever accomplished and everything I may yet accomplish is both due and dedicated to her and to my dad Ken, whom we all miss more than ever but whose memory also inspires us to keep going. And we are, it must be said, still going. And strong.

And then there's Annie McClanahan—my closest friend, my most awe-inspiring colleague, my one true love, and, perhaps most amazingly, my fellow Golden Bear turned fellow Panther—about whom nothing I can say could ever be close to adequate. Though the dissertation was finished in her absence, no situation could have been a less fitting allegory for how greatly Annie has inspired my work and influenced my ideas; for the unconscionable number of drafts she's read; for the life-affirming and life-saving counsel she's given; for the scholar and the person she's encouraged me to be and helped me to become; for the simple fact that all that could ever be owed is owed to her. But of course, Annie rejects the very notion of debts, and so I'm fairly sure she'll accept this happily inadequate expression of absolute love and endless gratitude instead.

Contents

INTRODUCTION : 1

ONE OR SEVERAL CONTEMPORARIES?
of drag and drift

ONE : 7

NEITHER/NOIR
nostalgia, neo-genres, and the many lives of the speaking dead

TWO : 38

THE PRIVILEGE OF CONTEMPORARY LIFE
periodization in the Bret Easton Ellis decades

THREE : 70

THE LONGER GOODBYE
timely secrets of the contemporary detective novel

FOUR : 95

THE HISTORICAL NOVEL AND ITS CONTEMPORARIES
or, the chronological mistake

One or Several Contemporaries? (Of Drag and Drift)

INTRODUCTION

> *I have referred to three dates. A fourth should be added: whatever year counts as contemporary with the publication and reception of this book.*
>
> JEROME CHRISTENSEN
> *Romanticism at the End of History*

The contemporary is always on the move. That is the central premise of this project. It is also an unavoidable—yet strangely unmentioned—problem for anyone who works on the period we call "contemporary literature." The word "contemporary" is a deictic, not a name: it points to something different depending on where you're standing when you say it. It's also a relation, not a period: the limits of what counts as contemporary are constantly being moved and stretched, so one never knows exactly where the period begins, what it encompasses, or how it can ever come to an end. The contemporary does not so much delimit history as drift across it; and in doing so, it inevitably drifts away from the present it's supposed to describe. Yet despite these problems, we continue to keep faith in the historical contours of contemporariness, in the proximity of the people who seem to be our contemporaries, and, of course, in the capricious category of contemporary literature. So what are we really saying—how, exactly, are we situating ourselves—when we call ourselves contemporary?

In current scholarship, the complexities of the contemporary have generally been reduced to the platitude that we simply know it when we see it. "The anthropology of the contemporary," Paul Rabinow attests, "has seemed to me best done by doing it."[1] Yet living directly in (or just "doing") the contemporary is surely the very thing that makes it so difficult to know. Not only do we not know it when see it; we don't know it *because* we see it. Hiding in plain sight, buzzing constantly all around us, the contemporary eludes our grasp precisely because it has already seeped into our pores. Like Rabinow, Amy Hungerford—in her shrewdly titled essay, "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary"—suggests that it is better simply to immerse oneself in the contemporary than to haggle over it:

> But finally, how interesting are the arguments about how to choose beginnings and ends? More interesting is all the new work being done with the cultural artifacts of the last six or seven decades. It is enough to make me follow the pop singer Prince's example, to which my title alludes, to give up the hieroglyphics we have nominated for the header of this period and concede that until the contemporary is over, I will call myself a scholar of contemporary literature.[2]

[1] Paul Rabinow, *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 1.
[2] Amy Hungerford, "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary," *American Literary History* 20.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2008): 418.

Hungerford's humble claim is that even if we can't define the contemporary, we know intuitively what it is. But the paradox of her title reveals that something more historically complicated is at stake in her concession. The contemporary constitutes the grounds of the present at the same time as it slips into the past; it is already something "former" before it's even "over." So even if we take Hungerford's advice, conceding the question of "beginnings and ends" and just enjoying the present ride, we still find ourselves in a strange historical no man's land, a moment that is still unfurling although it already feels past, a period whose name is not (like Prince's) merely an empty placeholder but an index of its own paradoxical place in time. The word "contemporary" is not just a sign—and no mere sign of the times—but also a name for all the problems that come with trying to name it.

Not for lack of trying, contemporary studies cannot get around the challenges posed by the category of the contemporary. My project aims to address these challenges head on. In "Contemporary Drift," I argue that the contemporary is not just a name for novelty or an index of immediacy—it is also an untimely confrontation with time past and passing. A vexed relation posing as a definite period, the contemporary is a measure of history's drift rather than a periodizing hedge against it: a precise account of the imprecise process by which we find ourselves in history.

There are two main claims that make up "Contemporary Drift." My first claim is that the contemporary is more than a contextual concern for scholars of the present moment. It is also a conceptual problem that is worked through—both self-consciously and subterraneously—in contemporary literature. Read through the vicissitudes of narrative form, the contemporary becomes more than an invisible backdrop, a provisional context, or an arbitrary cut-off. Literature shows the contemporary to be a changing act of historical self-reflection, a varied and variable way of taking the measure of the present. Contemporary narratives reveal the dialectical tensions that shape the contemporary, which can be measured in days as well as decades; refer to both persons and periods; be felt as immeasurable velocity or as interminable delay; and invoke a sense of novelty only alongside a nagging feeling of anachronism. The tension at the heart of the contemporary, I argue, is both revealed and relieved through what my subtitle calls the present's different "tenses"—that is, the various narrative temporalities that work to describe the historical contradictions of the contemporary. In this project, the ostensible simplicity of the present tense gives way to the range of different tenses we use to construe, construct, and situate the contemporary: from the deferred and the durable to the repetitive and the outdated.

Readers may nevertheless begin to wonder: why does one need specifically *contemporary* texts to get at the decidedly abstract qualities of contemporariness? Surely, the literature of the past is just as committed to understanding (or just as condemned to inscribe) the concept of the contemporary as the literature of our immediate present. Nor do I want to be mistaken for making the historicist claim that the contemporary only becomes a problem *in* the period of contemporary literature; that would be news to critics like James Chandler and Kevis Goodman, who argue that the concept of a unified, self-consciously mediated present emerges in the Romantic period. This project has something different in mind. If the contemporary is shaped by the aporias of historical self-consciousness—if it marks, as Hungerford intimated, its own uncertain or unstable place in history—I want to know what happens when we read the conceptual paradoxes of the

contemporary from the same unreliable historical position. The method of "Contemporary Drift," in other words, is designed to match its materials. So I wouldn't say that contemporary literature provides a privileged place from which to assess the concept of the contemporary. In fact, I'd say precisely the opposite: contemporary literature is the *least privileged* archive in which to think about contemporariness—and in just this way, it allows us to grasp the methodological consequences of the lack of perspective, the loss of critical distance, that corresponds to the concept itself.

Even if they are unique in no other ways (not the position I subscribe to in these chapters, but still), contemporary texts pose a special challenge to literary history. As Gordon Hutner points out, critics have long been wary of studying contemporary literature at all, assuming that literary history demands "the test of time"[3]—a test rigged so that the texts of the present always fail. The prejudice against contemporary literature, Hutner explains, rests on the belief that "scholars and literary historians simply did not know yet what contemporary writing would prove interesting to the future and what was merely ephemeral" (421). Hutner thinks otherwise. "Teaching contemporary realism," he proposes, "enables us to give the fiction of our own time the same urgency and power we find in much older texts, leading us to delve more deeply into our history—the political, spiritual, economic, social, and sexual life of our moment" (423). Works of contemporary literature, he suggests, help us account for what "life" is like—and what conditions shape it—in our particular present moment.

Such an account is not what I intend to offer here. My interest in the contemporary is not for the specific historical situation it describes but for the problems of historical representation that arise when we try to describe it. For Hutner, realist texts of the moment give the lie to the belief that the contemporary cannot be historicized. What are we to read, however, if we want to understand why the category of the contemporary appears to pose this kind of problem in the first place? While contemporary realism may give us a provisional glimpse of the specificity of present life, we must look elsewhere to understand the historical instability of the contemporary as such. Here, then, is the second claim of "Contemporary Drift": we can best grasp the paradoxical time of the contemporary by reading it through the historical dynamics of genre. Genre brings to the surface what the contemporary represses, foregrounding a more complicated dialectic of change and continuity. Genres stay the same even as they change over time— they are recognizable precisely to the extent to that they're repeatable. We know what a detective story is, after all, whether we're reading one by Arthur Conan Doyle, Dashiell Hammett, or Stieg Larsson. If the contemporary drifts, genre drags: genre's slow accumulation of examples and exceptions provides a different perspective on the supposed novelty of contemporary time. It unveils the process, at once narrative and historical, of how we perceive the period unfolding under our feet.[4]

---

[3] Gordon Hutner, "Historicizing the Contemporary: A Response to Amy Hungerford," *American Literary History* 20.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2008): 421.

[4] Of course, the confrontation between genre and the contemporary takes different shapes in different literary periods. In the modernist injunction to "make it new," for instance, the dream of absolute contemporariness is hitched to the rejection of traditional generic categories. In the transition to postmodernism, this injunction appears ironically overturned: postmodern literature famously apes or incorporates existing genres high and low. Yet in both cases, the result is strangely the same—the periodizing term begins to function as a generic one. The categories "modernist" and "postmodernist"

But what kinds of genres? My claim is that the contemporariness of contemporary literature is not limited to what it is "new" about it; the literary category itself, I suggest, only emerges out of what has *re*newed. In this way, my project engages not the newest or most "contemporary" genres but some rather old ones. These are genres that, even as they reappear on the contemporary scene, are not truly thought to belong to it: film noir, detective fiction, the realist novel, and the historical novel. I ask what happens when genres that first appeared in a previous historical moment (whether the nineteenth century or the 1950s) rematerialize in our present. The contemporary "afterlives" of these prior genres confront the present with its conditions of possibility in the past, revising our traditional readings of the original genres at the same as they reveal the unstable status of the contemporary itself. Each of the following chapters focuses on a single generic afterlife, showing the different ways that these ostensibly outdated genres turn the historical tensions of the present into the paradoxical temporalities that limn contemporary life. In doing so, they suggest that being contemporary may mean always being just a little out of date.

At its most general level, "Contemporary Drift" thinks about the ways we think about the category of the contemporary; about how we do so *from within* our own contemporary; and about what it means for the project itself to be doing the same. More specifically, the project aims to articulate the different concepts we use to give shape to the shifting outlines of contemporary life—from discredited modes like repetition and anachronism to the exhausting prospects of deep time and prolonged delay—and the different measures that give chronological substance to the present: the day, the decade, the cycle, the century. But I also want to insist, finally, that these concepts emerge in historically specific forms: that is, in particular genres that bring together an outward chronicle of literary history with an inward mode of narrative time. By the end of these explorations of the contemporary, then, you should also be able to assess an argument about genre as such: that genre's dialectical account of history is the very thing capable of putting the contemporary in its historical place.

The chapters that follow will state these claims in different ways, with different emphases, and in different orders—all, with any luck, for the sake of a more coherent whole. Chapters 1 and 2 continue to lay the methodological groundwork for which this introduction has offered only a hasty blueprint. In their focus on specific genres, they also set the stage for the two latter chapters, which offer more fine-grained readings of how contemporary genres make the contemporary work, and how they make us rethink what the contemporary actually is.

Chapter 1, "Neither/Noir," asks how the novelty of the contemporary might be the product of repetition and cyclicality. Here, I bring to life the temporality of genre's "afterlife" by examining neo-noir films whose voiceover narration is spoken by characters who turn out to be dead. I contend that these films bring to the surface classic film noir's repressed anxieties about death and the temporality of the past. Tracking the shifting

---

become monolithic genres in their own right, obscuring the diverse genres whose forms and histories (whether in absence or in excess) shape each period's image of itself.

function of the voiceover from *Sunset Boulevard* to *Sin City*, I demonstrate how the historical rhythms of genre pose a rebuttal to accounts of postmodern nostalgia. Ultimately, I claim, the repetition of the noir form embodies not the aesthetic exhaustion of postmodernism but the very dialectic of continuity and difference that characterizes genre. In the speaking dead of neo-noir, we find both the perfect figure of genre's repeated reincarnations and an acknowledgement of the temporal contradictions that underlie the contemporary itself.

Chapter 2, "The Privilege of Contemporary Life," suggests that the artificial closure of the decade opens on to a longer view of historical process. The chapter begins by detailing the problems of historical perspective that have historically plagued the present. Then, surveying the remains of literary realism, I discover a genre that uniquely addresses the dilemmas of historical self-consciousness: the "decade novels" of Bret Easton Ellis and J.M. Coetzee. In *American Psycho*, *Glamorama*, and *Diary of a Bad Year*, the experience of the present appears incompatible with the retrospective gaze of periodization. The attempt to sum up one's own decade threatens to leave one only with the pathologies of consumer culture (in Ellis) or the de-politicization of personal life (in Coetzee). But the continuities that link Coetzee's current opinions to the long past of literary history, and that link Ellis's two novels to one another, also provide an alternative to the false closure of the decade. The decade novel, I argue, ultimately describes not a presentist eternity but the ideological continuities of the modern epoch. Ellis and Coetzee expose the fragile ideology of the decade by situating the present within modernity's *longue durée*.

Chapter 3, "The Longer Goodbye," uses the literary genre of the mystery to reflect on the mysterious category of the present. I begin by reconsidering the history of the detective novel and the still-dominant allegory of reading to which it gave rise. While the classic detective novel was structured around hermeneutic space (the familiar interpretive binaries of surface/depth, concealed/revealed), contemporary detective novels like Colson Whitehead's *Intuitionist*, Michael Chabon's *Yiddish Policeman's Union*, and Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* are concerned with the frustrated experience of durational time. These novels index the interminable wait for legal resolution, political recognition, and spiritual redemption (the disappointment of deferred racial utopia; the anticipation of religious apocalypse). Ultimately, I use the figure of the wait to connect the narrative form of unmet expectations to the problem of how we explain—indeed, how we read—our own contemporary. In the contemporary detective novel, the deferrals of reading give us a different way of relating to the day-to-day temporality of the present.

Finally, in Chapter 4, "The Chronological Mistake," I suggest that the tensions of anachronism ultimately make possible a coherent concept of the century. Starting from the multiple meanings of the word "contemporary"—which names both a historical period and relation to other people—I turn to a genre that is founded by the same tense duality between past and present: the historical novel. In both its form and its literary history, the historical novel forces us confront the "necessary anachronism" that structures historical observation. But the anachronism of the historical novel, I suggest, also offers a way of articulating the double life of the contemporary: its simultaneous naming of presentness and pastness. I use two very different contemporary historical novels—John Fowles's *French Lieutenant's Woman* and Tom McCarthy's *C.*—to describe the two sides to the problem of anachronism. In one novel, anachronism appears in the jarring incongruity between the narrated past and the narrating present; in the other, anachronism looms in

the absence of historical difference altogether, the replacement of temporal movement with total synchrony. Yet in both cases, what is at stake is the historical tension at the heart of the contemporary. The anachronistic genre of the historical novel shows us that being contemporary is more than a matter of separating the present from the past; it also depends on bringing the two back together. The historical novel, in all its newfound old-fashioned-ness, offers an ill-timed yet perpetually relevant account of how we come to see ourselves as contemporary—and how contemporariness remains uncannily in sync with the past.

In the end, these reanimated genres all suggest that there is more to the contemporary than what lies in front of us. The problem of how we grasp the specificity of the present—of how we consolidate a sense of the now—is intimately connected to the larger methodological questions that haunt literary criticism: how we construct canons and how we select our archives; how we determine the boundaries of historical periods and how we translate critical conversations across them; how we lay claim to the continued relevance of the past. The problem of contemporary literature, in other words, turns out to be everybody's problem. Beneath the structure of the contemporary—which governs not only the immediate present but its unceasing engagement with the past—lie the tensions that shape the whole of literary history: between change and continuity, between particular and universal, between narrative form and historical force.

Neither/Noir: Nostalgia, Neo-Genres, and the Many Lives of the Speaking Dead

ONE

> *A first, slightly disquieting remark: speaking about film noir consists, from the beginning, in being installed in repetition.*
>
> MARC VERNET
> "*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom"

The Deaths of Genre

For a study of the afterlives of genre, film noir seems like an obvious place to start. Noir is one of those signifiers of the past that our present remains unable to shake; what Slavoj Žižek has called noir's "everlasting power of fascination" over postmodern culture may just as easily seem like an unearthly—and interminable—haunting.[1] This chapter will argue, however, that the persistent return of noir need not be read as a sign that we are helplessly possessed by the past. On the contrary, film noir's historical status as a genre hinges precisely on its refusal to die. To understand why that is the case, though, it will be necessary to bring something else back from the dead—the concept of genre itself. Already in 1981 Fredric Jameson was to announce "the end of genre": "The moment in which the deeper aesthetic vitality of *genre* comes to consciousness and becomes self-conscious may well also be the moment in which *genre* in that older sense is no longer possible."[2] Jameson's claim was taken as a truism for postmodernism. "*Postmodern genre*," Marjorie Perloff proclaims, "sounds like a contradiction in terms."[3] As genres could, in Jameson's view, no longer be produced, so too, Jacques Derrida suggested, could genre no longer be maintained as a coherent concept for literary criticism. For Derrida, genre is founded on a set of essentially contradictory claims. On one hand, "As soon as the word *genre* is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind." On the other hand, these interdictions are impossible to obey: "The law of the law of genre … is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy."[4] Genre, says Derrida, does exactly what it prohibits—it mixes categories, draws multiple lines of belonging—undoing itself in the process and exposing the impossibility of making clear generic demarcations. In light of Jameson's and Derrida's critiques, genre became a difficult concept to take seriously.[5] Assessing literary studies at the beginning of the 1980s,

---

[1] Žižek also notes that noir's "power of fascination on so-called 'postmodern' theory" has not necessarily produced *good* theory: "The first feature that strikes the eye apropos of the texts on *film noir* is their unusual theoretical poverty and uniformity. … The will to put into words the obvious fascination with *film noir*, to translate it into positive theoretical accomplishments, seems somehow inherently hindered, doomed to fail" (*Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan In Hollywood and Out* [New York: Routledge, 1992],149).

[2] Fredric Jameson, "Historicism in *The Shining*," in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 83.

[3] Marjorie Perloff, "Introduction," in *Postmodern Genres*, ed. Marjorie Perloff (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 3.

[4] Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 224, 227. The essay was originally published in 1980.

[5] Ralph Cohen sums up the more general theoretical anxieties surrounding the concept of genre: "Postmodern critics have sought to do without a genre theory. Terms like 'text' and 'écriture' deliberately

Franco Moretti concluded, "The concept of literary genre has remained confined to a sort of theoretical limbo: recognized and accepted, but little and reluctantly used."[6] Things are not so different today. As John Frow attests, "The counterpoint to the central presence of genre in the classroom has been its decline as a vital issue in contemporary literary theory … . With a few honorable exceptions … it's just not one of the topics about which interesting discussions are happening these days."[7] As recently as 2007, it was still necessary for Bruce Robbins to ask, "Why should we care about genre?"[8]

We should care, first of all, because we're still not sure what it is; genre, oft-dismissed, is even more often misunderstood. As Frow explains, "The major reason for this [dismissal] is the continuing prevalence of a neoclassical understanding of genre as prescriptive taxonomy and as a constraint on textual energy."[9] But it's a mistake to see genres as rigid, pre-formed categories or as prescriptive rules. Rather, as Wai Chee Dimock argues, genres are "a taxonomy that never fully taxonomizes, labels that never quite keep things straight. … Unfinishability might also be said to be a systemic failing in all genres—a productive failing—in the sense that none is a closed book, none an exhaustive blueprint able to predict and contain all future developments."[10] Genre, for Dimock, is nothing like a law. It is, rather, "a runaway reproductive process: offbeat, off-center, and wildly exogenous" (1379); the work of genre is "cumulative reuse, an alluvial process, sedimentary as well as migratory" (1380). Genre is a figure of passage and of process—fluid rather than fixed—allowing us to track the movements of the literary as it migrates across geographical space and accumulates over historical time.

It is, finally, the wayward historical lives of literary form that genre makes uniquely visible. Genre is an experimental predication, "a provisional set," in Dimock's words, "that will always be bent and pulled and stretched,"[11] doomed to failure and contamination but able to reveal, nonetheless, how narratives, texts, and literary traits mesh and mutate across time. To capture the processual, open-ended sense of genre, Dimock concludes, "Literary studies needs to be more fluid in its taxonomies, putting less emphasis on the division of knowledge and more on kinships, past, present, and future."[12] But Dimock's account of genre, seeking to combine "a long time frame and a short observational

---

avoid generic classifications. And the reasons for this are efforts to abolish the hierarchies that genres introduce, to avoid the assumed fixity of genres and the social as well as literary authority such limits exert, to reject the social and subjective elements in classification" ("Do Postmodern Genres Exist?" in *Postmodern Genres*, ed. Marjorie Perloff [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988], 13). As Cohen goes on to suggest, though, and as I'll argue as well, hierarchy, authority, and fixity aren't really what genre is about.

[6] Franco Moretti, "The Soul and the Harpy: Reflections on the Aims and Methods of Literary Historiography," in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, Revised Edition, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller (London: Verso, 1988), 12. The essay was originally published in 1982.

[7] John Frow, " 'Reproducibles, Rubrics, Everything You Need': Genre Theory Today," in "Remapping Genre," ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Bruce Robbins, special issue of *PMLA* 122.5 (October 2007): 1627.

[8] Bruce Robbins, Afterword to "Remapping Genre," ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Bruce Robbins, special issue of *PMLA* 122.5 (October 2007): 1644.

[9] Frow, " 'Reproducibles, Rubrics, Everything You Need'," 1627.

[10] Wai Chee Dimock, "Introduction: Genres as Fields of Knowledge," in "Remapping Genre," ed. Wai Chee Dimock and Bruce Robbins, special issue of *PMLA* 122.5 (October 2007): 1377.

[11] Wai Chee Dimock, *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 73-74.

[12] Dimock, "Genres as Fields of Knowledge," 1384.

distance" (1382), ultimately over-extends itself, and things begin to break apart: once the dynamics of history are remapped onto "deep time," the provisional circumscriptions of genre give way to "endless kinships" that don't really look like genres anymore.[13] With Dimock, we lose grip on the historicity of genre because we lose sight of what a genre actually is. Here is Dimock on the "genre" of the epic:

> *The Ramayana* is not the only epic dissolved by its host of variants, switching back and forth from ancient to modern, from arcane to popular, from a bulky epic to fragments small but highly charged. *Gilgamesh* a Sumerian and Akkadian epic dating from to 2100 BCE, was freshly translated [in] … 1992, … 1992, … 1999, … 2001, and … 2004 … . Scaled down and set adrift as a floating particle, it can also filter through and lodge itself in another genre, sticking out as a cyst or bump, irritant or stimulant A two-page condensation of *Gilgamesh* the epic, for instance, is suspended as kind of a lyric precipitate in *Gilgamesh* the novel … . Also in that particle form, the ancient epic plays a crucial role in the Darmok episode of *Star Trek*. The *Odyssey*, needless to say, has been floating loose and relaunched over and over. … The *Divine Comedy*—or at least the *Inferno*—is now the stuff novels are made of … . Even the *Aeneid*, the least promising of the lot, has been contemplated more than we might think. Filtering into Latin fairy tales and read in school in the Middle Ages, it has since been deposited across an equally surprising map, also featuring a mix of the high and the low, with school learning feeding into popular expressions.[14]

This is a powerful reimagining of literary history, revealing formal affinities that persist across far longer periods of time than critics tend to be comfortable with. But what traverse these periods aren't, in the end, actually genres. They are individual texts: the *Ramayana*, *Gilgamesh*, the *Odyssey*, the *Inferno*, and the *Aeneid*. Dimock's *longue durée* of literary forms is not a history of how our generic understanding of the epic changes but of how particular texts switch generic labels—how they start off as epics and are subsequently "relaunched" within different generic frameworks. This reading verges uncomfortably close to a kind of timeless intertextuality: Dimock tells us how individual narratives are reappropriated and reimagined without concern for generic borders, but not how genres themselves are formally altered and historically passed down. As an illustration of the fact that texts are never bound to the genres or the time periods into which they're born, Dimock's account is persuasive. As an articulation of how genres themselves change over time, it isn't.

Between the endless affiliations afforded by deep time and the rigid boundaries erected by old-fashioned genre criticism, what might the history of genre look like? Moretti offers a different perspective on the proper scale for genre's histories:

---

[13] Dimock, *Through Other Continents*, 84, 78.
[14] Dimock, "Genres as Fields of Knowledge," 1384-1385.

> Cycles constitute *temporary structures within the historical flow*. That is, after all, the hidden logic behind Braudel's tripartition: the short span is all flow and no structure, the *longue durée* all structure and no flow, and cycles are the—unstable—border country between them. Structures, because they introduce repetition in history, and hence regularity, order, pattern; and temporary, because they're short. … Now, 'temporary structures' is also a good definition for—genres: morphological arrangements that *last* in time, but always only for *some* time. Janus-like creatures, with one face turned to history and the other to form, genres are the true protagonists of this middle layer of literary history—this more 'rational' layer where flow and form meet.[15]

The provisional nature of genre reveals the push and pull of form and history: how particular formal modes both appear in and push against particular historical moments. But what makes genre historically meaningful can't be temporariness alone; indeed, what Moretti calls "temporary structures" would basically describe all impermanent or "historical" objects, which appear at some moment in time and disappear at another. The historical key to genre, then, is not its tendency to disappear but, rather, its dialectical capacity to *return*. Moretti, however, merely brackets the issue: "A few genres experience brief but intense revivals decades after their original peak, like the oriental tale in 1819-1825, or the gothic after 1885, or the historical novel (more than once). How to account for these Draculaesque reawakenings is a fascinating topic, which however will have to wait for another occasion" (31). Yet the "reawakening" of genres is, I want to suggest, precisely what makes them genres. As Phillip Wegner usefully points out, "Genres are inaugurated in repetition: the symbolic order or laws of a generic institution come into being not with the first effort … , but with those subsequent works that look back on it as the template for a particular kind of labor."[16] Genre is bound up not simply with a particular historical situation but with the dynamics of change and continuity that link one situation to the next. More than mere "fascinating" outliers, generic reawakenings cut to the core of what genre is: a formal grouping that doesn't just "last for *some* time" but that lasts long enough to be repeated. If genre is able to mediate, as Moretti puts it, between "flow and form," it does so through the dialectical force of repetition, showing us how the borders between historical presents are both built up and blurred by the movements of history.

Despite Moretti's postponement of the problem, the fact is that, one way or another, we *do* "account for these … reawakenings"; the problem is that we don't always count them as genres. This is exactly what has happened in the history of film noir, which first emerged in the 1940s and 1950s and continued to appear throughout the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. But these "revived" noir films aren't generally thought to belong to the genre called "film noir." Sometimes they're called "neo-noir"; more famously, though, they've been given a less generic and more disapproving label: *nostalgia films*. This

---

[15] Franco Moretti, *Graphs Maps Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2007), 14.
[16] Phillip E. Wegner, *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 8.

was the phrase Jameson coined to describe the cinematic symptom of postmodern culture's "omnipresent and indiscriminate appetite for dead styles and fashion; indeed, for all the styles and fashions of a dead past."[17] Such a "caricature of historical thinking" (286) is paradigmatically captured by "the formal apparatus of the nostalgia film," which "has trained us to consume the past in the form of glossy images" (287). These images of the past, though, are more specific than Jameson first admits, as his account of the ur-genre of the nostalgia film returns again and again to the particular case of neo-noir. To understand the "aesthetic colonization" of the past, Jameson notes, one need only "witness the stylistic recuperation of the American … 1930s, in Polanski's *Chinatown*" (19). More generally, "The insensible colonization of the present by the nostalgia mode can be observed in Lawrence Kasdan's elegant film *Body Heat*," which invokes "a new connotation of 'pastness' and pseudohistorical depth, in which the history of aesthetic styles displaces 'real' history" (20). Fred Pfeil expands on Jameson's account of neo-noir's nostalgic orientation:

> Whatever *film noir* was in the forties and fifties, it will not be again three decades or more later by dint of straightforward imitation, and not only for the general reason that no such slavish reconstruction could ever escape the fetishizing and ossifying effects of its intention simply to repeat, but because the meanings and effects of the original *films noir* even today must still be experienced and understood in their relation to a whole system of film production, distribution and consumption—the Hollywood studio system, in effect—which was in its last hour even then and is now gone.[18]

It is, for Pfeil, the inevitable shortfall of every "intention to repeat" that marks off neo-noir from classic noir, revealing the former's futile striving for the lost unity of the latter. "Slavish," "fetishizing," "ossifying": these are the catch-all terms that condemn neo-noir to the status of nostalgic pseudo-genre.

This is, to be sure, an important way of understanding late-twentieth-century culture. But it is a pretty bad way of understanding genre. Genres arise in and circulate through particular historical periods—but genres are not synonymous with periods or with whole "pasts." While it is undoubtedly the case, as Pfeil notes, that historical periods themselves cannot be repeated, genres, on the other hand, can be. In this way, the films that ground Jameson's and Pfeil's understanding of nostalgic "recuperation" must be seen as recuperations of an entirely different sort: not of a "past," vaguely speaking, but of a past *genre*. The attempt "to appropriate a missing past"[19] and the attempt to revive a past genre are not, in the end, the same thing. For the discarded life of the neo-genre also discloses the historical truth of genre as such: the accumulative continuities that, linking one present to another, constitute history precisely in the guise of "repeating" it. What Jameson dismisses as the pseudo-history of "aesthetic styles" is really the temporal

---

[17] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 286.
[18] Fred Pfeil, "Home Fires Burning: Family *Noir* in *Blue Velvet* and *Terminator 2*," in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), 230.
[19] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 19.

movement of genre itself, which, far from being opposed to " 'real' history," offers us the means to reawaken it.

Here we return to the problem of generic return, to the afterlife or neo-history of the noir film. Noir provides an especially apt case study of genre's unsettled histories because its relation to genre is, from the beginning, far from but certain. James Naremore sums up the challenge of categorizing noir: "There is in fact no completely satisfactory way to organize the category; and despite scores of books and essays that have been written about it, nobody is sure whether the films in question constitute a period, a genre, a cycle, a style, or simply a 'phenomenon'."[20] This uncertainty, though, is exactly what a genre is—as Dimock put it, an unfinished, indefinable process of definition, "labels that never quite keep things straight." When Žižek enters the fray to proclaim that noir is not a genre but "a kind of logical operator introducing the same anamorphotic distinction in every genre it is applied to,"[21] he is merely reinforcing this reoriented account of genre. Noir, contra Jameson and Pfeil, is not a confined period but a historical process, one that includes both classic noir and neo-noir, both change and continuity, both a sense of the discrete present and an understanding of historical arc. It is precisely noir's status as a genre, in other words, that explains why it always risks being mistaken for a host of other categories (a style, a cycle); why it is constantly spilling over both its formal limits and, finally, its historical boundaries.[22]

This chapter will compare a series of moments in the history of noir film in order to show how the dialectical temporality of genre allows us to rewrite the history of a present that has been dismissed as nostalgic or repetitive. How, I want to ask, might the return of noir have nothing to do with repeating the past? Moving from what I'll call "classic" noir (the 1940s and 1950s) to "neo" noir (the 1970s and 1980s) to, for the sake of clarity, "retro" noir (the 1990s and 2000s), I read film noir as a genre durable enough to accommodate continuity—to remain formally recognizable across a variety of different cultural milieus—yet flexible enough to allow for change. Ultimately, I argue, the repetition of the noir form embodies not the aesthetic exhaustion of postmodernism but the very dialectic of continuity and difference that characterizes genre.

The later moments of neo- and retro-noir can't be said merely to repeat classic noir, for the simple reason that they also change it: they rearrange or reimagine key formal elements of noir in ways that compel us to revise our original understanding of the genre. So what changes, exactly? It is the very thing that Joan Copjec has called one of noir's most "obvious" features: the relation between death and the voiceover. "Nothing has seemed more obvious in the criticism of *film noir*," Copjec writes, "than this association of

---

[20] James Naremore, *More Than Night: Film Noir In Its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 9.

[21] Slavoj Žižek, " 'The Thing That Thinks': The Kantian Background of the *Noir* Subject," in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), 200.

[22] This is not to say that such spillage doesn't threaten to dissolve a temporarily—but usefully—coherent sense of genre. Žižek's "logical operator" occasionally seems to cast the net of noir so wide that its standing as a legible genre will threaten to melt into air. Read enough essays on neo-noir and you may well start to wonder what the genre really means. Do films as starkly diverse as *The Silence of the Lambs*, *The Bourne Identity*, *Fight Club*, and *Kill Bill* deserve to be held up as exemplars of the genre? I'm not so sure. (For essays on this wide variety of "neo-noir" films, see *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*, ed. Mark T. Conard [Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007].)

death with speech, for the voice-over is regularly attached to a dead narrator."[23] But that's not entirely true: in the classic noir films of the 1940s and 1950s, the narrator speaks under the threat of death but he is nevertheless, while speaking, still alive.[24] In the neo-noir of the 1970s and 1980s, in turn, the threat of the protagonist's death essentially disappears—and along with it, the entire apparatus of the voiceover. Only in the retro-noir of the past decade does the voiceover confirm the ghostly truth of Copjec's claim, as the classic voiceover returns but with a crucial difference—its narrator is no longer about to die but is now speaking directly from beyond the grave. One of film noir's most "obvious" or defining characteristics thus also turns out to be one of its most historically malleable: noir's speaking voice moves from being on the verge of death to being in denial of death to emanating immediately, as it were, from the world of the dead itself. But the shifting position of the voiceover, I want to insist, is not an exception to the coherence of the genre but its constitutive element: genre is forged neither through timeless continuity nor through limited historical situatedness but precisely in its mediation between the two. As genres change over time, they illuminate the core that keeps genre recognizably the same. In this way, the noir voice's constitutively unstable connection to death has everything to do with how the genre itself has time and again eluded its own demise. The shifting mortality of the voiceover is, this chapter will argue, the very thing that has allowed film noir to continue, decade after decade, to come back to life.

Film noir thus provides an exemplary case for how genres work in history, how they negotiate change and continuity, how they employ repetition to reveal what is new about a given present—that is certainly one my central claims here. But there is another, more specific point I wish to make. The history of the noir voiceover is, in the end, a history of film noir's struggle to come to terms with the historical paradoxes of its own generic return. While neo-noir's elimination of the voiceover offers the fantasy of a genre that has been brought fully back to life, the paradoxical speaking dead of retro-noir suggest that the entire genre of film noir can only be understood as speaking from beyond the grave. If it takes the later, "repeated" phases of noir to grasp the truth of the genre as such, that is because noir is, from the beginning, built around the retroactive ambiguities of the afterlife. In film noir's speaking dead—sutured over in classic noir, disavowed in neo-noir, and finally exposed in retro-noir—we discover the perfect figure both for genre's repeated reincarnations and, finally, for the temporal contradictions that underlie our sense of the contemporary itself.

The Groan of the Voice

"Today," J.P. Telotte writes in his influential history of film noir, "we would typically begin any list of the basic *noir* conventions with that narrative combination of voice-over and flashback."[25] For Telotte, the voiceover is primarily an index of noir's more general "fascination with the workings of the human psyche" (14). But there is more to it than

[23] Joan Copjec, "The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal: Private Space in *Film Noir*," in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), 183.
[24] Yes, there are exceptions; and yes, I'll suggest that these exceptions only serve to reinforce the rule.
[25] J.P. Telotte, *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 40.

that.[26] More specifically, classic noir films used the voiceover as a way to retain the first-person narration of the hard-boiled detective novels they were adapting. Of course, cinematic voiceover will never be mistaken for literary first-person, and so the voiceover also embodies one of the essential differences that sets off film noir from its hard-boiled roots. This formal difference also provides the grounds for elucidating a thematic one. The novelty of the noir subject—in opposition to the traditional figure of the detective—is his inextricable involvement in the case he's trying to crack. For Copjec the "topological incompatibility of classical detective fiction and *film noir*" is exemplified in perhaps the most famous noir film, *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944): "Although it is inconceivable for Keyes, as a classical detective, to have any involvement with a woman, it is equally inconceivable for Neff, as a *noir* hero, to escape such involvement."[27] The noir subject's involvement in events, however, is paradoxically paired with his inability to change them. Despite getting himself "mixed up" in the plot, he is powerless to prevent it from happening—the protagonist's involvement in the action is the very thing that makes it seem inevitable.[28] As Neff himself fatalistically realizes halfway through *Double Indemnity*, "Suddenly it came over me that everything would go wrong." If the noir subject is thus defined by his inescapable participation in events that he is powerless to alter, this condition is already expressed by the structure of the voiceover. The voiceover opens an irreducible gap between narrative and narration, between diegesis and the explanatory voice. Because the noir narrative demands the integration of the hero into the mechanisms of the plot, the possibility of explaining that plot emerges only after the fact—the narrator can only speak after he's extricated himself from the story he's narrating. While the traditional detective works to reconstruct a crime that was committed in the past and to which he did not bear witness, the noir subject must wait to explain the life-threatening events that he has been swept up in from the beginning.

Žižek explains the structural contradiction between the noir subject's involvement in the plot and the form of his narration as an essentially ontological problem. "The *noir* universe," he writes "is characterized by a radical split, a kind of structural imbalance, as to the possibility of narrativization: the integration of the subject's position into the field of the big Other, the narrativization of his fate, becomes possible only when the subject is in a sense already dead, although still alive."[29] The mortal threat under whose sign the noir narrator tends to speak is thus the realization of the structural gap between voiceover and narrative—but it is just that: only a threat. Kaja Silverman elaborates: "The embodied male voice is likely to speak 'over' the image track only because of drastic circumstances,

---

[26] One thing to say, for instance, is that film noir's use of the voiceover is largely a matter of production history. As Sarah Kozloff argues, "The 1940s were the technique's golden age, in terms of the sheer number of films that used it, the proportion of narrated to non-narrated films, and the prestige, budget, and quality of those using narration" (*Invisible Storytellers: Voiceover Narration in American Fiction Film* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988], 33). Such a golden age was, in its fashion, self-reproducing: consider the case of *Mildred Pierce* (Michael Curtiz, 1945), which added a voiceover halfway through its production in an effort to duplicate the success of *Double Indemnity*. (Thanks to Carol Clover for bringing this key piece of film history to my attention.)

[27] Copjec, "The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal: Private Space in *Film Noir*," 180.

[28] As Maureen Turim observes, "Fatalism pervades film noir. … The aura of inevitability bathes the action" (*Flashbacks in Film: Memory & History* [New York: Routledge, 1989], 170).

[29] Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom*, 151.

when it is (or recently has been) *in extremis*."[30] The tragic fate of the narrator/hero is indeed a staple of the classic noir film: Walter Neff in *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944), Waldo Lydecker in *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944), Frank Chambers in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946), Jeff Bailey in *Out of the Past* (Jacques Tourneur, 1947), and Frank Bigelow in *D.O.A.* (Rudolph Maté, 1949) all die in the final frames of their stories. Yet none of them dies before his story is finished being told. Despite the extremity of the noir narrator's circumstances, he is nevertheless still alive while he's speaking. This is why Žižek's assertion that the narrator is "already dead" along with Copjec's claim that "the voice-over is regularly attached to a dead narrator" both overstate the case. Copjec seems to know it, too; her examples dilute rather than sharpen the point—"whether literally as in *Sunset Boulevard* and *Laura*, metaphorically as in *Detour*, or virtually as in *Double Indemnity*."[31] Žižek similarly hedges his bets: the noir narrator is "dead," but only "in a sense." Of course, if we're talking about death, then the difference between "literally" and "virtually" is everything: it is the difference between characters who are actually dead and characters who, actually, aren't.[32]

These hedges concerning the ontological status of the noir narrator are, it turns out, a reflection of the evasions performed by the films themselves. Though their narrators are on the verge of deaths they cannot escape—Neff is dying from a gunshot wound; Bigelow has been poisoned; Chambers is on death row—classic noir films go to great and sometimes paradoxical lengths to assure us that the speaking voice is attached to a living, breathing body. Such lengths attest to the anxieties that attend disembodied narration. How do we know the voice we are hearing properly belongs to the world it describes? The formal work of classic noir revolves around keeping this question at bay. The films strive to ensure that the disembodied voice is only temporarily so, and that when all is said and done the voice will return to a real live body that can be realistically expected to do the talking.

It is true, as Copjec argues, "that however contiguous it is with the diegetic space, the space of the voice-over is nevertheless radically heterogeneous to it" (186). But it is necessary to add that film noir is overwhelmingly anxious about this heterogeneity, and so becomes preoccupied with overcoming or obscuring it. It accomplishes this by compulsively articulating the physical and material alibi that grounds the detached voice in diegetic reality. In noir, the voice always has a frame—a physical space that reassures us that even though the voice isn't coming from within the plot, it is coming from a space a lot like the plot. The physical reality of the frame story is so important to the noir film that it is almost always the first thing we see: *Out of the Past* opens with Bailey telling the shadowy story of his past to his fiancée as they drive toward its present consequences; *D.O.A.* opens with Bigelow entering the Los Angeles police to station to report his own murder, the story of which he will then commence to tell; *Detour* (Edgar G. Ulmer, 1946) begins in the truck stop where Al Roberts recalls the traumatic events that have recently befallen him;[33]

---

[30] Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 52.

[31] Copjec, "The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal," 183.

[32] But what of those "literal" cases, you ask? I don't think they're as literal as they seem; I explain why in the next section.

[33] *Detour* actually presents an interesting limit case for the argument I'm making. Unlike the other examples here, Roberts's voiceover is not grounded in a physical act of telling. In the film's opening truck-stop scene,

and the opening shots of *Double Indemnity* show us Neff's car careening through the streets of Los Angeles, on the way to Barton Keyes' office, where Neff will tape a confession for Keyes. In this way, Neff's voiceover is grounded in the diegetic space of the frame story, and the voice itself has a clear, mundane alibi: it is the confession Neff is dictating into a tape-recorder. Despite the "radical heterogeneity" of the noir voiceover, then, it is never truly extra-diegetic: the voice always registers from a verifiable time and place, which may be beyond the scope of the story it is telling but is not beyond the scope of representation itself. There is always a realist alibi for the voiceover, reassurance that the voice really belongs to someone.

Yet the work of constructing this physical guarantee of the voice's origin also risks collapsing in on itself. This is what happens in the strange final scene of *Double Indemnity*. In the last transition back to the post-diegetic space where Neff is recording his confession, he looks out at the skyline of L.A. as he ponders the fate of Phyllis and asks Keyes to look after Lola Dietrichson and her boyfriend Nino. Neff has been facing diagonally away from the camera and toward the office window (a notable shift from the opening shot of Neff, where his face—and voice—are framed head-on by the camera), but as he makes this last request, he unexpectedly turns back over his shoulder and speaks directly to the camera: "Hello Keyes." For the briefest moment, the voiceover seems to confront its fundamentally extra-diegetic or otherworldly nature, addressing itself directly to the camera and to the viewer who sits on the other side of it. But this gesture outward is once more captured by the diegetic confines of the narrative, as Keyes—no longer the absent addressee, index of an unknown moment of future listening—is in fact standing in the doorway. And, he tells Neff, he's been standing there for some time. On the most literal level, of course, the climactic appearance of Keyes-the-detective erases any remaining uncertainty concerning Neff's fate: he has been caught, and will not, as he had hoped, "escape to Mexico." But there is another, more paradoxical effect of Keyes's appearance. If he has in fact been "standing there" in the doorway listening to the confession, then Neff's recording becomes entirely redundant. The original reason for Neff to be speaking aloud is the recording he's making for Keyes; Copjec notes that "the film … deliberately severs this speech from its addressee in order to return us repeatedly to the image of a solitary Neff, seated in an empty office at night, speaking into a dictaphone."[34]

Roberts is offered the perfect alibi for his voice—the offer of a ride on the condition that he be willing to chat with the driver (as a surprisingly friendly trucker tells him, "I don't like to ride alone at night. I'm one of those guys I have to talk or I fall asleep")—but he refuses it. When the voiceover begins, then, it is not situated as a speech act. Nevertheless, the film maintains a rigorous link between Roberts's voiceover and his literal person. As Robertson sits in the diner, his face is repeatedly framed in harshly-lit close-up. At a certain moment, however, the surrounding frame goes dark along with his entire face, except for a strip of light illuminating his brow and eyes—and at this precise moment, the voiceover begins. While *Detour* thus gives us a rare cinematic example of internal monologue, it nevertheless maintains that this monologue is emanating from a particular consciousness—Roberts's—at a particular time and place: the diner where Roberts is seated. As the voiceover surfaces throughout the story, the film periodically cuts back to the image of the darkened face with illuminated eyes seated at the lunch-counter, so that there can be no mistake about where the voice belongs. And despite the absence of a literal scene of enunciation, the stylized illumination of Roberts's brow is there to remind us that *the voice is coming from inside here*. What may at first be taken as a disembodied voice is in fact a case of fully embodied thought.

