

CYBERSPATIAL PARADIGMS IN THOMAS PYNCHON'S *THE CRYING OF LOT 49*
AND DON DELILLO'S *WHITE NOISE*

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ABSTRACT

Between the 1960s and 1990s, Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo both registered and attempted to influence the development of a mode of cultural perception organized around computer technologies that we can call a “cyberspatial paradigm.” This cyberspatial worldview involves a dual ontology in which experienced reality is generated by a fundamentally different, hidden one. This way of organizing experience parallels the structure of cyberspace, in which a hidden set of data gives rise to a world that is experienced spatially. This dissertation examines the responses Pynchon and DeLillo mount to their shared perception that American culture is beginning to be organized around this paradigm. Their responses are particularly clear in *The Crying of Lot 49* and *White Noise*, and the dissertation focuses on those texts.

While sharing many similarities in the way in which they respond to the cultural paradigm of cyberspace, Pynchon and DeLillo primarily differ in the degree to which they sense the interactive potential in the cyberspatial paradigm. Pynchon sees American culture as setting the stage for meaningful collaboration between individuals. This interactive potential in Pynchon’s novels involves a search for a way out of the system of simulation and control, which raises the possibility of intervening in the creation of experienced reality in a way that—since it is fundamentally cooperative in nature—skirts the hegemonic demands of a dominant, totalitarian culture. However, this collaboration

comes at the cost of the individual. The collaboration of individuals dissolves into a totalitarian demand for obedience. DeLillo, on the other hand, doesn't see escape from the system of simulation and control as a viable possibility. Neither does he see collaboration along the fringes of society as possible in a culture that has become so adept at absorbing the fringe into the mainstream of corporate profitability. The task for his characters, then, is to find a way to live within the constraints of simulated, virtual reality. In the process, his characters create themselves as individuals, carving out a small pocket of space in which they can create their own universe without giving in to the demands of the system.

The two authors represent opposing impulses that are connected in a cyclical way: Pynchon's impulse creates a collaborative space, but, since this space is inevitably taken over by powerful others, it results in the dissolution of the individual that originally made this collaborative space possible. DeLillo's impulse starts from the end point of the Pynchonian one: the individual has become nothing more than what the marketing departments of corporate America has said it is. By going deeper into this unsettling reality, DeLillo demonstrates how the individual can re-emerge under these circumstances, thereby creating the sorts of individuals capable of engaging in Pynchonian collaboration.

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CHAPTER 1

CYBERSPACE, DUAL ONTOLOGIES, AND THE INTERFACE

Between the 1960s and 1990s, Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo both registered and attempted to influence the development of a mode of cultural perception organized around computer technologies that we can call a “cyberspatial paradigm.” This organizational principle takes computer-human interactions as a model for all experience, and sees the phenomenal world as something generated from a hidden set of data. Pynchon and DeLillo respond to this paradigm in nearly opposite ways. Pynchon tries to find inspiration in the new computer and communications technologies—like the pentagon funded ARPAnet, the forerunner of the modern Internet—emerging in the California of the 1960s. Pynchon’s well-documented familiarity with technological systems and his California experience make it likely that he was aware of at least some of these developments as they took shape. These technologies offered Pynchon a model for a form of decentralized collaboration; they seemed to suggest new forms of collectivity that could counteract the freedom-threatening aspects of those technologies. While he is clearly ambivalent about the success of this endeavor, it nevertheless forms the crux of his response to the cyberspatial system he sees taking shape. As Brian Stonehill has argued, Pynchon’s early novels are “prophecies of cyberspace” in which Pynchon denigrates the binary mode of thought associated with computer technology since it seems to close off the vibrant possibilities that the analog world offers (11). At the same time, however, Stonehill reads Pynchon as also embracing the life-affirming potential that

might be found in the global communications networks that precede the modern Internet: “There's thus a central tension between Pynchon's suspicion of the digital realm and his hinting that the Earth itself is a sentient creature. And this tension is prophetic, since if the planet is growing itself a nervous system, that global neural web might well resemble the Internet” (12). Pynchon senses both doom and the potential for a new form of communication in the technologies that will become cyberspace. While many of Pynchon's novels could be considered, in Stonehill's term, “prophecies of cyberspace,” (11) I focus on *The Crying of Lot 49* in this dissertation because it does a particularly good job of demonstrating the potential disruption to the status quo that a networked group of outsiders could wreak. In this novel, Oedipa moves from her normal, perceptible world towards the hidden information that she perceives as generating the world she experiences. Although her search for the underlying “reality” of the world, for a luminous truth, fails, in her search she becomes involved in a complex process of collaboration. Her attempts to get out of the generated world result in the collaborative generation of another one.