[34] Copjec. "The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal," 186.

But Neff isn't finally as solitary as he seems, and the Dictaphone turns out to be strangely extraneous, for Keyes will never listen to this recording—he's been in the office with Neff the whole time, listening to Neff's voice in the flesh. Copjec fails to take into account Keyes's strange reappearance: he is not irrevocably severed from the message being addressed to him, but is, at the last moment, physically reattached to it. The film works so hard to give the voice a material basis (both in the recording equipment that allows a voice to speak to no one and then in the presence of the addressee himself) that its two explanations ultimately cancel each other out.

What explains the excess of justifications for the voice? We can better understand *Double Indemnity*'s anxious undoing of the voiceover by considering the constraints that the film places on the individual, diegetic voices of its characters. The main plot of the film concerns Neff and Phyllis's plan to murder Phyllis's husband, Mr. Dietrichson. But their plan requires an odd prohibition: the characters in *Double Indemnity* are free to plot each other's deaths, but they are barred from speaking aloud about death itself. When Phyllis first raises the possibility of taking out an accident insurance policy for her husband, Neff asks her to clarify: "You mean some dark night a crown block might fall on him?" But Phyllis cuts off the conversation: "Please don't talk like that." The prohibition against speaking about death is repeated a short time later, as Neff and Phyllis determine the details of the murder. "What do you suppose would happen if he found out about the accident policy?" Phyllis asks. Neff replies, "Plenty, but not as bad as sitting in the death house," to which Phyllis again exclaims: "Don't ever talk like that!" Neff, in turn, internalizes the prohibition: explaining to Phyllis what a "capital sum" is, he says, "In case he gets killed. [*pause*] Maybe I shouldn't have said that."

Murder, in the noir universe, can be committed; it just can't be discussed. This is a puzzling ethical reversal (words, on this account, being more dangerous than deeds). Yet as strange as this inversion might seem, it remains, in *Double Indemnity*, irreducible—death is inextricably bound up with the speaking voice. This is nowhere clearer than in the film's climactic confrontation between Neff and Phyllis. Having turned their paranoia on each other, Neff now wants nothing more than to kill Phyllis; to (in the parlance of the old wise-guy movie) shut her up. When he confesses this desire to her, however, he can only couch it in euphemism: "Sometimes people are where they can't talk." This evasive way of describing Phyllis's death not only returns us to the prohibition of speaking about death; it also, interestingly enough, reveals the prohibition's origins. The reason *Double Indemnity*'s characters are barred from speaking about death is that, in the noir film, death has a particular character of its own: as Neff defines it here, death is the central prohibition to speech. Keeping the characters' dialogue free from talk of death is thus merely the recognition of death as the ultimate obstacle to talking in the first place. From the fast-paced banter to the hovering voiceover, film noir is filled to the brim with speech. And the only thing that can stop noir's steady stream of spoken words is the cessation of life itself. Death, the absolute limit of speech, must be kept absolutely apart from it.

What is threatening about the voiceover, finally, is that it risks breaking noir's defining prohibition in a different way: it raises the specter not of speaking *about* death but of death itself being able to speak—the possibility that people might keep talking even after they're "where they can't talk." The voiceover, detached from the sight of a speaking body and disjunctively overlaid on a different image track, risks appearing to emerge out of nowhere: from a non-place that, lying beyond the reach of narrative expression,

corresponds to the nameless void of death itself. Between the voiceover and its material alibi lies the persistent threat that the voice may never return to its narrative body, that it may turn out to be the eternally disembodied, logically impossible voice of ghost, spirit, or specter. The diegetic voice of the noir character is supposed to be a hedge against mortality, the irreducible proof that the speaker is still alive. But the disjunctive structure of the voiceover radically undermines the reassuring link between life and speech: it raises the sinister possibility that the voice we've been hearing all this time does not belong to a living body at all—that it is really, in the end, the impossible voice of the speaking dead. In this way, *Double Indemnity's* refusal to allow any talk of death is not simply a perverse inversion of the conventional wisdom about sticks and stones. The film's prohibition against speaking about death is, in fact, its attempt to keep at bay the more terrifying and paradoxical experience of hearing the dead speak.[35]

But of course, by the end of *Double Indemnity*, there is no paradox. The potentially fatal gap that separates the voice from the narrative is sutured by the frame story and the establishing shots that explain the where and the how of Neff's voiceover—and then done away with altogether by a simple in-the-flesh dialogue between Neff and Keyes that renders the voiceover entirely extraneous. The excess of explanations that *Double Indemnity* gives for the disembodied voice we're hearing (is it being dictated into a tape-recorder, or is it being spoken directly to Keyes?) reveals the extent of the film's anxiety about the deathly pall of the voice. Better to have too many, well-nigh contradictory accounts of where the voice is coming from than no account at all—for the latter leaves open the possibility that the voice is emanating from a space that is outside narrative representation entirely, both impossible to imagine and unbearable to hear. Having raised, in the form of the voiceover, the specter of an impossible voice, the classic noir film goes to contradictory lengths to disavow it. In this way, classic noir is structured not by the "radical heterogeneity" of the voiceover but by its recognition of this heterogeneity as a mortal threat to the logic of its narrative universe. This is true through the very last moments of *Double Indemnity*, where Neff's death is not an embrace of the void but its fullest denial. For Neff is able to die on screen only after his ghostly voice has been returned to his body, as the time of the plot and the time of the frame story finally meet up.[36] The body may

---

[35] The unbearable voice of the dead neatly aligns classic film noir with Mary Ann Doane's history of cinematic time. In her account of the birth of cinema, Mary Ann Doane suggests that narrative cinema emerges precisely to naturalize and to neutralize the shock of death that was represented in early, non-narrative films. The temporality of film, she argues, works tirelessly to suppress the "Ur-event" of death: "The direct presentation of death to the spectator as pure event, as shock, was displaced in mainstream cinema by its narrativization. Technology and narrative form an alliance in modernity to ameliorate the corrosiveness of the relation between time and subjectivity" (*The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002], 164).

[36] This remains the case even when we take into account *Double Indemnity*'s famous—and never released—alternate ending, The original ending that Wilder filmed (frowned on by the Production Code and ultimately cut by Wilder himself) followed Neff all the way to the gas chamber, where Keyes watches his former friend put to death and leaves the prison a broken man. Naremore convincingly argues that this ending "would have thrown a shadow over everything that preceded it": "Without [the gas chamber sequence], claims investigator Barton Keyes seems a less morally complex character, audiences are left feeling a bit more comfortable, and the film's critique of American modernity becomes less apparent" (*More Than Night*, 93, 82). Nevertheless, this alternate ending maintains the same relation between death and the voiceover that I've been describing: whether Neff dies in Keyes's arms or in the gas chamber, his death only comes *after* his voiceover narration has ceased. Indeed, as Naremore describes it, the gas chamber sequence is notable above

surrender in the end, but Neff has at least rescued his voice from the void. Turning death into the proper endpoint of its story, the film thus neutralizes the untimely threat of death that has haunted it through the voiceover from the beginning. Neff has to wait for the story he's telling to end before giving up the ghost; in doing so, he guarantees the truth of his own description of death as the place where people "can't talk." Death, in *Double Indemnity*, is the void of speech, which is to say, its absence—but it is also the void opened up *by* speech, in the form of the voiceover. Opening a fatal gap between the on-screen narrative and the off-screen voice, the void of the voiceover must finally be sutured, covered over, dreamed out of its dangerous disembodiment and returned, in the last instance, to the mouth of the speaking body as well as to the ear of the listening one. Both of these bodies may be finite, susceptible to knife, bullet, or gas chamber; yet in *Double Indemnity*, it is the voice, not the body, that bears the most terrifying—and finally unspeakable—trace of mortality.

Tales from the Crypt, Jokes from the Morgue

Classic film noir, recognizing the ghostliness of the voiceover, strives to disavow it. Of course, some films make the process of disavowal more complicated than others. A first complication arises in *Laura* (Otto Preminger, 1944). In the film's final sequence, Waldo Lydecker, who attempted to murder Laura before the film began and has now returned to finish the job, is shot by detective MacPherson and his fellow policemen. As he slumps to the floor, Lydecker gasps, "Good-bye, Laura." The camera then pans to a broken clock (which Lydecker hit when trying to shoot MacPherson) and lingers there for a surprisingly long time, until we hear Lydecker's voice one last time: "Good-bye, my love." The sound of this second good-bye poses some problems. "From where do these words come?" asks Copjec.

> Not from Lydecker, clearly, as he lies dead on the floor. The final living words issued from the diegetic space of Laura's apartment and from the visibly wounded body of Lydecker, but these words emerge from elsewhere. The difference between the two spaces is audible in the lack of room tone in the second 'good-bye.' This suggests that the final line was, like Lydecker's radio address, recorded in a sound studio, not on the film set and thus not from the diegetic space the film creates. In narrative terms, we would locate the place of their enunciation on the other side of death, somewhere beyond the grave.[37]

The source of the ghostly words that close the film is, at first glance, indeterminable. *Laura* appears to present to us precisely what *Double Indemnity* suppressed: a voice that issues from "beyond the grave." But Copjec herself cautions, "*Laura* is no horror film, and it would be unwise to try to make it into one by mistaking the import of its ultimate

---

all for its uncanny sense of quiet: "There was no blood, no agonized screaming, and, for once in the movie, almost no dialogue" (92-93).

[37] Joan Copjec, *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004), 161.

positioning of Lydecker's voice-over narration outside narrative time (the sprung clock), outside the narrative space, beyond earthly life" (161). The problem of the film's final line, in other words, is not its paradoxical ghostliness but the circuitous route by which that ghostliness is dissolved and assimilated back into the film.

The issue of locating the voiceover in *Laura* is one that, according to Copjec, "hangs suspended throughout the film: from where—from what point in the narrative—does [Lydecker] narrate the story that unfolds?" (160). But if this question is difficult to resolve, it is not because *Laura* withholds the answer; it is, rather, because the film offers too many answers. Like *Double Indemnity*, *Laura* responds to the threat of the supernatural voice by providing a contradictory excess of natural, material alibis for the voiceover. In the end, what is troubling about Lydecker's final words is not their inherent ghostliness but the fact that this ghostliness is only an effect of our own inability to decide which rational justification explains them.

Before the final goodbye, there are three separate instances of voiceover in *Laura*; each is spoken by Lydecker, but each has a different diegetic ground in the film. When the film begins, we hear Lydecker narrating while we watch MacPherson search his apartment. But Copjec's question "from where does he narrate?" is answered almost immediately, as MacPherson bursts in on Lydecker sitting in the bathtub—where he is typing the words we have just been hearing. The first voiceover, then, is disembodied for just the briefest moment before it is connected back to its bodily source. The second voiceover occurs as Lydecker and MacPherson are talking at a restaurant. Lydecker is telling MacPherson a story that the film then presents in flashback, with Lydecker's telling overlaid as a voiceover; here, we know from the beginning that the voice we're hearing is literally being spoken over lunch. The third—and most telling—moment of voiceover occurs moments before Lydecker's death. Laura is first startled to hear Lydecker's voice inside her apartment, and then relieved to discover that he is not actually there: his voice is coming from the radio, through which he delivers a weekly address. The radio explains how one can hear a voice that isn't immediately present. But it also enacts a further displacement that recalls the excessive protests of *Double Indemnity*. When the radio address ends, a voice comes on explaining, "You have heard the voice of Waldo Lydecker by electrical transcription." The ostensibly "live" transmission of the radio turns out to be a further recording, and this double disembodiment means that it is still possible for Lydecker to be physically present in Laura's apartment, waiting to kill her—which, we quickly discover, he is. While *Double Indemnity* ultimately shied away from the ontological stakes of recording technology—we only hear Neff's voice directly, never mediated through the Dictaphone—*Laura* indulges them. Beginning with a scene of "transcription" that links the typewritten word to the spoken one, the film ends by exploring the technological consequences of the transcribed voice, which not only produces a link between two media (say, the typewriter and speech) but also severs it. The recorded voice is both disembodied and temporally displaced, capable of being played back any number of times into eternity.

The disjunctive temporality of "electrical transcription," coupled with the infinite potential of radio transmission, cannot help but be on the viewer's mind when she hears Lydecker's final, ghostly goodbye. Rather than pointing us toward the afterlife, these sound technologies pull us back into the diegesis. Copjec notes that the distinctive "tone" of those last words "suggests that the final line was, like Lydecker's radio address,

recorded in a sound studio," but the analogy here is unnecessary. The words need not be "*like* Lydecker's radio address"; they may just as likely be *part* of it. As the viewer has just been shown, the recorded voice can be played back anytime and radioed out to anywhere, and so the most obvious explanation for Lydecker's fourth and final voiceover is that it exploits the disjointed time of the radio address. This final transmission may be impossible to pinpoint in time, but insofar as that impossibility is governed by the film's own thematized technologies, the time of the voiceover still remains within the temporal bounds of the diegesis. Resisting its own supernatural kinship with the horror film, *Laura* instead registers the shock of the voice's technological abstraction. The paradox of the speaking dead is replaced by the plane of the "electrically transcribed" voice, which emanates not from the beyond of the afterlife or from the constraints of the coffin but from a decidedly smaller and less threatening box: the mechanical apparatus of the radio.

If *Laura* complicates my account of classic film noir's repression of the dead voice, it does so only to affirm it. But there is still a more glaring exception, which you've probably had in mind since this chapter began: *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950), as everyone knows, is literally narrated by a dead man. Our narrator is Joe Gillis, who begins the movie floating facedown in a swimming pool. Surely, this is the place where classic film noir finally acknowledges the paradox of the voiceover that has been haunting it all along? While *Sunset Boulevard* does indeed bring us to the brink of avowing the voiceover's ghostly secret, it, too, can only end by suppressing it. The difference between this and previous noir films, however, is that *Sunset Boulevard* makes the process of disavowal part of its plot: the film thematically depicts its own absurd attempts to deny the cadaverous status of the narrator. *Sunset Boulevard* allows us our most sustained glimpse of the paradoxical spectrality of the voiceover—but only, in the end, to critique how far we'll go to convince ourselves that we never really saw it.

To read *Sunset Boulevard* in this way—as less comfortable with its narratorial paradox than it lets on—I want to begin not with what's in the film but with something that got left out. As Ed Sikov points out in his exhaustive biography of Billy Wilder, *Sunset Boulevard* was slated to be released with an alternate opening, which would have followed earlier noir films by beginning not with a disembodied voiceover but with a frame story that explains the voice's physical location. That location was to have been the morgue—where Joe Gillis's dead body would be seen regaling the other corpses with the story of his murder.[38] This alternate framing device evoked so much laughter in preview screenings that it was cut from the film at the last minute. Sikov sets the scene: "They took it to Evanston, Illinois, just north of Chicago. The lights went down and the film began. The camera rolled down Sunset Boulevard and into the morgue, the corpses started talking,

[38] The original script described the opening like this: "An attendant wheels the dead Gillis into the huge, bare, windowless room. Along the walls are twenty or so sheet-covered corpses lying in an orderly row of wheeled slabs with large numbers painted on the walls above each slab. … The attendant exits, switching off the light. For a moment the room is semi-dark, then as the music takes on a more astral phase, a curious glow emanates from the sheeted corpses." On this astral cue, the "sheeted corpses" begin to chat ("Don't be scared. There's a lot of us here. It's all right") and even display, under the circumstances, an impressively wry sense of humor—"I was having a tough time making a living," says Joe; replies another: "It's your dying I was asking about." (Quoted in Ed Sikov, *On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder* [New York: Hyperion, 1998], 283-284.)

and the audience erupted into peals of laughter."[39] Knowing full well what it was doing, *Sunset Boulevard* tried explicitly to embrace the "talking corpses" that had caused the classic noir film so much trouble. But the details of the frame story are ultimately less interesting than the response it induced—laugher. The "peals of laughter" that greeted the spectacle of corpses chatting in the morgue validates the anxieties of the earlier noir films: though the noir narrator is always on the verge of dying, and though the detached form of the voiceover invokes the void of death, film noir has to retain the living integrity of the speaking voice, lest the entire narrative structure collapse. The fate of the original version of *Sunset Boulevard* is thus all but predicted by the earlier films: at the very moment that the talking corpse becomes a literal presence in film noir, it is dismissed by a disbelieving audience, mistaken for a twisted joke.

Sunset Boulevard is still invariably described as a film narrated by a dead man. In light of the problems the first version of the film faced with preview audiences, however, this conventional description raises some new questions. The test audience laughed helplessly at the physical spectacle of the speaking dead; in response, Wilder cut the frame story situating the narrator in the morgue; as a result, audiences stopped laughing at it (*Sunset Boulevard* is many things, and includes some wicked moments of humor, but it will never again be mistaken for a comedy). This simple chain of reasoning implies that what initially troubled the preview audience has now been resolved: if they laughed at the sight of a garrulous corpse, no more laughter suggests that the speaker is no longer quite so corpse-like. The voiceover narration, originally taken to be a joke, is no longer a laughing matter. But this reversal forces us to reconsider the classic account of *Sunset Boulevard*: although the film still appears to narrated by a dead man, he cannot be as dead as we thought—something has to have happened to smooth over the paradox of Joe's voice. While the original preview audience may have scoffed "how can a corpse be talking?" we are faced with a different conundrum: why is Joe Gillis, his dead body afloat in the pool, now accepted as a plausible speaker?

In fact, the very process or ideological procedure of erasing death is at the thematic center of *Sunset Boulevard*. Death refuses to be made public; when Norma suicidally announces, "You know I'm not afraid to die," Joe responds: "That's between you and yourself." The only death that is publically acknowledged in the film is the death of Norma's pet chimp—a perverted ritual of mourning to which Joe, mistaken for the animal undertaker yet unable even to feign identification or sympathy, can only demur, "Lady, you got the wrong man." In an important sense, however, he is precisely the right man to preside over the chimp's funeral: for it is precisely Joe's death, I want to suggest, that remains not only unmourned but also unacknowledged throughout the film, a death that cannot be recognized except through the vulgar substitution of a chimp's body for Joe's. The inscrutable burial rites of Norma's monkey compel Joe to bear witness to the illegible and ultimately disregarded spectacle that will constitute his own eternally deferred funeral.

Having excised the frame story set in the morgue, the film is now free to act as if Joe isn't actually dead. The mode of self-delusion first hinted at in the private ritual of the monkey's funeral reaches its fully public climax in the famous final sequence of *Sunset*

[39] Sikov, *On Sunset Boulevard*, 301.

Boulevard. As the camera returns to Norma's house for the first time since she murdered Joe, we see a cop in the hallway trying to make a phone call:

> COP: Coroner's office? I want to speak to the coroner. *Who's on this phone?*
> [cut to upstairs bedroom, where an older woman is also on the phone]
> JOURNALIST: I am. Now get off! This is more important. *Times* city desk? Hedda Hopper speaking. I'm talking from the bedroom of Norma Desmond. Don't bother with a rewrite, man, take it direct. Ready? "As day breaks over the murder house, Norma Desmond, famous star of yesteryear, is in a complete state of mental shock."

The cop, seeking out the one person whose job it is to officially pronounce Joe dead, is interrupted by the imperatives of the gossip columnist, who is interested not in Joe's death but in Norma's life. Joe may have entered eternal sleep, but at Norma's house, "day breaks." As the media displace the police as the arbiters of narrative, what happens here, finally, is a rewriting of Joe's and Norma's fates. While Norma is interviewed in her bedroom as a criminal, she emerges onto the stairs reborn as a film star, with the crime scene transformed into a set and Joe's murder nothing but an elaborate movie plot. The significance of Norma's famous (and famously misquoted) lines—"Tell Mr. de Mille I'm ready for my close-up"—is precisely her recognition that a media circus is essentially indistinguishable from a movie. Ultimately, the effect of the news cameras that have ravenously descended on Norma's house is to suppress the death they were called there to report. Norma, expecting to see de Mille, thinks that it's all just a movie, and the cameras are in no position to suggest otherwise. For them, Norma's the story, the star, if no longer of the big screen, then definitely of the small—while Joe, an afterthought, is now a cog in a machine-like fiction rather than a corpse to be identified by the coroner.[40]

While *Sunset Boulevard* begins with Joe's voiceover paradoxically positioned between life and death, the story it tells is really the story of how that gap is ideologically closed, of how his death is rewritten and repressed. From the opening lines of his introductory monologue, Joe knows exactly what will happen: "But before you hear it all distorted and blown out of proportion, before those Hollywood columnists get their hands

[40] The "savage critique" of "Fordist Amerika" that Naremore finds in the alternate ending to *Double Indemnity* is thus explicitly registered in *Sunset Boulevard* (*More Than Night*, 93, 88). It is even more emphatically expressed in Wilder's 1951 follow-up, *Ace in the Hole*, where the central themes of "advanced capitalism, instrumental reason, and death" (Naremore, 82) are directly linked to the spectacle of mass media. *Ace in the Hole* tells the story of newspaperman Chuck Tatum, who discovers Leo Minosa buried alive in a cave-in and endeavors to keep him there in order to create a media circus around the story. Here, as in Wilder's earlier films, death is never accounted for: when Tatum finally confesses his role in Leo's death to his editor in New York, the editor hangs up on him. In the end, however, Tatum's own death—the fatalistic brunt of his failed confession—is visually registered as none of Wilder's other victims (Neff, Joe, Leo) has been. After sustaining a mortal injury at the hands of Leo's wife Lorraine (whom he has just tried to strangle), Tatum returns to the office of his small-town Albuquerque newspaper to die—when he does, his body falls suddenly and violently toward the camera, filling the entire frame when it hits the floor while his face is gruesomely turned up to the screen. In this way, Tatum is ironically punished for the sins of a media apparatus that pathologically refuses to face death.

on it, maybe you'd like to hear the facts, the whole truth." The media, Joe predicts, will write the story they want, and in doing so, the essential fact to be "distorted" will be the physical fact of Joe's demise. Toward the end of the film, Joe says of Norma, "The dream she had clung to so desperately had enfolded her." And hers is a dream where Joe never dies. Thus, although the film opens with Joe's voice, it can only close with Norma's, whose final words (like those of the noir voiceover) point beyond the diegetic frame: "This is my life. Just us and the cameras—and those wonderful people out there in the dark." Here, however, her words aim not to break the frame but to cast its net more widely, to draw the audience into Norma's cinematic "dream." If the dream of the film set and its fiction of eternal life has engulfed Norma, it has engulfed us too, "out there in the dark." In *Sunset Boulevard*, the original cut of the noir voice—the gap opened by disembodied speech—is replaced by the cutting out of the frame story that unwittingly exposed the voice's paradoxical materiality; and by the end of the film, the voiceover itself is replaced by the steely gaze of the camera, which implicates us in a fantasy world where Joe's murder never took place. In the end, *Sunset Boulevard* overwrites the unimaginable horrors of death by turning Norma's crime into her greatest acting role and the impossible speech of Joe's corpse into nothing but the everyday magic of the movies.

Unexcitable Speech

"It is a striking fact," Silverman observes in her account of the voiceover, "that, apart from contemporary movie and television revivals of film noir, this voice is largely confined to a brief historical period, stretching from the forties to the early fifties."[41] For Silverman, this "brief period" is also what confines or delimits the genre of film noir as such. After the fifties, she suggest, noir returns only as "revival" or homage, and the voiceover—which Telotte calls "the most characteristic *noir* narrative strategy"[42]—in turn transforms from a meaningful formal feature to a mere emblem of repetition: an empty invocation of a past moment of film production (or, as Silverman puts it, "a signifier for an earlier textual system"[43]). The problem with this account is that it fails to explain a strange quirk concerning the emergence of neo-noir in the 1970s and 1980s: the majority of neo-noir films from this period do not actually use voiceover narration. *The Long Goodbye* (Robert Altman, 1973), *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974), *Night Moves* (Arthur Penn, 1975), *Body Heat* (Lawrence Kasdan, 1981), *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Bob Rafelson, 1981), *Blood Simple* (Joel Coen, 1984): each of these founding films of the neo-noir canon uniformly does away with classic noir's most "characteristic" feature.[44] This significantly complicates the standard story we tell about the genre—that authentic (or historically "confined") film

[41] Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 52.
[42] Telotte, *Voices in the Dark*, 14.
[43] Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror*, 239n27.
[44] Two exceptions again prove the rule. The first is *Blood Simple*, which doesn't have a voiceover narrator though it does open with a disembodied voice: that of Visser, the sleazy private detective. Yet the voice is never explained and never speaks in the film again, suggesting that this is a different kind of affectation—not an evocation of the noir voice but a quasi-literary mode of introductory narration, almost like an epigraph (the move is repeated in the Coens' *No Country for Old Men* [2007]). The second exception is *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). But it too has extenuating circumstances. Deckard's voiceover in the film was famously added to the film against Scott's wishes. In the extensive re-release of the film that came in 2007, Scott retook control of the film and excised the ersatz voiceover.

noir is followed by ahistorical attempts to perfectly reproduce or blandly repeat it.[45] On the contrary, the repetitions of neo-noir come with a crucial difference, a deliberate imperfection; and this difference, I want to suggest, is precisely the site of neo-noir's own reflections on the historical stakes of generic "revival."

We can begin to explain the disappearance of the voiceover by taking note of the more general paranoid style that suffused American films in the wake of Watergate. The classic noir narrator, blindly caught up in events as they unfold, is nevertheless afforded a retrospective position of total knowledge at the end; he narrates from the position of perfect (if doomed) hindsight. But this kind of totalizing perspective is increasingly rejected by the conspiracy films of the 1970s, in which the position of total knowledge is no longer the beginning condition of narration but the narrative's unattainable or impossible goal. Jameson makes this point most famously in his reading of *All the President's Men* (Alan Pakula, 1976). The impossibility of representing the totality of global capitalism is encapsulated, according to Jameson, in the film's famous ("and seemingly gratuitous") rising crane shot, which moves from Woodward and Bernstein asleep in the Reading Room of the Library of Congress further and further out to reveal the "well-nigh cosmological" circles of desks and tables as visible from the room's domed ceiling.[46] In Jameson's reading, the shot allegorically depicts the totality that the journalists are working to uncover. But of course the glimpse that the camera gives us is only possible outside the subjective viewpoint of the reporters. The camera synecdochically stands in for a totalizing perspective that cannot be attained from any perspective within the diegesis—that is, from the position of everyday life itself.

The absence of the voiceover in 1970s neo-noir registers the same impossibility of global perspective that Pakula's shot communicates. In the neo-noir of this period, there is no longer any guarantee of a future perspective that will be able to put the pieces of the present in place. Resolution gives way to sheer chance; as Harry Moseby explains at the end of *Night Moves*, "I didn't solve anything—I just fell in on top of it." Like the infamous narrative intricacies of *All the President's Men*, *Night Moves*'s plot defies summary, wrapped up by a string of revelations that are both anticlimactic and ambiguous. At the end of the film, Harry has "fallen in on top of" a giant smuggling ring, and he is now trying to determine what exactly it is that they're smuggling. The MacGuffin-like object has just been dropped in the middle of the ocean, and so Harry takes a boat out to see what it is. But what it is—some sort of ancient statue—ultimately matters far less than what it *does*; the object turns out to be meaningful not epistemologically but only physically, becoming the material deus ex machina that saves Harry when the low-flying seaplane that is shooting at him hits the object and crashes into the water. There is no one to explain the

[45] Naremore, for instance, describes *Chinatown*'s meticulous attempt to recapture the look and "feel" of an earlier moment of cinematic production: "Though *Chinatown* makes use of Panavision and highly mobile camera equipment that enables an operator to walk with characters through doorways and into tight spaces, it cleverly adapts the new technology to the feel of the old studio films; throughout, the framing is tight and restrictive, and the color scheme is relatively muted and monochromatic. Scriptwriter Robert Towne and director Roman Polanski, the chief authors, were obviously devoted to old movies" (*More Than Night*, 205-206). Yet few critics have noted that this devotion comes up short. There is, in fact, one essential aspect of "old movies" that is conspicuously missing from *Chinatown*'s mise en scène: the voiceover.

[46] Fredric Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 78.

significance of the smuggled artifact to Harry, and no one—certainly not the voice of some future Harry—to explain it to us, and so the statue simply floats there, opaque and unreadable and utterly unsuited to the role of revelation. Lacking epistemological closure, the film can only close with a final invocation of Harry's impotent ignorance. For he is now stuck in the middle of the ocean on a boat named *Point of View*—which is, of course, the very thing he is imprisoned by. His own limited viewpoint, which lacks the totalizing hindsight of the voiceover, is what prevents him from seeing the plot's big picture. Injured and exhausted, Harry tries to use a small fishing pole to activate the gearshift on the boat, but it remains just out of reach, and all the boat can do is go in circles. In a final shot that exposes the brute truth concealed in Pakula's more well-known sequence, the camera pulls up and back, holding the boat at the center of the frame as the image gets farther and farther away, so as the closing-credits begin to roll, what we see is not the "cosmological" totality of the Library of Congress, but only the aimless circles of Harry's boat and the opaque emptiness of the sea.

The absence of the voiceover in neo-noir is the precise corollary of this abyss. From the perspective of a world that is itself untotalizable—resistant to narrative reconstruction and epistemological certainty—the voiceover has no place to ground itself, and thus no place in the films themselves. We see the same thing at the end of *Body Heat*. Ned Racine is in jail, having just discovered that Matty Walker, the woman who conspired put him there, is an imposter. But his discovery, as the context of the prison cell confirms, comes too late: Matty has gotten away with it, and in the film's final shot we see her lying on the beach, untroubled by the events that have just transpired. The significance of the missing voiceover in *Body Heat* is made manifest in the juxtaposition of its two closing shots: first, the camera gives us a birds-eye view of Racine as he lies in his jail cell; then it cuts to an image of Matty sunning herself on the beach, fixed in profile. Just as in *Night Moves*, the totalizing view of the crane shot cannot show the protagonist what he needs to know—it cannot penetrate the "other sides" or alternate identities of Matty, which remain symbolically obscured by a camera angle that is constrained to Matty's profile. The totalizing synthesis promised by the birds-eye perspective of the camera is once more exposed as a fantasy: it cannot, as we see (or don't see) in the final shot, show us everything.

There is thus a convincing case to be made for reading neo-noir alongside the conspiracy narratives of the 1970s, and for historicizing the disappearance of the voiceover as an index of the paranoid cultural logic of the period as a whole. The paranoid subject, fanatically attuned to signals of conspiracy yet constantly at risk of being left in the dark, is the complete opposite of the fatalistic noir narrator for whom everything, reconsidered in retrospect, is explicable and foreseeable. The absence of voiceover in 1970s and 1980s neo-noir corresponds to a historical moment in which no future perspective seems capable of explaining the social chaos and political conspiracies that litter the present. Situating neo-noir within the age of conspiracy, this reading offers an account of the period that is principally synchronic and symptomatic. But understanding neo-noir *as a genre* also demands an account that is diachronic and overdetermined. The question to ask of neo-noir, then, is not only how it reflects its present moment, but also how it refracts and responds to the past moment of classic noir.

The more historically mobile heuristic of genre allows us to note a second discrepancy between neo-noir and classic noir; one, I think, that isn't explicable in terms

of neo-noir's historical situation alone. While noir has its heroes speaking on the verge of death and usually dying in the final frame, all of the neo-noir films I've mentioned here insist on keeping their protagonists alive. Harry Moseby has been shot in the leg, but his real fate is to be forced to stay alive to confront his failures as a detective; the same goes for Ned Racine, who lies awake in his prison cell mulling over his failure to foresee his own downfall. The list of neo-noir heroes who number among the living goes on: Phillip Marlowe in *The Long Goodbye*, Abby in *Blood Simple*, and, of course, Jake Gittes in *Chinatown*, who is implored simply to "forget" the corruption he's just uncovered. In each of these films, the absence of the voiceover ultimately corresponds to a fallen or failed noir subject who, unlike the classic prototype, somehow manages to keep himself alive.

Neo-noir's refusal to give up the ghost finds its most extreme example in the bizarre remake of *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Bob Rafelson, 1981). The original *Postman* stays true to James M. Cain's 1934 novel: both film and novel end with Frank and Cora, having murdered Cora's husband, driving to the beach to celebrate their renewed love; but on the drive home from the beach, Frank gets in a car accident and Cora is killed. It is then Cora's accidental death, and not the premeditated murder of her husband, for which Frank is found guilty and sentenced to death row. The story's title registers the irony of this chain of events. As Frank tells a priest before he is about to die, he should have remembered that that "the postman always rings twice"—that justice can be deferred but never escaped, that the scales are always balanced, that fate inevitably doubles back. The title of the 1981 film, on the other hand, means nothing whatsoever. This is not an overstatement: having cut out the voiceover, the film also cuts out the framing device of death row, which is to say, it cuts out Frank's ironic punishment—so by the end, the postman has not rung a second time. Instead, the film concludes with the immediate aftermath of the accident, with Frank sobbing over Cora's dead body. Perhaps this loss is supposed to be punishment enough; at any rate, the crucial point is that however emotionally distraught Frank may be, he is, as he mourns for Cora, still alive. The irreducible link between death and the voiceover is here acknowledged in reverse: only by getting rid of the voiceover and its proximity to death does the film allow Frank to avoid the postman's second ring—to avoid, that is, the classic noir narrator's irreducible foreknowledge of his own fated death. The threat of death lodged in the voiceover is hereby neutralized, and the proof is in the neo-pudding: neo-noir heroes never die. Responding to the problematic relation between the void and the voice, neo-noir resolves the anxiety that plagued classic noir. There is no longer any risk of discovering that the narrator has been speaking from beyond the grave, because the hero doesn't narrate, and in this way, he doesn't have to die.

Attending to the changing function of the voiceover thus paints a different historical picture of the noir genre. More than a nostalgic revival or a thoughtless recycling of noir style, neo-noir actually solves the structural dilemma that shaped the earlier films, eliminating the threat of the speaking dead that haunted classic noir. And it is only by understanding this crucial historical difference between noir and neo-noir that we discover the site of neo-noir's true repetition. For this latter phase of noir films remains equally anxious about life and death—but its central worry is not for the life of the narrator but for the life of the genre itself. So we might more properly say that the dilemma of classic noir is not so much resolved as displaced: classic noir's anxiety about the speaking dead becomes, in neo-noir, the fear of being taken for a genre that has itself

risen from the grave. The self-defeating lengths to which a neo-noir film like *The Postman Always Rings Twice* goes to avoid this impression—to insist on the legitimate life of both its hero and its status as a genre—repeats classic noir's contradictory insistence on the physical basis of the speaking voice. From the disavowed void of the voiceover to the mysteriously revived neo-noir hero, film noir's historical repetition is founded on a set of formal changes that address the trouble of distinguishing what is living from what is dead. In neo-noir, this trouble reflects the neo-genre's own contested historical status. It stages the challenges of accounting for generic change.

He May Be Dead, But He's Absolutely Right

The first phase of noir's afterlife thus gives up the ghost only to flesh it out—to make it seem as alive and lively as a supposedly dead genre can be. But this of course involves an even more sweeping act of disavowal: whereas classic noir denied the deathly status of its disembodied voice, neo-noir represses *its own* ghostly state. In refusing to let its protagonists die, neo-noir ultimately refuses to acknowledge the fact that it is already the living-dead form of an expired genre. So the precarious, ultimately paradoxical position of classic noir's narrator doesn't really disappear in neo-noir—it simply becomes the formal condition for the genre as a whole. Yet just as the genre won't stay dead, the paradox originally expressed in the voiceover won't stay buried. When the voiceover returns in the retro-noir of the 1990s and the 2000s, it comes as a double rebuke: an undoing of both classic noir's manic literalism and neo-noir's magical thinking.

Once again, tracking the imperfect repetitions of genre proves a way to challenge the conventional story about recent film history. If the neo-noir of the 1970s displays a politically engaged or at least a "revisionist" spirit,[47] that spirit is assumed to be gone by the 1990s, when Hollywood returns to the well a second time and hauls up an even more vacant or reductively aestheticized mass-reproduction of noir style. Whereas neo-noir films tend to be set in the present, shot in color, and attuned to the political temperature of the age, retro-noir films like *The Man Who Wasn't There* (Joel Coen, 2001), *Sin City* (Robert Rodriguez, 2005), and *The Good German* (Steven Soderbergh, 2006) are set in the past, shot in black-and-white, and apparently detached from contemporary passions.[48] From the perspective of genre history, however, the retro-noir film takes on a renewed significance, as it responds to and rewrites the formal dilemmas of film noir—reconceiving, in the process, the very engine of genre's historical movement. For unlike the self-cancelling alibis for Neff's voice in *Double Indemnity*, and unlike Frank's faked-out fate in the remade *Postman Always Rings Twice*, the protagonists of retro-noir have one thing in common: they

[47] Richard Martin identifies "two distinctive neo-noir traditions": "the revisionist and the formulaic, the former inspired by the *nouvelle vague*'s experimental/investigative approach to film, the latter a manifestation of renewed cinematic interest in a popular narrative pattern that had temporarily been relegated to the small screen and other art forms" (*Mean Streets and Raging Bulls: The Legacy of Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema* [Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 1997], 27).

[48] Earlier retro-noirs like *The Two Jakes* (Jack Nicholson, 1990) and *L.A. Confidential* (Curtis Hanson, 1997) display some if not all of these features as well. Most importantly, they mark the return of the voiceover with an essential difference: the voiceovers in both of these films are not grounded in any diegesis or frame story, leaving the voice open to its deathly exposure in subsequent retro-noir films.

all narrate their films, perhaps inconceivably but nevertheless quite literally, after the moment of their death.

Though not billed as such, *The Man Who Wasn't There* is yet another retelling of Cain's *Postman*.[49] But in contrast to the 1981 version, it reasserts the primacy of the voiceover and pushes the voice's proximity to death to the limits of representation. Ed narrates the film from death row, from which he has been asked to write a confession for a popular "men's magazine." But although the film thus appears to link the voiceover to a concrete situation of enunciation—we even see Ed in the physical act of writing—the connection between Ed's voice and his living body turns out to be far more tenuous. Unlike Neff's voiceover, which had to be re-attached to his physical body before he could be allowed to die onscreen, Ed's voice exceeds the moment of its diegetic capture in the jailhouse. In the film's final sequence, we see him finish writing his confession and then proceed to walk from his cell to the electric chair—while throughout the scene, Ed *continues to narrate*. He speaks right up to the moment when he is restrained in the chair, the switch is pulled, and the screen fades to white. Ed's voiceover, like Neff's, eventually catches up to the story it's telling, but unlike Neff's, Ed's voice ultimately overtakes its own alibi, producing the very paradox that *Double Indemnity* seemed so intent to avoid: Ed narrates not just the events leading up to his execution but also the event of his death itself.

The Man Who Wasn't There leaves us right on the precipice of this paradox. The end of the voiceover, the end of the film, and the moment of Ed's death occur at exactly the same time, all folded in to the same fade-to-white. Whether Ed's final words take place on the this side of his fate or on the other side is ultimately undecidable. But his voice has already been detached from its ostensible source in the written confession, and the fact that we no longer have any idea where Ed is narrating from in the final scene means that it may just as well be coming from beyond life as within in it. More to the point is that Ed himself raises this possibility. As he sits down to meet his fate, his voiceover reflects on the possibility of meeting Doris in the afterlife, where he will say to her "all those things they don't have words for here." Ed's words, having been detached moments ago from the body that was supposed to house them, are thus free to reflect on the unimaginable—or simply unspeakable—possibilities of speaking in the afterlife. The film does not directly show us what the voice of the afterlife sounds like; though what it really seems to be saying in this final scene (which raises the specter of how to distinguish between the "here" of life and its beyond) is that we might not know it even if we heard it—or if, indeed, we have been hearing it all along.

---

[49] Despite altering the names of the characters, the film hews surprisingly close to Cain's novel, retaining even smaller details like the decision to try Doris alone for the murder Ed committed, the climactic role of the car accident, Ed's ironic conviction not for the murder he did commit but for the one he didn't, and, most significantly, the revelation that Ed has been narrating all along from "the death house," where he is awaiting execution (James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice* [New York: Vintage Crime, 1992], 115). Even the altered names don't stray much farther from the origins of film noir: "Nirdlinger"—the name of the department store where Doris works and whose owner, Big Dave Brewster, Ed kills—is borrowed from Cain's *other* classic novel of the same period, *Double Indemnity*, in which Walter Huff meets, conspires with, and is killed by Phyllis Nirdlinger (so even the decision to change Cain's names in *The Man Who Wasn't There* simply repeats the change that Billy Wilder made to the names in his film version of *Double Indemnity*).

Sin City, interestingly enough, returns us to the uncomfortable link between the electric chair and unauthorized speech.[50] Its more grotesquely literal version of the same scene alerts us to the further extremes of life and death to which *Sin City* wishes to subject the speaking voice. Marv, the hero and narrator of the second of *Sin City*'s four interlinked episodes, has just on gone a rampage of revenge against the city's corrupt rulers, and he too now sits in an electric chair waiting to confront the beyond. The majority of Marv's story has been told not through diegetic dialogue but by way of voiceover; indeed, the climactic events of Marv's capture, his trial, and his imprisonment have all been explained solely via voiceover narration. The voiceover abruptly stops only at the moment he is strapped into the electric chair. The switch is pulled, his body gyrates gruesomely, and he slumps down as if dead—and only then does Marv open his mouth and mumble, "Is that all you got?" Marv's last, literally vulgar act of speech—though it does not come from the afterlife—nevertheless registers a significant reversal, marking the return of the disembodied voice to its physical body at the very moment that both life and voice appear to have been expelled from it.

The inverted causality of Marv's gruesome last words sets the stage for *Sin City*'s continual disruption of the traditional linkage between the speaking voice and the living body. This inversion is made explicit in the next section of the film, as Dwight drives out of Old Town to get rid of Jackie Boy's dead body, which is sitting next to him in the passenger seat. As they drive, Jackie Boy begins to talk to Dwight; Dwight recognizes that this must be a hallucination, but the scene is presented to us straight, with nothing hallucinatory or otherwise visually distinctive about it—just two guys talking in the front seat of a car, one of whom is a corpse. As Jackie Boy gives Dwight some rather sound advice concerning his predicament, Dwight can only respond by summing up, in voiceover, the absurdity of the situation: "I know he's dead, I know I'm imagining this, but he's absolutely right." The contradiction implied by this statement—if he's dead, can he really be "right" about anything?—returns us to the contradiction that's been lodged in the noir voiceover all along. The talking corpse is simply an extreme version of the disembodied narrator, both of whom are tasked with describing a scene that they are constitutively barred from taking part in. Jackie Boy's dead body, in other words, is just the latest manifestation of the spectral paradox of the voiceover as such, which remains unassimilable to the everyday reality it strives to depict.

From these two phantasmagoric images of deathly speech, *Sin City* arrives at the most openly paradoxical depiction of the voiceover yet. The film's climactic unveiling of the otherworldly site of the voiceover also happens to be one of the only moments in Rodriguez's otherwise panel-by-panel remake of Frank Miller's graphic novels that departs from its source material. At the end of Miller's novel *That Yellow Bastard* (book 4 of the S*in City* series), Hartigan, the hard-boiled cop who has twice saved little Nancy from the villainous child-molester Junior, kills himself. The where and the why of Hartigan's suicide are less important than the precise sequences of his goodbye. In the third-to-last panels of Miller's text, Hartigan stares directly out of the page and aims his gun at himself as he gives the goodbye speech that appears verbatim in the film: "An old man dies, a

[50] Though one could perhaps say that retro-noir's coarse fascination with sequences of capital punishment is just the return of the repressed death scenes—the gas chamber and the morgue—that were left out of Wilder's two classic noir films.

young woman lives. Fair trade. I love you, Nancy." On the next page, spread out across the two penultimate panels, we see only a black background and large white letters spelling out "BOOM." The last pages of the novel then show us Hartigan's body—not centered on the page but set all the way to the far edge of the right panel—lying in the snow, with words beneath him, written in yellow, that read "THE END."[51] Hartigan says goodbye, and then he shoots himself, the end of his life perfectly coinciding with the end of the novel.

The text is quite clear about this sequentiality. The gunshot comes at the last possible moment, after everything that needs to be said (Hartigan's confessions of forbidden love and suicidal honor) has been said. The sequence *speech, then death* is, of course, the logic of classic noir, where a character like Neff must stop talking ("sometimes people are where they can't talk") before he can die. The film version of *Sin City*, however, reverses this sequence, exposing the paradoxical heart of the voiceover. In the film, Hartigan's speech, rendered in voiceover, appears to end with the words "Fair trade." At that point, he shoots himself, and the film reverts to a kind of photonegative image (white silhouettes overlaid on a black background) that is completely animated: the draining of detail and shading along with the replacement of live, if digitized, actors with animated sketches all seem to underscore the climactic transition from life to death. But this is neither the end of the film nor the end of the voiceover. It is only after Hartigan's body has slumped down into the snow that the final sentence of his goodbye speech is voiced: "I love you, Nancy." Departing suddenly from the novel that it otherwise aims to perfectly reproduce, *Sin City* turns Hartigan's last words into a voice that continues to speak—both paradoxically and paradigmatically—after the moment of its death.

My claim is that the talking corpses (figurative and literal) of *Sin City* also represent the defining feature of retro-noir—the genre's dialectical response to both the structural disavowals of classic noir and the generic conjuration of neo-noir. In this third and most recent historical instantiation of noir, both the voiceover and the genre as a whole are revealed for what they really are: ghostly echoes, deathly reanimations, intrusions into the living present of forms from the far side of the grave. Upon its release, critics dismissed *Sin City* for precisely these reasons: that it was too nostalgic, too derivative, too dependent on older narrative forms. As J. Hoberman wrote of the film, "More than just the narrative comes full circle—in a way it's the history of pulp. All the visual ideas that the savvy comic-book artists of the '40s swiped from *Citizen Kane* return as the zombie accoutrements of pure digitalia."[52] If *Sin City* contains the entire "history of pulp," though, that is because it also concerned with the *historicity* of pulp: that is, with how genres transform and transmit themselves over time. Hoberman's reference to the "zombie"-like "return" of past aesthetic forms is already a part of *Sin City*'s generic self-consciousness: having exposed the noir narrator as a speaking corpse, the film finally recognizes noir itself as a form that, zombie-like, is forever coming back from the dead.

However, pulp history's most vengeful return is visited not upon *Sin City*—which, shot entirely in front of a blue screen, at least updates its pulp ideas through digital

---

[51] Frank Miller, *Frank Miller's Sin City Volume 4: That Yellow Bastard* (Milwaukie: Dark Horse Books, 2005), 218-223.

[52] J. Hoberman, "Dark Night Returns," review of *Sin City*, Dimension Films, *Village Voice*, March 22, 2005, http://www.villagevoice.com/2005-03-22/film/dark-night-returns.

formatting—but on *The Good German*, which attempts not simply to remake the stories and styles of classic noir but to reproduce the technological foundation of the films themselves. Soderbergh imposed a number of technical constraints on the film's production—such as the use of era-appropriate camera equipment—in order to replicate the feel of the 1940s studio film (of which *Casablanca* is the signal example). But although *The Good German* sounds like the fullest expression of what Pfeil called the nostalgic work of "slavish reconstruction," here, too, the film's complicated use of the voiceover disrupts its ostensibly simple conception of both narrative time and film history. *The Good German* takes the vexed temporality of the voiceover to its limit, bringing the paradox of the speaking dead to bear on the fragile coherence of linear narrative.

The Good German uses three separate voiceover narrators, Jake, Tully, and Lena—but each speaks only once, piping up out of nowhere and disappearing just as unexpectedly. The voiceover in *The Good German* is defined by dissonance: not just between the time of the narrative and the time of the speaking voice but also, at a more elemental level, between the content of the voice and the images over which it talks. The first voiceover comes after a series of shots that link our identification to Jake (Jake is framed by a doorway as he steps off a plane in Berlin; then reflected in the sunglasses of his driver, Tully; and finally named directly by the sign Tully is holding), which ultimately lead us to Jake's hotel room where he sets about unpacking. The voiceover begins just as Tully leaves the room, his footsteps echoing in the background as the camera remains steadily fixed on Jake. But the voice we hear speaking over the scene is not Jake's; it is Tully's. The disjunctive shock of hearing a voice we weren't expecting establishes the discontinuity that grounds *The Good German*'s use of voiceover. In this case, the disjunction is matched by the content of Tully's monologue, which reveals the gap between his own naïve appearance ("nobody bakes apple pie like my mom") and his more sinister role running the black market in Berlin: "The war was the best thing that ever happened to me. … And the best part of it was that nobody got hurt." Tully's cynically self-interested assessment of the war is obviously ironic: war is nothing but hurt. But it acquires a more explicitly ironic meaning a few scenes later, when Jakes discovers a body on the bank of the river: a corpse that turns out to be Tully's. The dramatic irony of Tully's blindness to his own fate—a victim of the very post-war situation in which "nobody got hurt"—thus echoes the structural contradiction on which it depends, which is that the future time implied by Tully's retrospective narration can only be located after the moment of his death.

At this point in the chapter, our confrontation with noir's speaking dead has surely lost its sense of novelty. What is interesting about *The Good German*, however, is that Tully's impossible narration causes problems not only for his voiceover but for the other two as well—and, as a result, for the narrative as a whole. Jake's voiceover emerges under equally dissonant circumstances, directly after he is beaten up by Tully, in a scene that seems to transform him from focalized hero into pitiable victim. This dis-identification also allows for Jake's disembodied speech. What Jake has to say is equally problematic: "Tully wouldn't be a problem, or not anything I couldn't figure out." Like the earlier ironic disjunctions—between Jake's body and Tully's voice, between Tully's sunny appearance and his sinister disposition—Jake's words contradict the image directly before our eyes: doesn't getting beaten up by Tully make him enough of a "problem"? They also pose a larger problem of narrative sequence. Does Jake's disembodied voice already know about

Tully's death? The idea that "Tully wouldn't be a problem" can be read as a canny nod to Jake's foreknowledge, the privilege of his voiceover's position at a later point in the narrative. Or it can be read as yet another blind insight, an irony that registers only for the viewer. We have no way to decide, which is another way of saying that we have no way to know from where in the narrative Jake's voice is coming from. Tully's death dislodges the voices of both Tully and Jake, neither of which can be oriented within narrative time. In *The Good German*, the voiceover, once aligned with death, becomes completely dislocated by it.

The third voiceover is spoken by Lena, whose voice, like Tully's, enters the frame the moment she leaves it. Like the previous two, her voiceover is also concerned with Tully's death, though in a more explicit and ostensibly practical way: Lena tells us that she was the one who killed Tully. Yet the revelation is stated with surprising flippancy, as if we already knew it: "I *had* to kill Tully," she says. Even this confession, then, is strangely disoriented; the emphasis on the necessity of Lena's actions takes for granted that we know what Lena did in the first place. She speaks as if the narrative has already identified her as the culprit—even though it hasn't. Lena's voiceover is thus crucially dislocated in its confrontation with Tully's death. And unlike Jake's voiceover, this dislocation is not a product of ambiguity but of self-conscious disorientation. Assuming that the plot has told us something that it hasn't yet, Lena reveals that she herself doesn't know where in time she's speaking. Even to herself, her voice bears no legible relation to narrative time. The speaking voice's irreducibility to diegetic time is confirmed by an interesting plot point: Lena never confesses her crime to any other character, so while the viewer knows the solution to the mystery, no one in the film ever figures it out. Just as the voiceover cannot be situated in narrative time, so too can the information it conveys not be incorporated into the diegetic mechanics of the plot.

We thus find ourselves far afield from the bygone days of physical alibis and frame stories. In *The Good German*, the voiceover no longer bears any relation to the time or space of the narrative. Rather, the film insists on the ironic discontinuity that governs the relation between narrative events and the disembodied, disoriented voice that speaks over them. The undead temporality of the noir genre thus finds its fullest expression in the unknowable temporal coordinates of *The Good German*'s voiceovers. If *Sin City*'s "zombie accoutrements" (to return to Hoberman's phrase) come to cinematic life in the form of the speaking dead, *The Good German*'s ostensible fetish for technical replication is similarly unsettled by the voiceover—only here, it is the linear time that separates the original from the remake, 1942 from 2006, that is undermined by a series of speaking voices that refuse the before-and-after logic of historical sequence. Reimagining the conditions of the classic voiceover that it is supposed to be imitating, *The Good German* provides the means for reading its engagement with genre in new terms, as it turns the voiceover itself into the evidence of alternate times and reverse causalities: the assertion, against the one-way flow of traditional narrative, that returning to a genre may be the best way to see it for the first time.

Repetition Compunction

Or we can put the point a different way: that the first moment of a genre may already be a return. I've suggested that the fluidity of generic time is formally (and thus far, perhaps,

only allegorically) registered in the floating voiceovers of *The Good German*. But the film begins and ends with more concrete evocations of genre's uncanny temporality. The film begins with a documentary-style montage of a bombed-out postwar Berlin. These opening scenes, however, are cut off from the diegesis not just aesthetically but historically: they were not shot by Soderbergh, but taken from previously recorded stock footage now in the studio vault. Of course, the introductory montage has an obvious intertext—*The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949) begins in exactly the same way. But the footage also complicates the dynamics of intertextuality, because it is more than a *reference* to the cinema of the 1940s; it is a direct part of that cinema. The footage was shot in 1948, by none other than Billy Wilder. Opening with stock footage compiled by the one of the founding directors of classic noir, Soderbergh's film literally incorporates the very history it sets out to imitate. The voiceover's temporal dislocation is thus only an extension of *The Good German*'s sense of genre, which allows this contemporary film to not only remake the past from an ironic distance but to integrate the materials of the past into its very mise en scène.

The move from generic imitation to historical intermixing is given a further twist at a key moment in the film's climax, when Lena—our femme fatale on the run—decides to hide out in a movie theater in, as she puts it, "the French sector." This winking juxtaposition of American movie history and the French milieu has, of course, a very special significance for film noir: for the term itself was coined not in the U.S. where the films were made but in post-war France, where a heterogeneous series of previously embargoed films were released all at once, allowing French critics to discern in them a shared style that wasn't visible to American viewers the first time around. As Marc Vernet explains, "The notion of *film noir* … was meaningful only for French spectators cut off from the American cinema during the war years and discovering in Paris during the summer of 1946, under the impetus of the Blum-Byrnes accords, a few detective films that would form the core of the genre."[53] Noir's untimely christening, its retroactive act of naming, stands as a challenge to the standard notion of an authentic, historically confined genre (and its later, watered-down imitations). In fact, noir—forged during the war years of the U.S. but founded on the post-war shores of Europe—already has to repeat itself just to come into existence. If film noir is an exemplary genre, as this chapter has claimed, that is because its origins are already compromised, its status *as* genre in question from the beginning, the very concept of its "beginning" marred by repetition.

And its founding repetition spawns others. As Naremore points out, "In effect, film noir did not become a true Hollywood genre until the Vietnam years … . At this point, *noir* had fully entered the English language, and it formed a rich discursive category that the entertainment industry could expand and adapt in countless ways."[54] From this perspective, the neo-noir of the 1970s can no longer be seen merely as a reductive revival; it is, rather, the repetition of noir that constitutes it as an American film genre for the first time. The retro-noir of the 2000s, in turn, stands as the moment at which this series of repetitions is rearticulated as a properly generic history. The shifting status of the voiceover provides the means to measure a genre that changes even as it stays the same—stays recognizable as noir—while the ghostly form of the voiceover, slowly brought to the

[53] Marc Vernet, "*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom," in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), 4.
[54] Naremore, *More than Night*, 37.

fore, bespeaks the historical logic of genre as such, which repeats to begin with and lives on only by coming back from the dead.

In this chapter, I've tried to show how the historicity of genre offers a different way of understanding the historical lives of narrative forms: a way of reading literature and film neither as simply nostalgic nor as wholly symptomatic but as overdetermined by their engagements with a past that is both distant and persistent. Yet the discerning reader might still wonder whether my concern for the historical imagination of form leaves room for actual history. In this reading of genre's formal history, what happens to a different kind of historical reading—one that would situate form in its more specific historical context?

I conclude this chapter, then, with a thought experiment: what would it look like to read the evolution of the voiceover as the overarching symptom of noir's changing relation to its immediate historical circumstances? The "chronotope" of classic noir, as Sobchack sums it up, is

> by now familiar: returning veterans trying to reinsert themselves both into the workplace and family life after a long absence; working women who had realized themselves as economically independent during the war being remanded, not always willingly, to the hearth and motherhood; official rhetoric establishing the family unit and the suburban home as the domestic matrix of democracy even as divorce rates and personal debt escalated; economic and social ambivalence about the future deepening as the home front was reconfigured from a wartime economy that promoted the social unity of production and self-sacrifice to a peacetime economy emphasizing the privatized pleasures of consumption.[55]

Classic noir, in Sobchack's view, responds to the wartime disruption of the homestead by reconstituting "the privileged spaces of wartime and postwar American culture … nightclubs, cocktail lounges, bars, anonymous hotel or motel rooms, boardinghouses, cheap roadhouses, and diners" (156). Taken together, these spaces constitute "noir's retroactive fantasy of home" (139). The genre's ideological investment in "actually lived cultural spaces" (166) also helps explain classic noir's anxious consolidation of the voiceover. What Copjec called the "radical heterogeneity" of the voiceover is both established and buffered by its grounding in physical space—whether the space of Keyes's office, or Lydecker's radio booth, or Norma's movie set. If the threat of the voiceover is the risk of its puncturing the homogeneity of diegetic space, classic noir responds by obsessively returning the voice to its culturally-inscribed spatial origins.

By contrast (and as I gestured to earlier), neo-noir's dispersal of the voiceover indexes a different cultural anxiety. In the post-Watergate era, the noir voiceover no longer represents the suturing fantasy of "lived cultural space" but the disappointed desire for total knowledge; the unverifiable logic of conspiracy thinking. Keeping its heroes alive in order to subject them to their own ethical and epistemological failings, neo-noir swaps

[55] Vivian Sobchack, "Lounge Time: Postwar Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 131.

the domestic ideology of the post-war moment for the paranoid logic of the 1970s. Jameson's famous description of "totality as conspiracy" neatly accommodates the neo-noir films of the period in just this way, as the disappearance of the voiceover speaks to a refusal of total narrative explanation.[56]

Finally, the fate of the voiceover in retro-noir can likewise be articulated according to the chronotope of its late-twentieth century moment—which here may be less ideological than technological. In his book *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema*, Garrett Stewart argues that the increasing digitization of film production in the 1990s creates a series of narrative transformations that separate it from the cinema that came before. For Stewart, the essential change that occurs in the move from "filmic cinema" to "digital cinema" is a change in the representation of time—a change, that is, in the recognition of how the medium (first the filmstrip, then the digital pixel) embodies temporality.[57] Stewart goes on to explore "how a digitally intermixed cinema might realign the fit between photogrammatic seriality and the psychic sequencing of plot" (4). And one of the things he finds (in a variety of different films) is the same paradox we've already discovered: "Heroes or heroines … hunt down the mystery of ghostliness, or other related anomalies of embodiment, only to find that they have exposed the secret of their own previous and until-now unrealized murders" (89). The "posthumous self-specters" (16) that Stewart identifies as a hallmark of digital cinema's paradoxical temporality are the same speaking dead who populate *The Man Who Wasn't There*, *Sin City*, and *The Good German*. For Stewart, however, the "trick endings" of digital cinema are not a historical outgrowth of the richly-layered political plots of the 1970s, but their utter negation. In "Hollywood's ontological gothic," Stewart concludes,

> any question of a suspect totality is shifted from social or geopolitical to strictly cinematic structure, from complot to plot. In the process, these latest Hollywood variants of the fantastic often train viewers, from the first shot forward, to put aside all vestigial unease about logical contradictions or incoherence and accept, however passively, the given for the actual. In this, as it happens, they may well offer cinema's compensatory answer, as institution, to their apparent antithesis in "reality TV." (103-104)

Stewart's final jab provides the final piece of the puzzle: as representatives of the digital gothic, retro-noir films are also easily exhibited as evidence of the contemporary's aesthetic exhaustion, whereby the films' depiction of spectral time becomes the alibi (if not the allegory) for their otherwise mindless repetition of a once-authentic genre.

Safeguard of domestic space. Signpost of paranoia's limits. Specter of digital time. These historicist accounts of the voiceover are indispensible for understanding the changing cultural conditions that cultivate film noir. But I'm not sure they tell the whole story. What historicism lacks in these cases is a diachronic axis. The voiceover may be different things at different times; so what ties them together? What connects these diverse historical moments in the name of a continuous genre? What authorizes us to call all of

---

[56] See Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, 9-84.
[57] Garrett Stewart, *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 3.

these films "noir"? The synchronic construct of the chronotope misses the very thing that makes genre so formally generative and so theoretically significant: its capacity to exceed its synchronic moment, to extend across time's historical confines. To read the voiceover as noir's way of grappling with the paradoxes of genre's spectral times and afterlives is, I've tried to show, to offer more than empty formalism. On the contrary, the voiceover serves as noir's record of its own generic dynamics: an inscription of the temporal problems that come with bringing a genre back to life. The contradictory lives of the speaking dead are the very things that make noir hang together across history—and not just because they provide a formal allegory for genre's ghostly returns, but also because they represent the concrete cinematic form that noir continually returns to. Noir's separate historical phases are brought together under the spectral sign of the speaking dead. They are the spirits that constitute noir's generic spirit; the echoes that ensure that, no matter how else history changes them, noir films ultimately speak in the same voice.

Genre thus provides the grounds for reading history on a larger scale—across moments and in motion. And this shift in scale is ultimately a way to broaden our perspective on the contemporary. What I've only been able to imply in this chapter, and what will become explicit in later ones, is that these two perspectives—continuity and contemporariness—are dialectically inseparable and mutually illuminating. At the very least, such an enlightened perspective on the present should already be clear from the way I've tried to reframe retro-noir. This final phase of the genre is the one most often dismissed as degraded and derivative, taken as an emblem of the imaginative failure of contemporary culture (and between *Chinatown* and *Sin City*, is there even really a choice?). Stewart is a largely unflappable reader of the most pulpy popular films, but even he remains suspicious of the capacity for digital cinema's "phantom temporality" to represent and respond to "the very here and now of contemporary cultural formation."[58] Yet the illusory time of contemporary film—and, ultimately, the elusive time of the contemporary itself—reappears when we return to the concept of genre. For the impossible, spectral time of the "ontological gothic" is also the logic of genre's historical movement: the lived time by which past forms return from the dead. So the "phantom temporality" of recent cinema may really be the ghostly means by which genre breathes life into the present. In this way, retro-noir portrays a contemporary that is neither out of ideas nor outside of time. On the contrary, this most recent return of noir reflects a contemporary that has given up the illusion of radical novelty in order to affirm a revived connection to a past that, we might yet discover, has only been playing dead.

[58] Stewart, *Framed Time*, 111, 106.

The Privilege of Contemporary Life: Periodization in the Bret Easton Ellis Decades

TWO

Only the Utopian future is a place of truth in this sense, and the privilege of contemporary life and of the present lies not in its possession, but at best in the rigorous judgment it may be felt to pass on us.

FREDRIC JAMESON
"Marxism and Historicism"

He's helping define the decade, baby.

BRET EASTON ELLIS
Glamorama

Presents and Absence

Is it possible to periodize the present? The widening net of globalization and its consequent fragmentation of everyday life have made it increasingly difficult to grasp the historical significance of the contemporary, and so we find ourselves, as Fredric Jameson observes, "in a situation in which we are not even sure there is so coherent a thing as an 'age', or zeitgeist or system or 'current situation' any longer."[1] Yet the difficulty of articulating the coherence of the "current situation" may also reveal a more categorical tension between history and the present. After all, the ability to organize historical events into a narrative of successive epochs or ages—a process of historical retrospection generally called periodization—is logically unavailable to the present: in the immediacy or the embeddedness of the day-to-day, there is no place from which to make the external and totalizing judgment of history. This is why, Jameson explains, "the present is not a historical period: it ought not to be able to name itself and characterize its own originality."[2] Lauren Berlant and Harry Harootunian have recently pushed the point further, making the case that we ought to separate the present entirely from the totalizing imperatives of periodization. The present, Harootunian writes, breaks "the spell cast by the phrases 'our modernity', and 'history itself' "; awakening a history that is otherwise "external and dead" requires "an ontology … sensitive to or accountable for the durational present."[3] Berlant similarly recasts "the problem of writing the history of the present" as "a problem of affect": by resisting periodization, the present becomes a space in which history can be immediately "sensed" or experienced.[4] For both Berlant and Harootunian, the present opens a fissure in the official life of historical periods, a suspended moment in which time is no longer narrated and manipulated from a distance but felt and "acted upon" from right up close.[5]

[1] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, xi.
[2] Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), 25.
[3] Harry Harootunian, "Remembering the Historical Present," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Spring 2007): 484, 492, 494.
[4] Lauren Berlant, "Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event," *American Literary History* 20.4 (Winter 2008): 845.
[5] Harootunian, "Remembering the Historical Present," 494.

A durational, unperiodized present, however, risks relegating history to the past. Between proximity and distance, embeddedness and retrospection, are we really left to choose between a present without history and a history without the present? To be sure, it is not so easy to separate them. When Jameson suggests that the "ultimate dilemma" of historical thinking "turns on the status of the present and the place of the subject in it,"[6] he is echoing a long line of twentieth-century thinkers who have insisted on the centrality of the present to our concept of history—from Georg Lukács, who writes, "Without a felt relationship to the present, a portrayal of history is impossible,"[7] to Hayden White, who suggests that there is no "reason why we ought to study things under the aspect of their past-ness rather than under the aspect of their present-ness."[8] The perspective of the present, these accounts agree, makes history possible. But what makes possible a history of the present? The beginning of a more dialectical answer appears in an oft-misunderstood maxim from Jameson's *Singular Modernity*: "We cannot not periodize."[9] For Jameson, periodization is not the only meaningful way to view history, but it may be an unavoidable starting point. No matter how energetically poststructuralist theory has resisted fitting the "endless series of sheer facts and unrelated events" into a single narrative of historical development, the impulse to periodize inevitably reasserts itself (29): periodization returns to the present in the form of an "unauthorized self-affirmation" (25). So it would be premature to radically separate the present from history and from the paradoxes of historical self-reflection. While it may be impossible to periodize the present with any certainty, it is also impossible not to try.

And try we have. The last several decades have seen no shortage of attempts to give name to the spirit of the present age.[10] The paradoxical force of Jameson's maxim is most powerfully demonstrated by the vexed career of what is surely the most stubbornly persistent and problematic periodizing term of the last half-century: postmodernism. What does the term refer to? Is it a literary aesthetic or a historical period? A philosophical premise or a political platform? "The postmodern," Perry Anderson writes, was both "common referent and competing discourse": "It pointed beyond what had become of modernism; but in what direction, there was no consensus, only a set of oppositions … ; and in what arts or sciences, only disconnected interests and criss-crossing opinions."[11] What is interesting about the problems of postmodernism, in other words, are not the details of the various debates over what the word means but the fact of the debates themselves—why, in general, we have never been able to agree on what period we're in. The essence of the categorizing term "postmodern" is that it has never seemed adequate to the task of categorization. The countless books published on the topic in the last two decades more often than not begin with anxious reflections on the term's inadequacy.

---

[6] Fredric Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism," in *The Ideologies of Theory* (London: Verso, 2008), 478.
[7] Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 53.
[8] Hayden White, "The Burden of History," in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 48.
[9] Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 29.
[10] A list of these names would certainly include Adorno and Horkheimer's "culture industry," Debord's "society of the spectacle," Jameson's "late capitalism," Hard and Negri's "Empire," and the recent explosion of various "posts" (post-historical, post-contemporary, post-9/11).
[11] Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 2002), 44-45.

"Postmodernism is an exasperating term," admits one, because it "is several things at once."[12] Another notes, "The concept of postmodernism … has come to suffer from semantic fuzziness. One cannot abstain from using the concept, but at the same time one does not know how to define it precisely."[13]

But this is precisely the rub: one knows the term is fuzzy, exasperating, or inadequate, and yet one feels compelled to use it anyway. "Yet *another* book on postmodernism?" begins 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?"[14] Whatever the justification for talking about postmodernism, whenever the debates were exhausted, the term returns—the book, embarrassed or unpersuaded by its topic, still gets written, and those "exhausted" debates continue to lurch ahead. As Josh Toth and Neil Brooks see it, postmodernism was coming to an end almost as soon it began: "In the mid to late-eighties … a number of events seemed to herald the end of postmodernism."[15] But this end was heralded again by the epochal events of the 1990s (the fall of the Berlin wall), and again by the events of the 2000s (the fall of the twin towers)—and yet the end of postmodernism has never finally managed to arrive. Assessing the periodizing discourse of "post-9/11," Walter Benn Michaels perfectly captures the paradoxical fate of postmodernism as a moment that's over and ever-living, unavoidable and insufficient, all at once: "Although a good many people described the attack as marking the end of what they called postmodernism—claiming that, in its face, no one could remain a postmodernist—the truth is that the response to it marked the complete triumph of postmodernism, or, as it should, perhaps, in its most purely theoretical form, be called, posthistoricism."[16] Michaels insists on the continued relevance of the postmodern and, at the same time, feels compelled to qualify or rename it ("or, as it should … be called"), suggesting that the concept of the postmodern is both inescapable and still not quite right. Postmodernism is a periodizing concept that seems only to operate under erasure, to predict in advance the moment when it will cease to apply; and yet it continues to operate nonetheless.

Living under the sign of postmodernity has thus meant being unable to shake the suspicion that the very term "postmodernity" is not a sufficient name for lived conditions. For Jameson, our distrust of the postmodern may be the mark of the more general aversion to periodization that defines our age (an age "in which we are not even sure there is so coherent a thing as an 'age' "). But there is something else at work here. While the anxieties about the failings of postmodernism as a periodizing term inevitably connect back to anxieties about the failings of the postmodern period,[17] the uncertainties surrounding the term also tell us something about the historical status of the present itself.

---

[12] Hans Bertens, *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History* (London: Routledge, 1995), 3.
[13] Stefan Morawski, *The Troubles With Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1996), 1.
[14] Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 1.
[15] Josh Toth and Neil Brooks, "Introduction: A Wake and Renewed?" in *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, ed. Josh Toth and Neil Brooks (New York: Rodopi Press, 2007), 2-3.
[16] Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 181.
[17] Consider the first sentence of Jameson's epochal *Postmodernism*: "It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (ix).

The oscillation between self-reflection and self-doubt, between trying and failing to periodize the present, is, it seems to me, more than a symptom of postmodern culture. It is also an index of the paradoxical historicity of the present. If postmodernism is, as Jameson modestly claims, simply "an attempt to think the present historically,"[18] we would do well to focus not only on the corrective "historical" part but on the contingent nature of the "attempt"—an attempt that is never fully successful, and so reveals itself less as a historical certainty than as a placeholder for the present's inevitable historical shortfall. As one attempt to name the present, the concept of postmodernism carries within it its own incompleteness or contingency, anxiously shifting its boundaries and shuffling its features so as to reveal the irreducible gap that lies between the experience of the present and the elaboration of the period.

This gap is already apparent in some of the best known accounts of twentieth-century life. Henri Lefebvre's three-volume *Critique of Everyday Life* was, he acknowledged, a less than ideal solution to the practical limits that publication poses to writing a complete history of the changing present: "Two ways of studying daily life and its alterations might be envisioned: either a periodical publication or a series of works over time attempting regular updates. The first, doubtless preferable, was not feasible for material (editorial) reasons."[19] Horkheimer and Adorno were equally aware that *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—which aimed to provide a thorough account of "social phenomena of the 1930s and 1940s in America"—could not, by definition, keep up with the changing life of the present.[20] Twenty-two years after the publication of *Dialectic*, they admit (in the preface to the 1969 edition) that "to bring the text fully up to date with the current situation would have amounted to nothing less than writing a new book" (xii). Here, in compact form, are all the problems of historicizing the present: periodization cannot keep pace with the "up to date"; history can never fully answer to the absolute demands of the "new"; what is current about the "current situation" will soon be the very thing that fixes it in the past. For Horkheimer and Adorno, as for Lefebvre, the present is marked above all by its capacity for change, and so any "systematic theory" of the present period turns out to be impossible: "to construct a systematic theory which would do justice to the present economic and political circumstances is a task which, for objective and subjective reasons, we are unable to perform today" (xiii). This is why the oft forgotten subtitle of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is indispensable: a theory of the present can only ever constitute a set of philosophical fragments.[21]

This chapter will explore what kind of history such fragments of the present can add up to. Here, then, I want "the problem of writing the history of the present" to *remain* a problem—and to remain *that* problem and not become another one—in order to argue that accounting for the "disrespected"[22] category of the present demands neither drastically de-historicizing the present nor hastily historicizing it, but, rather, attending to

---

[18] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.
[19] Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume III: From Modernity to Modernism (Towards a Metaphilosophy of Daily Life)*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2005), 9.
[20] Max Horkheimer & Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xiii.
[21] Most fragmentary of all will be the section most directly tied to "culture today": "Still more than the others, the section on the culture industry is fragmentary" (*Dialectic*, 94, xiii).
[22] Berlant, "Intuitionists," 848.

the historical contradictions it mediates. Contrary to the claims of Berlant and Harootunian, the present remains a fundamentally historical category; yet contrary to those critics who have remained in thrall to the idea of the postmodern (whether to bury or resurrect it), it is a historical category unlike any other. The changing contours of what is perpetually called "contemporary life" make history a constant negotiation between embedded experience and external judgment. Demanding an act of historical self-reflection that is both "unauthorized" and unavoidable, the present pushes the limits of periodization not to repudiate it but rather to reveal how a truly dialectical sense of history emerges in the brief moments where periodization ceases to apply.

Ten Years, Give or Take

How does the present adopt a self-reflexive historical perspective in the first place? Berlant, Harootunian, and Jameson have all approached the question as a problem of literary form, and as a matter, more specifically, of the mechanics of genre. For Berlant, the affective present is best rendered through the "you-are-thereness" of the historical novel, which, she claims, aims to make history *feel* present to its readers (847). Yet it is hard to shake the feeling that looking back on the past and looking around at the present name different historical procedures. Berlant's account of the historical novel is thus countered by Jameson, for whom the science fiction novel displaces the historical novel in "a relationship of kinship and inversion all at once," shifting the classic historical gaze of "Sir Walter Scott's apparatus" to the vicissitudes of the actually existing present.[23] Science fiction obtains a view of the present by imagining itself already looking back on it from the future (giving the genre the same utopian cast described by Jameson in this chapter's opening epigraph). Discussing a 1959 novel by Philip K. Dick, Jameson argues that its future perspective (the novel is set in 1997) distinguishes the authentic process of history, "the realities of the 1950s," from "the representation of that rather different thing, the 'fifties,' " the allegorical summing up of the decade through its most visible stereotypes (281). Sci-fi's speculative futures demystify those stereotypes. But having leapt forward into the future, the genre becomes less equipped to explain how the present constructs its self-image to begin with; the self-reflexive impression of "the fifties," no matter how ideologically mystified, nonetheless raises the central and as yet unanswered question of how contemporary experience gets molded into the shape of a historical period. Harootunian, in turn, seeks to return to the matter of representing "the *actuality* of the everyday as it was being lived and experienced in the large industrialized cities."[24] But as Harootunian acknowledges, a literature "privileging the details of everydayness" is constitutively unstable, undercut by a "unity of the present" that is both "minimal" and "precarious" (4). Lacking the contextualizing power of an outside perspective, the everyday life of the present has no clear beginning or end, and thus threatens to expand, unbridled, into eternity.

At the heart of what both Berlant and Harootunian call "the historical present" is a tension that none of these genres is quite able to resolve. As a period, the present names

[23] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 284-5

[24] Harry Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 3.

both an immersion in everyday life and an ad hoc historical totality, and so requires a narrative form capable of representing the paradoxical intersection between experience and retrospection. I want, then, to propose a genre more uniquely suited to the present's historical paradoxes: the "decade novel." The decade is the preeminently "stereotypical" or degraded version of periodization; yet it is also, as Steven Biel suggests, "a standard feature of popular historical understanding in the United States."[25] Indeed, the inadequacy or artificiality of the decade as a form of history is an explicit part of its periodizing appeal—as Biel observes, "It has become increasingly common in these journalistic histories [of individual decades] to hint at problems in writing about decades and then to ignore such caveats completely" (260n1). In its strange mix of the popular and the historical, the commodified and the self-conscious, the decade offers an ideal narrative mode for the present to try—and, by definition, to fail—to imagine itself as a historical period.[26] As a genre, the decade novel stages the futile confrontation between the narration of everyday life and the allegorical expression of a period.

Navigating the distance between everyday details and historical wholes, the decade novel also compels us to reassess realism's center of gravity. Classic accounts of the realist novel have focused, understandably, on the tension between language and reality or the problem of representing "the real"[27]—on what it means, in Amy Kaplan's words, to "produce a social reality that can be recognized as 'the way things are'."[28] But there is a second tension at the heart of the realist project: "the way things are" is never how they'll be for long. Realism, Kaplan thus suggests, is a genre under constant threat by "the sense of the world changing under the realists' pens" (9). Realism's index of imminent change—its built-in friction between representing the present and watching it pass away—directly confronts us with the problem of what it means to periodize the unfinished present. Jameson argues that this is where realism inevitably runs aground: "To acknowledge the imminence of some thoroughgoing revolution in the social order itself is at once to disqualify those materials of the present which are the building blocks of narrative realism … Realism can accommodate images of social decadence and disintegration … but not this quite different sense of the ontology of the present as a swift-running stream."[29] Yet it is precisely the threat or the specter of a flowing, liquid present—and the nascent sense of historical self-consciousness its tides produce—that shapes the realist project. The

---

[25] Steven Biel, "Lewis Allen's 'Only Yesterday' and the Idea of the Decade," *Journal of American Studies* 25.2 (August 1991): 260.

[26] It perhaps goes to show just how "deeply ingrained in the historical consciousness of Americans" (Biel, 259) the decade is that one of the most theoretically ambitious readings of a decade in recent years, Jameson's "Periodizing the 60s"—which has much to say about the possibilities and limits of periodization generally—says nothing at all about its own reliance on the category of the decade. (See "Periodizing the 60s," in *The Ideologies of Theory* [London: Verso, 2008]: 482-515.)

[27] George Levine, for instance, explains that "my focus will be on the struggle inherent in any 'realist' effort—the struggle to avoid the inevitable conventionality of language in pursuit of the unattainable unmediated reality" ("The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley," in *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon [Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000], 617).

[28] Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 8.

[29] Fredric Jameson, "Afterword: A Note on Literary Realism," in *A Concise Companion to Realism*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 281.

unaccountable forces of contemporary history have been part of realism from the beginning.[30] Thus, in Erich Auerbach's famous account, Balzac's "*histoire sociale* is not a matter of 'history' in the usual sense—not of scientific investigation of transactions which have already occurred, but of comparatively free invention; not, in short, of *history* but of *fiction*; is not, above all, a matter of the past but of the contemporary present, reaching back at most only a few years or a few decades."[31] This "unusual" relation to the immediate present and recent past ultimately demands a new way of thinking historically. As Auerbach puts it, realism, rejecting the "romantic Historism" of Scott, directly "conceives the present as history" (477, 480). But as *what kind* of history? One of the "distinguishing characteristics of modern realism," according to Auerbach, is that "everyday occurrences are accurately and profoundly set in a definite period of contemporary history" (485). Yet realism is also, as Auerbach himself shows, built on the foundation of a constitutively *indefinite* present, the recognition "that the social base upon which [one] lives is not constant for a moment but is perpetually changing through convulsions of the most various kinds" (459). So even as the present offers the realist novel a solid or "accurate" historical backdrop, its own history remains "fluid" and in flux (491). Here, then, we come to the central paradox of the realist novel, which Auerbach expresses but does not quite confess: how does one depict "a definite period of contemporary history" as something that is also "not constant for a moment"? How can the present be both concretely historical and "perpetually changing"?

This is the problem, concealed at the heart of realist representation, that the decade novel brings to the surface. What kind of "definite period" can the present ever really be? The decade provides an answer that, in its very deficiency, reveals the limits of the question. "The claim for the intelligibility of the decade as a field of study," James Chandler argues, "is precisely its status as a time without a movement."[32] But this is at best, Chandler says, an "ironized basis for … periodization," as the self-contained or completed status of the decade both represses and exposes the actual mutable form of the present (59). In the ironic form of the decade novel, the problem of representing reality becomes inextricable from representing it as history, and the successful depiction of "the way things are" is framed by the failure to describe the historical process that is irrevocably changing those things as we speak.

In the pages that follow, I examine how the genre of the decade novel is elaborated in the work of Bret Easton Ellis and J.M. Coetzee. Ellis's *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* are both obsessive catalogs of their cultural presents, intensely devoted to recording the micro-history of everyday life in, respectively, the 1980s and 1990s, while Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* attempts to sum up political life in the 2000s. Yet all three novels have an unusually complex relation to the "details of everydayness" they unrelentingly process. Going beyond the traditions of documentary realism they clearly invoke, these decade

---

[30] Jameson puts the point a somewhat different way, noting that realism itself will inevitably become the literary historian's own kind of historical material: "One can, to be sure, argue that all great realist novels are in some sense already historical ones … even if they are not officially about past time, [they] eventually become historical documents on the very strength of their—dare I say it?—realism" ("Afterword," 281).
[31] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 480.
[32] James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 59.

novels undertake to raise everyday details to the level of history: the objects and ideologies of everyday life are reinterpreted as historical metonyms or allegories that transform the present, however precariously, into a self-contained period. That compressed image of contemporary history inevitably takes the form of the decade. Mediating between immersion in the present and observation of the past, between the affects of history and the forms of narrative, the genre of the decade novel traces the paradox of contemporariness back to a single source: the challenge of periodizing a present that is changing under our feet.

You will, by now, have noted a somewhat egregious case of false advertising in this chapter's title. The periodizing label "the Bret Easton Ellis decades" may first call to mind the particular years of the 1980s and 1990s, during which the spectacular and excessive consumerism of postmodern culture that is the well-known subject (and oft-cited symptom) of Ellis's writings reached its pinnacle. But an entirely reasonable rejoinder must be made: can Bret Easton Ellis, whether as canonical literary chronicler of life under late capitalism or as "Brat Pack" celebrity author personally indulging capitalism's excesses, single-handedly encapsulate a decade? Of course not. It is, in other words, impossible to avoid the arbitrariness that underpins every attempt to "sum up" or brand the present as a decade.[33] To the extent that I've courted this arbitrariness in my title, it is only to reveal it as such, to show how the idea of the decade so easily comes undone. My commitment to the notion of the "Bret Easton Ellis decades" is a commitment primarily to its inadequacy, to its shortfalls and blind spots—if nothing else, to its obvious failure to account for even *the other author* this chapter will be about. The "unauthorized" inclusion of Coetzee in a chapter on the "Ellis decades" will, I hope, only strengthen the arguments I intend the latter phrase to make: that the decade's attempt to freeze the present is the very thing that sets it in motion; that slicing up history is just the first step toward reassembling it; that a decade, above all, never lives up to its name.

The larger aim of title and chapter alike, then, is not to make a periodizing claim—not to suggest that the challenge of the historical present simply becomes visible *during* certain decades—but instead to show how the limits of periodization make way for the possibilities of the literary: how the problems of the decade are worked out in the form of the decade novel. The historical logic of the decade ruptures realist narrative by demanding two incompatible perspectives at once—yet realism's reassertion of continuity

[33] Indeed, the very practice of naming decades or other periods after individual authors is itself thoroughly passé. In "The Age of 'The Age of' Is Over," Robert J. Griffin claims exactly what his title says: that we "have begun to displace the mode of periodization that subsumes an age under the aegis of one figure" ("The Age of 'The Age of' Is Over: Johnson and New Versions of the Late Eighteenth Century," in "Periodization Cutting up the Past," special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* 62.4 [December 2001]: 377). As Griffin explains, "The Age of Johnson is over because the age in which most critics felt comfortable talking in that way is over" (381). The almost absurd inadequacy of reducing a heterogeneous and multifarious historical moment to a single name can now give way to a new practice of literary history, which, Griffin argues, "would aim toward recovering a sense of contemporaneity, by which I mean an intuition of the way that contemporaries impinge on each other in a given cultural and material situation" (391). The idea that the singular name of a given period will always leave out a great many other names that shaped it is part of what I want to explore with the phrase "the Ellis decades." As for the jarring doubleness introduced by Griffin's use of the word "contemporaries" to mean the people who make up the past, I reflect on the multiple meanings of "contemporary" in Chapter 4.

in turn exposes the critical limits of the decade. So the decade novel not only acts out the imaginative leap the present takes to turn itself into a historical period; it also discloses the inevitable inadequacy of the object that results from trying to squeeze a living present into the decade's pre-fabricated mold. Ultimately, I argue, the short circuits of the decade allow for new reflections on the question of contemporary history. Beyond both the divided perspective of the decade and the self-referential blindness of a perpetually unfolding present (the eternity of "presentism" that has been linked to the ideologies of both modernism and postmodernism[34]), the effort to periodize the present discloses the structure of continuity that makes history both coherent and durable. Out of the confrontation between periodization and the present, history reemerges as *longue durée*, and the afterimage of the dislocated decade becomes, finally, the continually retold story of capitalism itself.

The Style of the Times

American Psycho and *Glamorama* are best known for their graphic representations of sexual violence and gratuitous consumerism—as Laura Findlay points out, much critical work on *American Psycho* has gone so far as to "brand the novel as pornography."[35] But the bright lights of Ellis's spectacular content have tended to distract critics from the formal problems posed by the texts, which concern in equal measure the history of the present and the idea of the decade. If Ellis's decade novels are known for anything, it is their virtually encyclopedic obsession with period detail: "Price is wearing a six-button wool and silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie and leather wing tips by Fratelli Rossetti."[36] Jameson sees the obsession with fashion as a symptom of the failure to think historically: postmodernism can only "[approach] the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image, and '1930s-ness' or '1950s-ness' by the attributes of fashion."[37] But the nostalgic negation of history does not fully account for *American Psycho*'s investment in the everyday. The novel is not aimed at "approaching the past" but at historicizing the present. As a description of the concreteness of the present, Ellis's gloss on the style of the times cuts two ways, undoing the "stylistic connotation" of a more

[34] Harootunian suggests that the "growing conviction in the autonomy of the present from past and future [is] variously called presentism and modernism" ("Remembering" 480). But paradoxically, the "presentist" disconnection from history has also been a central claim in accounts of postmodernism. Timothy Bewes, for instance, describes the particularity of the postmodern condition as "a morbid fearful refusal of antagonism or confrontation in a pitiful attempt to preserve the present" (*Cynicism and Postmodernity*, [London: Verso, 1997], 7); Jameson similarly defines it as "the way our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past, has begun to live in a perpetual present and in a perpetual change that obliterates traditions" ("Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster [New York: The New Press, 1998], 143-144). The undecided position of presentism as a periodizing feature of both modernism and postmodernism is a first indication of the continuity that, I argue, haunts the category of the present.

[35] Laura Findlay, "Mary Harron's *American Psycho*: Female Subversion or Perspective?" in *Sub/versions: Cultural Status, Genre and Critique*, ed. Pauline MacPherson et. al. (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), 80.

[36] Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 5.

[37] Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 19.

familiarly nostalgic mode. The "attributes of fashion" in *American Psycho* do not replace a more authentic history; instead, they capture the fetishized fashion-consciousness that characterizes the historical specificity of "the eighties" as such. For Ellis's novel, "what are people wearing?" is the question through which the period of the 1980s defines itself. The authentic history of the 80s, in other words, *is* its superficiality.

Glamorama does nearly the same thing for the 1990s, only with fame-obsessed fashion models instead of social-climbing investment bankers and celebrity names instead of designer brands:

> "Check the Cs for dinner." …
>
> "Naomi Campbell, Helena Christensen, Cindy Crawford, Sheryl Crow, David Charvet, Courteney Cox, Harry Connick, Jr., Francesco Clemente, Nick Constantine, Zoe Cassavetes, Nicolas Cage, Thomas Calabro, Crisi Conway, Bob Collacello, Whitfield Crane, John Cusack, Dean Cain, Jim Courier, Roger Clemens, Russell Crowe, Tia Carrere and Helena Bonham Carter—but I'm not sure if she should be under B or C."[38]

Two historicizing operations are once again visible here. The avalanche of names underscores each one's built-in obsolescence: the farther a reader gets from the contemporary sphere of the novel, the more unrecognizable these names become. Yet ultimately the spirit of the decade resides not in the content of the names but in their pathological repetition. The 90s are expressed not simply as a mosaic of historically specific names, but as the self-contained period in which the celebrity name itself became the unit of measurement for social space. *Glamorama* sums up the 90s almost exactly as *American Psycho* sums up the 80s, only this decade is defined not by what it wears but by whom it knows.

Both novels make the stylistic vagaries of daily life stand for an entire decade. But while the decade novel initially promises to bring together the immediacy of the present with the distant judgment of periodization, the genre's narrative instability unwittingly demonstrates the logical gaps that the decade's hasty synthesis remains unable to bridge. Early in *American Psycho*, there is an apparently routine description of a social call: "I shiver and hand her my black wool Giorgio Armani overcoat and she takes it from me, carefully airkissing my right cheek, then she performs the same exact movements on Price while taking his Armani overcoat. The new Talking Heads on CD plays softly in the living room" (10). Once again each detail functions as an ideological allegory for the decade. But as it plays softly in the background (in a historically new format, no less), the CD calls attention to a somewhat different way of periodizing the present. Fashion provides both the immediate backdrop for Patrick Bateman's first-person narration and the symbolic counterpoint to its increasingly graphic episodes of violence; Patrick's interest in pop music, however, is deliberately set apart from his present-tense narrative and its moral provocations. The novel is broken into short sections whose banal titles denote the time, place, or activity that the sections describe: "Lunch with Bethany," "Office," "Thursday," "Video Store then D'Agostino's." Eventually we come to a section titled "Genesis," which

[38] Bret Easton Ellis, *Glamorama* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 8-9.

is, as it fairly warns, a laboriously detailed discography of Phil Collins's band, composed in the enthusiastic voice of the music journalist and intent on aligning the shape of the decade with the band's artistic trajectory—making good on the claim that Genesis is indeed "the best, most exciting band to come out of England in the 1980s" (136). The alternative sense of history first hinted at by the "new"-ness of the Talking Heads CD is made explicit in the "Genesis" section (which cannot help, of course, but already name something of a beginning): Patrick's musical encapsulation of the 80s depends on a narrative of development and on a consciousness of historical change.

Describing the album *Invisible Touch*, which he calls "the group's undisputed masterpiece," Patrick relies on the dialectical perspective of periodization: "It's an epic meditation on intangibility, at the same time it deepens and enriches the meaning of the preceding three albums" (135). The two independent clauses are thrown off-balance by a missing word, and the resulting cleavage, which denies both the progressive temporality of the conjunction ("*but* at the same time") and the simultaneity of comparison ("at the same time *as*"), reveals the two irreconcilable positions that *Invisible Touch* occupies as a historical and historicizable object. The album is first described on its own terms and according to its narrow thematic content (its "meditation on intangibility"); but *Invisible Touch* bears a different, cumulative meaning with respect to "the preceding three albums," which it "deepens and enriches" only from the retroactive distance of its own subsequent development. As Genesis's previous albums are rearticulated as the prehistory of *Invisible Touch*, the "presentist" experience of history as immediate content becomes paired with a properly historical perspective able to organize objects retrospectively in changing relation to each other across time.

Ultimately, the newly available position of historical judgment enables Patrick to view the 80s as a fully formed period:

> I've been a big Genesis fan ever since the release of their 1980 album, *Duke*. Before that I didn't really understand any of their work … all the albums before *Duke* seemed too artsy, too intellectual. It was *Duke* (Atlantic; 1980), where Phil Collins' presence became more apparent, and the music got more modern, the drum machine more prevalent and the lyrics started getting less mystical and more specific (maybe because of Peter Gabriel's departure), and complex, ambiguous studies of loss became, instead, smashing first-rate pop songs that I gratefully embraced. (133)

Patrick's excursus neatly encodes the cultural transformations stereotypically associated with everyday life in the 1980s: emotional emptiness (banishing the "ambiguous" or "complex"), the omnipresence of technology ("the drum machine [became] more prevalent"), the replacement of artist with celebrity ("Phil Collins' presence became more apparent"), the blurring of art and commodity ("first-rate pop songs")—all changes that are necessary, Patrick claims, for him to embrace the band as continuous with, and finally synecdoche for, his own historical present. Patrick's modest explanation of how he comes to "understand" Genesis is thus a surprisingly apt account of epochal break, which separates his experience of "1980" from everything that came "before that" (what Patrick appropriately refers to, in the same paragraph, as "the 1970s"). From the aesthetic

differences that index the progression from one Genesis album to another, Patrick extrapolates the sense of epochal transformation necessary to make the band representative of a single, discrete decade. A mere allegory of historical break becomes the formal grounds for periodizing the present.

Two more "musical interludes" appear in the novel, under the titles "Whitney Houston" and "Huey Lewis and the News," which, along with "Genesis," are the only moments in the text where Patrick imagines the 1980s as a historical totality. Genesis's "In Too Deep" is "the most moving pop song of the 1980s" (136); Houston's "How Will I Know" is "my vote for best dance song of the 1980s" (253); Huey Lewis and the News's "Heart and Soul" is "the tune that firmly and forever established them as the premier rock band in the country for the 1980s" (355). But there is a significant consequence to the periodizing perspective that emerges in the musical interludes—all three sections are markedly discontinuous from the rest of the text. Despite the novel's apparently unwavering chronological movement and its insistence on the concreteness of time and place (of what Patrick is doing, when, and where: "Video Store *then* D'Agostino's"), the interludes make no reference to the events of the narrative or their own situations of enunciation. They seem to take place outside narrative time.

Patrick's "I" persists through the interludes, but his narrative voice is decidedly altered, offering an emotionally inflected perspective—oscillating between thoughtful criticism and enthusiastic affirmation—that is at odds with the disinterested neutrality of the narrative's tireless, almost robotic mechanisms of cultural recording. When Patrick ebulliently describes Whitney Houston's debut album *Whitney Houston* as "one of the warmest, most complex and altogether satisfying rhythm and blues records of the decade" and declares that "Whitney herself has a voice that defies belief" (253) his register, both interpretive and libidinal, seems a far cry from the dry reportage of the narrative at large, which is dominated by Patrick's ubiquitously uninflected descriptions of his male companions' wardrobes ("Armstrong is wearing a four-button double-breasted chalk-striped spread-collar cotton shirt by Christian Dior and a large paisley-patterned silk tie by Givenchy Gentleman" [137]). But Patrick's increasing resemblance to a feeling, thinking human being must be seen as the effect of a deeper formal shift, which has endowed him with a capacity for authentically historiographical observation—the ability to see the 80s as a completed decade, a frozen slice of historical life—only by excising him from his story. The historical life of the 80s that Patrick is finally able to narrate is not, in the last instance, his own.

In his essay on "Serial Masculinity" in *American Psycho*, Berthold Schoene describes the "autistic self-encapsulation of its narrative and the novel's adamant denial of progress" and wonders "whether there might be any conceivable way out."[39] The formal interruptions of the musical interludes (on which Schoene does not comment) provide an answer. As if in direct response to Schoene's question, the interludes show Patrick stepping outside his "self-encapsulation"—focusing instead on, say, the shared pleasures of Whitney Houston—while also embracing the progress narrative of Phil Collins's career. What Schoene diagnoses as "the monotonous seriality of the novel, which resembles a Gothic tomb hermetically sealed off from all progress, development, or escape" is in fact

[39] Berthold Schoene, "Serial Masculinity: Psychopathology and Oedipal Violence in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*," *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 54.2 (Summer 2008): 395, 394.

crucially ruptured by Patrick's pop music digressions, which transcend both the action of the narrative and the (psycho)pathology of Patrick himself (382). An inhuman serial killer and a postmodern-male-in-crisis,[40] Patrick becomes more emotionally human and less "rigidly" masculine once he inhabits the distance and detachment of the historian.[41] Yet it would be a mistake to say that he is redeemed by his critical distance—especially given that the historian's detached perspective uncomfortably mirrors Patrick's disconnected experience of his own body ("I think I'm nodding" [375]) and ultimately of the entire outside world (*"I simply am not there"* [377]). On the contrary, Patrick's original emotional detachment—"all the mayhem I have caused and my utter indifference toward it" (377)—clearly inaugurates his narrative separation from the grotesque immediacy of everyday life. While the gregarious, humanized language of the musical interludes at first seems to promise Patrick a redeemed connection to the world, it actually underscores the opposite, the irredeemable absence of such a connection: the interludes indulge a fantasy incompatible with the rest of the narrative. It is the "humanizing" dream of historical distance, not Patrick's original psychosis (despite the increasing air of unreality it gains throughout the novel), that seems conjured out of thin air.

The relation between the interludes and the untenable fantasy of historical distance becomes even starker when we compare the novel to its film adaptation. The film version of *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000), otherwise notable for its fidelity to Ellis's original text, departs from the formal constraints of the book in a single significant way: it brings Patrick's musical monologues inside the diegetic narrative, so that he performs them in front of his victims as he's preparing to kill them. The speeches come to resemble ironic seductions, and eventually, in the climactic scene of the film, actual seductions. Two women are kissing on Patrick's couch, and though he stands watching them, he's not paying them much attention—he's too busy extolling the virtues of Whitney Houston. In response, the women laugh at him—"You actually listen to Whitney Houston? You *own* a Whitney Houston CD? More than one?"—and the hallucinatory chase scene that follows seems to derive both its urgency and its ironic sadism from the implicit affront to Patrick's masculinity. Though the film is surely right to see in Patrick's musical taste a complex negotiation of masculine identity, it cannot help but remind us of the fact that this sexual confrontation cannot take place in the novel's version of the same scene: in the interludes, other people (indeed, the entire social matrix of gendered interpersonal relations) do not exist. Detached from the concerns of the rest of the novel, the interludes express not the anxieties of masculinity but the fantasy of having already resolved or overcome them. The film thus exposes precisely what the novel's interludes must disavow—the entirety of social exchange—as they seek to imagine a critical distance from the present.

---

[40] Findlay claims that the novel expresses a "crisis of masculinity" (84), a point echoed by Schoene, who describes the "rigidly interpellative processes of male individuation … perpetuat[ed] through an endless series of coercive acts of psychic self-(de)formation" (379).

[41] As Dipesh Chakrabarty suggests, historical detachment is at the heart of a fundamentally Western historicist rationality: "If historical or anthropological consciousness is seen as the work of a rational outlook, it can only 'objectify'—and thus deny—the *lived* relations the observing subject already has with that which he or she identifies as belonging to a historical or ethnographic time and space separate from the ones he or she occupies as the analyst. In other words, the method does not allow the investigating subject to recognize himself or herself as also the figure he or she is investigating. It stops the subject from seeing his or her own present as discontinuous with itself" (*Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000] 239).

The larger point of the film's re-contextualization of the musical interludes is that, on the question of historical perspective, it no longer needs them. While Ellis's novel is about the problem of periodizing the present, the film version of *American Psycho* traffics in actual periodization: released in 2000, it looks back on the 1980s with two decades of hindsight. In the film, the fantasy of historical distance has given way to real historical distance. The discontinuity of the novel's interludes can be recontained is sutured by the transformed situation of historical perception that is the condition of viewing the film. The film cannot ultimately resist flaunting the structural irony on which it is built and to which it is, by dint of its historical distance, entitled. All representations or reenactments of history, after all, are structured ironically: the gap between the viewer's present and the characters' present inevitably find its way into the text. A film about a prior decade cannot help but communicate something about how strange, how distant, how downright *past* the past is. When Ellis describes Patrick listening to his Walkman or talking on his cell phone, the text is signaling something about the intersections of class, technology, and alienation; yet when Harron's film stages these same scenes, they come with an added, ironic exclamation: cassette tapes are such a cumbersome technology! old cell phones were hilariously oversized! The blandly historical details of Ellis's present become props in Harron's film, and as props, they are also jokes—jokes about technological obsolescence that are equally about the inexorability of historical change.

The privilege of hindsight is most powerfully demonstrated by a relatively minor detail in the film's last scene. Both the novel and the film end with Patrick and his friends gathered at Harry's bar, trying desperately to make a dinner reservation. Here is how the novel describes the scene: "On the TV screen in Harry's is *The Patty Winters Show*, which is now on in the afternoon and is up against Geraldo Rivera, Phil Donahue and Oprah Winfrey. … On the screen now are scenes from President Bush's inauguration early this year then a speech from former President Reagan … Soon a tiresome debate forms over whether he's lying or not, even though we don't, can't, hear the words" (396).[42] For Patrick, Reagan is one more mindless, soundless image on the TV screen, different in detail but not in kind from Geraldo, Oprah, et. al. In the film, on the other hand, Reagan (who is here still president, a not insignificant detail, as I'll suggest in a moment) is accorded a surprisingly central visual position: he is framed in tight close-up, his significance underscored by a slow zoom. He is also giving a speech about the Iran Contra and Robert Bork—which we know because we, unlike the characters in the novel, can actually hear him. What explains the upgrading of Reagan from background static to privileged speaker?

The decade is so ingrained a mode of historical thought, Biel reminds us, that we not only divide history up into decades, we also, once finished, like to name them. "The application of labels for decades," Biel writes, "enhances the sense of social cohesion: for example, the 'Roaring Twenties', the 'Turbulent Sixties', or the 'Me Decade'."[43] As for the 1980s, they are, of course, the "Reagan eighties." The figure whom Ellis is committed to ignoring is precisely who, in later years, stands in for the totality of the decade. The film knows this; the novel, still immersed in its moment, doesn't yet. In the novel, Price's

[42] Indeed, the act of tuning out Reagan—or of not hearing him at all—is a motif throughout the novel: "The TV is tuned to a press conference Reagan's giving but there's a lot of static and no one pays attention" (142).
[43] Biel, "The Idea of the Decade," 262n9.

comments about Reagan—"He looks so … *normal*. He seems so … out of it. So … *un*dangerous. […] He presents himself as this harmless old codger, but inside […] but inside …" (unbracketed ellipses in original)—are designed to ironically echo Patrick's own false appearance (who presents himself as this harmless young investment banker, but inside …). In the film, these same lines (spoken by the character now named Timothy Bryce) point in the opposite direction: they aim not to code Reagan in terms of Patrick, qua monstrosity, but to read Patrick in terms of Reagan, as twin synecdoches for the 1980s as a whole.[44]

In both the novel and the film, the reason Price/Bryce misses the connection between his description of Reagan and the inner truth of Patrick is the same: it is because he's too close to it, stuck inside what can only be fully grasped from without. In Ellis's novel, however, it is only Patrick's psychopathic interiority that Price fails to see. In the film, what he misses is not just Patrick's interiority but the way that absence of interiority now expresses the essence of an entire historical period. For viewers of the film, meanwhile, our grasp of the allegorical significance of Patrick's interior lack is made possible by our position *outside* the scene—which is also, in the end, our position outside the entirety of the 1980s. The historical distance that compels us to laugh at the size of the characters' cell phones thus reappears at the level of cinematic form. The distance between the 1980s and the film's release date is contained in the viewing distance that makes clear the visual resonance between Patrick and Reagan, turning Price/Bryce's failed reading of subjective interiority into a successful reading of historical allegory. Only from the privileged position of the outside—which is only an unsuccessfully integrated fantasy in the novel but is the film's condition of historical possibility—can we affirm Patrick's response to Price/Bryce as the defining motto of the decade itself: "But inside doesn't matter."

The novel, by contrast, can only segregate its self-reflexive historical perspective from the narrative present. While depicting Patrick's murderous descent into madness as a symptom of the moral blankness of bourgeois consumer society, *American Psycho* repeatedly encounters, in the interruptive form of the interlude, the cognitive gap between a simple repudiation of Patrick (or diagnosis of his illness) and a grasp of the totality of his contemporary conditions. The two irreconcilable narrative levels simply reinforce Patrick's "one single bleak truth: no one is safe, nothing is redeemed" (377). The demystifying power of history's critical distance remains, for the present, as unrealizable a fantasy as the moral redemption of Patrick himself.

Glamorama approaches the problem of the historical present from the other side, yet its commitment to the present's uninterrupted immanence is not enough to fend off the contradictory demands of decade-thinking. While *Glamorama* retains *American Psycho*'s interest in pop music, it lacks the narrative exteriority that in the first novel makes possible a vision of progress. *Glamorama* possesses no transcendental apprehension of historical development to set against the overwhelming, immersive detail of day-to-day reality, and

[44] The link between the two is also captured visually in the film. While all of Patrick's friends, including Bryce, are shot at strange and uncomfortably close angles, Reagan, speaking on television, is framed in perfect close-up, with the camera slowly zooming in toward him. A few moments later, the exact same shot is repeated with Patrick at its center: perfectly framed, the camera slowly zooms into Patrick's face, eventually getting so close that the image becomes a blur and finally a black hole—a darkness that doubles as the film's final fade out.

the autonomous pop objects through which Patrick tracks historical change have now invaded the everyday life of Victor Ward's present.

In *Glamorama* the full-length album has been broken down into individually commodified singles more properly consigned to background music: "A couple walks out of the Crunch fitness center, carrying Prada gym bags, appearing vaguely energized, Pulp's 'Disco 2000' blaring out of the gym behind them as they pass a line of BMWs" (269); "Everything But the Girl's 'Missing' plays over everything, occasionally interrupted by feel-good house music, along with doses of Beck's 'Where It's At' and so on and so on" (275); "As the Chemical Brothers' 'Setting Sun' blasts out on cue we're back in Notting Hill at some industrial billionaire's warehouse" (287). Pop music makes up the ideological fabric of Victor's daily life; taken together, the songs form nothing more than a soundtrack ("blast[ing] out on cue" from no discernible location).[45] Elsewhere, Victor repeats snippets of decade-appropriate song lyrics when he is at a loss for anything else to say: " 'I'm a loser, baby,' I sigh, slumping back into the booth. 'So why don't you kill me?' " (90). Such cultural references serve Ellis's allegorical reconstruction of the decade: Beck's "Loser" and the rest of these songs, the novel claims, somehow represent the unique attitude of "the nineties." But *Glamorama* does not follow the meticulous historical record-keeping of *American Psycho,* which provided the record label and year of release for each album it mentioned. Instead, Victor and his erstwhile band-mates demonstrate their expertise by naming songs' running times rather than their release dates (103-4), and *Glamorama*'s climactic scene returns to the same meaningless, de-historicized musical statistics. As Victor races to uncover a terrorist plot to blow up a plane, he realizes with dawning horror that the clue he has been following—a printout reading "WINGS / BAND ON THE RUN / 1985 / 511"—is not coded flight information at all: "It's a song called '1985' … It's on the *Band on the Run* album … It's not a flight number … It's how long the song is … That song is five minutes and eleven seconds long" (499). Even the briefest hint of history is immediately reduced to one more floating song title aimlessly dispersed throughout the narrative. Having effaced the context of its musical references, *Glamorama* makes history a matter not of years but of minutes—a radically condensed form of time-keeping able to measure nothing beyond itself.

"For historians," Harootunian suggests, "the date is the proper name of the event."[46] So what happens when we plug in the dates for these songs ourselves? As it happens, the added dates expose a strange discrepancy between the historical life of the pop references and the narrative setting of *Glamorama*. Whereas "Missing" dates from 1994 and "Disco 2000" from 1995, neither "Where It's At" nor "Setting Sun" was released until 1996. But *Glamorama* itself is supposedly set between 1994 and 1995, which means that the historical setting of the narrative and the historicity of the objects used to establish it as a period ultimately fail to line up. In its effort to express the totality of the 90s, the novel ends up referring to songs that, from the perspective of the narrative present, did not yet exist.

This misalignment (which might otherwise seem pedantic, if not simply accidental) reflects a deeper paradox concerning the historical status of the text: *Glamorama*, a novel

[45] The analogy is not inappropriate, given that Victor's psychological unraveling is measured by his growing certainty that his life is being scripted, directed, and filmed.
[46] Harootunian, *History's Disquiet*, 15.

striving to sum up the spirit of the 90s, appeared in 1998, before the decade had ended. Of course, the practice of summing up a decade before its end is not uncommon. Tom Wolfe's description of 1970s as the "Me Decade," for instance, came in 1976, and Biel's essay on the decade opens with a similar instance of prematurity or prolepsis: "*Newsweek*, in a slightly tongue-in-cheek attempt to get a jump on the competition, boldly proclaimed on 4 January 1988 that 'The 80s Are Over'."[47] In all of these instances, we see the strange appeal that the closed form of the decade holds for the "swift-running stream" of the present. *Glamorama* registers the effects of this disjunction: the tension between the totality of the decade and the particular location of the present shapes the vexed temporality of Victor's story. Consider: all we really know is that the plot takes place sometime during a "nineties" whose calendar years the text does not bother to differentiate. Struggling to pinpoint the location of the narrative by using only the signposts of pop culture (does it take place after Beck's *Odelay* came out in 1996 or before Cindy Crawford left MTV's "House of Style" in 1995?), we discover that the novel's historical clues do not interact in a predictable or "realistic" way. *Glamorama* succeeds in representing itself as a unified decade by removing the dates from its world of floating and fragmentary pop singles—but in doing so, it sacrifices the coherent temporality of its present. This is perhaps why the novel refers to its moment of occurrence only once. Victor's love interest Jamie provides the single clue concerning when exactly the story takes place: "It was maybe ten-thirty or eleven and … in December 1990 … four years ago? … five?" (351, ellipses in original). It is not quite right, then, to say that the plot takes place between 1994 and 1995, because doing so ignores the crucial uncertainty of the passage: Jamie herself does not currently know what year it is.

In a novel whose surfeit of celebrity names and cultural references seems to promise a kinship with the mechanics of realism (if not merely the excessive application of a "reality effect"[48]), none of the characters knows the defining detail of modern social life: the date. Having rejected *American Psycho*'s tenuous fantasy of critical distance, *Glamorama* collapses immediate experience and historical reflection into a single, suffocatingly synchronous narrative viewpoint: warned that "Significance is rewarded in retrospect," Victor replies, "I think this *is* the retrospect, baby" (527). Imprisoned by periodization, the novel loses track of its own present as a definite, locatable moment in history. Only the critical distance of an imagined exteriority could put the novel's obsessive cultural documentation in proper perspective, revealing not the smooth, undifferentiable surface of the decade but the pulse of history as it moves immediately through the present. Without an outside perspective, everyday life in 1995 is all but swallowed up by the very attempt to imagine, from within it, the "period" of the 1990s as an already completed historical whole.

---

[47] Biel, "The Idea of the Decade," 259.

[48] This is Barthes's term for those descriptive details that do not have a narrative function (are not part of the plot) and do not refer to any particular thing in the "real world" but instead refer to the idea of reality itself: "Just when these details are reputed to *denote* the real directly, all that they do—without saying so—is *signify* it; Flaubert's barometer, Michelet's little door finally say nothing but this: *we are the real*; it is the category of 'the real' (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified; in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism: the *reality effect* is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity" ("The Reality Effect," in *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000*, ed. Dorothy J. Hale (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 234.

Eternal Occurrence

Both *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* adapt their presents to the logic of the decade, yet neither narrative survives the confrontation between external analysis and immanent experience. In each case, the present is either ruptured or displaced, marked by an insupportable fantasy of critical distance or by an intractable entanglement in the colonizing totality of the periodizing imagination. Watching each novel wrestle with the self-reflexive logic of the decade, one may feel the historicity of the present slipping away. But the contradictions of historical self-reflection are embedded as much in the concept of the decade as in the blinkered immediacy of the everyday. To understand this, it is necessary to read *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* not simply in isolation but as formally and inextricably linked, bound together by uncanny echoes and structural repetitions that bring to the fore the false closure of the decade. In its attempt to articulate contemporary life as a self-contained period, the decade runs aground on the continuity of the present.

The link between *American Psycho* and *Glamorama* takes the form of an elaborate joke, which proceeds in two parts. The first part is set up in the final scene of *American Psycho*, with Patrick sitting in Harry's bar, unable to gain the attention or concern of his companions, discussing what he thinks must be the universality of experience at this particular moment in history—"this is, uh, how life presents itself in a bar or in a club in New York, maybe *anywhere*, at the end of the century and how people, you know, *me*, behave"—and finally settling his gaze on a building placard bearing, in blood-red letters, the ominous warning "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" (399). As the novel's last words, the sign offers allegorical assurance that the historical boundaries dictating "how [Patrick's] life presents itself at the end of the century" will not easily be overcome. The second part of the joke comes at the beginning of *Glamorama* as Victor struggles to explain his dissatisfaction with the design scheme of his new nightclub: "'It's just that this is all so … so … *'89*?' " (12, ellipses in original). Just as Patrick reads the grand distinction of the epoch into the difference between Genesis's output in the 1980s and everything the band did in the 1970s,[49] Victor assumes that his own place in the midst of the 1990s must imply a decisive break from *American Psycho*'s 1980s. The frightening impossibility of change or "EXIT" that ends *American Psycho* thus appears to be ironically overturned in *Glamorama*, whose characters take it on faith that the dates separating one decade from another produce the historical transformation they are supposed to name. As an MTV interviewer says to Victor, "Aren't the 1980s over? Don't you think opening a club like this is a throwback to an era most people want to forget?" (160). If the interviewer is right, then Patrick must simply have a taste for the dramatic, since escape from his historical circumstances turns out to have been as easy as flipping the calendar. For Victor, there are the 90s, and then there is everything else—all of which is *so* 1989.

Glamorama makes the same point at the level of its narrative form. The book is split into six chapters, with each chapter containing between fifteen and thirty numbered sections. In the first five chapters, those sections are numbered in descending rather than

[49] Patrick sees the same epochal tension in the work of Huey Lewis and the News, who "burst onto the national music scene at the beginning of the decade" but "really didn't come into their own" until jettisoning the "late seventies" fads of New Wave and punk (352-353).

ascending order—meaning that the first section of Chapter 1 is titled "33"and the last section is titled "0." The numbers, however, don't mean anything. They don't index a reversed or otherwise scrambled chronology, nor do they represent a countdown to some climactic zero-point (nothing is resolved or revealed when we hit "0"). The section numbers are a purely superficial mode of organization. But they do have one interesting narratological consequence: the reader always knows exactly how far she is from the end of the chapter. Even though no consequential narrative events take place at "0," we always know when, precisely, that uneventful break will come. The certainty imposed by the countdown is a dependable yet utterly empty form—which is not, finally, very different from the emptiness of calendrical time itself. We tend to think of the calendar as counting up, but in fact, it is always counting down toward an end: the end of a year, of a decade, of a century. Our useless knowledge of how many sections are left in one of *Glamorama's* chapters is just like the useful knowledge of how many years are left in a decade, which likewise counts down toward a fully predictable yet finally meaningless break between one artificial period and the next.

How, then, does Patrick's anxiety that the 80s will never end so easily transform into Victor's sanguine belief that the 90s name something definitively, historically new? The tension between the hopeless eternity of the present (to which not only the very last but also the very first words of *American Psycho* alert us: "ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE" [3]) and the epochal routine of the decade is ultimately resolved by the formal continuity between the novels themselves. While Patrick assumes that a radical cultural shift engenders the leap from the 70s to the 80s, he cannot explain the causes that underlie it; he has no idea how real epochal change actually takes place. An air of indecipherable mystery surrounds historical transition, making Patrick's present feel as if it will never end: without an account of causality or a concrete concept of change, there is, indeed, no way to imagine an exit. Victor's rejection of what in turn seems to him "so 80s" is not a reversal at all, but a perfect repetition. Like Patrick, he assumes that his present emerged fully-formed out of a historical break that he nevertheless cannot explain; so even as he embraces the myth of his present's origin, Victor guarantees that there will be no way to imagine its end. Finally, then, the ostensibly epochal differences that separate *Glamorama* from *American Psycho* collapse into each other: a shared belief in the *sui generis* singularity of the decade ironically connects these two novels that are about superficial historical difference. The brand names and celebrity faces may change, but the persistence of brands and celebrities underscores the continuity between the novels' historical consciousness. Even the parallel trajectories of Patrick and Victor (one violent, fashion-obsessed protagonist ends his novel talking to a park bench, the other to an imaginary film crew) suggest that the basic terms of the books remain constant, creating the odd but unavoidable impression that there is little difference between being a serial killer with political pretensions and being a terrorist without any.

Taken to such an extreme, the formal continuity of the novels disturbs the premises of their social satire. *American Psycho*'s success as a satire would seem to depend on its historical specificity, on "how life presents itself" at the unique moment of the 1980s. The metaphorical link between investment banker and serial killer indexes the ethical consequences of emergent cultural decay: at the empty center of 80s bourgeois professional culture, "surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in" (375). But the symptoms by which *American Psycho* defines the specificity of its decade—

"Sex is mathematics. Individuality no longer an issue. … Desire [is] meaningless. Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead" (375)—could just as easily describe the 90s of *Glamorama*. Victor has the same "mathematical" or pornographic relation to sex, the same illegible individuality (both he and Patrick are constantly mistaken for other people), the same inability to bring or be brought to justice, the same obsession with status and "surface." The serial killer seems at first to provide a perfect allegory for the unique ethical wasteland of 1980s Wall Street, except that in Ellis's version of the 1990s, the "analogy" between empty cultural values and sociopathic violence takes exactly the same form. Just as work in "mergers and acquisitions" becomes, in Patrick's hands, "murders and executions" (206), so do fashion models become interchangeable with terrorists: "As a model all you do all day is stand around and do what other people tell you to do […] and it was an analogy that made sense […] and it wasn't hard to recruit people … everyone wanted to be around us … everyone wanted to be movie stars … and in the end, basically, everyone was a sociopath" (352, unbracketed ellipses in original).

In the end, then, the joke of the novels is played on the very form of the decade, on the perverse arbitrariness of the line that separates "the eighties" from "the nineties." Read side-by-side, Ellis's two satires of social decay—and the symptoms they diagnose—become interchangeable, and the presumed historical difference between the two decades fades away. In its place, the 1980s and the 1990s merge into the larger period we don't like to call (but still do) postmodernity, which more capaciously names the overarching context—and, perhaps, the proper periodization—of Ellis's writing. While the decade squeezes history into a smaller and smaller frame, its act of compression is overcome by the continuity that turns Ellis's allegorically closed decades into versions of a single unspooling present.

A Year in the Life

The categorical problems of periodization play an even more explicit role in Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*. Indeed, the book raises two questions of categorization just in its title. The first is a problem of a genre; the second, of history. Peter D. McDonald observes that, "as its title indicates, the text makes the problem of genre part of its own fabric"; yet, he continues, "this is not to say that *Diary* can be read literally as a diary."[50] That is, first of all, because the book is made up not of a single diary or journal, but of three, all juxtaposed on the same page. Each page of the text is divided horizontally into three sections: the top comprises the political musings of John C., an aging South African novelist living in Australia; the middle of the page constitutes JC's personal diary, which details how he meets Anya, a young Filipina woman in his building who becomes his typist and his friend; and at the bottom of the page are Anya's own thoughts about JC and her villainous boyfriend Alan, a financial manager who hopes to rob JC of his savings. Secondly, then, *Diary* isn't "literally" a diary because its main section—the top of the page—isn't a diary at all; it is JC's published "opinions." The short topical essays that occupy half of each page are to be part a book published in Germany: "Its title will be *Strong Opinions*. The plan is for six contributors from various countries to say their say on any subjects they choose,

[50] Peter D. McDonald, "The Ethics of Reading and the Question of the Novel: The Challenge of J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 43.3 (Fall 2010): 483.

the more contentious the better. Six eminent writers pronounce on what is wrong with today's world."[51]

As McDonald notes, these problems of genre produce the structuring tension "between the conventional novelistic desire to read for the plot … and the traditional essayistic impulse to reflect on JC's provocative opinions."[52] But the status of JC's opinions returns us not only to the first vexed word of Coetzee's title but also to its last—not only, that is, to the matter of genre but to the measure of history. We have established that *Diary of a Bad Year* isn't exactly a diary. The next question is: is it about exactly one year? The text is, as JC describes it, "a response to the present in which I find myself" (67). At first, the sense of presentness appears couched in the language of immediacy, rooted in JC's own material situation. One opinion begins, "On television last night a BBC documentary" about "the myth of Al Qaida" (31)[53]; another is prompted by "an article in a recent *New Yorker*" about the US "proscribing torture" (39). In the repeated rhetoric of the "recent," JC establishes that he is responding to what is immediately in front of him. The cultural context sketched by his opinions is inseparable from the context in which they are forged. So he underscores the material conditions of his own place of enunciation—"Every day for the past week the thermometer has risen above the forty-degree mark" (211)—and emphasizes the currency of current events: "The *current* hysteria about sexual acts with children … " (53); "A US court *recently* ruled that public schools in some town or other in Pennsylvania many not … teach … Intelligent Design" (83, emphases mine). What he writes, what he reads, and what he does are all demonstrably of the moment: "*A few weeks ago* I visited the National Library in Canberra to give a reading" (171); "I cast my mind back over the new fiction I have read *in the past twelve months*" (189); "According to Judith Brett, whose *recent* disquisition on John Howard's Australia I have been reading … " (115); "In his *recently* published history of post-1945 Europe, Tony Judt argues … " (122, emphases mine). What JC calls "today's world" is, it would seem, a world primarily composed of what is recent and within reach.

Ultimately, however, the discourse of currency that shapes JC's opinions gives way to a different sense of worldly significance and historical coherence. "The present in which" JC finds himself is not limited to the physical immediacy of his own actions and the rhetorical urgency of recent events. The present, rather, comprises the entire "dark times" of political life at the beginning of the twenty-first century (73): the political and social transformations that have reshaped the word in the wake of 9/11. Taken together, the "Strong Opinions" paint a picture not simply of "how to live" (193)—as JC more broodingly phrases it at the end of the novel—but of how in particular to live through "the disgrace of being alive in these times" (141). That is, they paint a picture of what constitutes the specificity of "these times" themselves.

JC's opinions are thus not only immediately topical—they are also expressly historical, aiming to explain what makes the post-9/11 period coherent as a period.[54] The

---

[51] J.M. Coetzee, *Diary of a Bad Year* (New York: Viking, 2007), 21.

[52] McDonald, "The Ethics of Reading," 494.

[53] McDonald reports that "though the documentary is never named, it is no doubt Adam Curtis's Bafta-award winning *The Power of Nightmares*, a series of three programs first broadcast on the BBC in October 2004" (484).

[54] For reasons that should quickly become clear, I find myself entirely at odds with another critic's claim that, in *Diary*, "historicity is manifested as a latent part of the text" only, and not in its explicit content

historicity of the present is woven together through section titles that touch on the defining issues and figures of the 2000s: "On Terrorism," "On Al Qaida," "On Guantanamo Bay," "On Avian Influenza," "On Tony Blair." JC rebukes the act of "'spreading democracy', as is now being done by the United States in the Middle East" (9); he responds to "the use of torture in the interrogation of prisoners" (18); he weighs "the response to terror attacks by the governments of the United States, Britain, and now Australia" (19); he takes up the challenging topic of "suicide bombings" (30). Taken together, these topics evoke a decade defined by the paradoxes of democracy, and the shame or the curse of the times thus comes to be manifested in a single, central figure: "The drama being played out before our eyes is of a ruler, George W. Bush (whether Bush turns out to have been a pawn in the hands of others is not relevant here), whose hubris lies in denying the force of the curse on him" (49). With the appearance of this particular world-historical personage, we move decisively from the "Reagan Eighties" to the "Age of Bush": an age of terrorism, torture, and "national shame" (39). Though the drama of the age may be "being played out before our eyes," it is played out with the unmistakable force of a historical period; the impetus to define the age is "a matter of not having to appear with soiled hands before the judgment of history" (41). McDonald stresses that we must avoid "reading *Diary* as, say, a symptom of the 'Age of George W. Bush'."[55] His worry, however, misses the point. At issue is not the status of the book as "symptom" but the status of the age it describes—something it does clearly enough to allow McDonald to give name to it. *Diary of Bad Year*, in other words, aims to tell us just what makes the "Age of George W. Bush" an age in the first place.

But Coetzee's summation of the Bush age, like Ellis's accounts of the previous two decades, is also riven by the tension between everyday experience and external periodization. Whereas *American Psycho*'s periodizing perspective ruptured the continuity of its narrative, in *Diary* this dichotomy is literalized in the figure of JC himself. JC's opinions about the historical present turn out to be the very things that prevent him from belonging to it. JC's emphatically contemporary opinions are haunted by the possibility of being eternally out of touch. Anya points out that "most of the time he wears a mustard-coloured tweed jacket that could come from a 1950s British movie" (53), while Alan suggests that JC "comes from another world, another era. The modern world is beyond him" (98). The sense of disjunction between the form of JC's opinions and the present they attempt to describe is ultimately registered in the opinions themselves:

> What has begun to change since I moved into the orbit of Anya is not my opinions themselves so much as my opinion of my opinions. As I read through what mere hours before she translated from a record of my speaking voice into 14-point type, there are flickering moments when I can see those hard opinions of mine through her eyes—see how alien and antiquated they may seem to a thoroughly

(Benjamin H. Ogden, "The Coming into Being of Literature: How J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* Thinks through the Novel," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 43.3 [Fall 2010]: 466). Indeed, as I argue here, it seems to me that the novel is precisely about the problem of making history manifest.

[55] McDonald, "The Ethics of Reading," 493.

> modern Millie, like the bones of some odd extinct creature, half bird, half reptile, on the point of turning into stone. (136-137)

The problem, though, is not what kind of opinions JC has; it is the function of the opinions themselves. What is "antiquated"—what can never, by definition, belong to its moment—is the very practice of periodizing. "Politics is all around us," Anya says at one point, "it's like the air, it's like pollution" (35). And what's "all around us," she implies, shouldn't have to be named or discussed. It's enough trouble to live and breathe the present; one doesn't want to have to self-consciously examine it. In *American Psycho*, the outside position of periodization was a matter of narrative incongruity. In *Diary of a Bad Year*, the problem of periodizing the present is reimagined as the problem of not belonging to one's present: of being old, out of touch, unmodern. JC is a character whose politics, whose profession, and whose age all make him seem like a remnant of an older time—an outsider to the very present he is striving to grasp.

At the same time, the paradoxical duality of JC's perspective—which is both part of and apart from the present—challenges the traditional function of periodization itself. Anya's erstwhile boyfriend Alan says at one point, "Wake up!—you should tell him that. The world moves on. A new century" (93). But the tension between JC's "antiquated" views and his account of the contemporary calls into question the very newness of the "new century." The split between old and young, past and present—which is manifested both in the figure of JC and on the page itself (literally divided between JC's out-of-touch opinions and Anya's "modern" glosses on them)—both implies the clear dividing lines of periodization and, at the same time, undermines them. In *Diary*, the status of the historically new is haunted by the specter of the superannuated. The interplay between the time of the present and the untimeliness of periodization is present from the first pages of the book, which begins not with an excursus on Al Qaida or Guantanamo Bay but with a section titled "On the origins of the state":

> Every account of the origins of the state starts from the premise that "we"—not we the readers but some generic we so wide as to exclude no one—participate in its coming into being. But the fact is that the only "we" we know—ourselves and the people close to us—are born into the state; and our forebears too were born into the state as far back as we can trace. The state is always there before we are. (3)

Just as Ellis's decade novels reassert continuity, here, too, continuity returns to trouble the sense of rupture on which periodization is premised. This opening section—which eludes the present at every turn, touching on such un-contemporary topics as the philosophy of Aristotle and Hobbes, the films of Kurosawa, and the ideology of the Third Reich—suggests that the present is never free either from the historical conditions that gave rise to it or from the past theoretical frames that continue to make it legible. But the further point is that the historical conditions of the present can never fully be traced. The innumerable lines of affiliation between past and present make it impossible to know where exactly the present starts, at what point it names something new. "Theses on the origins of the State," Deleuze and Guattari famously wrote, "are always tautological"; the

beginnings of the state are "always being pushed back in time."[56] For JC, whose particular contemporary moment is defined by the terrifying reassertion of state power, this is true not simply of the state but of the present as such. The present, no matter how "new" it promises to be, is nevertheless "always there before we are."

In their attempt to illuminate the new contours of contemporary sovereignty, JC's musings on the origins of the state call into question the very idea of historical origins, and thus interrupt the present's simplified sense of novelty. The paradoxical pastness that casts its shadow over present times becomes most fully apparent at the end of one of JC's timeliest opinions, "On Terrorism." Here is the passage at some length:

> In the 1990s, I recall, I published a collection of essays on censorship. It made little impression. One reviewer dismissed it as irrelevant to the new era just dawning, the era inaugurated by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the break-up of the USSR. With world-wide liberal democracy just around the corner, he said, the state will have no reason for interfering with our freedom to write and speak as we wish; and anyhow, the new electronic media will make the surveillance and control of communications impossible to carry out.
>
> Well, what do we see today, in 2005? Not only the re-emergence of old-fashioned restrictions of the baldest sort on freedom of speech—witness legislation in the United States, the UK, and now Australia—but surveillance (by shadowy agencies) of the entire world's telephonic and electronic communications. It's déjà vu all over again.
>
> There are to be no more secrets, say the new theorists of surveillance, meaning something quite interesting: that the era in which secrets could exert their power over the lives of people (think of the role of secrets in Dickens, in Henry James) is over; nothing worth knowing cannot be uncovered in a matter of seconds, and without much effort; private life is, to all intents and purposes, a thing of the past. …
>
> The masters of information have forgotten about poetry, where words may have a meaning quite different from what the lexicon says, where the metaphoric spark is always one jump ahead of the decoding function, where another, unforeseen reading is always possible. (22)

The push and pull of periodizing claims here is disorienting. There is, first of all, the "world-wide liberal democracy" of the post-Cold War era, an age in which the issue of state censorship is totally "irrelevant." But then there is the *new* "new era" of the post-9/11 world, in which the promise of "world-wide liberal democracy" is refuted by the "re-emergence" of state-sponsored surveillance and control—forms of sovereign power that are both omnipresent "today, in 2005," and yet entirely "old-fashioned." The unexpected

[56] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 427, 428.

cliché that JC uses to describe this historical vacillation ("it's déjà vu all over again") is surprisingly appropriate: the experience of the present moment is the experience of *once again* sensing that we've seen all this before, an experience that can be only phrased in a way that we have *also* undoubtedly seen before—so often, of course, that we no longer know where or when we saw it first.

The second two paragraphs of the passage pull out the historical rug once more. While the reassertion of state restrictions on freedom of speech clearly gives the lie to the previous announcement of an age in which state surveillance has withered away, the "new theorists of surveillance" are met by JC with equal skepticism. The fatalism of the future tense ("there are to be no more secrets") is not without irony, which comes to the surface in the last sentence of the paragraph: secrets are, "*to all intents and purposes*, a thing of the past." The qualification reminds us that it is in fact exceedingly difficult to know for sure what is of the present and what is decidedly "of the past." The problem of the "origins of the state" returns again and again as a problem for grasping the present state of sovereign power.

The difficulties of describing any "new era" are finally couched in the historical recalcitrance of literature. Note first what happens when JC says "the era in which secrets could exert their power over the lives of people … is over." What era is this? Apparently, the era that stretches from "Dickens and James" all the way to the most recent past. But the steady duration of this past era is revealed, in the final paragraph, to be something more historically unique. The literary, for JC, is not simply another mode of historicization but also a hedge against it: claims about a new era of surveillance and the dissolution of secrets are bound to run up against literary language itself, in which secrecy—the sheer potential of multiple readings—lives on. What really lives on in literature, though, is the sense of continuity that links Dickens to James and both of them to, let's say, Coetzee himself. Literary language will always have its secrets, and in this way it rebuts the hasty historical claim that secrets are no longer part of the fabric of daily life. In literature's endless capacity to be read in new and unforeseeable futures, we become able to see the long continuities that situate the present in history.

Of course, with JC's account of the eternal "spark" of poetic language, we do find ourselves in the disappointingly murky waters of transhistorical aestheticism, perhaps swimming too hard against the currents of historical contingency. Yet Coetzee's quixotic gesture toward the power of the literary does finally remind us that what we're studying here is not the Bush decade as such but the literary genre of the decade novel, which, more than a symptom of its age, offers an account of how our sense of an age comes into being. In fact, JC's literary diversion prompts us to recall something important: that decades do not exist literally in the world, and that they thus have their own irreducible relation to fictional or literary form. This, then, is a good place to return to the ostensibly "literary" problems posed by Coetzee's novel as a whole. I began this section by pointing out what McDonald calls "the vexed question of *Diary*'s generic identity."[57] But the extent of those generic vexations hasn't been addressed yet, because we haven't specified the particular genre for which *Diary* poses problems. It is not the genre of the diary or the journal that Coetzee's novel challenges, but the genre of realism.

[57] McDonald, "The Ethics of Reading," 493.

The book's jacket copy describes *Diary of a Bad Year* as "fiction." In fact, the novel works incessantly to shed the carapace of fictionality. The narrator, you will have noticed, is particularly difficult to disentangle from Coetzee: his name is John C, he is a novelist born in South Africa, he now lives in Australia—this is obviously Coetzee's biography. At a certain point, the connection between JC and Coetzee becomes hard for even the most jaded reader of metafiction to ignore: "A few weeks ago I visited the National Library in Canberra to give a reading. As a preface to the reading I made some remarks about pending security legislation. … I was quoted as saying that my novel *Waiting for the Barbarians* 'emerged from the South Africa of the 1970s, where the security police could come in and out and barnstorm (*sic*: the word I used was *blindfold*) and handcuff you without explaining why' " (171). So JC not only shares Coetzee's biographical details; he shares his literary output. There's more. As McDonald points out, the scene at the National Library actually took place off the page:

> In fact, as opposed to fiction, Coetzee gave a reading from *Barbarians* at the National Library on October 23, 2005. Like JC, he too made a few rather more oblique introductory remarks about its contemporary significance, which the *Australian* promptly reported as 'a thinly veiled attack on Australia's proposed anti-terrorism laws' … . That the journalist Matt Price made all the transcription errors JC attributes to the *Australian* makes a narrowly autobiographical reading of entry six all the more tempting.[58]

Yet Coetzee distorts facts about the scene as well, and so, McDonald writes, "fiction blurs into fact and vice versa, while actual misreporting becomes an apparently fictional misreporting of misreporting, leaving us as readers at a loss as to which protocols to apply. Does this mean that *Diary* is not really a work of fiction after all but a strangely confessional exercise in displaced autobiography? Or that JC's 'Strong Opinions' are in the final analysis really J.M. Coetzee's?" (495-496). McDonald correctly reminds us that no clear answer to these questions will be forthcoming. But he may, I think, be asking the wrong questions. McDonald connects the problem of realism to the question of whether the opinions in the book are "really" Coetzee's. This is a familiar realist dichotomy: if the opinions are Coetzee's, they are *real*; if they are not Coetzee's, they are *fictional*. For McDonald, the problem is that we can't decide. But there's another, more elemental problem: can opinions *about* the real world really be said to be fictional?

The question of whether "we are now privy to Coetzee's actual opinions" thus misses the point.[59] Whether the opinions are Coetzee's or not, *they describe the same historical present*. In this way, the problem of JC's opinions reveals the overarching tension between the instability of Coetzee's realism and the unstable form of the decade novel. Catherine Gallagher has recently argued that the "fictionality" of realist fiction is tied predominantly to "the lack of individual, specific and embodied referents for the characters' proper

[58] McDonald, "The Ethics of Reading," 495.
[59] Ogden, "Coming into Being," 480.

names."[60] It is precisely the "*nonexistence*" of a real person behind the name, she argues, that "sustains its effect on reality, that is to say, its effect on the reader" (357). For Gallagher, the realist novel's names-without-referents index the novel's unfinished fictionality, which is the very way it trains its readers to distinguish fiction from reality—"the fictional character's incompleteness … create[s] a sense of the reader's material 'reality' as ontologically plentiful" (361). But where does that leave Coetzee's *excessively* realist novel, where names blur the line between the real and the fictional by stubbornly invoking the "real people" who lie outside the realm of the novel (from John C. to George Bush)? If non-referential names comfort us with the pleasure of our own reality ("the elation," as Gallagher puts it, "of a unitary unboundedness" [361]), what do the all-too-real names in *Diary* do? Rather than shoring up our sense of reality, I want to suggest, *Diary* exposes the hard core of fictionality that is at the heart of our very real ideas about historical periods. No matter how real the people who populate them, decades themselves are only ever fictional constructs, experiments of thought. The problem of whether the book's opinions are "actual" or fictional is thus really the problem of how any set of individual elements (Coetzee's ideas no less than Ellis's consumer goods) fits in to the fictional totality of a period. The dilemmas of realism prompted by Coetzee's novel are not the same old metafictional tricks but, in fact, the proper form of the decade itself.

In *Diary of a Bad Year*, the tension between realist fiction and metafictional reality (the opinions both are and aren't Coetzee's; the events of the novel actually happened and also didn't) ultimately describes the precarious status of the decade, whose mediation between history and the present, totality and everyday life, is always a negotiation of real parts and fictional wholes. This is the truly "literary" exercise of turning the unfinished present into a completed historical period. To remake the present as a historical whole is to traverse the uncertain middle ground between the messy realities of experience and the necessary fictions of totalization. The process of negotiating between the two—of translating everyday life into the self-contained form of the age—is the process that *Diary of a Bad Year*'s compromised realism lays bare. To say that Coetzee's novel is more than fiction is not simply to mistake it for autobiography or non-fiction; it is, rather, to connect the novel's untenable realism to the formal problem of the historical present, where the fiction of periodizing the "world today" is the necessary response that history makes to the indisputable reality of life as it is lived. Indexing the excesses of the realist impulse, *Diary of a Bad Year* couches the everyday details of the present in the language of the decade, only to remind us that the conjuring of the decade, which makes Coetzee's novel so irreducibly realistic, is also the realist novel's most indulgent fiction.

Art / History

The decade, like *Diary of a Bad Year*, is neither fully real nor fully fictional; it is both a valiant attempt to sum up and seal off the present, and also a reductive mode of repressing longer continuities. Having articulated the latter as a rebuttal to the former, the risk now is that those continuities will turn out to be too long. The nostalgic continuity forged between JC and his literary past, like the formal continuity between *American Psycho* and

[60] Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," in *The Novel, Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 349.

Glamorama, finally threatens to impose a present that goes on forever. Harootunian cautions, "Too often, thinkers [have] submitted to the temptation to see everyday life as a perennial present, instants successively piled on top of one another, … assuming the de-historicized coloration of the commodity."[61] Jameson likewise observes that the present "inevitably comes to be thickened and solidified, complemented, by a rather more metaphysical backing or content, which is none other than the idea of eternity itself."[62] How, then, can we affirm the present without "affirm[ing] its eternality"?[63] Having exposed the inadequacy of the decade, the present, I want to suggest, offers a different understanding of historical continuity, able to serve something other than perpetual expansion. Out of the confrontation between periodization and the present, history reappears not as eternal return but as *longue durée*.

In his reading of *Glamorama*, Walter Benn Michaels suggests that the novel works best as an allegory for the dissolution of political belief and the replacement of the political with the personal. For Michaels, the evacuation of politics necessarily involves the foreclosure of political transformation: "It's the politics of being who you are, and the revolution it imagines involves becoming 'whatever you're not'."[64] The "revolution" of personal identity that Michaels most likely has in mind is the one we witness in the penultimate section of *Glamorama*, where Victor, having more or less failed to save the world, appears to settle for saving himself, transforming before our eyes from naïve model and terrorist dupe to brilliant super-spy whose enrollment in a prestigious law school and reconciliation with his once-estranged family means he barely has time to do a fashion shoot. This kind of transformation would seem to mark the rigorous depoliticization of revolutionary change, so that today, Michaels tells us, politics is nothing more (or less) than self-improvement.

There is, however, one complication in this reading: even the moment of Victor's personal transformation never quite takes place. As we discover in the final section of *Glamorama*, the "new" Victor was too good to be true: he is an imposter, a secret agent sent to annex Victor's life, leaving the real Victor imprisoned in a hotel room in Milan, watching the imposter impersonate him on entertainment news and waiting (without exactly knowing it) to be killed. Even the degraded transformative potential of self-improvement is short-circuited at this point, which means we need a different way of understanding the dynamics of change. It turns out that the problem of personal transformation is not so much an issue of political belief (bourgeois individualism versus revolutionary collectivity) as one of historical time. The structuring anxiety of *Glamorama* is not how we can change ourselves but whether things can ever change at all.

The specter of eternity haunts *Glamorama* before it even begins. The novel's first epigraph, attributed to Krishna, reads, "There was no time when you nor I nor these kings did not exist." The anxiety that underwrites Victor's narrative from the beginning is the same as the anxiety that Patrick's narrative can register only at the end: what happens if nothing ever changes? Here is the urgent problem of the present to which the decade was a necessary, if necessarily failed, response: how to ensure that the apparently endless

---

[61] Harootunian, *History's Disquiet*, 72.
[62] Fredric Jameson, "The End of Temporality," *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Summer 2003), 712.
[63] Harootunian, *History's Disquiet*, 93.
[64] Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 174.

experience of the present actually comes to an end. Lacking the promise of a distanced historical perspective that appears, however inexplicably, in *American Psycho*, *Glamorama* discovers itself fully imprisoned in the immediacy of the present. It is thus all the more pressing to find a way out.

If Ellis's novels, taken together, emphasize the illusory form of change as it defines the border between decades, and if Coetzee's novel undercuts the perception of change with the transhistorical hope of aesthetics, then we must look elsewhere for a way to narrate the changing history of the present. In the last scene of *Glamorama*, Victor, for his part, does manage to fix his gaze on something different—not the fast-moving culture of fashion and celebrity but the stilled form of a rather elaborate painting:

> I'm drinking a glass of water in the empty hotel bar at the Principe di Savoia and staring at the mural behind the bar and in the mural there is a giant mountain, a vast field spread out below it where villagers are celebrating in a field of long grass that blankets the mountain dotted with tall white flowers, and in the sky above the mountain it's morning and the sun is spreading itself across the mural's frame, burning over the small cliffs and the low-hanging clouds that encircle the mountain's peak, and a bridge strung across a path 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—and I'm falling forward but also moving up toward the mountain, my shadow looming against its jagged peaks, and I'm surging forward, ascending, sailing through dark clouds, rising up, a fiery wind propelling me, and soon it's night and stars hang in the sky above the mountain, revolving as they burn.
>
> The stars are real.
>
> The future is that mountain. (546)

While describing the mural's strange panorama, in what appears to be a hallucinatory flight of fancy, Victor suddenly imagines himself within it. At this fantastic (and clearly unreliable) moment, there is no longer any distinction between the painting and Victor, and the novel is able to depict the central dilemma of the present: what happens when you analyze a landscape of which you yourself are a part? But *Glamorama*'s response is disappointingly allegorical; the landscape keeps changing—first "it's morning" and then "it's night," and Victor is crossing a path and then a bridge and then a highway—without ever actually arriving somewhere. Confronted with an image of his own present, Victor sees a landscape in infinite regress: the perpetually but superficially shifting present blinds him to the possibility of a truly transformative end. Amid these crudely allegorical renderings of historical "movement" (paths, bridges, highways), does anything *actually* change?

In fact, something already has. I noted earlier that the first five chapters of *Glamorama* are made up of sections numbered in descending order. That all changes in Chapter 6, where Patrick's imprisonment and impending assassination are narrated in sections that now count up instead of down. This formal transformation does not

immediately guarantee a correlative transformation of content. But it does provoke a change in the way we expect historical change. No longer oriented toward the predictable, empty break of the chapter and decade alike, the ascending numbers of *Glamorama*'s last chapter break with the meaningless turnover of calendrical time and impose a view of history that is not endless but properly open-ended. Our inability to know when the end of the chapter will come now matches not only Victor's own unknowing relation to his imminent fate but also an account of historical break in which change may well come—just not according to the monotonous rhythms of the countdown or the rustling pages of the calendar.

With this new dynamic between narrative expectation and historical transformation in mind, we can now observe that Victor's painting also contains a new account of the way things change. First the crude "bridge strung across a path" is replaced by a "highway," and then the "low-hanging clouds" part to reveal the consumer seductions of "billboards"—the mural doesn't change; it *modernizes*. The allegorical change from day to night is merely shorthand for a grander (though, it turns out, equally naturalized) narrative of history, which we now recognize as the well-worn tale of capitalism's plodding conquest of the natural world. The painting depicts the historical procession of modernity, in which, as Horkheimer and Adorno predicted, the "economic powers" of capital "are taking society's domination over nature to unimagined heights"[65]: heights represented not only by the mural's mountain peak but by the forms of late capitalism—the temporality of fashion, the fetishism of celebrity, the commodification of art, the disintegration of political belief—that the decade novels of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s have all along sought to document.

Faced with the threat of a present that goes on forever and a consumer ideology that claims to be inescapable, the decade novel provides a surprisingly Lukácsian response: to "bring the past to life as the prehistory of the present," it is necessary to scale the ad hoc walls of the decade.[66] The causal link between contemporary life and its conditions of possibility in the past first appears in the ironic but indissoluble continuity between presents. While the relation between Ellis's 1980s/1990s and Coetzee's 2000s initially appears as a distinction between the "postmodern" and the "post-9/11," all three decades can be situated in a still larger historical dynamic, which, like the present, has not existed for all eternity but only acts as if it has: this is of course the history called capitalism. "The market," JC declares in *Diary of a Bad Year*, "is where we are, where we find ourselves" (118). The sense—equally "modern" and "postmodern"—of the present's endlessness turns out to be the ventriloquized claim of capital itself.[67] The tension between

---

[65] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvii.

[66] Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 53.

[67] The problem of capitalist eternity—which connects back to Coetzee's description of the vanishing origins of the state—also goes by a more specific name: it is what Marx calls "the secret of primitive accumulation" (see *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes [London: Penguin, 1976], 873-876). As Jason Read glosses it, "So-called primitive accumulation can only extend the conditions of the capitalist mode of production infinitely backward in time. Capitalism was (and always will be) possible; to become real, it only required the industriousness and intelligence of the first capitalist" (*The Micropolitics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present* [New York: State University of New York Press, 2003], 22). The history of primitive accumulation thus replaces history with eternity. The myth of capitalism's easily identifiable origin is a way to obscure the historical process of capitalist accumulation that remains ongoing. For Marx capital is constantly remaking itself: "The history of this expropriation assumes different aspects in different

change and continuity, between the specter of eternity and the prematurity of break, is ultimately the tension that supports what Moishe Postone calls "the historical dynamic of the modern capitalist world": "This dialectic involves the accumulation of the past in a form that entails the ongoing reconstruction of the fundamental features of capitalism as an apparently necessary present—even as it is hurtled forward by another form of time."[68] The modern imperative to move forward—to perpetually transform the means of production—is thus countered by the insistence that capitalism, eternal and necessary, has really been there all along. Things change so rapidly it's as if they never change at all.[69]

Understanding the capitalist grounds for the collusion of change and eternity, we can now see the dilemma of the decade differently. The decade exposes the limits of periodization, the consequences of what happens when, as Terry Eagleton warns, "the impulse to historicize capsizes into its opposite: pressed to the point where continuities simply dissolve, history becomes no more than a galaxy of current conjunctures, a cluster of eternal presents, which is to say hardly history at all."[70] In the unraveling of the decade, history re-emerges. So the "EXIT" that Patrick seeks out in vain is not, after all, an escape from a 1980s of his own construction; it is an escape from capital's ceaseless *durée*, of which the hollow culture of the 80s is merely a recent and extreme iteration. The dialectic of the present, which both tries and fails to periodize itself in the guise of the decade, makes it possible to rearticulate the successive presents of the last three decades as self-consciously distinct but ideologically continuous moments in the modern and modernizing—ongoing and self-reproducing—history of capitalism.

In response to the claim that "we cannot not periodize," the decade novel—positioned at the intersection between the present and history, between everyday life and external judgment, between the vexed immediacy of realism and the ex post facto perspective of historical narrative—shows how the present always threatens to resolve Jameson's double negative into a single one. My claim is that the decade's negation has a crucially positive dimension. The present conjures an angel of history propelled not by the

---

countries, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession, and at different historical epochs" (876). The myth of primitive accumulation turns this constant struggle into a singular, already completed event—indeed, it turns the *process* of capitalist accumulation into the *period* called "capitalism." As Deleuze and Guattari explain it, "From a standpoint within the capitalist mode of production, it is very difficult to say who is the thief and who the victim, or even where the violence resides. … That which gave the worker and the capitalist this form eludes us because it operated in other modes of production. It is a violence that posits itself as preaccomplished, even though it is reactivated every day" (*A Thousand Plateaus*, 447). The myth of primitive accumulation turns the contingent into the "preaccomplished," active process into finished inevitability, the uncertainty of historical time into the sturdy predictability of progress.

[68] Moishe Postone, "The Holocaust and the Trajectory of the Twentieth Century," in *Catastrophe and Meaning: The Holocaust and the Twentieth Century*, ed. Moishe Postone and Eric Santner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 104.

[69] And the paradoxical movement of this dialectic continues to accelerate. As David Harvey sees it, the defining feature of economic life since 1945 is a flexible, post-Fordist economy that "emphasizes the new, the fleeting, the ephemeral, the fugitive, and the contingent in modern life" (*The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1990], 171). Change, in other words, is the constant of capitalism, and so thinking about how to change the existing order forcibly runs up against an already co-opted concept of change. Žižek pointedly poses the problem of envisioning change under contemporary capitalism: "How, then, are we to revolutionize an order whose very principle is constant self-revolutionizing?" (*Organs Without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* [New York: Routledge, 2004], 213).

[70] Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 46.

approaching "storm" of progress but by a sea of seemingly constant change, doomed not simply to record "one single catastrophe" but to struggle in vain to revise every catastrophic word as it is recorded.[71] The ironic temporality of capitalism is buoyed by accelerated change: capital continually transforms itself in order to stay the same, to remain actively under the sign of ever-expanding accumulation. Yet the same paradoxical experience of change structures the contemporariness of contemporary life, the constantly shifting boundaries of the present. The double life of the present, which both adopts and repels periodization and which is suspended precariously, as Krishna warns, between the flow of history and the abyss of eternity, thus orients us within the *longue durée* of capital itself. While Harootunian dismisses "presumptions of continuity" as the ideology of historians, I would say that they express the essential retort that the present gives to the privilege of retrospection.[72] In the decade novel, the present resists both the pull of eternity and the lure of self-containment by recognizing itself as a contingent moment in the continuous march of capitalism. Neither naturalizing nor eternalizing, the revelation of continuity levels a ceaselessly relevant critique. Despite their claims to the contrary, those billboards, which line not only the highways of *Glamorama*'s mural but all three novels' shared vision of late capitalist life, have not always been there, and this means that their "answers" will not, finally, have the last word.

[71] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257-258.
[72] Harootunian, *History's Disquiet*, 15.

The Longer Goodbye: Timely Secrets of the Contemporary Detective Novel

THREE

What is the meaning of their waiting?

SIEGFRIED KRACAUER
"Those Who Wait"

No Hard-Boiled Feelings

Literary criticism's enduring interest in the figure of the detective is no great mystery. "The detective," in Shoshana Felman's famous account, "is only a detective in his (her) function *as a reader*."[1] To read like a detective is to read in a very particular way: the detective works "to extort the *secret* of the text, to compel the language of the text … to confess" (Felman, 192). In the past decade, however, the language of forced confession has made literary critics increasingly suspicious of such a suspicious stance toward literature. Introducing a special issue of *Representations* on "The Way We Read Now," Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus contend that reading like a detective is not always the right way to read, prone to miss at least as much as it unearths: "What lies in plain sight is worthy of attention but often eludes observation—especially by deeply suspicious detectives who look past the surface in order to root out what is underneath."[2] In their conclusion to "The Way We Read Now," Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood similarly argue that it is necessary to "mov[e] away from 'beneath' and 'behind' (those most beloved tropes of a hermeneutics of suspicion) in favor of 'beside'."[3] To rise from the depths back to the surface—to replace a suspicious investigation of what lies "beneath" with a credulous mapping of what lies "beside"—means renouncing the kind of reader who keeps faith in the existence of buried, disguised, or concealed meanings; the reader who, as these critics see it, acts like a detective.

I want to suggest, however, that there is something more at work in detective work. In detective fiction, the mystery is not simply a projection of hidden depths; it is also an expectation, a promise, which *takes time* to be fulfilled. Secrecy is not just a static structure—a timeless choice between surface and depth—but a temporal dynamic. The temporality of detection complicates the familiar hermeneutic dichotomies of surface/depth, beneath/beside, buried/open, absent/present, reminding us that a reader's negotiation of interpretive space always takes place over time. It is thus time to rethink the long taken-for-granted relation between readers and detectives: if detective fiction tells us anything about the act of reading, what it conveys is not the situation of hermeneutic space but the dawning awareness of durational time.

---

[1] Shoshana Felman, "Turning the Screw of Interpretation," *Yale French Studies* 52 (1975): 176.

[2] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," in "The Way We Read Now," edited by Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best with Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood, special issue, *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009): 18.

[3] Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood, afterword to "The Way We Read Now," edited by Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best with Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood, special issue, *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009): 145.

Although it is often described as a genre concerned with the retrospective narration of the past,[4] detective fiction is built fundamentally on future expectation, a constant looking forward to a well-nigh utopian moment of absolute knowledge. The detective narrative, Franco Moretti concludes, is nothing but a means to an end:

> Detective fiction's ending is its end indeed: its solution in the true sense. The *fabula* narrated by the detective in his reconstruction of the facts brings us back to the beginning; that is, it abolishes narration. Between the beginning and the end of the narration—between the absence and the presence of the *fabula*—there is no 'voyage', only a long *wait*.[5]

Detective fiction fulfills the promise of resolution by publicly reinstating the law and order of total explicability—the triumphant event of epistemological closure. Yet in Moretti's view, the detective novel is also strangely self-cancelling: the solution to the mystery retroactively negates the story that led up to it. So "what happens," Tzvetan Todorov asks, in the narrative of detection? "Not much. The characters of this second story, the story of the investigation, do not act, they learn. Nothing can happen to them."[6] At the very last moment, the detective deciphers, narrates, names names. Before that, there is nothing to do but wait.

The wait, these accounts imply, is simply a waste; that is why, once closed, the detective's case (or, in this case, the book) has no need of being reopened. The wasted time of the detective narrative is demonstrated to Moretti's satisfaction by what he assumes are the genre's encouraged reading habits: "Who, in fact, ever 're-reads' a detective story?"[7] The problem with this, of course, is that plenty of people reread detective stories. One such person is Fredric Jameson, who coyly admits, "Inveterate readers of Chandler will know that it is no longer for the solution to the mystery that they reread him, if indeed the solutions ever solved anything in the first place."[8] While Moretti imagines that the satisfaction of the solution is the only possible point to reading a mystery ("only the name of the murderer counts," he says[9]), Jameson raises a more troubling possibility: what if it is in the nature of ends to never really solve anything, to perpetually disappoint us? What if we know full well that the end will never be as satisfying as we expect?[10] The point is persuasively made by Robert A. Rushing, who notes that scholars of

---

[4] In Tzvetan Todorov's famous description, the detective novel "contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. … We might further characterize these two stories by saying that the first—the story of the crime—tells 'what really happened', whereas the second—the story of the investigation—explains 'how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it' " (*The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977], 44, 45).

[5] Franco Moretti, "Clues," in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, Revised Edition, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller (London: Verso, 1988), 148.

[6] Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, 44.

[7] Moretti, "Clues," 150.

[8] Fredric Jameson, "The Synoptic Chandler," in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), 33.

[9] Moretti, "Clues," 150.

[10] Peter Brooks's seminal *Reading for the Plot* is generally thought to attest to the determining importance of narrative ends, describing "the active quest of the reader for those shaping ends that, terminating the dynamic process of reading, promise to bestow meaning and significance on the beginning and the middle."

detective fiction mistakenly "believe that the genre delivers satisfaction through the solution of the mystery when, in fact, *no one is satisfied by the solution*."[11] Rushing further glosses this disappointment by explaining that the classic

> vision of how and why mystery novel readers read is strongly influenced by the 'Van Dine principle,' a presumed normative pact between the author and the reader: at the point in the novel in which the detective announces the solution, the reader must be able, in principle, to solve the mystery. If the reader has been sufficiently astute and careful, he or she will have amassed the necessary clues and followed the detective's logic to its proper end. The problem with the Van Dine principle is that, despite its seductiveness, it virtually never describes the compact between author and reader. On the contrary, even a cursory glance through detective fiction will show that the mystery's solution almost invariably involves subtle but important facts that were concealed from the reader, or depends on esoteric knowledge the reader is almost certain not to possess.[12]

What is most unsatisfying about solutions, in other words, is that they tend to reveal the reader's own blindness—mysteries, we inevitably discover, are not solved by logic and deduction but by some capricious, unforeseeable interpretive leap.[13] In the last instance, the solution turns out to be nothing more than a repetition of the reader's inability to see it from the beginning. In this way, Poe's "Purloined Letter" is still the most exemplary of detective stories: its solution has been literally hiding "in plain sight," both in the form of the letter lying casually upon the Minister's table and in the form of Dupin's blithe announcement of the solution on the very first page of the story—"Perhaps the mystery is a little *too* plain. … A little *too* self-evident."[14]

It is thus far from self-evident that classic detective fiction is organized around the uncomplicated pleasures of the end (or what Dennis Porter, in another well-known

---

But Brooks ultimately concludes that our experience of "those shaping ends"—and their impossible promises—will always be fraught with ambivalence: "We are frustrated by narrative interminable, even if we know that any termination is artificial, and that the imposition of ending may lead to that resistance to the end which Freud found in his patients and which is an important novelistic dynamic in such writers as Stendhal and Gide" (*Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984], 19, 23).

[11] Robert A. Rushing, *Resisting Arrest: Detective Fiction and Popular Culture* (New York: Other Press, 2007), 9.

[12] Robert A. Rushing, "Traveling Detectives: The 'Logic of Arrest' and the Pleasures of (Avoiding) the Real," *Yale French Studies* 108 (2005), 89-90.

[13] Žižek similarly describes the unavoidable disappointments that accompany the detective's triumph: "We are immensely disappointed if the denouement is brought about by a pure scientific procedure … But it is even more disappointing if, at the end, after naming the assassin, the detective claims that 'he was guided from the very beginning by some unmistakable instinct' " (*Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* [Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991], 49).

[14] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Purloined Letter," in *The Portable Poe*, ed. Philip Van Doren Stern (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 441. Here, of course, it is the Prefect's laughter that stands in for our own refusal to believe that things could ever be so obvious: "Ha! ha! ha!—ha! ha! ha!—ho! ho! ho!"

account of the genre, calls the "reward" of reading[15]). On the contrary, writers as different as Agatha Christie and Raymond Chandler capitalize on a more unsettling dialectic between satisfaction and dissatisfaction, showing how it may be a letdown to get even what we think we want. Moretti is right about one thing, though: the popular detective novel offers at least the appearance of closure, even if it often turns out to be less than rewarding. Responding to the essentially closed or completed form of the detective narrative, various high modernist and postmodernist rewritings of detective fiction are marked by one central difference: even the patina of closure disappears. In writers from Faulkner and Robbe-Grillet to Pynchon and Bolaño, the ostensible pleasure of detection collapses into the frustrating indeterminacy of what Porter terms "anti-detection," where "what is missing in the end is the satisfaction of desire that comes from 'knowledge' " (251). But as I've tried to suggest, "satisfaction" has always played a vexed role in detection, which means that anti-detection is not so much a radical reinvention of the detective narrative as its logical extreme. Modernist and postmodernist detective fiction replaces displeasure with irresolution, making good on the threat of the unsatisfying solution by leaving readers with the most unsatisfying end there is: a solution that never appears at all. In both its popular and its literary form, in other words, the detective novel is haunted by disappointment, whether of the unsatisfying answer or of the answer that has disappeared altogether.

In a different way, of course, so simple a dichotomy between popular detection and modernist anti-detection will turn out to be too good to be true, ignoring the ways that detective fiction has increasingly blurred the lines between highbrow and lowbrow culture. In the decades since writers like Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, and Paul Auster reworked the materials of the detective story with the tools of high postmodernism, the actual pulp writers of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s have themselves entered the American canon, with the Library of America publishing Raymond Chandler's complete works in 1995, followed by two volumes of "American Noir" authors in 1997 and the complete works of Dashiell Hammett in 1999. Which is simply to say that the famous "erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" by which Jameson defined postmodernism works both ways.[16] So even as detective stories remain a fertile reference point for literary fiction—as the novels I examine in this chapter attest—a more experimental prose style has in turn been re-appropriated by "genre" writers like Richard Price and David Peace. And such crossings of high and low are hardly confined to the novel. Television shows like *Dexter* and *Bored to Death* along with graphic texts like Frank Miller's *Sin City* series break down the borders between lowbrow entertainment and canny highbrow pastiche. The distinction between satisfaction and dissatisfaction has become similarly fuzzy, as television serials like *Damages* and films like *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000) and *Zodiac* (David Fincher, 2007) experiment with different forms of ambiguity, open-endedness, and irresolution.[17] The division between detection

---

[15] The novel form generally, Porter writes, "resembles a baited trap that entices the reader with the promise of a reward. And the reward traditionally offered in a detective novel is a revelation and reconstruction in which everything is seen to fit together" (*The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981], 254).

[16] Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," 128.

[17] To this list, we could even add a more definitively lowbrow procedural like *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. At the end of each episode, the show cleanly wraps up its mystery, yet it does so by staging a re-enactment of

and anti-detection thus risks over-simplifying a much more heterogeneous cultural field. Why, then, continue to use it at all? We would do well to think of detection and anti-detection not as two discrete instances of the genre (closed versus open, popular versus literary) but as the two poles of expectation that every detective story is equally compelled to negotiate. In the pages that follow, I focus on a set of ostensibly highbrow or "literary" detective novels, not because I think they winkingly deconstruct or transcend popular forms of detection, but rather because they bring to the surface the tensions that shape the genre as a whole: between lowbrow and highbrow, anticipation and anticlimax, satisfaction and disappointment.

The genre of the detective novel is thus founded not on the assurance of the end but on the always uncertain distance between expectation and fulfillment, the persistent gap that makes waiting—and reading—take place. This sense of the wait, I want to suggest, is the real point of detective fiction. In the lag between reading and revelation, one feels not only the anticipation of narrative fulfillment but also the anguish of unfolding time. To understand this alternate temporality of detective fiction, however, it is necessary to break the spell cast by its ending. The critical genealogies of detection and anti-detection that I summarized above are equally fixated on the embattled status of the end, the solution's precarious position between pleasure and disappointment, presence and absence. But to assume that the meaning of the detective story lies in its end (whether pleasurable, disappointing, or mysteriously absent) is to miss the central way that detection, built on the affects of anticipation and the specter of interminable delay, situates meaning in time. In this essay, I want to focus on a different kind of detective novel, one that, moving beyond both the popular problem of dissatisfaction and the literary infatuation with irresolution, reveals the interplay of expectation, deferral, and disappointment that corresponds to the genre's secret structure of waiting.

In the past decade, a number of "literary" detective novels have turned markedly away from the issues of indeterminacy that preoccupied their modern and postmodern forebears. These novels shift the genre's focus from the problem of reconstructing the past to the difficulties of anticipating the future. Colson Whitehead's *Intuitionist*, Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*, and Michael Chabon's *Yiddish Policemen's Union* all use the dynamics of the classic mystery plot to think through more timely problems of terrorist threat, utopian deferral, and apocalyptic anxiety.[18] In doing so, they make the wait not

---

the crime that it subtly confesses (by way of a blurry, shaky camera style visually set off from the style that characterizes the main diegesis) is not so much a definitive solution as a speculative—and perhaps even a wholly fictionalized—reconstruction.

[18] Other examples of this shift include Kazuo Ishiguro's *When We Were Orphans* (2000), Julian Barnes's *Arthur and George* (2005), and Pynchon's *Inherent Vice* (2009), all of which offer a different perspective on the dialectic of expectation and disappointment. In *When We Were Orphans* and *Arthur and George*, solving a case does not reinstate law and order or bring personal renown but only reveals the disappointments of political compromise and bureaucratic delay. In *Inherent Vice*, the pieced-together puzzle is but a temporary hedge against the unaccountable experience of historical transition. Detailing the slow emergence of disillusionment that bridged the end of the idealist 1960s and the onset of the paranoid 1970s, the last lines of Pynchon's stoner detective novel leave us with private eye Doc Sportello driving down the freeway, immersed in a literal fog that is also, unmistakably, the fog of history: "Maybe then it would stay this way for days, maybe he'd have to just keep driving … Then again, he might run out of gas before that happened, and have to leave the caravan, and pull over on the shoulder, and wait. For whatever would happen. For a forgotten joint to materialize in his pocket. For the CHP to come by and choose not to hassle him. For a

only the formal counterpoint to detection's mode of secular revelation but also the grounds for the everyday experience of the detectives themselves. In these novels, mysteries are solved, murderers named, conspiracies, if not thwarted, at least brought to light—and yet, despite the determinacy of the solutions to their cases, Lila Mae Watson, Meyer Landsman, and Sartaj Singh are, at the ends of their narratives, left waiting. The end of one wait, for these detectives, is only the beginning of another.

The Intuitionist, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, and *Sacred Games* all reveal the friction between form and content that has structured the genre of detective fiction from the beginning: the generic laws of detection (according to which the mystery must be solved, the secret unveiled) inevitably run up against the unanswerable demands of expectation (such that the end we get is never the end we were hoping for). While the detective narrative promises to tell us what we want to know, its true function is to remind us again and again that, as readers embedded in time, we do not know everything yet. The detective story's solution, ever unsatisfying, is never what one is really waiting for. Thus do these contemporary detective novels compel reader and detective alike to confront what Anne-Lise François calls the "oddly satisfying reprieve or 'letdown' from teleological expectations"[19]: the surprising sense of possibility present in the endless prospect of waiting.

The detective novel's wait, I want to suggest, requires us to rethink both the meaning of the genre and its model of reading. Reading like a detective need not imply a stance of suspicion or impose a law of revelation; it is, rather, a process that illuminates what it means to be subject to time. In Whitehead's, Chabon's, and Chandra's novels, disappointment inheres in the very structure of the solution, whether the delay of utopia or the postponement of apocalypse. Yet in each of these texts, the experience of the wait holds out hope for something else: not a different or better end but, I argue, a different way of reading the middle. By shifting our critical focus from the endpoint of the detective story to its "meantime," I show how disappointment demands a new conception of narrative secrecy: the secrets of these texts are not projections of hidden knowledge but already-broken promises, whose continual letdown makes us aware of the time it takes to read them. Ultimately, I claim, the secret of waiting shapes not only the way we read or why we read but *when* we read. Transforming reading from a search for answers into an awareness of the wait, what I have perhaps prematurely but not un-self-consciously called, in this chapter's title, "the contemporary detective novel" returns us to the question of how it is possible to construct a sense of the contemporary in the first place—the question of how to read the mysterious category we call the present. Reading today's detective novels, we discover that the act of reading is not only embedded in but also reflective of the delayed times that make up our present time.

---

restless blonde in a Stingray to stop and offer him a ride. For the fog to burn away, and for something else this time, somehow, to be there instead" (*Inherent Vice* [New York: Penguin Press, 2009], 369).

[19] Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), xxi.

Utopian Clues

Like any good detective novel, *The Intuitionist* is all about learning to read.[20] The novel's two rival factions of elevator inspection, Intuitionism and Empiricism, are, at the most obvious level, opposed ideologies of reading. As James Fulton's housekeeper Mrs. Rogers explains to Lila Mae, the Empiricists "all had this long list of things to check in elevators and what made an elevator work and all, and [Fulton]'d come to hate that. He told me—these are his words—'They were all slaves to what they could see'. But there was a truth behind that they couldn't see for the life of them."[21] Lila Mae expands on this in a way that makes plain the novel's racial allegory: "White people's reality is built on what things appear to be—that's the business of Empiricism" (239). Empiricism, then, is practical and materialist, a credulous relation to the surfaces of things: "See, the Empiricists stoop to check for tell-tale striations on the left winch and seize upon oxidation scars on the compensating rope sheave, all that muscle work, and think the Intuitionists get off easy" (57). Intuitionists, by contrast, eschew the vulgar materialism of empirical inspection; they strive instead to read without seeing, to "separate[e] the elevator from elevatorness" (115). It stands to reason that, if Empiricism is bewitched by appearances, then Intuitionism is what's capable of penetrating to what Mrs. Rogers calls the "truth behind" them. But there's a problem with this. The "truth" that the Empiricists couldn't see, and that prompted Fulton to invent Intuitionism in the first place, was the truth of Fulton's race: "He wasn't who he was. He passed for white. He was colored" (236). And this truth was one that Lila Mae's Intuitionist reading was not able to discern either.

The very discovery of Fulton's secret, then, confirms a hidden correspondence between Intuitionism and Empiricism, the overriding suspicion that these two ideologies of reading are not as different as they, well, appear. That's because the two schools of thought are just different methods of reading for the same thing. Intuitionism may see past the merely visible, but only in the service of bringing the invisible to light, of mapping hidden meanings back on to life's material surfaces. Just a few pages into the novel, Lila Mae—chided as "one of those voodoo inspectors" (7)—shows us the essence of Intuitionist reading. Eyes closed,

> she's trying to concentrate on the vibrations massaging her back. She can almost see them now. The elevator's vibrations are resolving themselves in her mind as an aqua-blue cone. … As the elevator reaches the fifth floor landing, an orange octagon cartwheels into her mind's frame. … The octagon ricochets into the foreground, famished for attention. She knows what it is. … "I'm going to have to cite you for a faulty overspeed governor," Lila Mae says. … "But you haven't even looked at it," the super says. "You haven't even seen it." (6-7)

[20] The novel makes plain the allegorical stakes of this investment from the beginning: the plot is set in motion by an accident at the Fanny Briggs Memorial Building, "shrewdly" named by the mayor in an attempt to garner support among the city's increasing African American population. And who was Fanny Briggs? Lila Mae learned about her in the third grade: "Fanny Briggs was a slave who taught herself how to read" (12).
[21] Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* 9New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 239.

The key to Intuitionism is that it can penetrate beyond the mechanical surface, past the "nuts and bolts" (58); it doesn't have to "look" or "see" to know what's wrong. But what Intuitionists *intuit* is ultimately no different from what Empiricists *see*. Lila Mae is correct in her diagnosis only to the extent that the Empiricists would, seeing different things, come to the same conclusion: one way or another, the building super has himself a faulty overspeed governor.

Another way to put it is that what Intuitionism and Empiricism have in common is that they are both modes of *inspection*. And by the end of the novel, it is not one or the other of these ideologies that Lila Mae has transcended, but the very task of the inspector: "Just one or two matters left to clear up. The elevator inspector wants to know for sure, even though Lila Mae understands all she needs now" (250). This passage, a joke at the expense of a narrative that does indeed "clear up" everything, also draws attention to a different dichotomy of reading practices that emerges in the novel's final pages. The split is registered in Lila Mae herself, who is here named twice: as both "the elevator inspector" and "Lila Mae." The "elevator inspector," of course, is responsible for the classic activity of the detective, whose motivation is to solve the mystery, "to know" everything "for sure." The traditional detective, as Brian McHale explains, "sift[s] through the evidence of witnesses of different degrees of reliability in order to reconstruct and solve a 'crime'."[22] For Lila Mae, the solving of the plot's crimes, the wrapping up of its loose ends, is similarly empirical and logical: "Arbo and Natchez are merely unanswered questions. Their intrusion into her life is a matter of cause and effect, prospering along logical trajectories of greed, and only require adequate information to explain them. Time to sift the facts through her fingers and shake out the fine silt until what is left in her hand is what happened" (231). The question of "what happened" is the province of both detection and inspection, and—no matter whether you're reading on the surface or underneath it—it boils down to a simple issue of "adequate information," a proper "sifting" of the facts.

So the elevator inspector sifts, and she and her readers get the answers they are looking for (Natchez's real name is Raymond Coombs, he works for Arbo, the corporation had nothing to do with the "catastrophic accident" that began the narrative).[23] But then there is "Lila Mae," who already "understands all she needs." Which is what, exactly? In fact, this new understanding is the mark of a "new literacy," a transformation in Lila Mae's

---

[22] Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), 9.

[23] Michael Bérubé observes that *The Intuitionist*'s "final page [is] like the final page of *The Crying of Lot 49* but far less sinister" ("Race and Modernity in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*," in *The Holodeck in the Garden: Science and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Peter Freese & Charles B. Harris [Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2004], 169). While the influence of Pynchon's novel certainly weighs heavily on Whitehead's, there is also an essential difference—in *The Intuitionist*, we actually find out what happened. Compare this to the famous final scene of *Lot 49*, which ends just as "the auctioneer cleared his throat. Oedipa settled back, to await the crying of lot 49" (Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1966), 152). These last lines enact a surprising separation between the reader and Oedipa, as we discover the solution to a question Oedipa herself is not in a position to ask—the meaning behind the novel's title. Yet this unexpected piece of information serves only to distract us from a more formal solidarity, as Oedipa and her readers are brought back together to wait for an answer that, placed outside the bounds of the narrative, can never come: the revelation of who will bid on Lot 49, the exposure of who is behind the Tristero conspiracy, the discovery of whether there is a conspiracy at all. This helps bring into starker relief the distinction I want to draw between the indeterminacy of "anti-detection" and the temporality of the wait in contemporary detective novels.

very conception of reading: "In the last few days she has learned how to read, like a slave does, one forbidden word at a time" (230). What Madhu Dubey calls *The Intuitionist*'s "corrective reading" of African American history is thus also a correction to the standard ways we think about reading.[24] No longer concerned with the epistemological closure of her case—with the narrative resolution that corresponds to successful inspection—Lila Mae's new mode of reading resists the imperatives of both Empiricism and Intuitionism, and their corresponding choices between surface and depth, the material and the ineffable. As Dubey describes the final scene, "Fulton's (and later Lila Mae's) manuscript is written in hieroglyphic code, circulates in the form of scattered notes and torn-out pages, and is numinous with mystery" (240-241). What is important, though, is that, having taught herself "how to read" anew, Lila Mae is no longer concerned with interpreting that "hieroglyphic code," with penetrating the manuscript's "mystery." While both the Empiricists and the Intuitionists (along with various and sundry politicians and corporations) are hurrying to "break Fulton's code and hieroglyphics" (Whitehead, 254), Lila Mae is no longer interested in the pursuit. "Sometimes in her new room she wonders who will decode the elevator first. It could be Arbo. It could be United. It doesn't matter" (255). Lila Mae's "new literacy" consists in something other than decipherment; decoding "doesn't matter." Set against the common obsession with the encrypted—fantasies about the fullness of Fulton's secrets—Lila Mae's new mode of reading cannot simply be about seeing the *right* things, or seeing things differently; it has to be about something more than "seeing" altogether.

Rejecting resolution, revelation, and the vicissitudes of inspection itself, Lila Mae's "understanding" is not concerned with the decoding of secrets or the wrapping up of plots; she is unconcerned, in other words, with pretty much any possibility of closure. But what are you doing when you no longer expect closure—when you're no longer reading for resolution? Lila Mae's new way of reading has, finally, opened up the possibility of *waiting*. It is here, waiting for a future whose arrival remains unplanned and uncertain, that the novel leaves its protagonist: "If it is the right time she will give them the perfect elevator. If it is not time she will send out more of Fulton's words to let them know it is coming. As per his instructions. It is important to let the citizens know it is coming. To let them prepare themselves for the second elevation" (255). Learning how to read differently thus means reimaging the traditional form of detection's long wait. Lila Mae is waiting not for the exposition of empirical answers but for the arrival of a utopian future; so while the novel makes good on the promise of the former, it is the latter that gives substance to Lila Mae's final, and definitive, act of waiting. Intervening between Intuitionism and Empiricism, Lila Mae's "new literacy" locates meaning neither on the surface nor in the depths but in the very experience of delayed time—the structure of the wait.

To grasp the utopian future, Jameson has recently suggested, one must learn to decipher the present. "The Utopian impulse," he writes, "therefore calls for a hermeneutic: for the detective work of a decipherment and a reading of Utopian clues and traces in the landscape of the real."[25] For Jameson, "reawakening … the imagination of possible and alternate futures" demands a new kind of reading practice, one able "to affirm that

[24] Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 238.
[25] Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), 415.

dystopia is in reality Utopia if examined more closely, to isolate specific features in our empirical present so as to read them as components of a different system" (434). Lila Mae appears to be this new kind of reader; yet what her reading reveals is precisely the unreadability of the future. In *The Intuitionist*, the essential mystery of the utopian or redemptive future persists. Lila Mae's "forbidden" act of reading does not penetrate the mystery of Fulton's "utopian text" but rather preserves it. Her utopian reading reveals to her one essential truth: that despite what one discovers about the present, the future is a mystery that will remain unread.

What Lila Mae's detection tells her about the future, in other words, is that one has to wait for it. If, in Whitehead's novel, learning how to read is about learning how to ignore deeper meanings, then for Lila Mae, reading like a detective means being willing to wait. While Intuitionism proposed reading for what one can't see, Lila Mae ends by discovering the necessity of reading for what she can't *foresee*. As the last scene of Lila Mae's solitary writing makes clear, Fulton has bequeathed to Lila Mae not an "other world" to realize (nor, even, to theorize) but a world that she can only await: "They're all doomed … by what she's working on. What she will deliver to the world when the time is right. They are not ready now, but they will be" (254). Between the "now" when they are not ready and the unforeseeable moment when the "time is right," all Lila Mae can do is wait. Jameson's "utopian clues" may be waiting to be read, but they will not be read by us. In *The Intuitionist*, the work of the detective is not to make the future immediately visible but to ensure that we will continue to wait for as long as its secret is kept.[26]

End Times

Like Lila Mae, the detectives of *Sacred Games* and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* are left hanging. In Chandra's and Chabon's novels, however, the deferred beyond of *The Intuitionist* is made part of the texture of the present, which is no longer reaching out toward a utopian future but trying to forestall an apocalyptic one. The waits of Sartaj Singh and Meyer Landsman are a direct result of the nature of the crimes they are investigating, crimes that leave things, quite literally, open-ended: by preventing apocalypse, each detective transforms the end of his narrative into a non-event, the perfect absence of any climax. And precisely in the absence of a determinate climax, the threat of nuclear annihilation persists: forestalling the apocalypse, Landsman and Sartaj realize, does nothing to resolve the political and religious tensions that gave rise to the threat in the first place. Following Whitehead, Chabon and Chandra use the temporality of deferral to offer a stark riposte to the standard reading of (and the standards of reading in) the

[26] But how long will that be? The well-known last lines of the novel assure us: "It will come. She is never wrong. It's her intuition" (255). This assertion of certainty does as much to undermine the promise as to guarantee it. The last sentence is presumably supposed to modify the first (as in, *It is her intuition that the future will come*). Yet one could just as easily take the final sentence to modify the second—*it is her intuition that she is never wrong*. With this, the recursive structure of faith breaks down: if it is merely her intuition that she should trust her intuition, then the very grounds for certainty about the future rest on uncertainty in the present. Intuition, then, is as much about not knowing as knowing. By playing intuition back on itself, revealing the recursive paradox of its self-reproduction (of having an intuition about one's own intuition), the novel closes with the apt suggestion that what one believes about anything only begins from the possibility of knowing nothing.

detective novel: the wait is not a desire for or a drive toward the solution but a counter-movement against it, an expectation that, when satisfied—the total destruction of the earth prevented—simply reproduces itself.

The detective, neither a public servant nor a private individual, is traditionally expected to mediate these two spheres of social life. Mysteries are perpetrated by private citizens and bungled by the police; they can only be solved by the detective, who occupies both positions at once. In *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* and *Sacred Games*, however, the divide between private and public returns to haunt and ultimately to undo the successful social mediation promised by detection. The unbridgeable gap between the individual perspective of the detective and the social totality implied by apocalypse disillusions Landsman and Sartaj and muddles the ostensible satisfactions of the detective story. The mysteries in both novels provide the occasion for constantly discovering the political beneath the personal—the specter of mass violence implied by the materiality of a single corpse. The dead body that begins *Sacred Games* is that of Mumbai crime boss Ganesh Gaitonde, who has killed himself (along with his platonic love interest Jojo) while taking refuge, for unbeknownst reasons, in a bomb shelter. In his attempt to reconstruct what happened to Ganesh, Sartaj discovers a more urgent and still unfolding plot: Ganesh had been working for a powerful Hindu guru, and right before Ganesh died, he unwittingly assisted Guru-ji in smuggling a nuclear bomb into Mumbai. Guru-ji plans to detonate the weapon in the middle of the city and blame it on a fake Islamic fundamentalist group, the Hizbuddeen (Army of the Final Day), in order to incite a war between India and Pakistan. "Every golden age," Guru-ji tells Ganesh, "must be preceded by an apocalypse. It has always been so, and it will be so again. … Every great religious tradition predicts this burning, Ganesh. We all know it's coming."[27] The spiritual distinction between hero and villains—Sartaj is a Sikh who no longer believes in god, Ganesh a recent convert to Hinduism and a devout disciple of Guru-ji—is in fact a disagreement over the present's relation to the future. Guru-ji's aim is to bring about the end of the world in order to replace the fallen present with a redeemed future, while Sartaj, striving to save the present from the future, must prevent the end from ever arriving.

The body that Landsman finds at the beginning of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* belongs to Mendel Shpilman, the disowned son of the most powerful rabbi in Sitka.[28] But this body, too, contains conspiratorial multitudes: the local investigation into Mendel's murder reveals a globe-trotting plot—organized by Sitka's orthodox Jews and supported by the United States government—to bomb the Islamic shrine in Jerusalem (which, in Chabon's counterfactual globe, is part of Palestine), rebuild the Jewish temple there, and "hasten the coming of Messiah."[29] As in *Sacred Games*, the prospect of religious violence that hangs over *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* is tied directly to the frustration of prophecy's unfulfilled promise. Tired of the endless deferral of messianic redemption, Rabbi Shpilman, just like Guru-ji, conspires to realize the dream of the distant future in the

---

[27] Vikram Chandra, *Sacred Games* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 838.

[28] Chabon's novel is both a detective story and a historical counterfactual: it takes place in an alternate present in which the state of Israel does not exist and the Jews have been temporarily settled in Sitka, Alaska. The story is set in the months before "Reversion," when Sitka's sixty-year " 'interim status' as a federal district" (29) is poised to expire, at which point the land will revert to the U.S. government and the Jews will once again be diasporically scattered across the globe.

[29] Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), 344.

immediate present, to "basically *force* Messiah to come" (295). Indeed, the problem with the religious extremists who populate both books is precisely that they are unwilling to wait. "Theirs was not," Chabon's narrator points out, "by definition an endeavor that attracted men with the talent for waiting" (339).

In the face of such historical impatience, the mysteries of the dead bodies fade into the background, replaced by more intractable—perhaps irresolvable—political conflicts. Realizing this, Sartaj laments, "In this Gaitonde affair, there would be no justice, no redemption. There was only a hope for some partial explanation of what had happened" (557). Landsman says pretty much the same thing: "So the killer of Mendel Shpilman, whoever it was, is walking around free. So, so what?" (397). What is strange, however, is that these pronouncements of resignation are entirely premature. For there is, in fact, a full "explanation" of the "Gaitonde affair," and justice too: Guru-ji's plot is foiled, his men apprehended, their nuclear weapon confiscated. Likewise, just a few pages after Landsman's shrugging abnegation, Mendel's killer is neither anonymous nor free: the killer turns out to be Landsman's Uncle Hertz, who has confessed to the crime and is "already under arrest" (405). So why, on the verge of successfully solving their cases, do Sartaj and Landsman avow the impossibility, the utter hopelessness, of a complete solution? Here is the first hint of a more radical discontinuity between mystery and answer. In the end, the ungraspable complexity of apocalyptic conspiracy provides a retort to the oversimplified closure of the individual case. The political context of both novels hovers above the specificity of the crimes, instilling even the successful solution with an unmistakable air of disappointment.[30]

In *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, disappointment arises out of the difference between two kinds of mysteries, which are not open to the same type of resolution. Although both the name of the murderer and the participants in the conspiracy have been unmasked, only the case of the murder, an event fully consigned to the past, is capable of being closed. The terrorist conspiracy, on the other hand, is still unfolding, and naming the men who plotted it has done nothing to prevent their actions. The bombing of Qubbat As-Sakhrah has, at the end of the novel, still taken place. The final scene of Uncle Hertz's confession is set directly against the everyday aftermath of the bombing; the epistemological order putatively restored by the naming of the murderer is juxtaposed to the political chaos of a world teetering on the brink of apocalyptic conflict: "All these people rioting on the television in Syria, Baghdad, Egypt? In London? Burning cars. Setting fire to embassies. … That's the kind of shit we have to look forward to now. Burning cars and homicidal dancing" (406). Answering the question of who killed Mendel is but a momentary distraction from the disappointing discovery of how utterly lacking the

[30] It is worth noting that in Chabon's novel, disappointment is a built-in element of religious belief itself. As Chabon describes it (in terms that will be familiar to readers of Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida), Jewish messianism is defined by deferral: " 'Do you really feel like you're waiting for Messiah?' Berko shrugs … 'It's Messiah,' he says. 'What else can you do but wait?' " (127). It is this wait, rather than any presumed arrival, that defines Jewish faith—"the principle, thinks Landsman, that every Jew has a personal Messiah who never comes" (331). Fredric Jameson provides a nuanced gloss on this easily-misunderstood issue: "We must be very subtle in the way in which, particularly those of us who are not believing Jews and are very far from such kinds of beliefs, we understand the coming of the Messiah. The non-Jews imagine that Jews think of Messiah as a promise and a future certainty: nothing could be farther from the truth" ("Marx's Purloined Letter," in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's* Specters of Marx, ed. Michael Sprinker [London: Verso, 1999], 62).

detective is in political agency. Solving the case has only revealed how far Landsman is from resolving the political instability roiling all around him.

Approaching the same problem from the opposite direction, *Sacred Games* wonders why even the successful prevention of terrorism might prove disappointing. Here, the solution is not merely a screen covering over a larger disappointment—now disappointment is part of the structure of the solution itself. In the climactic scene of Chandra's novel, the disappointment of the solution is registered explicitly in terms of the wait. Sartaj has tracked Guru-ji and his stolen nuclear weapon to a safe house in Mumbai. On the verge of apprehending the villains and averting apocalypse, Sartaj's partner Kamble is "rigid with excitement and anticipation" (875), while "inside the command post, there was an expectant silence … filled with waiting" (876). The anticipation, however, leads to nothing: despite both the expectations of the police force and the implicit promise of the text's omniscient narration, the successful raid on Guru-ji's hideout takes place entirely off-screen, beyond the purview of the narrative. Sartaj and Kamble are forced to wait in a command post some distance from the action:

> Nothing changed in the room, but then, from far away, came a series of pops, and then another, phap-phap-phap, phap-phap-phap-phap. And then a last little boom. A moment passed, and from the front of the room, a cheer grew and spread. Anjali Mathur came running through the clapping crowd. 'We're safe,' she said. 'We're safe.' (876)

The climactic confrontation between good and evil is reduced to a series of meaningless onomatopoeic sounds. Sartaj reflects on the paradox of a resolution that has not resolved the feeling of waiting: "So, with those little banging sounds far away, apparently the world had been saved. Sartaj didn't feel any safer. Inside him, even now, there was that burning fuse, that ticking fear" (877). The emphasis on the smallness and the distance of the sounds (coupled, already, with their non-representational quality) suggests that action and intervention always take place someplace else, while in the room itself, "nothing changed." The gap between expectation and event is in the very nature of apocalyptic anxiety, for which resolution always contains a *lack* of change. Forestalling nuclear apocalypse has not quelled Sartaj's "ticking fear" of it: so long as the apocalypse does not arrive, the "fuse" of Sartaj's dread will continue, paradoxically unextinguished, to burn.

Sartaj "trie[s]"—and fails—"to feel satisfaction" (877). Why is the outcome so disappointing? Because it is the opposite of an end: it is persistence without progression, "survival" without change ("We have survived another day. But the thought did not make him feel any better" [871]). Not unlike Guru-ji's metaphysical assurance of historical change, detection has promised Sartaj a solution that will change everything, a transformation of the unsolved, uncertain present into a knowable, fearless future. But the solution is simply the same old present, the future is still out there, and the wait is all that remains: "Sartaj stayed outside. He listened to the flapping of the flag on the temple, and watched the water. He had the sense that something was about to change. He was waiting. But he wasn't sure it ever would" (880). Waiting, then, is neither a happening nor a non-happening: it is the postponement of change and at the same time the unceasing promise of it. To wait is to feel not only the disappointment of the deferred future but also the

unsettling potential of the present, whose transformation—whether catastrophic or redemptive—is forever postponed.

In both novels, the answers we have been waiting for turn out to be nothing but a disappointment; as Landsman complains, "The exaltation of understanding; then understanding's bottomless regret" (400). In *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, the names we learn do nothing to prevent political violence, while in *Sacred Games*, prevention is its own disappointment, as the survival of the present can only entail the anxious continuation of the wait. Solutions are either arbitrary—"Detection made detectives look clever, but often solutions were gifts from fools" (Chandra, 644)—or self-evident: "Landsman wrestles with the perennial detective problem of being obliged to state the obvious" (Chabon, 390). They are either impossible to logically deduce or not worth the trouble of doing so. The climaxes of both novels suggest that it is not the absence of an answer that is disappointing but the answer's anticlimactic presence, which is never exactly what we expect it to be and thus leaves us perpetually waiting for something else.

Moretti suggests that "detective fiction's ending" is also its "end," which is to say that the ending is its whole point: the moment where the genre becomes most fully itself. Yet something strange happens at the ends of *Sacred Games* and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. If these detective novels are defined not by the pleasure of the solution but by the disappointment of an unending wait, then we should not be surprised to learn that satisfaction only becomes available by way of a different genre altogether. In the final pages of both novels, Landsman and Sartaj, having confronted the letdown of their successful detective work, do find something to be happy about—but it is the happy ending of the marriage plot, generic staple not of the detective story but of the romance. No longer invested in the teleology of detection, Landsman can only embrace the happily-ever-after (the satisfying status quo) of the romantic reconciliation that has been waiting for him from the start:

> For days Landsman had been thinking that he missed his chance with Mendel Shpilman, that in exile at the Hotel Zamenhof, without even realizing, he blew his one shot at something like redemption. But there is no Messiah of Sitka. Landsman has no home, no future, no fate but Bina. The land that he and she were promised was bounded only by the fringes of their wedding canopy, by the dog-eared corners of their cards of membership in an international fraternity whose members carry their patrimony in a tote bag, their world on the tip of the tongue. (410-411)

With "no home" and "no future" (of either a political reclamation of Sitka or a messianic return to Israel), Landsman possesses nothing but a rekindled relationship with his ex-wife—nothing "but Bina." Landsman uses his love for Bina to shield himself from the apocalyptic uncertainty of the future. Even the gesture toward a broader sense of collective ethnic identity only emerges out of Landsman's and Bina's marriage: they "were promised" not an "international" Jewish community-in-exile but a "land … bounded only by the fringes of their wedding canopy." Landsman may have "lost his belief in fate and promises," but at the very last moment he affirms the worldliest of promissory structures: the wedding vow (410).

Sartaj does pretty much the same thing: "Here with Mary … he was not afraid of either the happiness or the heartbreak that lay ahead. He was newly alive, as if he had been freed of something. He did not understand why this should be so, but he was satisfied enough with not understanding completely. To be alive was enough" (945). Earlier, at the raid on Guru-ji's hideout, the simplicity of survival was *not* enough ("the thought did not make him feel any better"). Why is it enough now? If Sartaj is "satisfied" with "not understanding," it can only be because he is no longer held by the expectations of the detective genre. Sartaj finds himself "freed" from the temporality of detection, "alive" according to the criteria of an entirely different genre: the "burning fuse" of endless anticipation has been transformed into a romantic acceptance (if not the hetero-normative codification) of whatever "lay ahead."

If the solution to the mystery of the detective novel is already freighted with disappointment, Chabon's and Chandra's novels turn the letdown of the solution into the ultimate disappointment of readerly expectations: a violation of the laws of genre. By forgoing the detective's classic stance of analytic solitude or hard-boiled isolation and affirming instead bourgeois monogamy, Landsman and Sartaj openly flout what we expect the genre to be. Detective narratives rarely culminate in a marriage or romantic coupling—the asexuality of the classic analytic detective is equally matched by the destructive sexuality of the hard-boiled *femme fatale*. Yet there is also something fishy about the incongruously romantic endings of *Sacred Games* and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, which makes sense once we recall that the detective novel's ending is merely its most insistent red herring. The problem with these off-kilter endings is not that they dispel the fantasy of generic purity (which is, of course, only ever a fantasy); it is, rather, that this ostensible breach of the detective genre perfectly captures detection's compromised relation to closure. The romantic ending is at once happier than anything the detective novel could offer and, precisely because it is not seen as a natural outgrowth of the genre, more disappointing. These endings, in other words, are simply an extreme version of the classic solution that does not proceed from rules, laws, or logic but instead appears out of nowhere, resolving everything so neatly (Sartaj and Landsman being suddenly sanguine the cases that had relentlessly hounded them) that its perfection is precisely what makes it unsatisfying. If there is something off-kilter, even vulgar, about these happy or romantic endings, the issue is not that they are happy, but that they uncannily capture the displeasure of disjuncture that characterizes the end of the detective novel as such. The generic incongruity of the endings to *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* and *Sacred Games* is merely a stand-in for the disappointment of all endings—all moments of revelation, unveiling, or happily-ever-after—that interrupt the interminable time of the detective's wait.

Middle Grounds

Is the wait, then, simply an absence of events, an erasure of agency? Looking at the ends of *The Intuitionist*, *Sacred Games*, and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, it might seem so. But that is only because we are looking for the meaning of the wait in the wrong place. Capitalizing on a genre built from the beginning around the long wait, these novels suggest that the significance (the "end") of the detective narrative lies not in the secret of its ending but in the anticipation leading up to it—where, it will turn out, much more than Todorov's "not

much" happens. What, these novels ask instead, does it mean to read for what Peter Fenves calls "a secret for which there is no corresponding revelation"?[31] Refusing the fantasy of revelation or the illusion of end times, these three texts articulate a logic of the meantime, the time between expectation and fulfillment, between ungrounded suspicion and unerring knowledge: the drawn out time—rather than the implied space—of the secret.

D.A. Miller remarks that "secrecy" is above all a "spiritual exercise," a promise of knowledge that, because it might never be fulfilled, is really a matter of faith.[32] It is tempting to think of the standard detective narrative as a process of banishing the spiritual, replacing superstition with science, recasting the mystical as a matter of secular explanation. Yet the unfulfilled endings to Whitehead's, Chabon's, and Chandra's novels suggest that the genre may be unable to eradicate the "spirit" of the secret. The end of the detective story retains a kernel of the mystery that is its condition of possibility in the first place. For Miller, the purpose of the secret lies not in its capacity to be revealed but in its insistence on being kept: "The self is most itself at the moment when its defining inwardness is most secret" (200). As a result, the self continues to be itself *only as long as its secret is kept*—the hidden depths promised by the secret are merely an alibi for the way secrecy installs subjects in time. The same may be said for the detective novel: a genre shaped by secrecy must be most itself when its secrets remain secret. The significance of the secret, then, is not what it hides but how long one has to wait for it to be revealed. If the end of *The Intuitionist* surprisingly reasserts the indecipherable over the detectable, and if the endings to *Sacred Games* and *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* commit a strange act of generic betrayal, all this is because the end is not really what makes these books detective novels. The secret of the detective genre is not to be found at the end of these stories at all, but in their middles.

At the center of all three novels lies a different kind of secret—one that, because it protects the unbearable truth of each text's narration, cannot afford to be revealed. For Lila Mae, as I've already suggested, the discovery of Fulton's secret (that he was a black man passing as white) prompts her to learn to read differently. But the truth of Fulton's race brings on a second, more paradoxical revelation: "He was joking, right? About Intuitionism. It was all a big joke" (232). What one fictional reviewer of *Theoretical Elevators* calls "hope's last chance against modernity's relentless death march" is, at its inception, nothing more than a "prank" (238) and a "satire" (239)— a joke on all those who believed in the false appearance of his skin color; a hidden message to a white world that, as Lila Mae puts it, only "looked at the skin of things (239). The founding promise of Intuitionism is that "*there is another world beyond this one*" (63). Yet this hidden world is not a transformative utopia but the bitter, material truth of racial discrimination: it is the world of Fulton's secret skin color, a world in which his only hope is to pass. Here, then, is Lila Mae's true discovery: "He knows the other world he describes does not exist" (240). This is a powerfully ironic origin story.[33] Intuitionism is a gesture toward the "truth behind that

[31] Peter Fenves, "Out of the Blue: Secrecy, Radical Evil, and the Crypt of Faith," in *Futures of Jacques Derrida*, ed. Richard Rand (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 124.
[32] D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 207.
[33] The realization also complicates utopian readings of Whitehead's novel. Lauren Berlant, for instance, says that "this is why theorizing, not achieving, utopia is so necessary. Fulton says, 'There is another world beyond this one.' This sentence sounds like it is about the future but the point, in the novel, is spatial.

[Empiricists] couldn't see for the life of them," but the truth that it discovers behind appearances is the truth that Intuitionism itself is a lie. The discovery of Fulton's secret has only revealed that the promise of seeing through surfaces can't be kept: "He creates a doctrine of transcendence that is as much a lie as his life" (241). The secret that Lila Mae finally reads in Fulton's texts is that there is no utopian secret.

This paradoxical conception of the secret is repeated throughout *The Intuitionist*. The solutions to its two central mysteries—what happened to the elevator at the Fanny Briggs building? and what does Lila Mae have to do with it?—are that they weren't mysteries at all: they were accidents. The incident at Fanny Briggs, Lila Mae determines, was "a catastrophic accident. That is what the remains will give up to Forensics' latex probings: nothing" (227). "Nothing" is also the answer to Lila Mae's involvement in the conspiracy. The corporations have been chasing her because she is identified in Fulton's notebooks as "the one." But it turns out that the phrase doesn't mean anything; it's just another happy accident: "He notices he has written *Lila Mae Watson is the one* in the margin of his notebook. That's right. That's the name of the only other person awake at this hour of the night. She doesn't know what she's in for, he thinks, dismissing her from his mind. He's always writing things in the margin" (253). All that Lila Mae is "in for" (and of course, as with all dramatic irony, it is Fulton himself who "doesn't know") is the result of an old man's wandering mind. She is not *the* one; she is only *some*one, a soul glimpsed in outline who distracts a sleepless Fulton from his work. This ironic contingency extends to the closing scene: "She's the keeper," yes, but "it didn't have to be her" (255). The inspector's way of reading is revealed to have been, from the beginning, constitutively blind: "What Intuitionism does not account for: the catastrophic accident the elevator encounters at that unexpected moment" (231). But it is not only Intuitionism that doesn't account for the "unexpected moment"—it is detection as such, the act of reading for hidden clues that cannot account for the meaningless contingency that may have put them there in the first place. Like the secret origin of Intuitionism itself, what these accidental secrets reveal is the impossibility of anticipating what they might say, and thus the futility of reading for them.

The secret of *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* concerns Mendel Shpilman. Mendel is the Tzaddik Ha-Dor, the potential messiah of his generation. But his potential is never realized, a basic structural condition of the novel's version of Jewish messianism: "Every generation loses the messiah it has failed to deserve" (197). Neither worldly nor holy, Mendel performs a series of small miracles but cracks under the expectations they carry, descending into drug addiction and retroactively casting his miracles entirely into doubt. As Rabbi Shpilman tells Landsman, "Miracles prove nothing except to those whose faith is bought very cheap" (141). If it is not proof of the divine, what exactly does the miracle do? If Mendel is not the messiah—he dies a destitute junky rather than a redeemer of the world—what are his miraculous acts an index of? In fact, Mendel's inexplicable acts of healing, comfort, and foreknowledge are the perfect demonstration of the secret that has "no corresponding revelation." They are not direct evidence of the will of god, just holes in

---

Theorizing opens up the present to a lived alternativity *in the present*" ("Intuitionists," 853). The point, for Berlant, is that the novel is not about the far-off future but about the utopia that inheres in the present. The problem is that the "other world" Fulton alludes to is an entirely different kind of "lived alternativity": Fulton's "other world" is not the beyond of utopian promise but the alternativity of racial otherness.

the fabric of secular knowledge—mysteries that frustrate every desire to explain them. Alter Litvak is one instance of a secular, skeptical Jew who, upon meeting Mendel, has his skepticism brought to the brink (but, as we will see, only the brink) of the otherworldly. Here is Mendel producing Litvak's lost lighter from his own pocket, and then, even more miraculously, encouraging Litvak to light the yahrzeit candle he has always secretly refused to burn:

> There was a click, and a scrape, and then Litvak leaned wonderingly forward and poked the end of the cigar into the flame of his own Zippo lighter. He felt the momentary shock of a miracle. Then he grinned and nodded his thanks, feeling a kind of giddy relief at the belated arrival of a logical explanation: He must have left the lighter back in Sitka, where Gold or Turtletoyb had found it and brought it along on the flight to Peril Strait. Shpilman had borrowed it and, with his junkie instincts, pocketed it after lighting a papiros. Yes, good.…
>
> "Go, Reb Litvak. Light the candle. There's no prayer you say. There's nothing you have to do or feel. You just light it. Go on."
>
> As logic drained from the world, never entirely to return, Shpilman reached into Litvak's jacket pocket and took out the glass and the wax and the wick. For this trick, Litvak could make himself no explanation. (354)

The lack of explanation (how does Mendel know about Litvak's private ritual?) is not cause for conversion. The passage depicts not the onset of Litvak's belief but the absolute limits of his non-belief: the "shock" of the miracle causes cynical reason (the hallmark not only of the non-believing Jew but also of the successful detective) to confront the limits of its perception, the lacuna of its power. There is no choice in the passage between a secular and a religious explanation or a materialist and a metaphysical one. The miracle, rather, is permanently suspended between the two, making the desire for "logical explanation" inseparable from the frightening possibility of there being "no explanation" at all. The miracle turns the "belated arrival of … explanation" into an indefinite wait.

The "miraculous" distance between logical explanation and the inexplicable secret is also lodged at the level of Chabon's prose. While the normal function of free indirect discourse is to blur the difference between the narrator's authority and a character's consciousness, to fuse the exterior world with the interior experience of it, in *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* it does precisely the opposite. Rather than fluidly insinuate us into Landsman's thoughts, Chabon's free indirect style opens a chasm between reader and detective. Immersed in the language of Landsman's inner life, one expects to watch the detective think in a straight line toward epiphany. Yet at the climactic moment where Landsman finally solves the "puzzle" of Mendel's murder scene, the narrative abruptly zooms out, providing not an explanation of the puzzle but instead an explanation of the internal attempt at explanation. Bypassing the direct object of Landsman's thought, the narrative makes thought itself its object:

> He unfolds [the chessboard] and contemplates it and thinks, I missed something in the room. No, he didn't miss anything; but he missed something, it's gone by now. Only he didn't miss anything. But he must have missed something.
>
> His thoughts are a tattoo needle inking the spade on an ace. They are a tornado going back and forth over the same damn pancaked trailer. (397)

The "back and forth" of the first paragraph is clearly Landsman's own thought process, beginning with a first-person thought ("I missed something") that is mirrored by the third-person of free indirect style ("he missed something"). But Landsman's thoughts are interrupted by two apparently incongruous metaphors professing to describe *the process of thinking* itself. The metaphors—with their unmistakable suggestions of classic hard-boiled style[34]—demystify the magic of free indirect discourse: they record the exact moment where the narrative ceases to inhabit Landsman's consciousness and instead stands outside it, describing it from a distance. And looked at from afar, thought turns out to be essentially circular, not a linear progression toward revelation but a wayward, unpredictable unfolding: the tattoo needle's constant retracing, the tornado's unknowing repetition. At this moment, the detective's putative control of his narrative is doubly undermined: by the errant movement of his thoughts and by the omniscient perspective of a narrator who is alone able to describe them. In the gap between perception and introspection, consciousness and self-consciousness, the narrator intervenes to insist that no matter what mysteries the detective is able to solve, there is one thing he will never be able to read—himself. This climactic passage suggests that the detective's drive to understand everything does not lead directly to explanation but only to a self-reflexive, infinitely regressing explanation of explanation. Like Mendel's miracles, the irreducible gap between Landsman's consciousness and the critical distance of the narrator undoes the possibility of revelation. By describing the interior processes of detection from afar, inhabiting a position of observation that the detective cannot, by definition, inhabit himself, the narrator's metaphorical depiction points to everything—self-consciousness, narrative omniscience, generic reference—that eludes detection. For Chabon, reading detective fiction is not a matter of transforming readers into detectives but of exposing the vast distance of narrative perspective that cannot help but separate them.

Sacred Games similarly leaves one aspect of its narrative form mysteriously inexplicable: the status of Ganesh's narration. For while Ganesh performs the duties of first-person narrator for more than half the novel, he has also, all the way back on page 46,

---

[34] Chabon's novel is filled with the peculiarly mixed metaphors distinctive of classic hard-boiled detective fiction, which indulged what Jameson calls "the practice of the outrageous simile" ("Chandler," 37). But the authors most famously associated with hard-boiled style (Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain) generally used first-person narrators, linking the stylized worldview of the prose directly to the consciousness of the detective. Chabon's novel, on the other hand, is narrated in the third person, which means that these (at least partly self-referential) metaphors actually distance the detective from the generic authority of his narrative. Rather than giving rhetorical form to the detective's "outrageous" way of interpreting the world, Chabon's metaphors instead stand for everything that lies outside Landsman's consciousness. The metaphors describe the entirety of the world beyond his experience, a world that extends, of course, to genre—or literary intertextuality—itself.

managed to kill himself. The novel treats the event as the straightforward engine to a purely secular mystery: why did Ganesh Gaitonde kill himself? When Sartaj laments that there can only be a "partial explanation" of "the Gaitonde affair," he is referring in part to the mysteries that subtend any suicide; one can never know all the reasons. But if the novel offers a much more than partial explanation, it is able to do so because it includes 500 pages of Ganesh himself explaining it. The mystery of Ganesh's suicide is thus displaced onto a more fundamental and resolutely formal problem, which the novel neither answers nor even treats as a question: how in the world is Ganesh able to narrate in the first place?

Because none of the other characters is able to register the problem, *Sacred Games* leaves the reader alone to deal with the impossibility of believing the matter plainly before her eyes: the intrusion, into the logical world of detection, of a confessing corpse. As the novel begins, Sartaj follows an anonymous tip to Kailashpada, where Ganesh has sealed himself in his nuclear shelter. While they are waiting for the bulldozers to arrive to break down the doors, Ganesh talks to Sartaj through the speaker system, beginning the lengthy story of how he became a gangster. When the police break down the doors, Ganesh shoots himself, and Sartaj, unsettled but more or less uncurious, goes home. The chapter ends: "But what did it matter, any of it? Gaitonde was dead. Sartaj turned over, thumped his pillows determinedly, arranged them, and lay down his head and slept" (50). If Gaitonde is simply "dead," then that should be the end of it. There is nothing to do but handle the tangible objects of the material world ("thump" and "arrange" the pillows) and go to sleep.

But with the first words of the very next chapter, the comforting dream of a decipherable, secular world is interrupted, ensuring that we will not sleep so soundly again: "So, Sardar-ji, are you listening still? Are you somewhere in this world with me? I can feel you. What happened next, and what happened next, you want to know. I was walking under the whirling sky riven by clouds … " (51). Ganesh begins with a strange reversal: it is not he, the haunting ghost, who is spectrally present in Sartaj's world; it is rather Sartaj who is "in this world with" Ganesh—the *other* world, one can only imagine, of the dead, or of spirits, or of the divine.[35] Why does Ganesh assume Sartaj is "with [him]" in this other world? Because Ganesh understands his reader. In Kailashpada, Ganesh had begun telling Sartaj the story of his life but did not have time to finish it, and he knows that Sartaj—who is, recalling Felman's definition, *only a detective in his function as a reader*—will naturally want to know how it ends. Reading is precisely the durational desire for knowledge, the drive "to know," in Ganesh's apt repetition, "what happened next, and what happened next." Yet the anticipatory stance of reading, Ganesh recognizes, is as much about deferral as it is about fulfillment, and so it carries Sartaj not to a state of

[35] As the police are about to force their way into Ganesh's shelter, he asks Sartaj one last question: "As [Sartaj] walked away, he thought that under the engine's roar he heard a last fragment, a question: 'Sartaj Singh, do you believe in God?' " (*44*). In his debriefing with the Intelligence Bureau, Sartaj does not relate this last question: "He did not tell them, or Katekar or Parulkar, about the question he thought Gaitonde had asked, at the last. He wasn't sure he heard it, anyway" (50). Indeed, he may *not* have heard it. But we, at any rate, on the very next page, do hear Ganesh's voice, and the parallel between Ganesh's question and ours—*from where is Ganesh narrating?*—does not seem incidental. It is the problem of situating the miracle within the rational world—the logical detective's impossible confrontation with the theological beyond—and our question, demanding an answer we would prefer not to know, is thus one, like Ganesh's, that it is perhaps better to pretend we have not heard.

total understanding but paradoxically into "this" other "world," a world of ghosts or gods that is defined precisely by its inability to be rationally explained. Explanation is reduced to a chain of movements ("what happened next … what happened next"), such that answers are no longer endpoints but only momentary interruptions of the endless process of questioning. The urge to "want to know" is simply the urge to read, and the ostensible finality of a detective's decipherment is but a single, tenuous moment in the temporality of the longer, perhaps interminable process of reading. The drive to explain the world does not stop until it runs up against the hard surface of the inexplicable, which is, in perfectly circular fashion, the condition of possibility of what we are reading: the formal secret of the novel's narration. Literally set outside the living world of logic, this secret represents not the object of hermeneutic suspicion but its intractable limit—the discovery, by readers as well as detectives, that what detection ultimately makes known is its own incessantly fated shortfall.

To read like these three detectives is to confront secrets that are suspended between the secular and the divine, the logical and the mystical, the banal and the revelatory; it is to wait for an explanation that, like Landsman's messiah, "never comes" (331). But waiting need not mark a withdrawal from expectation, a refusal of all hopes for the future. As Benjamin writes in the last of his "Theses," "We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. … This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous empty time."[36] Set uncertainly between present and future, the detective work of Sartaj, Landsman, and Lila Mae may put off the satisfaction of knowing the future (the ideological "magic to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment" ["Theses," 264]), but it also allows them to see something different in their present. In this way, detection gives new meaning to the long wait, which does not promise any specific future but instead illuminates those elements of the present (the possibility of the miracle, the persistence of the dead) that, stubbornly remaining secret, keep us waiting in order to compel us to keep reading.

Timely Meditations

In the last line of their "Afterword" to "The Way We Read Now," Apter and Freedgood, in a tone at once conciliatory and celebratory, observe that any conversation about how we read is bound to be undercut or overtaken by the problem of when that "we" is situated: "In the meantime, *now* is *then*, and the ways we read and can read have already changed their method and modes, and they cannot, happily, be enumerated."[37] The play between "now" and "then" points simultaneously to the inexorability of change and the lag with which it is registered. By the time a dominant method has been recognized as dominant, it will already have been displaced. For Apter and Freedgood, the now is precisely what cannot be accounted for, what "cannot … be enumerated." The ability to describe one's present implies that it has already become part of the past. Reading, then, is intimately bound up with the present: first, because the way we read is subject to change in (and to the change of) the present; but also, more significantly, because the present represents the absolute limit of what we are able to read. Because "now" is constantly

[36] Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," 264.
[37] Apter and Freedgood, "Afterword," 145.

slipping back into "then," present time can never be directly read or accessed. Apter and Freedgood's reference to "the meantime," on the other hand, provides a different way of approaching the problem. The meantime, I have argued, is the time of the wait, not an absence or a void but the crucial moment when the times of "now," "then," and "later" become uncannily intertwined, when the easy identification of beginnings and ends is unceremoniously undone. Neither proleptic nor periodizable, the present *is* this wait.

What my chapter's title calls the "timeliness" of the detective novel's secrets may thus far have seemed only a light pun, a first hint of the argument that detective fiction is as much about time as it is about space. Yet the "timely" secret may finally be understood as that secret that is most relevant or timely to us *now*, precisely because it concerns the mystery *of* the now, of timeliness—the secret place of the present in history. As Kevis Goodman puts it, the present "is a version of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle: the difficulty of recording and recognizing history-on-the-move, or, to invoke grammar rather than physics, the difficulty of treating or recreating the historical process as a present participle … rather than as a past perfect."[38] The uncertainty or instability of the historical present returns us, finally, to the one mystery of *The Intuitionist* that we have left unsolved: when, exactly, is the narrative supposed to take place? In her essay on Whitehead's novel, Berlant describes the book as both a "nove[l] of the historical present" and a "historical nove[l] of the recent past."[39] Well, which is it?

In fact, the nameless city in which the novel is set presents a virtually undecidable historical backdrop, a strange amalgam of styles from different eras of the twentieth century. Michael Bérubé sums up the difficulties of assessing the novel's historical context:

> The city is and is not New York, the time is and is not the 1940s or 1950s … The Great Migration seems to be a recent thing, and racial integration has only just begun to get under way. But every so often, the novel draws on tropes from more recent decades, not only in the naming of major buildings after major figures in African-American history (a phenomenon that, in the real New York, postdated the release of "Peggy Sue" by some years), but also in the evocation of "last summer's riots," which sound more like the stuff of 1967 than like 1943. … In the "riots," I suggest, we are supposed to hear not only the echoes of 1967 but the devastation of Los Angeles in 1992; and in "some other poison" we are invited to think not only of heroin but of crack.[40]

What Bérubé calls *The Intuitionist*'s "temporal blurring" describes its relation not only to social history but also to literary history. Though both Berlant and Bérubé acknowledge the novel's generic debts to the detective novel, they trace those debts to different periods. Whitehead's text, writes Berlant, "slyly employs the intensities of the noir novel," a genre whose formula she sums up as "find evidence, make people pay, produce justice, and

---

[38] Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3.
[39] Berlant, "Intuitionists," 846, 847.
[40] Bérubé, "Race and Modernity," 169.

meanwhile, in the opening of attention not just to the built world but to the evidence of motive, become a sucker for love" (853). Bérubé, on the other hand, describes the novel as "a wry postmodern *noir* in the by-now-familiar mode of Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, and Paul Auster" (163). But of course, the schematic genre conventions described by Berlant are the very things that the "wry postmodern *noir*" of Pynchon and Auster seeks to subvert. *The Intuitionist*, in other words, resembles *both* a classic hard-boiled detective novel and a postmodern anti-detective novel; it is not simply a subversive or self-mocking pastiche but also an instance of the real, pulpy thing. Lila Mae Watson may be the canny successor to Oedipa Maas, yet stock characters like Ben Urich and crime boss Johnny Shush seem to belong to a different book altogether. The novel is equal parts postmodern and pulp.

The Intuitionist's ambiguous historical setting thus extends to its historically discontinuous literary analogues. But while the wayward historical references make it impossible to pinpoint the narrative's time of occurrence, the disparate literary references are the very things that make it possible to identify its genre: to characterize it, in the first place, as a detective novel. The novel's invocation of the detective genre's distinct historical manifestations—the Dick Tracy outfits, the sadistic noir villains, the anti-corporate paranoia, the postmodern ambiguity—captures the natural heterogeneity of genre's historical logic. What we think of as a single, self-present genre is in fact made up of different, discontinuous historical instances. *The Intuitionist*'s historical disruptions are ultimately the effects of its properly—if counterintuitively—coherent sense of genre. Historical discontinuity is the uncanny but entirely logical consequence of the novel's formal unity. *The Intuitionist* may dissolve the singularity of historical setting, but in its place the novel inserts a generic form able (indeed, defined by its ability) to mediate between multiple historical moments. Writing on the expanding sub-genre of African-American detective fiction, Daylanne English suggests that "in writing crime novels, contemporary black writers are enacting a kind of literary-generic anachronism in order to comment on a distinct lack of progress regarding race within legal, penal, and judicial systems in the US."[41] Renewed genres, English maintains, capture the discontinuous experience of modernity, the anachronisms that progress narratives try to hide. This, of course, is also Whitehead's allegorical version of the contradictions of modernity: there's technological verticality, but not racial uplift. Yet what English describes as the paradox of progress is also, I want to suggest, the paradox of articulating the present, which seems to be both moving forward and trending backward—changing in ways we can't fathom even as it is staying the same in ways we can't abide.

In this way, Berlant's strange equivocation between "the historical present" and "the recent past" turns out to be a perfect description of the mysterious historical status of the present—a mystery that *The Intuitionist* brings to light through the historical discontinuities of the mystery genre. But of course, English's claim about "literary generic anachronism" is hardly unique to detective fiction; it is, as I argued in Chapter 1, a defining feature of genre as such. So what's so special about the detective novel? This chapter has sought to suggest that contemporary detective fiction confronts the problem not just of how to measure progress but of what it means to wait for it. If the dialectical

[41] Daylanne K. English, "The Modern in the Postmodern: Walter Mosley, Barbara Neely, and the Politics of Contemporary African-American Detective Fiction," *American Literary History* 18 (Winter 2006): 773.

histories of genre are able to reveal what Goodman calls the "uncertainty principle" of the present, the detective novel translates the principle of that uncertainty into the everyday experience of the wait. The wait is not an empty space of disappointment but the temporal form of our inchoate, unfolding present.

The day-to-day temporality of the wait is exactly what Sartaj discovers on the final page of *Sacred Games*. While waiting previously felt like the failure of epochal change, here it gives Sartaj a different way to measure present time. Having successfully averted nuclear annihilation and now on his way to another day of work, Sartaj is stuck in a traffic jam. However, the gridlock has been caused not by an accident or an obstruction but by the sheer act of waiting itself: "A party of Municipal men were working on a hole in the road. They weren't actually working, they were standing around the hole looking at it, and apparently waiting for something to happen" (945). The traffic jam, in turn, becomes not a response to the workers' wait but an extension of it: "Meanwhile, a vast funnel of traffic pressed up against the bottleneck. Sartaj was … hemmed in by a BEST bus and two autos, and there was nowhere for anyone to go, so they all waited companionably" (945-946). The traffic jam is perhaps our most iconic symbol of wasted time—time in which there is nothing to do but watch time itself pass. Yet here waste is transformed into a "companionabl[e]" wait. What makes this wait so social, so sociable, so unexpectedly "happy" (946)?

Forced, finally, to slow down, Sartaj is no longer waiting *for* something. The experience of the traffic jam instead hints that the wait is the basic condition of everyday life—the time that governs each passing day. In the novel's very last lines, the link between the time of the wait and the unit of the individual day is made explicit: "He patted his cheeks, and ran a forefinger and thumb along his mustache. He was sure it was magnificent. He was ready. He went in and began another day" (947). The relentless forward thrust of the detective narrative has finally collapsed into its obverse: a constant, open-ended sense of anticipation; a state of "readiness" that has no specific object. Sartaj is "ready," perhaps for anything, but he is not ready for anything in particular. Nevertheless, this is not the indeterminate end of Porter's anti-detective novel. Rather, the absence of the solution is replaced by the presence of the day. The very end of *Sacred Games* reimagines the "end time" of the standard detective novel, turning the end of the narrative into the end of a day, which is also the beginning of "another day." The day, perhaps our most elemental unit for measuring the present,[42] installs us in a time that, neither repetitive nor teleological, can only be described as a wait—as the strange sense of undirected anticipation that both separates one day from the next and ties the days together. The wait

[42] I am thinking here of Goodman's reading of the day-long lifespan of the newspaper, through which she reframes Benedict Anderson's well-known account of the newspaper and the nation as a relation between everydayness and history: "There are really two issues intertwined in Anderson's description: where the first concerns the openness of this outward-oriented subjectivity engaged by the daily paper, the second is the altered perception of history invited by the rapid obsolescence of editions or installments of news. The newspaper's speeding up of communication renders ongoing history as a process in flux; time contracts such that 'now' is always on the verge of expiring into 'then' " (*Georgic Modernity*, 70). This last remark brings us back to Apter and Freedgood's account of "the way we read now," where they suggest that "now is" *already* "then." For Goodman, on the other hand, the "now" is only "on the verge" of passing away. The daily-ness of the daily paper thus provides a model of time that recognizes the fleetingness of the present but is able, if only for an instant (if not for a day), to fix it in place.

is what makes the present continuous, and it is also what makes the present continue, inexorably, to pass.

Reading, everyone knows, takes time.[43] This essay has sought to understand how reading may also give us time back—making us aware of the time we spend waiting, urging us to think of it not as time wasted but as time regained, rendered visible, read differently. To see reading as a long wait rather than an inevitable revelation is to hold off the false promise of the future in order to linger in the time of the present. The present, of course, is the open secret that everyone is in on. It is the absent cause of everyday life, the force that shapes us without our knowing how. Ostensibly resistant to being read, invisible to those who live within it, the present is most often felt as a mysterious burden—a "deadening weight," Antonis Balasopoulos calls it, "that usurps time."[44] The present, however, may not be the thief but the victim: not what steals time, but what time is stolen from.[45] If the present is the instant of history whose time most escapes us, then the challenge of articulating contemporary life is to *take back* usurped time. The contemporary detective novel, I have argued, gives us one way to do this. As Benjamin announces in the *Arcades Project*, waiting is not simply a matter of "pass[ing] the time"; it is a means to "invite it in." "He who waits," writes Benjamin, "takes in the time and renders it up in altered form—that of expectation."[46] But the point, as well as the power, of expectation does not reside in its expected end. On the contrary, expectation "alter[s]" time precisely by slowing it down, stretching it out: by forcing us, in other words, to take our time. Taking back the purloined time of the present means transforming the present's invisible burden into an indefinite unfolding—its "weight" into a wait. The secret of the present, then, is not just another clue to be deciphered. It is, rather, the fall into time that occurs when decipherment falters; the constant reminder—if not the sneaking suspicion—that there is more to our world than can be detected within it.

---

[43] "Another open secret that everyone knows and no one wants to: the immense amount of daydreaming that accompanies the ordinary reading of a novel" (Miller, *The Novel and the Police*, 215).

[44] Antonis Balasopoulos, "Ghosts of the Future: Marxism, Deconstruction, and the Afterlife of Utopia," *Theory and Event* 12.3 (2009).

[45] In his exemplary book of meta-history *Futures Past*, the historian Reinhart Koselleck argues that the "self-accelerating temporality" of modernity "robs the present of the possibility of being experienced as the present" (*Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe [New York: Columbia University Press, 2004], 22).

[46] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), 107.

The Historical Novel and Its Contemporaries; or, The Chronological Mistake

FOUR

> *Croce's great dictum that "all history is contemporary history" does not mean that all history is <u>our</u> contemporary history.*
>
> FREDRIC JAMESON
> *The Political Unconscious*

To Err Is Historical

Judging by the tone of contemporary scholarship, the concept of the contemporary is not particularly *au courant*. In her work on the temporality of global cinema, for instance, Bliss Cua Lim says that her project is aimed at "overturning the presentism of the contemporary." "If the past is not dead," she writes, "but instead paradoxically coexists alongside the present, then the very notion of contemporaneousness—as a single, self-consistent meanwhile—starts to fray."[1] Ian Baucom supports a similar overturning: " 'Our' moment is itself less of 'its' moment than we might assume."[2] But the moment named by the contemporary is already less singular than these critics suggest. The sense of a "single, self-consistent" contemporary is as frayed as the word itself, which, Paul Rabinow reminds us, has two entirely different definitions:

> The ordinary English-language meaning of the term "the contemporary" is: "existing or occurring at, or dating from, the same period of time as something or somebody else." But there is the second meaning of "distinctively modern in style," as in "a variety of favorite contemporary styles." The first use has no historical connotations, only temporal ones: Cicero was the contemporary of Caesar just as Thelonius Monk was the contemporary of John Coltrane or Gerhard Richter was the contemporary of Gerhard Schroeder. The second meaning, however, does carry a historical connotation.[3]

There is *our contemporary*, and then there are *Caesar's contemporaries*. Not just a synchronic present, the contemporary is also a personified temporal relation—a mode of connection that holds history together.[4] The very act of labeling our own moment "contemporary" is a

[1] Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 1-2.
[2] Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 160.
[3] Paul Rabinow, *Marking Time*, 1-2.
[4] Despite Rabinow's claim to the contrary, this "temporal" meaning certainly has its own "historical connotation." The sense of temporal proximity that allows us to talk about the contemporaries of Caesar or of Coltrane is also a proxy for historical periodicity (the politics of Ancient Greece; the musical culture of the mid-twentieth century). Indeed, the very word "period"—"dating from the same period of time"—appears in Rabinow's definition, suggesting that even as the contemporary moves through time, it is never free of history.

gesture that unconsciously conjures up the past. Giorgio Agamben nicely assesses the term's double edge: "Those who have tried to think about contemporariness have been able to do so only by splitting it up into several times, by introducing into time an essential dishomogeneity. Those who say '*my* time' actually divide time—they inscribe into it a caesura and a discontinuity."[5] But the contemporary is not just a division between present and past; it is also a word that names both sides of that division at once. The contemporariness of "my time" is set off from history only to the extent that it invokes history, calling up a different sense and set of contemporaries (Cicero and Caesar, Monk and Coltrane) who populate and propel the past.

My aim in this final chapter is to show how the concept of the contemporary—far from crudely excluding history—crucially mediates between past and present, revealing and rearticulating the ways we institute historical difference. If modern historical consciousness is built on the separation of the present from the past, as historians such as Peter Fritzsche and Reinhart Koselleck have argued,[6] this separation remains fickle and fleeting; history ebbs and flows, and so the lines we draw in the historical sand are constantly being eroded and rewritten. The slipperiness of the contemporary comes out in the untimely dialogue that occurs in this chapter's epigraph. While Croce's well-known aphorism suggests that history is always written from the perspective (and for the sake) of the present, Jameson's tart response reminds us that the matter of separating "history" from "the contemporary" is never so clean and simple.[7] The sense of immediacy promised by the term "contemporary" is also undone by it, as the word calls up all the contemporaries that aren't "ours." Appearing to claim history in our name, the contemporary also identifies the parts of history that don't belong to us. When we talk about the contemporary, we can never be sure *whose* contemporary—or whose contemporaries—we're talking about.

Both the deictic nature and the double meaning of "contemporary" mean that the term is ever adrift, complicating the concept of historical novelty and showing that the border between what is past and what is present is never truly settled. Promising to give shape to the unruly crowdedness of our unfolding present, the word "contemporary" also immerses us in the teeming crowds of history: in continuities and connections that cannot be separated out, cut up, or periodized. What Jameson diagnoses as historicism's

---

[5] Giorgio Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?" in *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 52.

[6] For Fritzsche, the birth of modern historical consciousness is dependent on a new sense of historical separation: "More aware of the distinctiveness of their own contemporary present, men and women came to invest the past with its own historicity and to understand it in terms of 'time' and 'place' " (*Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004], 7). Koselleck likewise contends that "the emergence of historical relativism"—that is, the sense of different historical positions—"is identical with the discovery of the historical world." This discovery changed the way history was written. The newly distinct present became the grounds for writing the history of an increasingly distanced past, while the present itself, because it lacked the necessary "temporal distance," could no longer be thought in historical terms: "The practice of writing a continuous 'current history' lost its methodological dignity" and was replaced by the belief that "the later a past is expounded, the better" (*Futures Past*, 130, 138, 139).

[7] Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 3; see also Benedetto Croce, *History: Its Theory and Practice*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923), 12.

"unacceptable option, or ideological double bind, between antiquarianism and modernizing 'relevance' " thus finds an answer in the double valence of the contemporary, which encompasses both historical perspectives at once.[8] Far from bracketing off history in the name of a novel present, the concept of the contemporary ensures that past and present remain in conversation—interconnected and overdetermined.

The division at the heart of the contemporary is made uniquely visible by a genre shaped by the same duality: the historical novel. The power of the historical novel, in Lukács's well-known account, is to allow people "to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them."[9] Berlant similarly argues that the genre is not just a "historical archive of a once-present moment" but a way of "communicating the you-are-thereness" of the past.[10] In both cases, what is essential to the historical novel is not simply its depiction of the past but its attempt to make clear the relevance of the past for the present. Yet the historical novel's thrust at authentic understanding always risks sliding back into "mere costumery," and so even its power is fraught with hazard.[11] The genre works only on the condition that it depicts history as something "self-contained," relating to the present as a concrete process rather than as parable or analogy[12]; yet the effort to maintain what Lukács calls "the real historical concreteness of the content and the real (not formal) self-containment of the form" (338) may just as easily turn the past into an irrelevant artifact and the historical novel into a document of antiquarianism—"a 'science of rudiments' " that finds "in history nothing that might have a living influence upon the present" (236).

To avoid antiquarianism, the historical novel must embrace anachronism. This is a counter-intuitive solution. As Nicholas Paige points out, "Historians do not much care for anachronisms, and for good reason: on the one hand, anachronism strikes at what they hold dearest, namely, rigorous attention to historical specificity; on the other hand, it serves as a disquieting reminder that interpretations of the past can be articulated only from the perspective of an inescapable present. … Anachronism [i]s that which must but cannot be eliminated if the historian is to exist."[13] The intolerable necessity of anachronism is inscribed in what Lukács calls the "necessary anachronism" of the historical novel.[14] But if anachronism is a necessary evil, what is it necessary for? James Chandler sees anachronism as the tension that allows historical novels to represent history:

---

[8] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 18.
[9] Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 24.
[10] Berlant, "Intuitionists," 847.
[11] Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 19.
[12] Insofar as it privileges resemblance over concrete determination, analogy has long been the *bête noire* of historicism. Stephen Best explains why: "It has become something of a commonplace within literary theory and legal historiography to distinguish analogy from causality, symbolic resonance from historical continuity. In social and cultural histories based on analogy, the argument goes, the lines of authority run from present to past, and events in the past warrant scrutiny because they resemble events in the present, while in those based on historical continuity and explanation (of how our present circumstances came about) the lines run from the past to the present" (*The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004], 22).
[13] Nicholas D. Paige, *Being Interior: Autobiography and the Contradictions of Modernity in Seventeenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 21.
[14] Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, 61.

> One might say that the historical novel is not only a form that attempts to fictionalize the past as it really was, but also a form self-aware of its own historicity along two axes: its participation in a contemporary and historically specific system of manners—the manners of commercial society—and in a generic evolution of narrative modes that in turn participated in their own, now residual, systems of manners.[15]

In the historical novel, the past is always shaded by the genre's "own historicity," which is to say, by the present moment in which it writes the past. The double duty of the historical novel makes it necessarily or structurally anachronistic: what the genre offers is not simply a glimpse of the past but a view of its own process of mediating the past from the position of the present. To depict the "system of manners" of a past moment is unavoidably to invoke the present historical system in which the depiction itself is embedded.

This account of anachronism, however, may let it too easily off the hook, making a "necessary" structure of what is, at heart, a mistake. Anachronism may be the structure of all historical observation; but it is also the error that gives contemporary history a bad name. More than historical difference as such, anachronism exposes the untimeliness or outdatedness of the contemporary, the hard time it has fitting in to history. The unwanted intrusion of anachronism—its métier of mistakenness—becomes clear when we consider the contemporary fate of the historical novel. Today, the anachronistic structure of the historical novel is no longer just an aspect of its narrative form; it is also part and parcel of its literary history. If the historical novel has always risked turning history into a dead or meaningless antique, we have now, ironically enough, begun to see the genre itself as the relic. This least contemporary of living genres—whose origins lie all the way back at the beginning of the nineteenth century—now tends to be seen as one of our most outdated literary forms. The writer Rachel Kushner points out the profusion of readers "who find history a retrograde topic for the novel, suggesting realms of the mediocre and the hopelessly bourgeois,"[16] a suggestion seconded by James Wood: "The historical novel, typically the province of genre gardeners and conservative populists, has become an unlikely laboratory for serious writers … What such novelists are looking for in those oldfangled laboratories is sometimes mysterious to me."[17] The novelist Jonathan Dee likewise "confess[es] a mild prejudice against historical novels":

> The effort to credibly reanimate a time, a way of being, that one never knew: even at its most technically successful, what is that effort drawing upon other than research…? Not to mention that any novel in our own day and age seems like enough of a museum piece

[15] Chandler, *England in 1819*, 146.
[16] Rachel Kushner, "Into Thin Air," review of *C.*, by Tom McCarthy, *Bookforum*, September/October/November, 2010, 39.
[17] James Wood, "The Floating Library: What Can't the Novelist David Mitchell Do?" review of *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, by David Mitchell, *The New Yorker*, July 5, 2010, 72-73.

> as it is, without transplanting itself nostalgically to a time its creator never knew.[18]

Dee's anxious reference to the literary "museum piece" explains a lot. At a moment when the cultural relevance of the novel is felt to be under threat (but when isn't it?), the last thing literature ought to do, Dee contends, is align itself with the ultimate of museum-ready concepts, nay, the premise of the museum as such. What could be more "oldfangled" than history itself?

The founding problem of the genre thus comes full circle: tasked with making the past relevant to the life of the present, the historical novel is now called on to justify its own contemporary relevance. To say that historical novels currently seem outdated is not to suggest that they are no longer written (they are, in bulk). It is, rather, to note the meaningful resonance between the anachronistic structure of historical observation and the anachronistic (or "nostalgic," or "museum"-like, or perhaps even "hopelessly bourgeois") role of the historical novel—the growing sense that this genre of past moments can never quite belong to its present one.[19] In both its form and its history, in other words, the genre of the historical novel challenges our understanding of where the past and the present belong, and what properly belongs to them. It compels us to confront the place of the outdated in history. And it is precisely through this genre's overdetermined affiliation with the retrograde, the oldfangled, and the historically mistaken that the historical novel is able to pose some surprisingly timely questions about the historical status of the contemporary.

In the pages that follow, I read the anachronism of the historical novel as a way of articulating the double life—or what Srinivas Aravamudan might call the "anachronistic opportunities"[20]—of the contemporary: its invocation of both the presence of the now and the persistence of the past. The problem with anachronism, however, is that it is really two problems at once. On one hand, it is a problem of the present intruding on the past; on the other, of the past being mistakenly integrated into the present. These two sides to anachronism have made it a surprisingly difficult term to come to terms with. Jerome Christensen, for instance, sees anachronism as the utopian possibility of connecting with other times, as "the potent icon of the past's incapacity to coincide with itself, to seal itself

---

[18] Jonathan Dee, "Speed of Light in a Vacuum: Tom McCarthy's historical avant-garde," review of *C.*, by Tom McCarthy, *Harper's Magazine*, September, 2010, 68.

[19] Chandler takes this point even further, suggesting—in a provocative bit of proleptic history—that the historical novel did not even properly belong to its original historical moment. "The historical novel," Chandler speculates, "has to be, in a strict sense, postmodern" (*England in 1819*, 142). This can be taken as a merely conceptual point: because historical novels contain two temporal moments—the described past and the enunciating present—it is technically organized around the form of the "post." But Chandler seems to have something more concrete in mind: namely, that the articulation of the present moment of writing means that the historical novel has always been self-conscious and is thus, in the "strict" or literary historical sense, the first instance of "postmodern" metafiction. I'm not sure we have to take the point that far, however. Suffice it to say that the genealogy of the historical novel unsettles the traditional mode of literary historicism that is carried out in its name.

[20] Srinivas Aravamudan, "The Return of Anachronism," in "Periodization Cutting up the Past," special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* 62.4 (December 2001): 349.

off as period or epoch or episode with no necessary consequences for our time."[21] Yet for Dipesh Chakrabarty, anachronism is precisely the opposite, the foreclosure of those same consequences and connections. "Anachronism," Chakrabarty writes, "convert[s] objects, institutions, and practices with which we have lived relationships into relics of other times. … The modern sense of 'anachronism' stops us from confronting the problem of the temporal heterogeneity of the 'now' in thinking about history."[22]

To explain what kinds of mistakes anachronism makes, to understand why anachronism provokes such paradoxically opposed reactions, and to propose why, in the end, these divergent responses perfectly reveal the dialectical contours of the contemporary, this chapter compares two different versions of anachronism in the contemporary historical novel. In John Fowles's *French Lieutenant's Woman*, the narrator's present intrudes on his account of the past. In Tom McCarthy's *C.*, on the other hand, all vestiges of the present (metafictional and otherwise) are scrubbed away, so past and present appear blithely blurred together. In one novel, anachronism appears in the jarring incongruity between the narrated past and the narrating present; in the other, anachronism looms in the absence of historical difference, the replacement of temporal movement with total synchrony. Yet in both cases, I suggest, what is at stake is the historical tension at the heart of the contemporary. The anachronistic genre of the historical novel shows us that being contemporary is more than a matter of separating the present from the past; it also depends on bringing the two back together. In *C.* and *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, we see what it means to create connections both within and between presents, and what it takes to situate those connections in history. For Fowles and McCarthy, the historical novel, in all its newfound old-fashioned-ness, offers an ill-timed yet perpetually relevant perspective on how we come to see ourselves as novel, as different, as contemporary—and, in turn, how the contemporary's flourish of newness, its gesture of historical difference, is the very thing that keeps it perennially (if mistakenly) in sync with the past.

Other Victorians, or, Historical Laughter

The first problem with the contemporary is that it seems like such an exclusive affair: a period defined by all the pasts it excludes. For Jameson, the self-proclaimed distinctiveness of the contemporary makes the "old dilemmas of historicism" ever urgent: if the contemporary is defined by the difference it imposes, how are we to explain "the claims of monuments from distant and even archaic moments of the cultural past on a culturally different present"?[23] How are we to tell, in other words, what's "*our* contemporary" and what isn't—and, once separated, we should we continue to care? Answers to the question have differed. At one extreme is Walter Benn Michaels's willfully provocative argument that history has "no bearing" on the present: "The point here is not that our sense of whose histories need to be taken into account must be extended; it is instead that no one's history need be taken into account."[24] In Michaels's view, knowing

[21] Jerome Christensen, *Romanticism at the End of History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 3.
[22] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 243.
[23] Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 18.
[24] Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 166.

how the present came to be formed tells us nothing about how to behave once we're in it. "The events of the past," he says, "can have only a limited relevance to the present, providing us at best with a causal account of how things have come to be the way they are, at worst with objects of antiquarian interest" (138-139). Responding to Michaels, Baucom's move in the other direction ends up taking him to the opposite extreme: striving to hang on to relevance, he loses his grip on history instead. For Baucom, there is "no such thing as a fully discrete or isolated 'present' or 'past', just as there is no discrete late twentieth century or early twenty-first to speak of, only a nonsynchronous contemporaneity in which an older deep-structural form inscribes, reasserts, and finds itself realized."[25] There may well be no such thing as a "fully discrete" present; and yet more often than not we act as if there is. What Baucom takes for granted is a question I don't think we can ignore: given that the relation between past and present *is* unstable—that our supposedly clear sense of historical difference so often turns out to be unreliable—how *do* we come, however fleetingly, to have faith in the soundness of the present? How, amidst the continual intrusions of the "nonsynchronous," out of the ever-shifting tectonics of history and everyday life, are we able to produce an approximate idea of what our contemporary is—of who it encompasses and who it excludes?

On these questions, it is Michaels rather than Baucom who offers some unexpected insight. For Michaels's rhetoric already depends on an invisible yet complicated historical gesture: the first-person plural pronoun "we." Consider his critique of *Beloved*. Michaels complains that Morrison's novel "redescribes something we have never known as something we have forgotten and thus makes the historical past a part of our own experience."[26] In the foreground are the terms that Michaels sees as central to *Beloved*'s historical sleight-of-hand—forgetting, remembering, experiencing. But these terms can't just float free; they have to belong to someone. So what is at stake is "something we have never known"; "something we have forgotten"; "a part of our own experience." Who exactly is this "we"? It is, I would maintain, more than a rhetorical flourish. Michaels is not making an argument about just anything—he is making an argument about history. More specifically, he is making an argument about precisely what belongs to the historical present and what does not. There is the present of "our own experience," and then there is "the historical past," and the two, for Michaels, are mutually exclusive. The "we" of Michaels's argument is thus far from incidental. It is, on the contrary, the foundation on which his argument about history rests. Michaels's "we" is not royal but historical: it does not aim to include everyone but only those who share the same present. By separating what is present from what is past, this "we" transforms the contemporary from a permeable feeling into a closed-off category. It consolidates—and ultimately produces—a discrete sense of the historical present.

In the very gesture of disavowing the past, Michaels cannot avoid putting history to use. It is only by seeing the past as past—by dividing history into what is and isn't relevant—that he can depict a present able to ignore it. Michaels's claim that "the question of past injustice has no bearing on the question of present justice" is, for this reason, not exactly right (166). The sentence has no meaning in a historical vacuum: it is entirely dependent on what one means by "present," and this, in turn, is entirely dependent on

[25] Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 30.
[26] Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 137.

what counts as the "past." "My point," Michaels clarifies, "is only that the interest in the past shouldn't be mistaken for an analysis of or an attempt to deal with the problems of the present" (167). If, however, we want to know what those problems are, if it matters which problems are present problems and which are past ones, if the present itself is something we hope to both "analy[ze]" and "deal with," then we cannot do without the past—which is the only way that anyone's idea of the present has any meaning to begin with. The past may or may not provide a reliable model for present behavior, but as the grounds for determining what our contemporary is and who our contemporaries are, it is always accounted for.

The historical stakes of the contemporary "we" are also at the center of Fowles's historical novel. *The French Lieutenant's Woman* seems at first to be an excessively faithful recreation of Victorian London. But this fidelity is shattered by the novel's disproportionate use of the first-person pronoun, which introduces anachronism by casting the shadow of the present over the depicted past. Set in 1867, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* follows Charles Smithson, a Victorian gentleman and man of science, who is torn, as the genre requires, between duty (his engagement to Ernestina Freeman, of bourgeois means) and passion (his unexpected and untenable love for the tragic Sarah Woodruff, a woman of no status whatsoever, who is ostracized due to her rumored affair with a French shipman). But the love story for which *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is most well known is not what the novel is most interested in. Fowles's primary concern is not just to mimic the style and the content of the traditional Victorian novel, but to sum up, from the privileged perch of the twentieth century, the entire Victorian age—"its tumultuous life, its iron certainties and rigid conventions, its repressed emotions and facetious humor, its cautious science and incautious religion, its corrupt politics and immutable casts."[27]

The desire to discover what "structures the whole age itself" (272) is, of course, hardly a contemporary one. The very notion of a "historical situation" or a "spirit of the age," Chandler persuasively shows, is an invention of the early nineteenth century—"historicist critique," he writes, is dependent on "the terms of a historicism that is emergent within Romanticism." Consequently, "The historicist framework of contemporary commentary does not afford the critical distance we sometimes tend to imagine."[28] Despite (or perhaps because of) its fastidious staging of the Victorian situation, Fowles's novel is consistently anxious about its own place in history. If past ages have a spirit, this spirit becomes, for the present, something more like ghostly possession, with the novel itself as medium—and Fowles's medium doesn't want us to forget that it's the one on stage. The voice we hear, after all, is never the voice of the age itself, but only the novel's own; *The French Lieutenant's Woman* thus goes to great lengths to remind us who's doing all the talking. The book is filled with authorial interruptions: "I am not doing well by Ernestina" (252); "I am overdoing the exclamation marks" (208); "I exaggerate? Perhaps, but I can be put to the test, for the Cobb has changed very little since the year of which I write" (4). On this kind of evidence, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* has been lumped in to the category of the postmodern historical novel, which, as Linda Hutcheon has famously (if indiscriminately) shown, strives to make transparent the subjective acts of writing and

[27] John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1969), 363.
[28] Chandler, *England in 1819*, 36, 35.

living that lie behind every ostensibly objective account of historical facts.[29] But there is something more significant at work here than the metafictional trappings of self-consciousness or handwringing over historical authority. The insistent, intrusive reminders that we are reading a fake Victorian novel tell us little about the distinction between fake and fact (indeed, the novel is diligently factual). What they tell us, rather, is that an awareness of the epochal past necessarily implies an equally, if unknowably, epochal present. The appearance of the authorial "I," in other words, is a matter not of *self*-consciousness but of historical consciousness. And this consciousness of historical difference can only appear as anachronism—as the mistaken intrusion of a present "I" into the landscape of the Victorian past. These brief moments of authorial presence, I'd argue, are not interrogations of authorship but hints of a more fundamental opposition that structures the novel, which revolves around not the fictionality of the "I" but the hidden historical lives of pronouns.

The appearance of the narrator brings to the surface a question that is always implied (and often begged) by the omniscience of the historical novel: in what time is the narrator supposed to be narrating? Whose contemporary is the narrator—ours or theirs? When Berlant praises the genre's "you-are-thereness," she suggests that the proper function of the historical novel is to make us forget this question: to collapse the distance between the past and its retrospect. To be immersed in a historical novel is, we like to say, to be transported to "another time." What we don't like to say is that there is usually something blocking our way: the mediation of the narrator. Historical "you-are-thereness," in other words, is a fantasy that is already ruined by historical narrators—by the fact that history needs telling. Indeed, the very phrase "historical novel" suggests that there is a natural frisson between the subject matter of history and the implied presentness of the novel form. It is this frisson that Fowles's narrator exposes, and this fantasy that he thus disenchants. "I have pretended," the narrator confesses, "to slip back into 1867; but of course that year is in reality a century past" (406). The narration of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* does not so much bridge past and present as remind us of their separation. In the historical novel, our only access to the action of history takes place through an "I" who is always set some distance away from it. The intrusion of the authorial "I" thus has a decisively historical spin. Its distant presence can be felt in all of the novel's broad assessments of Victorian life, even where it doesn't explicitly interrupt. For instance: "In spite of Hegel, the Victorians were not a dialectically minded age; they did not think naturally in opposites, of positive and negative as aspects of the same whole. Paradoxes troubled rather than pleased them. They were not the people for existentialist moments, but for chains of cause and effect" (248). Here, hidden in fiction's natural deployment of the third-person, is an additional charge—a sense not only of the abstract otherness of the Victorian "they" but also of their distance from us (precisely the distance from which it becomes possible to reduce the teeming complexities of historical life to the elegantly structured stereotypes that define an "age" and its people). In this way, *The French*

[29] Hutcheon coined the term "historiographic metafiction" to describe texts in which "theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs … is made the grounds for [the] rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past." For Hutcheon, such works "both inscribe and undermine the authority and objectivity of historical sources and explanations" (*A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* [New York: Routledge, 1988], 5, 123).

Lieutenant's Woman acknowledges what the genre of the historical novel so often endeavors to hide: the word "they" implies a second subject position; it demands a parallel pronoun.

Here, then, is the real significance of the novel's "I": not that it exists (not simply that stories have tellers and histories have writers) but that it exists in a fully fleshed-out historical milieu. What distinguishes Fowles's narrator is not his self-awareness but his awareness of his own historical moment. When the narrator speaks, he speaks the language of his particular time and place—the 1960s. This, of course, is the proper time of those "existentialist moments" that fail to move Charles and his Victorian contemporaries. It is also the time of the sexual revolution, whose transformations the narrator obsessively bemoans: "[Charles] also loved her for the part she played in his dreams—which was not at all the sort of part girls play in young men's dreams in our own uninhibited, and unimaginative, age" (210). Again and again, the narrator complains of the romantic excesses of his age ("Such a sudden shift of sexual key is impossible today. A man and a woman are no sooner in any but the most casual contact than they consider the possibility of a physical relationship" [176]). I will return to the peculiar conservatism of these assessments, which certainly seem to put the book, as we like to say, on the wrong side of history. For now, though, I am simply interested in their awareness *of* history: in how the narrator's interest in describing the spirit of Victorian era turns out to go hand in hand with the grasp of his own moment as a discrete age (if, in his view, of a decidedly different spirit).

In this way, the "I" stakes its claim on a definable, periodizable present. But I have also suggested that the historical status of contemporariness depends on something more robust than the first-person singular. So it is that, from the very beginning of the novel, we readers are enlisted to fill it out:

> Though Charles liked to think of himself as a scientific young man and would probably not have been too surprised had news reached him out of the future of the airplane, the jet engine, television, radar: what *would* have astounded him was the changed attitude to time itself. The supposed great misery of our century is the lack of time; our sense of that, *not* a disinterested love of science, and certainly not wisdom, is why we devote such a huge proportion of the ingenuity and income of our societies to finding faster ways of doing things …. But for Charles, and for almost all his contemporaries and social peers, the time signature over existence was firmly *adagio*. (11-12)

The jolt of this anachronism is, it turns out, felt less by Charles (who "would not have been surprised" by the technologies of the future) than by us—who may be most surprised to discover that there is a historical "us" at all. The anachronistic list of gadgets, which is jarringly out of place on Charles's properly nineteenth-century cultural scene, is the price the novel is willing to pay in order to consolidate a concrete sense of its own present. But such a present only has meaning as a shared category, as a collective capable of mirroring Charles's "contemporaries and social peers." Thus *we* have be to recruited—the proper word here might be "interpellated"—to claim ownership of this history: it is "our century," "our future," "our sense" of sped-up time; "we" are responsible for the acceleration of modernity (though this may be news to us). At the very moment we are hearing the

present cataloged (its misery, its speed, its disinterest in love and wisdom), we are also syntactically ensnared in it. In this way, *The French Lieutenant's Woman's* "we" is crucially different from what Garrett Stewart calls the "conscripted reader" of the classic Victorian novel—though both, importantly, represent equally "dated modes of address."[30] For Stewart, the Victorian novel's "vocative (or directive) aspect of conscripted reading" works to dramatize the situation of textual transmission itself (15). "Readers," he writes, "do more than underwrite the act of textual communication; they are conscribed, in short, by narrative's own economy as silent partners. … We will be concerned less with how a reader decodes a text than with how a text might encode—might teasingly encipher—its own reading" (10-11). Fowles's shared address, on the other hand, is not about "textual communication" but historical consolidation. The first-person plural does not dramatize the text's own "situation of reading" but insists instead that the act of reading always implies its own historical situation. If Fowles's description of the technological wonders of the present is less for the anachronistic sake of his characters than for the timely recourse of his readers, he needs those same conscripted readers—fellow inhabitants of the now, hailed by the same "we" and sharing the same "century"—to give concrete, communal substance to the present he wishes to describe. Fowles needs "us" to assure him that the present he wishes to believe in actually exists.

This is all to say that, to have a contemporary, one needs to have contemporaries. Yet the attempt to capture the shared history of the present has its own snares, which catch our reading of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* only to bring it full circle. For have we not already begun to suspect that Fowles's present is not actually "ours" anymore? That it may, in fact, be as outdated to us as Charles Smithson's present is to Fowles? After all, airplanes and jet engines and televisions are no longer signifiers of the new; if anything, they are markers of precisely how quickly the newness of the present can be taken for granted. While Jameson's response to Croce suggests just how easy it is to lose track of the contemporary, Fowles has the opposite problem: in his attempt to fix his contemporary—to translate it into the concrete life of the 1960s—he loses track of *us*. Concluding a description of Charles's historically typical penchant for absurd Victorian overdressing, the narrator notes, "Well, we laugh" (47). We do; only we might now be laughing at Fowles's own ideas of what is dazzling (the speed of air travel) and what is terrifying (the speed of romantic courtship) about his century. Yet I want to suggest that the amusing obsolescence of Fowles's present may not be a problem; indeed, it may be precisely the point. As I argued in my reading of Michaels's historical pronouns, the historical meaning of "we" is a function not just of inclusion but of exclusion—the present becomes perceptible precisely when it imagines itself to be different from the past. When Lim refers to anachronism as "a gesture of temporal exclusion," she is saying essentially the same thing[31]: anachronism begins by assuming that the present can be cleanly separated from the past. While we could say that Fowles's present fails to include us, that its anachronism extends not only into the past but also into the future, we can also put the point a different way: in being excluded, it is *we* who fail to include Fowles; who come, by that very gesture, to imagine ourselves as another, newer "we"; and who thus

[30] Garrett Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 5.
[31] Lim, *Translating Time*, 15.

find ourselves sharing something we did not know we shared—this strange new present that is the twenty-first century. The alienation we feel from Fowles's outdated present (from its admiration for radar and its anxieties about sexual liberation) is the very grounds for thinking historically about the contemporary. Laugh, and history does not laugh with us; and that, it turns out, is how we know it is history, and how we know where to find ourselves in it.

The Static Present

From a different perspective, of course, the "unmistakable antiquarian strain" of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*'s inclusive address looks like the very thing that makes the novel unmistakably of its moment.[32] One of the founding texts in the canon of postmodern fiction, Fowles's novel gives way to five decades' worth of "historiographic metafiction" (or what Amy J. Elias has more recently rebranded as "metahistorical romance"[33]), to a series of texts that are fixated on the anachronistic gap between represented history and the present responsible for representing it. When Aravamudan suggests that "the return of anachronism is nothing less than the return of the subject," he isn't kidding:[34] the familiar anachronisms of the metahistorical novel make history both subjective (that is, relative) and inter-subjective—a living dynamic between the *they* who populate the past and the *we* of the present, between history and its writing. It would seem, by that logic, that correcting for anachronism would be as easy as excising the contemporary "we" from the historical novel. But in fact, the rejection of metahistorical form and the consequent disappearance of the present cause the genre a new set of problems, forcing it to fend off antiquarianism and conceive historical connection in ever more compromised ways.

Tom McCarthy's *C.* has no framing device, no self-conscious account of historiography, and no apparent sense of its story *as* history. The novel has no implied "we" whatsoever. At the same time, it doesn't seem to have much of a "they" either—the novel's characters are so lifeless (so much like the dead "relics" of Chakrabarty's anachronism) that they seem to rebuke the historical novel's central fantasy of bringing the past to life. *C.*'s forestalling of historical self-consciousness is part and parcel of its rejection of novelistic consciousness as such: rather than thinking, feeling realist subjects, *C.* turns its historical actors into depthless vessels of brute matter, cogs in machines, insects unthinkingly flitting across the present. There is a flipside, though, to *C.*'s refusal of interiority. Its reduction of men to matter is also a way of insisting on the interconnectedness of exterior life. The end of internal consciousness marks the beginning of a purely materialist sense of synchrony.

Unlike Charles Smithson, who constantly reflects on both himself and his age, Serge Carrefax—who is born alongside the wireless telegraph at the dawn of the twentieth century, becomes a bomber in World War I, and surveys the fall of the British empire in Egypt—has no apparatus with which to register the historical meanings of his daily life. Serge, put simply, has no depth; as a child learning to paint, "he just can't do perspective:

---

[32] Stewart, *Dear Reader*, 14.
[33] See Amy J. Elias, *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).
[34] Aravamudan, "The Return of Anachronism," 351.

everything he paints is flat. … He sees things flat; he paints things flat."[35] But his lack of interior life also manifests as an obsession with physical, machinic connections: "Of all the pilots and observers, Serge alone remains unhaunted by the prospect of a fiery airborne end. He's not unaware of it: just unbothered. The idea that his flesh could melt and fuse with the machine parts pleases him" (164). This is the key: for Serge—and, I'll suggest later, for this particular historical moment of technological transformation—people are simply hollow vessels, emptied of psychology and filled with machine parts, material processes, or dead matter itself.

The novel returns again and again to these mixed metaphors of machinic consciousness. Serge's father Simeon, amateur telegrapher and director of a school for the deaf, is obsessed with sound. At his school, the children are prohibited from signing and are forced to speak, a process that Simeon describes not as a force of will but as the basic functioning of a machine:

> "The human body," he says, turning half-round to tap his knuckles on the whiteboard's glass, "is a mechanism. When its engine-room, the thorax, a bone-girt vault for heart and lungs whose very floor and walls are constantly in motion—when this chamber exerts pressure sufficient to force open the trap-door set into its ceiling and send air rushing outwards through the windpipe, sound ensues. It's as simple as that." (15)

Speech, in other words, is not an index of subjectivity but the product of a mechanical process. Such processes govern essentially everyone in the novel. Serge's sister Sophie "looks as though she were tuning into something—as though she had somehow turned *herself* into a receiver" (74). A doctor's eyes "glow … like thin filaments" (95). The arms of the forty students taking the School of Military Aeronautics' General Knowledge Paper are "like so many extensions of spring, fusee and escapement" (117). Serge's view from a plane seems to him "like a strip of film," which in turn makes Serge himself feel like "the gate, bulb, aperture, and general projection point" (160). The mouths of dead German soldiers "seem to be … transmitting" a sound, while "their eyes, despite being empty of perception or reaction, seem electrified, shot through with a current" (177). All of these metaphors merge in a culminating epiphany when, on a boat in Egypt, Serge

> has the impression of being not in nature but in some giant mechanism, like a clock, sextant or theodolite. The stalks and herons that strut and peck their way through marshes look mechanical; the marshes themselves, the fields, settlements and stretches of desert beyond them look mechanical as well, alternating and repeating like a flat panorama that's wound round and round by a dull, clockwork motor. Passages of desert suggest epochs—present, Napoleonic, ancient—which loom into focus like so many photographic slides, one following the other with an automated regularity; sometimes several epochs appear simultaneously, as though two or three slides

[35] Tom McCarthy, *C.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 39.

> had been overlaid. Even the movements of humans take on a mechanical aspect: chibouk-stuffing, tiller-plying, boom-guiding, forehead-rubbing, test-tube-lowering and hoisting, spying. Events follow the same sequence as they did yesterday: Alby and Pacorie and Serge conduct their three-way stand-off; tea and biscuits are served; Laura lectures Serge on Osiris, the information streaming out like a strip of punch-card paper issuing from her mouth—constant and regular, as though, by rubbing her forehead, she had set her exegetic apparatus at a certain speed from which it wouldn't deviate until instructed otherwise. (283)

This absurdly extended metaphor has a simple point: viewed mechanically, the individuated aspects of the scene—nature, boat, people, language, history—are all part of the same "giant mechanism." To see the mouth as a punch-card machine, eyes as receivers, bodies as springs, and nature as a wound motor in which all these machine-parts are placed is, finally, to see the present itself as a function not of petty acts of self-consciousness but of the material connections that give it substance and shape.

Stripped of psychological depth, the ostensible subjects of history are rearticulated as parts of the larger systems, organic and man-made, that determine them. Indeed, it is the very loss of depth that leads one to grasp the connections on the present's surface. The novel is crudely explicit on this point. When a painter-turned-pilot complains about the problems that flight poses to landscape painting—"It's all wrong, aesthetically speaking: all the depth and texture of a summer countryside steam-rollered into a flat page"—Serge responds, "That's what I like about it. … You're connected to everything around you: all the streaks and puffs" (147). But the sense of connection that most entrances *C*. emanates from a central source: the wireless telegraph, or radio, into whose newly dawning era Serge is born in 1898. Radio transmissions enable new fantasies of interconnectedness, as one can no longer "maintain the … fantasy of isolation from the vast sea of transmission roaring all around" (64). Wirelessness becomes the grounds for imagining connection in more than physical terms—it raises the possibility of transmitting just about anything "across long distances, by wires or, indeed, wirelessly … such that life in all its full, vibrant immediacy may be relayed without any delay" (110). The gap between the physical constraints of the "giant mechanism" in the previous paragraph and the unconstrained possibilities of wireless transmission is overcome in the book's climactic final pages, a fever dream in which Serge becomes an insect who becomes a machine who realizes that he is, in fact, a radio:

> This time, all the insects have combined into a single, giant one from whose perspective, and from within whose body, he surveys this new dream's landscape. In effect, he *is* the insect. His gangly, mutinous limbs have grown into long feelers that jab and scrape at the air. What's more, the air presents back to these feelers surfaces from which contact is to be made, ones that *solicit* contact: plates, sockets, holes. As parts of him alight on and plug into these, space itself starts to jolt and crackle into action, and Serge finds himself connected to everywhere, to all imaginable places. Signals hurtle

> through the sky, through time, like particles or flecks of matter, visible and solid. Each of his feelers has now found its corresponding touch-point, and the overall shape formed by this coupling, its architecture, has become apparent: it's a giant, tentacular wireless set, an insect-radio mounted on a plinth or altar. (300-301)

The "insect-radio" is the culminating figure of *C.*'s connective imagination. Fusing the organic and the mechanical, it also reminds us that the wireless possibility of "connect[ing] to everywhere" is nevertheless dependent on making sure the radio is literally plugged in. The physical "contact" of plugging into "plates, sockets, holes" is still the non-negotiable grounds for wireless transmission, a point that is underscored when the "signal" itself is rendered in a surprisingly materialist simile: "like particles or flecks of matter, visible and solid." If the radio enables new forms of immaterial connection, then, it is only because it also embodies the old forms. The wireless telegraph is still rooted to the earth, the invisible signals it dispenses dependent on the "touch-points" that physically bind the machine to both its operator and its energy source.

There is something else (something a bit more mercifully distanced) to say about this dense tangle of metaphors, however: they are eerily, unabashedly repetitive. The insect-radio is merely a final assemblage of the very, very many images of insects, machines, and radios that run throughout the novel. In this way, *C.* itself also seems to function mechanically, "alternating and repeating" like the "giant mechanism" on the boat. The modes of connection and transmission that replace historical depth in the novel are also the forms that hold it together *as* a novel. Eschewing the development of plot or the living richness of character, *C.* instead unfolds through the mechanical repetition of the same linguistic tropes over and over. At one point, the poles of a tram look "like arms of gramophones" (246); later, Serge thinks of his ship's "prow as a gramophone needle" (302). Air "seems to have become all noise and signal" (178), then gives way to "not just the transmitted noise and signal, picked up at a distance, but the *source* noise, the *source* signal" (304). The plot repeats too. Serge, for instance, is born with a caul—"The amniotic bag envelops his entire head, a silky hood" (9). Later, meeting with his doctor at a German sanatorium, Serge describes one of his psychosomatic ailments as a blurring of his vision: "The closest thing he could liken it to is one of his mother's silks—the really fine, dark ones—held right up to his eyeballs and stretched out in front of them, making the world gauzed" (91). This strange psychological echo of the caul is further literalized, first when Serge takes to flying with his girlfriend's stocking worn over his head, and then when his plane, shot out of the sky, is saved when it gets tangled in a silk parachute on the way down ("His view's still blocked by fabric, though: the white, silky stuff that wrapped the machine as it fell forms a sac around it" [174]). Serge's initial "gauzed" relation to the world, which already reminded him of his mother, is repeated by the "blocked vision" of the chute[36]—which, in a final ironic loop, may well be made of the very silk that the British government has been buying from Serge's mother.

We might thus say that the book is built on loops and repetitions—which would be apt, given that these words comprise *C.*'s most frequently repeated figure. Before the

[36] The mirroring of the caul and the parachute is also made clear by the book's chapter titles: Part I is called "Caul"; Part II, "Chute."

school pageant, lines of poetry "loop and repeat" (34). In radio transmissions, "Wireless ghosts come and go, moving in arpeggios that loop, repeat, mutate" (67). During practice for the recitation at Sophie's funeral, "The looping, repeating lines mutate and distort" (78). In the woods after his plane has crashed, "Serge starts murmuring zone-call sequences … one after the other, repeating and mutating" (178). On the boat in Egypt, Serge hears "loops and repetitions in the chafing of the anchorage" (285). And in Serge's climactic fever dream, he hears "repeating variations of the same phrase … These words loop a few times, then give over to a single syllable, repeated … —a word or non-word, that itself eventually mutates" (303).

I want to suggest that *C.*'s unstinting repetition, the constant loops and mutations of the same sounds, words, and images, is simply the formal realization of the novel's metaphorical interest in connection and synchronicity. Repetition turns the novel itself into a "vast sea of transmission," through which a reader does not so much drive forward as float along.[37] The novel aims to capture formally the non-narrative synchrony its characters long for. Reading *C.* is like having the experience of an "intermittent mechanical buzzing" (9) or a "low-resonating buzzing" (176), of hearing a vague set of repeated sounds floating just beneath the surface of the plot (of course, the word "buzzing" itself is yet another figure that buzzes throughout the book). But synchrony is finally more than either a formal effect or a thematic concern. It is, most broadly, a reimagining of history. When Serge returns home from the war, he finds his father obsessed with the notion of residual radio waves—transmissions that leave behind material traces of the historical past:

> "Imagine," he confides to Serge, lowering his voice as though they were being overheard, "just imagine: if every exciting or painful event in history has discharged waves of similar detectability into the ether—why, we could pick up the Battle of Hastings, or observe the distress of the assassinated Caesar, or the anguish of Saint Anthony during his great temptation. These things could still be *happening*, right now, around us. … We could pick up the words, the very *vowels and syllables*, spoken on the *cross*." (198-199)

This is a peculiarly materialist idea of anachronism: not that history's consequences or ghostly aftereffects are "right now, around us," but that its actual *discharges* are what remain. It is no accident that, for Simeon, these are discharges of sound. He says that one might be able to "pick up" the Battle of Hastings, but he doesn't mean the battle: he means its sonic traces. History, he suggests, is made up not of deeds but of vocal "distress" and "anguish." It is not the sum of past actions but the accumulation of the sounds made by past actors.

---

[37] The absence of narrative momentum ultimately seems to be rooted in Serge's own distaste for traditional plot. Consider what happens when he is asked by a superior officer to account for his time aloft: " 'Narrative, Carrefax'. […] 'Oh', says Serge. 'Well . . . ' His hand has gathered a thick wedge of tar. He looks at it, then up at the recording officer. 'We went up; we saw stuff; it was good' " (143, unbracketed ellipsis in original). Set within a novel that skips from the English countryside to Word War I to the Egyptian revolution with little account of how Serge gets from one place to the next or what happens in the interim, Serge's laughably reductive recounting of narrative time also comes to seem like a reasonably fitting description of *C.* itself.

This reduction of historical meaning to the non-signifying, non-subjective remains of language—"*vowels and syllables*"—explains *C.*'s own puzzling relation to both its historical content and its literary genre. What does it mean to be a historical novel that is interested neither in immediate historical experience nor in retrospective historical understanding? At first glance, *C.*'s investment in the logic of synchrony seems like a way not of connecting events but of dissolving their historicity. Back from the war, "Serge doesn't buy the line, peddled by the newspapers, that tens of thousands of men his age are wandering with 'shell shock'. He sees symptoms around London all the time … It's like a city of the living dead, only a few of whose denizens could proffer the excuse of having had shells constantly rattling their flesh and shaking their nerves. No, the shock's source was already there: deeper, older, more embedded" (214). Even as they are invoked, the cultural consequences of World War I are spread across the whole of society and cast infinitely backward in time. The shared sense of shock that seems to connect everyone in London is also a rejection of the specificity of its cause, which is no longer the world-historical event of the war but something "older," too far back to know, too deeply buried to explain. Elsewhere in the book, Serge unknowingly glides past moments of epochal significance. Serge's time in Egypt, where he works for the Ministry of Communications, is mostly spent listening to a colleague's lectures on Alexandrian history, which are briefly delayed "one morning in late February," when "Serge makes his way to the Ministry through streets thronged with jubilant Egyptians" (251). They are jubilant, of course, because the state of Egypt has just won independence. But the entirety of the Egyptian revolution is reduced to a single sentence, to "one morning" among many, which, for Serge, is distinguished only by a slightly more hectic stroll to work.

In her critique of McCarthy's novel, Amanda Claybaugh underscores both the "banality" of the text's "modes of connection" and, ultimately, their meaninglessness: "*c*," she concludes, "is for connections that reveal nothing at all."[38] Underneath the buzzing interconnectedness of the novel may lie authentic historical or intersubjective experience, Claybaugh argues, but "*C.* has no interest in disinterring those experiences or somehow giving voice to them on Serge's behalf" (178). If the novel refuses to "giv[e] voice" to Serge's experience of events like the Great War or the Egyptian Revolution, however, that is because Serge himself has nothing to say about them. *C.*, in other words, is intent on *retaining* the gap between textual omniscience and Serge's ignorance—a gap that also defines the historical structure of the contemporary. In this way, the novel's distinct blend of evacuated interiority and historical unawareness is neither the result of Serge's banality nor the product of McCarthy's indifference; on the contrary, it is the index of the immanent experience of a present that (as Timothy J. Reiss defines it) "cannot even be known, far less experienced," in historical terms.[39] *C.*'s refusal to speak "on Serge's behalf" is really its attempt to describe the past's experience of itself *as a present*, which is to say, the absence of historical self-awareness that made it a present to begin with. If, as Claybaugh sees it, the novel's connections "reveal nothing," it is because they reveal nothing *to Serge*. "By definition," Reiss writes, "one cannot analyze as closed a time still

[38] Amanda Claybaugh, "McC," review of *C.*, by Tom McCarthy, *n+1*, Number Eleven, Spring 2011: 179, 180.
[39] Timothy J. Reiss, "Perioddity: Considerations on the Geography of Histories," in "Periodization Cutting up the Past," special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* 62.4 (December 2001): 442.

being lived" (*442*). In Serge's chaotic contemporary, lived time overtakes historical analysis—the synchrony that ties together the disparate parts of the present also overwhelms the attempt to fit those parts into an articulate narrative. The connectedness of contemporary life turns Serge's present into "a dense and endless sheet of matter" (*C.*, 271), while history melts into pure presence, "a static that contains all messages ever sent" (308). This static is meaningless, to be sure, but only because it is the sound of Serge's immediate immersion in a present that cannot be made to meaningfully cohere. The "static" of history is simply the sustaining fiction of a static present, which appears unmoving and outside historical time only to those who are unlucky enough to be stuck inside it.

Crying Wolf

Before dissolving entirely into sheer matter or buzzing cacophony, however, McCarthy's novel asserts a minor but unmistakable historical counterforce, which casts the tension between history and the contemporary in a different light. Early in *C.*, a young Serge is walking across the grounds of Versoie, the family estate, when he notices a sound that is not part of the natural landscape:

> As Serge moves across the lawn he realises that the sound's coming not from the undergrowth but from somewhere much closer. He looks around; although there's no moon to light up the lawn a small glow is spilling from a lantern someone's left behind the sheet. When he comes face-on to the sheet he sees what's making the noise—or, rather, sees its shadow, cast on the sheet's far side by the lantern so as to be visible from the side, like a film made up of only silhouettes. It's some kind of moving thing made of articulated parts. One of the parts is horizontal, propped up on four stick legs like a low table; the other is vertical, slotted into the underside of the table's rear end but rising above it, its spine wobbling as the whole contraption rocks back and forth. The thing pulses like a [*sic*] insect's thorax, and with each pulse comes the rustle, scratch and chafe; with each pulse the horizontal, low part squeaks, and the vertical part now starts emitting a deep grunt, a gruff, hog-like snort. The grunts grow more intense as Serge comes closer to the sheet; the squeaks grow louder. The front part has a head; the back part too—Serge can make this out now, rising from broad shoulders. The thing's rocking and wobbling faster and faster, squeaking and grunting more with every pulse.
>
> Serge has started moving round to the sheet's side so he can find out what the source of this strange shadow display is when a scream comes from some way behind him. (60-61)

All the looping and mutating metaphors of the novel appear in this one passage, one after another. Projecting shadows onto the sheet, the scene is "like a film"; it is also a "contraption," a machine "made of articulated parts" and manifested in the cold angles of

geometry ("one of the parts is horizontal … the other is vertical"); and, finally, its pulsing movements make it seem "like an insect." The sheer proliferation of figures starts to seem suspicious. Can the film, the insect, and the table-like contraption all be describing the same thing? Indeed, the multiplication of metaphors suggests a scene that eludes or denies description. But what can be happening behind the sheet that is both so urgent and so impossible to represent?

Serge is called away before he can discover it. We, however, are not consigned to the same fate—for reasons that will offer a rather different perspective on *C.*'s relation to history. Serge is not simply a cipher, an empty vessel charged with emptying out history. He is also, critics have already noted, a coded invocation of a real historical personage: Sergei Pankeieff, or as he his more commonly known, Freud's Wolf Man. Although McCarthy has Serge born twelve years later than Sergei—in England rather than in St. Petersburg—and although he abandons the arc of Sergei's life story around the time Serge goes to war, the intersections are unmistakable: Pankeieff was also born with a caul, also suffered from "disturbances of his intestinal function," also had an affair with his nurse at a German sanatorium (indeed, Pankeieff married his), and also had a "brilliant" sister, "inclined in her studies to the natural sciences," who poisoned herself.[40] Most strikingly, Freud explains, "His principal subject of complaint was that for him the world was hidden by a veil, or that he was cut off from the world by a veil" (217). Even Serge's affectlessness is modeled on Pankeieff, whom Freud first describes as "unassailably entrenched behind an attitude of obliging apathy. He listened, understood, and remained unapproachable" (157). "When the news of his sister's death arrived," Freud continues, "he felt hardly a trace of grief" (167). And in his own memoirs, Pankeieff describes his relation to the world in what sounds like the materialist language of *C.*: "I had found life empty, everything had seemed 'unreal', to the extent that people seemed to me like wax figures or wound-up marionettes."[41]

The scene that Serge sees behind the sheet, then, isn't just any scene; it's a primal scene. Pankeieff was the occasion for Freud's most famous remarks on the nature of the primal scene, which, in the Wolf Man's case, involved witnessing his parents having sex *"a tergo,"* or from behind.[42] This certainly seems to be the scene Serge witnesses: one part of the "contraption" is "on four stick legs," the other part is "slotted into the underside of the table's rear end." Certainly, it should not be surprising to find this scene in *C.*, where so many central details of Pankeieff's case shape the novel's plot.[43] On second thought,

---

[40] Sigmund Freud, "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," in *The Wolf-Man by the Wolf-man*, ed. Muriel Gardner (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 241, 217, 165-166.

[41] The Wolf-Man, "The Memoirs of the Wolf-Man," in *The Wolf-Man by the Wolf-Man*, ed. Muriel Gardner (New York: Basic Books, 1971), 50.

[42] Freud, "History of an Infantile Neurosis," 182.

[43] A few scenes are taken almost verbatim from Freud's history. Here, for instance, is Freud describing an early memory Pankeieff has of his sister: "The patient suddenly called to mind the fact that, when he was still very small, 'on the first estate', his sister had seduced him into sexual practices. … the children were in one room playing on the floor, while their mother was working in the next. His sister had taken hold of his penis and played with it, at the same time telling him incomprehensible stories about his Nanya, as though by way of explanation. His Nanya, she said, used to do the same thing with all kinds of people—for instance, with the gardener: she used to stand him on his head, and then take hold of his genitals" (164). The same scene takes place in *C.*: "She wraps her arm around him, pulls him to his feet and, still kneeling beside him, yanks his trousers down around his legs. He wriggles as she pulls the pants beneath these down as well. 'Aha!' she

though, it is surprising. That's because, in Freud's view, this most famous of primal scenes likely never happened. "Scenes from early infancy," Freud writes, "are not reproductions of real occurrences, to which it is possible to ascribe an influence over the course of the patient's later life and over the formation of his symptoms. It considers them rather as products of the imagination which find their instigation in mature life" (192). "There is surely no need any longer to doubt," he concludes, "that what we are dealing with is only a phantasy" (203). Yet in *C.* (a text certainly well versed in poststructuralist responses to the Wolf Man's case history[44]) the event, triply mediated by a series of metaphors that allow the encounter to be missed, nevertheless takes place. How can we explain this unfaithfully literal account of the Wolf Man's primal scene?

The answer to this question should help us answer a larger, more overarching one: what is the Wolf Man doing in *C.* at all? And, once there, why is he subsequently erased? Although the Wolf Man was mentioned in some (but hardly all) reviews of McCarthy's novel, there is no explicit reference in either the narrative or its paratexts (the jacket copy, for instance) to Pankeieff, Freud, or psychoanalysis (in a book so obsessed with animals and the natural sciences, there aren't even any wolves). The historical resonance between Serge and Sergei is entirely encrypted. It thus takes a literal staging of the most famous scene of Sergei's life—which is also the most famously fictionalized scene of psychoanalysis—to bring Serge's namesake to the surface. It would be easy to say that this concrete irruption of the primal scene represents some kind of return of the repressed, only we have to specify what, exactly, has returned. It is not hard to do so: what has returned, of course, is history.

The flattening of historical experience into synchronic connection that I described in the previous section becomes even more literal in the novel's odd elision of its relation to the Wolf Man. Yet the appearance of the primal scene works as a complex way of letting history back in: first, by making manifest the novel's relation to this well-known case history; and second, by insisting on the historical reality of the one scene that Freud did *not* think constituted a properly historical part of the "History of an Infantile Neurosis."

---

shouts in triumph. 'Now to telegraph the Admiralty'. Holding him in place, she begins tapping his little penis with her index finger. ' "Dear Sir: Please send reinforcements" ', *tap tap tap*. … 'Stop it!' Serge shouts. 'Why? I've seen Miss Hubbard do it. She did it with the man from Lydium' " (22).

[44] McCarthy's self-aware use of literary theory presents its own interpretive dilemmas. It is hopeless (and probably pointless) to track all of McCarthy's theoretical references—at the same time, it would probably be remiss not to mention *C.*'s especially large debts to Deleuze and Guattari's essay "One or Several Wolves" and Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonomy*. In her review of *C.*, Kushner details some of the other references that saturate the book: "Despite coming from such disparate lines and tendencies, some of the literary and philosophical references work wonderfully, as when Serge feels the same elation Blanchot once did as he faces a firing squad, only to become indignant—a moment of true hilarity—when the soldiers lower their rifles, having just heard that the war is over. Elsewhere, they're more distracting. Some of the POW scenes are too reminiscent of Žižek's Siberian-prison gags. The name of the family estate, Versoie, similar to Versailles, is more importantly a Derridean word, from his essay 'Un Ver à soie' (A Silkworm of One's Own). Serge's rotten sun, seen in flight, is of course Bataille's. And McCarthy's transposing of insect/incest is the accidental anagram discussed in Derrida's essay 'Typewriter Ribbon.' These that I list are merely a glimpse: This book is loaded like an Alexandrian library, with a curious eagerness to leave its magnificent stack of sources showing" ("Into Thin Air"). Claybaugh, for her part, is less charitable: "Eloquently and sometimes wittily written, the reports [McCarthy's previous avant-garde writings that set the stage for *C.*] nonetheless read like the seminar papers of a graduate student who has gotten in over his head" ("McC," 172).

Having obscured its historical referent (the Wolf Man himself), *C.* returns to the scene of its crime, staging as historically real the one thing that *isn't* real in Freud's case history, as if to acknowledge in reverse the fact that it has otherwise made unreal—or simply unreadable—the actual historical grounds of its story.

So: the primal scene. But: why the Wolf Man? There is one last detail of the case that bears mentioning: despite Freud's explicit focus on the infantile nature of the neurosis and thus on the issue of personal fantasy rather than personal history, commentators have consistently remarked on the case's uncanny relation to the grand narratives of twentieth-century history. In his introduction to the excerpt of "Infantile Neurosis" in *The Freud Reader*, Peter Gay cannot help concluding his remarks with a dramatic flourish:

> There is still more drama to the case than this. On June 28 1914, on a hot Viennese Sunday, the Wolf Man, about to conclude his treatment, took a long walk and mused on the analysis that had dominated and changed his life for over four years. He felt well, was about to marry. As he returned to his rooms, the maid presented him with extra editions of the afternoon newspaper featuring screaming headlines: the Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the Archduchess had been assassinated at Sarajevo. A little more than a month later, the world was at war.[45]

Gay's perplexingly literary retelling—the especially "hot" day, the "long" and "mus[ing]" walk, the "screaming" headlines of the paper—ultimately leads to a different kind of "drama": the world-historical drama of World War I. If the passage's extraneous personal details seem to protest a little too strongly for the Wolf Man's individuality (his substance not just as a patient but as a character), they do so in order to highlight his transformation from analysand to universal symbol of an entire historical conjuncture.

Again and again, critics have taken the Wolf Man's life as an allegory for the life of the twentieth century. Introducing the Wolf Man's memoirs, Muriel Gardiner notes that "the Wolf-Man's life story reflects the changing history of the last eighty years, through changing epochs and contrasting circumstances."[46] She goes on to make sure her meaning is not misunderstood: "Although the Wolf-Man, when not overwhelmed by personal problems, was occupied just keeping alive and had little direct interest in world events, they could not but affect his life and color his thinking and activities" (vi). Whether or not you are interested in history, history is interested in you. The mere fact of living through history is here imagined as a way of recording it. Even Peter Brooks reads the Wolf Man's case as a confrontation between the individual and the historical:

> He lived through the individual and collective disasters of two world wars, the Bolshevik Revolution in his native Russia, the Nazi *Anschluss*, economic inflation, devaluation, and destitution, his wife's

[45] Peter Gay, Introduction to "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), 401.
[46] Murial Gardiner, introduction to *The Wolf-Man by the Wolf-Man*, ed. Muriel Gardner (New York: Basic Books, 1971), v.

> suicide, the demise of his two principal psychoanalysts, Freud and Ruth Mack Brunswick, and the persistence to the end of evident obsessional traits. The outer history of the Wolf Man was all too closely intertwined with the cataclysmic political history of twentieth-century Europe; while his inner history, as we know from Freud's case history, remained resolutely fixed on the past, caught in the labyrinth of personal disasters that Freud traces back to his patient's second year. The place of this inner story, this "history of an infantile neurosis," within the context of the experience of modern political and social history already suggests an elusive and particularly "modernist" issue of meaning and understanding. In particular, the case history within history, and personal history within the case history, pose forcefully major questions about the nature of historical and narrative understanding.[47]

The significance of the Wolf Man's case, then, is that it raises the question of how to situate the individual in history. But the particular character of the Wolf Man gives the question a further twist: the real issue he brings to the surface is how to situate the individual in a history that (in Gardiner's words) he has "little direct interest in." The Wolf Man's "fixation" on the personal over the historical, his unconcern for the epochal fires burning all around him, puts pressure on what it means to call his (or anyone else's) life "intertwined with" the history of the twentieth century. It poses the problem of how "historical" a life can be that isn't itself aware of history.

And this, finally, is the question we have been asking all along about Serge Carrefax as a character and about *C.* as a whole: to what extent can a text oblivious of history be imbued with historical meaning? What Brooks calls "the cataclysmic political history of Europe" is certainly present in *C.*, but it's hardly registered as cataclysmic, and barely as history. Rather, what *C.* seems to show us is not the specificity of political history but the tension between history and individuality, and the process by which individuals are retroactively subsumed by larger historical events. The first half of the novel hews closely to the events of the Wolf Man's early life. With the intrusion of the war, however, Serge departs from his erstwhile referent—he goes off to fight in the war, to become addicted to heroin in post-war London, to travel to Egypt in the employ of the British empire, and to die in 1922 (while Pankeieff, as Brooks recounts, "found employment as an insurance agent and lived a petit-bourgeois existence, complete with Sunday painting, in a state of relative peace" [266]). If the Wolf Man embodies the tension between "living through" history and registering it, then *C.*'s decision to dispatch with the historical record is really an acknowledgement of the ways that historical narratives inevitably displace individual affects. The novel depicts the process of decoupling the personal from the historical, suggesting that reading individuals as stand-ins for history necessarily entails ceasing to see them as individuals. Ultimately, then, the difference between the historical Sergei and the fictional Serge—the very difference that makes *C.* a historical novel—boils down to a single letter (though not the letter you might think). The historical force of *C.* is rooted not in the Wolf Man's history but in the disappearance, from that history, of the "i."

[47] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 265.

Tangled Webs

The Wolf Man's cryptic presence in McCarthy's novel adds a different historical dimension to its account of the contemporary—a hidden context that secretly grounds the novel's excessive metaphors of synchrony. But a closer reading of Serge's primal scene suggests something else: that historical context (if not consciousness) has been there from the start. The figures of connection that seemed to blur historical difference also turn out to embody it. In the primal scene, we found three of the novel's most repeated metaphors inexplicably stacked on top of one another. First Serge thinks the scene is like a film, then a makeshift machine, then an insect. What can these figures possibly have in common? To start, they all come from Serge's immediate surroundings. The amateur inventions of his father explain his sense of the "contraption"; his mother's silkworms and his sister's interest in the natural sciences explain the image of the "insect's thorax."[48] As for the film projector, that, too, has just made its debut on the grounds of Versoie. An old friend of Simeon's appears bearing gifts, specifically, "a Projecting Kinetoscope":

> Widsun sets it up on the Mulberry Lawn and projects onto a bedsheet strung between two trees … . Every night they get to watch Kinetoscope projections. It becomes a ritual: as soon as supper's over the bedsheet's hauled up, chairs laid out and reel after reel fed into the mechanism … . Each time Widsun racks up a new spool and starts running it, Serge feels a rush of anticipation run through the cogs and sprockets of his body; his mind merges with the bright bedsheet, lit up with the possibilities of what might dance across it. (45-46)

The sense of the sheet as a film screen on which the primal scene is projected clearly comes from the family "ritual" of watching the Kinetoscope. But the Kinetoscope is such a "spectacle" in the first place because it is fundamentally, historically new (45). The novel's relentless interconnection—even here, Serge's mind "merges" with the screen—gives way to a very particular historical grounding: Edison invented the Kinetoscope in the mid-1890s, so when it appears in Versoie in 1911, it remains an essentially novel technology. Before film emerges on the historical scene, Serge can't possibly use the language of film projection to describe the immediacy of his moment. When Serge describes the primal scene as being "like a film," then, he is not just invoking one more mode of connection; he is also revealing that the very metaphors of connection through which Serge sees the world are themselves historically conditioned.

C.'s seemingly timeless images of synchrony thus have their own historical conditions. The connectedness that makes up the contemporary may appear to dissolve historical depth, but the language of interconnection is born along by its own irreducible histories. The images of static, sound, and signal that reverberate throughout the novel, for

[48] In the climactic scene of Serge's fever dream, the giant insect-radio hybrid ultimately becomes "Incest-Radio" suggesting the further psychoanalytic significance of the insect imagery that buzzes throughout the book.

instance, emanate from the radio, which dates almost exactly to the year Serge was born. When Serge thinks that "things—here, solid, tangible—are somehow made more present by the tinny sound still spilling from the headphones" (66), he is right in more ways than one: the "tinny sound" of the radio—and the concepts of connection that its transmissions make possible—is the very thing that makes his present both "solid" and historically specific. Serge's here and now, which constantly seems to be slipping away into timeless presence, is in fact held together by an especially timely mode of historical experience. The use of the radio to overcode everyday life—Sophie's death is "like a signal, dispersed" (83); his nurse Tania "emits a low, guttural sound, of the same character and pitch as low-frequency radio waves" (113)—thus takes on a new significance: it is the mark of Serge's confrontation with the historically new.

In fact, almost all the language *C.* uses to capture synchrony is rooted in technological changes from the beginning of the twentieth century. When Serge imagines "a new age of … geometry and connectedness" or when he dreams of "becom[ing] geometry himself," his geometric consciousness emerges directly out of the aerial photography of World War I (159). His replacement of human relations with "lines and vectors, … vertical and horizontal axes" only becomes possible with flight (188). After the war, yet another technological innovation emerges to change Serge's sense of contemporary space: "Versoie seems smaller, and the world seems smaller, seems like a model of the world. It's not just that the distance between, say, here and Lydium has shrunk (and done so almost exponentially thanks to the motor car his father's purchased and now lets him drive whenever he feels like an outing)" (193). Even within the novel, the car marks a crucial transformation. The very first line of *C.* describes Dr. Learmont as he "rocks and jolts on the front seat of a trap as it descends the lightly sloping path of Versoie House. He has sore buttocks: the seat's hard and uncushioned" (3). The "rocking" and "jolting" movement of the carriage underscores a journey that is arduous and drawn out. Serge's sudden access to the automobile changes everything.[49] The jolts are smoothed out, the "click and shuffle of the horse's hooves on gravel" become the mechanical sounds of horsepower, the scenic landscape visible from the carriage turns to a blur, and time goes so fast that it appears to stop altogether. The car transforms Dr. Learmont's loping journey, palpable movement, and heightened bodily experience (those sore buttocks) into its opposite, an entirely new sense of immediacy, interconnection, and stasis: "Summoning up with his right foot a roar of snarling teeth and whirring cylinders, feeling beneath his hips the force of however many horses surging forwards, he watches the hedgerows run together till they blur into a tunnel of green speed. As this streaks by and the horizon accelerates towards him, it seems that he himself has become still" (194). The car blurs the landscape into stillness. The airplane flattens it into geometry. The radio disperses it into universal, un-individuated signal. But in all these cases, the flattening or dissolving of present time emerges out of particular historical conditions. The timelessness of Serge's present is only made possible by the technological changes that, marking the present off from the past, also make it timely.

---

[49] Enda Duffy sees the car as the defining technology of the century: "Access to new speeds, whether on a roller-coaster, airplane, but especially with the automobile, has been the most empowering and excruciating new experience for people everywhere in twentieth-century modernity" (*The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2009], 1).

In describing Serge's ahistorical experience of the present, *C.* illuminates the historicity of synchrony. Indeed, the novel's very interest in synchronic connection turns out to be a product of the historical circumstances it's describing. As Michael North suggests (bringing together the arguments of Friedrich Kittler, James Chandler, and others), the turn of the twentieth century gives rise not just to new metaphors for synchrony but to a new understanding of the concept itself: "In the shift from 1800 to 1900 the notion of temporal synchronicity comes to have a significance different from any it might have had for the Romantics. … As connections along the network become instantaneous, time and space are annihilated: immediacy means that everything is potentially present and close and that the time that used to separate dispersed places and different eras has been erased."[50] For North, the "ahistoricity of the present" (424)—its preference for the arbitrariness of individual years over the explanatory power of historical periods—is less a categorical quality than a specific result of the technological transformations that separate the twentieth century from the nineteenth:

> In a time when it was no longer a miracle for people in widely separated areas of the world to have the same ideas, to see the same images, to hear or speak the same words, simultaneity no longer seemed to require much explanation. The quasi-mystical quality that attaches to "the spirit of the age" reflects a time in which widespread uniformity was still a marvel: in 1800 the possibilities for simultaneous apprehension were limited indeed. By 1900 concepts like "the spirit of the age" gave a name to a quality so ubiquitous that it could easily go nameless. Yet it was also difficult to break free of the immediate so as to see it as something that had in fact been achieved. (423)

The concept of a coherent present becomes so natural by the dawn of the twentieth century that it is no longer needed as a concept. Today, contemporariness is not an idea to contemplate but the unspoken, ever-present grounds of everyday life. The notion of a shared historical present was once so unfamiliar that it had to be painstakingly elaborated. Now the experience of contemporary interconnectedness is so widespread that it tends not to appear to have anything to do with history at all.

This context quite neatly accounts for *C.*'s content. What it doesn't entirely explain is the novel's form. In *C.*'s account of contemporariness, what happens to *our* contemporary—to the divided time and distanced perspective that is supposedly "necessary" to the historical novel? A similar question haunts North's argument, which runs up against the problem Jameson first warned us about: how to determine whose contemporary "our contemporary" is supposed to be. North argues that the beginning of the twentieth century marks the end of one version of historical consciousness, when the ubiquity of interconnection supplants the concept of coherent or totalizable historical periods. But North's argument has its own historical coordinates: the present he's talking about comes about one hundred years after the present into which synchrony (and Serge,

[50] Michael North, "Virtual Histories: The Year as Literary Period," in "Periodization Cutting up the Past," special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* 62.4 (December 2001): 419-420.

too) is born. As North asserts, "Our contemporary tendency to think in terms of synchronic moments"—the replacement of the totality of the age with the arbitrariness of the individual year—is also "peculiar to the era of Y2K" (423, 422). This is a peculiar claim. Can the repudiation of eras really be thought of *as* an era? And if it can, what makes that era uniquely contemporary? In fact, the contemporariness on which North's argument is premised (the specificity of the "era of Y2K") breaks apart. He himself shows that "our contemporary" isn't unique in its attachment to synchrony; the conditions for that were laid a hundred odd years earlier. But the paradoxical formulation of the "era of Y2K"—which does not subscribe to the idea of eras, and is not specific to Y2K—brings something else to the surface. While North's focus on the epochal changes that distinguish 1800 from 1900 highlights their significance as individual years, the continuity that connects 1900 and 2000 gives rise to a different concept: it replaces the "invisible immediacy" (425) of the discrete year with the long history of the century.

The shared sense of ahistoricity that relates 1900 and Y2K paradoxically produces the historical concept of the century. In this way, the unstable referent and indefinite boundaries that undermine North's use of the phrase "our contemporary" do not dissolve its historical urgency. Rather, they resituate it in the context of the twentieth century as a whole. The category of the century is precisely what allows us to understand both the context and the consequences of synchronic consciousness, to track it from its birth in the media technologies of the early twentieth century to its vital role in the mediasphere of the early twenty-first. And the century, finally, is the invisible structuring principle of *C.* as well. It is the concept that mediates between the novel's depiction of synchrony and the implicit historical perspective of its generic form.

There is, as I suggested at the outset, no overt account in *C.* of the present from which history is observed. That doesn't mean that the present never appears—just that when it does, it can only take the form of an unauthorized, perhaps intolerable, anachronism. The language of technology that suffuses *C.*—from Dr. Learmont's "trap" to the mechanics of early film projection to the engines of turn-of-the-century fighter jets—is fully (almost fanatically) proper to its historical moment. As such, much of the novel's descriptive language cannot help but feel alien to everyone but the avid collector of early-century telegraphs. Every once in a while, though, a description strikes a different note. Consider this exchange between Dr. Learmont and Simeon Carrefax, on the occasion of Serge's birth:

> "It took a while, but he came calmly in the end. He had a caul."
> "Had a—what? A cold?"
> "A caul. A veil around his head: a kind of web. It's meant to bring good luck—especially to sailors.
> "Sailors? I tell you, Doctor: get this damned thing working and they won't need luck. There'll be a web around the world for them to send their signals down." (13)

Simeon's bad hearing and short attention span carry him from Serge's caul to Marconi's oceanic experiments in wireless telegraphy (which took place in the late-1890s) to the "web" of communication that Simeon predicts will soon circle the world. Of course, he will

be right, and in a rather terminologically precise way: there *is* now a "web around the world"—or, to use the properly contemporary nomenclature, a worldwide web.

This point is sure to elicit some groans. It certainly feels a bit unseemly. But that's part of my point. The anachronism of reading our present experience of the internet onto Simeon's stray metaphor for early wireless technology is almost too much to bear; indeed, some readers may prefer not to bear it, and to insist instead that one must read the novel on its own historical terms. The problem is that these *are* the novel's terms. This is the "necessary anachronism" of the historical novel, the consequences of a historicist sensibility that, as Chandler reminds us, cannot help but "produce two historical situations"—the historical scene and the scene of historical writing.[51] The danger of the incongruous, improper perspective is always in play when one is looking back at the past from the present. I happen to think the mention of the "web around the world" is a knowing wink on McCarthy's part, but it doesn't really matter either way. The point, rather, is that the phrase contains the unauthorized possibility of this future historical meaning, whether the novel means it to or not—and that such seemingly illogical but also inexorable evocations of a discontinuous contemporary are the risk on which the historical novel is founded.

The anachronistic presence of our contemporary in *C.*'s seemingly circumscribed past is thus built in to the narrative from the beginning. The emphatic emptiness of Serge's historical perspective is the very thing that reasserts our own. Our position as distanced readers is exposed at precisely the moment that our understanding jars with Serge's. To say, as I said earlier, that Serge misses the historical significance of the Egyptian revolution is also to silently acknowledge our own knowing perspective on history—our knowledge that there was something there to be missed. Though *C.* never conscripts us in the way *The French Lieutenant's Woman* does, it cannot help but rely on our distance from the past as a corrective to everything that Serge can't see. The incursion of our historical awareness is an indispensible—and unavoidably anachronistic—part of grasping the lack of self-consciousness that makes Serge so perfectly, and permanently, part of his contemporary. If, with Fowles, we saw that one needs contemporaries to have a contemporary, in *C.*, we discover that having a contemporary is the very thing that allows us to understand the contemporaries—and the contemporariness—of the past.

The anachronistic tension between our perspective and Serge's may finally be identified by a more specific label: the century. With the intrusion of anachronism, we glimpse the twentieth century as a whole, from the birth of radio to its afterlife in the web. North complains that media historians like Kittler are so immersed in the ideas of synchrony and immediacy that they fail to read the early twentieth century as a historical effect. *C.*, however, situates it as a historical cause. Anachronism is the very thing that conjures history, bringing together past and present not just in the form of the analogical echo but also as the two poles of a century in which the possibilities of synchronic thought are rooted in the evolution of wireless media. The concept of the century becomes visible only in the anachronism that allows us to imagine ourselves uncannily predicted in the life of the past, and thus to see the period we call "contemporary" as the historical consequence of a prior moment that once went by the same name.

---

[51] Chandler, *England in 1819*, 37.

We Have Never Been Contemporary

Agamben is one of the few thinkers who has tackled the contemporary as a conceptual (rather than a solely historical) problem. But even he seems overwhelmed by the task. The question posed by the title of his essay—"What Is the Contemporary?"—gives way to an unwieldy number of answers: "Contemporariness is, then, a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it"; "The contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time"; "To perceive, in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot—this is what it means to be contemporary"; "To be contemporary means in this sense to return to a present where we have never been."[52] As Agamben demonstrates, the contemporary can be a historical "relationship," or a person, or a perception, or an act. Amidst these discontinuous choices, Agamben's constant rephrasing seems only to point to the inexorable drift that is the one constant in our attempt to catch hold of the contemporary.

But Agamben's wayward definitions make a point of their own: the disjointedness of these various accounts of the contemporary is captured by the word itself. The contemporary's different syntactic functions (person, period, relation) are already present in the discontinuity that is inscribed in contemporary time. The disjuncture that is first manifest in Agamben's struggle to define the term ultimately points to the anachronism of the contemporary itself. Despite what many critics continue to suggest, the contemporary is not in the end about novelty, homogeneity, or synchronicity—it is, on the contrary, a mode of "disjunction," "disconnection," and "anachronism" (Agamben, 40-41). Anachronism may mark the unseemly intrusion, into history, of the contemporary. But it also reveals the historical division that, persisting *in* the contemporary, makes history possible.

The historical novels of Fowles and McCarthy disclose the historicity of our anachronous contemporary. For both authors, the question of what is properly contemporary can only be answered by taking seriously what seems historically improper—by attending to what doesn't belong. In *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, it is the entire milieu of the 1960s that seems out of place in a contemporary that has already drifted into the twenty-first century. In *C.*, on the other hand, it is our twenty-first-century present that encroaches on the past, opening the "our" of our contemporary to the structure of the century as a whole. In both cases, we see how the contemporary is constitutively out of place. Yet these novels suggest that the disjunction of the contemporary, its inexorable drift and intolerable anachronism, is the very thing that allows it to mediate between presentism and antiquarianism, between immediacy and history. Anachronism both asserts and disrespects historical difference; it calls the periodic lines of history into being at the same time as it calls them into question. Capturing the irresolvable tensions that set history in motion—between past and present, break and continuity, analogy and chronology—anachronism is the error that shapes the era of the contemporary. It is the mistake that makes us historical.

---

[52] Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?," 41, 45, 46, 52.

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. "What Is the Contemporary?" In *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, translated by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, 39-54. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

All the President's Men. Dir. Alan Pakula. Warner Brothers, 1976.

American Psycho. Dir. Mary Harron. Lions Gate Films, 2000.

Anderson, Perry. *The Origins of Postmodernity*. London: Verso, 2002.

Apter, Emily and Elaine Freedgood. Afterword to "The Way We Read Now," edited by Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best with Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood. Special issue, *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009): 139-146.

Aravamudan, Srinivas "The Return of Anachronism." In "Periodization Cutting up the Past." Special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* 62.4 (December 2001): 331-353.

Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*. Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition. Translated by Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953.

Balasopoulos, Antonis. "Ghosts of the Future: Marxism, Deconstruction, and the Afterlife of Utopia." *Theory and Event* 12.3 (2009). doi: 10.1353/tae.0.0078.

Barthes, Roland. "The Reality Effect." In *The Novel: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory, 1900-2000*, edited by Dorothy J. Hale, 229-234. Malden: Blackwell, 2006.

Baucom, Ian. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999.

———. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." In *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zohn, edited by Hannah Arendt, 253-264. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

Berlant, Lauren. "Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event." *American Literary History* 20.4 (Winter 2008): 845-860. doi:10.1093/alh/ajn039.

Bertens, Hans. *The Idea of the Postmodern: A History*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Bérubé, Michael. "Race and Modernity in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*." In *The Holodeck in the Garden: Science and Contemporary American Fiction*, edited by Peter Freese and Charles B. Harris, 163-178. Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2004.

Best, Stephen. *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Best, Stephen and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." In "The Way We Read Now," edited by Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best with Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood. Special issue, *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009): 1-21.

Bewes, Timothy. *Cynicism and Postmodernity*. London: Verso, 1997.

Biel, Steven. "Lewis Allen's 'Only Yesterday' and the Idea of the Decade." *Journal of American Studies* 25.2 (August 1991): 259-266. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27555487.

Blade Runner. Dir. Ridley Scott. Warner Brothers, 1982.

Blood Simple. Dir. Joel Coen. River Road Productions, 1984.

Body Heat. Dir. Lawrence Kasdan. Warner Brothers, 1981.

Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.

Cain, James M. *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. New York: Vintage Crime, 1992.

Callinicos, Alex. *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990.

Chabon, Michael. *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2007.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Chandler, James. *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

Chandra, Vikram. *Sacred Games*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2007.

Chinatown. Dir. Roman Polanski. Paramount, 1974.

Christensen, Jerome. *Romanticism at the End of History*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

Claybaugh, Amanda. "McC." Review of *C.*, by Tom McCarthy. *n+1*, number 11, spring 2011: 169-180.

Coetzee, J.M. *Diary of a Bad Year*. New York: Viking, 2007.

Cohen, Ralph. "Do Postmodern Genres Exist?" In *Postmodern Genres*, edited by Marjorie Perloff, 11-27. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.

Conard, Mark T., ed. *The Philosophy of Neo-Noir*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007.

Copjec, Joan. *Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2004.

———. "The Phenomenal Nonphenomenal: Private Space in *Film Noir*." In *Shades of Noir*, edited by Joan Copjec, 167-198. London: Verso, 1993.

Croce, Benedetto. *History: Its Theory and Practice*. Translated by Douglas Ainslie. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923.

Dee, Jonathan. "Speed of Light in a Vacuum: Tom McCarthy's historical avant-garde." Review of *C.*, by Tom McCarthy. *Harper's Magazine*, September 2010: 68-73.

Detour. Dir. Edgar G. Ulmer. Producers Releasing Corporation, 1946.

Derrida, Jacques. "The Law of Genre." In *Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge, 221-252. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Dimock, Wai Chee. "Introduction: Genres as Fields of Knowledge." In "Remapping Genre," edited by Wai Chee Dimock and Bruce Robbins. Special issue of *PMLA* 122.5 (October 2007): 1377-1388.

———. *Through Other Continents: American Literature Across Deep Time*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

D.O.A. Dir. Rudolph Maté. United Artists, 1949.

Doane, Mary Ann. *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.

Double Indemnity. Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount, 1944.

Dubey, Madhu. *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Duffy, Enda. *The Speed Handbook: Velocity, Pleasure, Modernism*. Durham: Duke University

Press, 2009.

Eagleton, Terry. *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.

Elias, Amy J. *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

Ellis, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. New York: Vintage, 1991.

———. *Glamorama*. New York: Vintage, 1998.

English, Daylanne K. "The Modern in the Postmodern: Walter Mosley, Barbara Neely, and the Politics of Contemporary African-American Detective Fiction." *American Literary History* 18.4 (Winter 2006): 772-796. doi:10.1093/alh/ajl018.

Felman, Shoshana. "Turning the Screw of Interpretation." *Yale French Studies* 52 (1975): 94-207. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2930436.

Fenves, Peter. "Out of the Blue: Secrecy, Radical Evil, and the Crypt of Faith." In *Futures of Jacques Derrida*, edited by Richard Rand, 99-129. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.

Findlay, Laura. "Mary Harron's *American Psycho*: Female Subversion or Perspective?" In *Sub/versions: Cultural Status, Genre and Critique*, edited by Pauline MacPherson et. al., 79-87. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008.

Fowles, John. *The French Lieutenant's Woman*. Boston: Back Bay Books, 1969.

François, Anne-Lise. *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008.

Freud, Sigmund. "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis." In *The Wolf-Man by the Wolf-man*, edited by Muriel Gardner, 153-262. New York: Basic Books, 1971.

Fritzsche, Peter. *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Frow, John. " 'Reproducibles, Rubrics, Everything You Need': Genre Theory Today." In "Remapping Genre," edited by Wai Chee Dimock and Bruce Robbins. Special issue of *PMLA* 122.5 (October 2007): 1626-1634.

Gallagher, Catherine. "The Rise of Fictionality." In *The Novel, Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, edited by Franco Moretti, 336-363. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Gardiner, Murial. Introduction to *The Wolf-Man by the Wolf-Man*, edited by Muriel

Gardner, v-vii. New York: Basic Books, 1971.

Gay, Peter. Introduction to "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis." In *The Freud Reader*, edited by Peter Gay, 400-401. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989.

Glamorama. Dir. Mary Harron. Lions Gate Films, 2000.

The Good German. Dir. Steven Soderbergh. Warner Brothers, 2006.

Goodman, Kevis. *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Griffin, Robert J. "The Age of 'The Age of' Is Over: Johnson and New Versions of the Late Eighteenth Century." In "Periodization Cutting up the Past." Special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* 62.4 (December 2001): 377-391.

Harootunian, Harry. "Remembering the Historical Present." *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Spring 2007): 471-494. doi: 10.1086/513523.

———. *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

Hoberman, J. "Dark Night Returns." Review of *Sin City*, Dimension Films. *Village Voice*, March 22, 2005. http://www.villagevoice.com/2005-03-22/film/dark-night-returns.

Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Hungerford, Amy. "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary." *American Literary History* 20.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2008): 410-419. doi:10.1093/alh/ajm044

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

Hutner, Gordon. "Historicizing the Contemporary: A Response to Amy Hungerford." *American Literary History* 20.1-2 (Spring/Summer 2008): 420-424. doi:10.1093/alh/ajm048

Jameson, Fredric. "Afterword: A Note on Literary Realism." In *A Concise Companion to Realism*, edited by Matthew Beaumont, 279-289.West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

———. "The End of Temporality." *Critical Inquiry* 29.4 (Summer 2003): 695-718. doi: 10.1086/377726

———. "Historicism in *The Shining*." In *Signatures of the Visible*, 82-98. New York: Routledge, 1992.

———. *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

———. "Marx's Purloined Letter." In *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx*, edited by Michael Sprinker, 26-67. London: Verso, 1999.

———. "Marxism and Historicism." In *The Ideologies of Theory,* 451-482. London: Verso, 2008.

———. "Periodizing the 60s." In *The Ideologies of Theory*, 482-515. London: Verso, 2008.

———. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981.

———. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

———. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." In *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, 127-144. 1983. Reprint, New York: The New Press, 1998.

———. *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*. London: Verso, 2002.

———. "The Synoptic Chandler." In *Shades of Noir*, edited by Joan Copjec, 33-56. London: Verso, 1993.

———. *Valences of the Dialectic.* London: Verso, 2009.

Kaplan, Amy. *The Social Construction of American Realism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988.

Koselleck, Reinhart. *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Translated by Keith Tribe. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Kozloff, Sarah. *Invisible Storytellers: Voiceover Narration in American Fiction Film*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

Kracauer, Siegfried. "Those Who Wait." In *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, translated

and edited by Thomas Y. Levin, 129-140. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995.

Kushner, Rachel. "Into Thin Air." Review of *C.*, by Tom McCarthy. *Bookforum*, September/October/November 2010: 39.

L.A. Confidential. Dir. Curtis Hanson. Warner Brothers, 1997.

Laura. Dir. Otto Preminger. 20th Century Fox, 1944.

Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume III: From Modernity to Modernism (Towards a Metaphilosophy of Daily Life)*. Translated by Gregory Elliott. London: Verso, 2005.

Levine, George. "The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley." In *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*, edited by Michael McKeon, 613-631. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.

Lim, Bliss Cua. *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

The Long Goodbye. Dir. Robert Altman. United Artists, 1973.

Lukács, Georg. *The Historical Novel*. Translated by Hannah and Stanley Mitchell. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962.

The Man Who Wasn't There. Dir. Joel Coen. Working Title Films, 2001.

Martin, Richard. *Mean Streets and Raging Bulls: The Legacy of Film Noir in Contemporary American Cinema*. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, 1997.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin, 1976.

McCarthy, Tom. *C.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.

McDonald, Peter D. "The Ethics of Reading and the Question of the Novel: The Challenge of J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year*." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 43.3 (Fall 2010): 483-499. doi: 10.1215/00295132-2010-026

Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Miller, D.A. *The Novel and the Police*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

Miller, Frank. *Frank Miller's Sin City Volume 4: That Yellow Bastard*. Milwaukie: Dark Horse Books, 2005.

Morawski, Stefan. *The Troubles With Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Moretti, Franco. "Clues." In *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*. Revised Edition. Translated by Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller, 130-156. London: Verso, 1988.

———. *Graphs Maps Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History*. London: Verso, 2007.

———. "The Soul and the Harpy: Reflections on the Aims and Methods of Literary Historiography." In *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*. Revised Edition. Translated by Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller, 1-41. London: Verso, 1988.

Naremore, James. *More Than Night: Film Noir In Its Contexts*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Night Moves. Dir. Arthur Penn. Warner Brothers, 1975.

North, Michael. "Virtual Histories: The Year as Literary Period." In "Periodization Cutting up the Past." Special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* 62.4 (December 2001): 409-424.

Ogden, Benjamin H. "The Coming into Being of Literature: How J.M. Coetzee's *Diary of a Bad Year* Thinks through the Novel." *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 43.3 (Fall 2010): 466-482. doi: 10.1215/00295132-2010-025

Out of the Past. Dir. Jacques Tourneur. RKO Pictures, 1947.

Paige, Nicholas D. *Being Interior: Autobiography and the Contradictions of Modernity in Seventeenth-Century France*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.

Perloff, Marjorie. Introduction to *Postmodern Genres*, edited by Marjorie Perloff, 3-10. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988.

Pfeil, Fred. "Home Fires Burning: Family *Noir* in *Blue Velvet* and *Terminator 2*." In *Shades of Noir*, edited by Joan Copjec, 227-260. London: Verso, 1993.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Purloined Letter." In *The Portable Poe*, edited by Philip Van Doren Stern, 439-462. New York: Penguin Books, 1987.

The Postman Always Rings Twice. Dir. Tay Garnett. MGM, 1946.

The Postman Always Rings Twice. Dir. Bob Rafelson. Paramount, 1981.

Postone, Moishe. "The Holocaust and the Trajectory of the Twentieth Century." In

Catastrophe and Meaning: The Holocaust and the Twentieth Century, edited by Moishe Postone & Eric Santner, 81-114. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Porter, Dennis. *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. New York: Perennial Classics, 1966.

———. *Inherent Vice*. New York: Penguin Press, 2009.

Rabinow, Paul. *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

Read, Jason. *The Micropolitics of Capital: Marx and the Prehistory of the Present*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2003.

Reiss, Timothy J. "Perioddity: Considerations on the Geography of Histories." In "Periodization Cutting up the Past." Special issue of *Modern Language Quarterly* 62.4 (December 2001): 425-452.

Robbins, Bruce. "Afterword." In "Remapping Genre," edited by Wai Chee Dimock and Bruce Robbins. Special issue of *PMLA* 122.5 (October 2007): 1644-1651.

Rushing, Robert A. *Resisting Arrest: Detective Fiction and Popular Culture*. New York: Other Press, 2007.

———. "Traveling Detectives: The 'Logic of Arrest' and the Pleasures of (Avoiding) the Real." *Yale French Studies* 108 (2005): 89-101. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4149300.

Schoene, Berthold. "Serial Masculinity: Psychopathology and Oedipal Violence in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*." *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies* 54.2 (Summer 2008): 378-397. doi: 10.1353/mfs.0.0014.

Sikov, Ed. *On Sunset Boulevard: The Life and Times of Billy Wilder*. New York: Hyperion, 1998.

Silverman, Kaja. *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.

Sin City. Dir. Robert Rodriguez. Dimension Films, 2005.

Sobchack, Vivian. "Lounge Time: Postwar Crises and the Chronotope of Film Noir." In *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, edited by Nick Browne, 129-170. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Stewart, Garrett. *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction*.

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

———. *Framed Time: Toward a Postfilmic Cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Sunset Boulevard. Dir. Billy Wilder. Paramount, 1950.

Telotte, J.P. *Voices in the Dark: The Narrative Patterns of Film Noir*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989.

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Poetics of Prose*. Translated by Richard Howard. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977.

Toth, Josh, and Neil Brooks. "Introduction: A Wake and Renewed?" In *The Mourning After: Attending the Wake of Postmodernism*, edited by Josh Toth and Neil Brooks, 1-14. New York: Rodopi Press, 2007.

Turim, Maureen. *Flashbacks in Film: Memory & History*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

The Two Jakes. Dir. Jack Nicholson. Paramount, 1990.

Vernet, Marc. "*Film Noir* on the Edge of Doom." In *Shades of Noir*, edited by Joan Copjec, 1-32. London: Verso, 1993.

Wegner, Phillip E. *Life Between Two Deaths, 1989-2001: U.S. Culture in the Long Nineties*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

White, Hayden. "The Burden of History." In *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, 27-50. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

Whitehead, Colson. *The Intuitionist.* New York: Anchor Books, 1999.

Wolf-Man, The. "The Memoirs of the Wolf-Man." In *The Wolf-Man by the Wolf-Man*, edited by Muriel Gardner, 3-132. New York: Basic Books, 1971.

Wood, James. "The Floating Library: What Can't the Novelist David Mitchell Do?" Review of *The Thousand Autumns of Jacob de Zoet*, by David Mitchell. *The New Yorker*, July 5, 2010: 69-73.

Žižek, Slavoj. *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan In Hollywood and Out*. New York: Routledge,1992.

———. *Organs Without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

———. *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991.

———. " 'The Thing That Thinks': The Kantian Background of the *Noir* Subject." In *Shades of Noir*, edited by Joan Copjec, 199-226. London: Verso, 1993.