DeLillo, though nearly the same age as Pynchon, writes his major works roughly two decades after Pynchon writes his. In those intervening years, the nascent communication networks of the 1960s become much more entrenched in everyday life. When DeLillo writes *White Noise* in 1985, personal computers—only in their infancy in the 1960s—had begun to further change the way people conduct the business of life. Seeing the ways in which American culture, American corporations, and American technologies had intertwined themselves, DeLillo seems to hold out very little hope that

these technologies can do anything other than entrap humanity in a cycle of purchasing ever-more technologically advanced products; having lost the disruptive potential they have in *Lot 49*, communications systems in *White Noise* tend to be used only to convince people to buy. DeLillo's response to this development of the cyberspatial paradigm, therefore, is to try to find some areas of experience that have not been totally colonized by the system. Rather than exploring the possibilities that emerge when people have unofficial systems of communication they can exploit, DeLillo explores what's left over when the mainstream has absorbed all communication into a lukewarm soup of advertisements designed to preserve brand integrity. His tentative answer is that, when cut off from productive forms of collectivity, the only possible response is to retreat to the individual as the source of creative energy that might stem the flood of the technocorporate system.

While *Lot 49* moves towards collectivity, *White Noise* moves towards individuality. As I will argue, neither author presents his response as an unqualified solution to the encroaching cyber-culture. However, their opposite responses can be seen as forming parts of a whole that better captures the budding cyberspatiality of American culture than either can do alone, and also outlines the shape of a theory that could re-imagine our own twenty-first century orientation towards technological and cyberspatial society.

In the following chapters, I will argue that Pynchon and DeLillo attempt to articulate the ways in which the features of cyberspace are taking shape in American culture between 1966, when Pynchon publishes *Lot 49*, and 1985, when *White Noise* is

released. Each author can see the shape of the cyberspatial paradigm only partially. Each gestures towards one limit of cyberspatial thought. Each also responds to this mode of thought in an attempt to influence its development. For Pynchon, the cyberspatial is bound up with ideas spawned from the revolutionary vibrations emanating from 1960s California. New computer and communications technologies give Pynchon the sense that the world may be on the cusp of discovering a new way of organizing experience in which authoritative central control can be subdued by distributed forms of organization. In contrast to *Lot 49's* Randolph Driblette, who claims to be the solitary projector of a universe (62), Oedipa discovers an alternate vision of reality in which what she experiences is generated by the myriad activities of individuals operating outside the view of the authorities of mainstream culture. This hope is, of course, balanced by an equally forceful sense that the newly formed collectivity that is promised will itself become an authority in need of combatting.

Virtuality, Hyperreality, and the Cyberspatial

Although the term “cyberspace” has since been extended to include nearly any form of interaction between humans and computers, as it was initially described by William Gibson in his novel *Neuromancer* (1984) it designates a specific sort of human/computer relationship:

Cyberspace. A consensual hallucination.... A graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system.

Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light ranged in the nonspace of the mind, clusters and constellations of data. Like city lights, receding. (51)

Gibson's cyberspace is an interface that transforms data into a "graphic representation." This interface makes use of humans' familiarity with spatial systems to enable them to navigate sets of data that are literally "unthinkable." Cyberspace, then, is fundamentally an abstraction, a map, or a simplification of an underlying and decidedly non-human complexity. N. Katherine Hayles describes it as "a level playing field on which humans and computers can meet on equal terms.... Cyberspace is created by transforming a data matrix into a landscape in which narratives can happen" (*Posthuman* 38). This description underscores that cyberspace is a compensation designed to mediate between raw, computer-readable information and the "cooked," humanly-digestible abstraction of that data.

It is this sense of "cyberspace" as a technologically constructed, "consensual hallucination," that simplifies an unthinkable complexity in order to enable humans to think in ways that they otherwise could not that I intend to invoke when I suggest that *The Crying of Lot 49* and *White Noise* exhibit a cyberspace sensibility. The cyberspatial paradigm, though perhaps best understood by analogy to computer technologies, is not solely tied to a Gibsonian cyberspace. As technologies encroach into new territories of experience, the way experience is organized also changes. The cyberspatial paradigm considers all experience to be a manifestation of unthinkably complex, hidden data. What we sense is understood to be an approximation of a very messy, difficult to understand, hidden set of information that somehow generates the physical world of experience. In

the same way that Gibson's cyberspace is a spatial representation generated by the "unthinkable complexity" to which humans have no access, the cyberspatial paradigm imagines the physical world to be formed from underlying information through a process both awe-inspiring and un-specifiable.

Cyberspatiality also involves the perception of a reciprocal relationship between informational and physical realities. As in Gibson's cyberspace, actions taken on the objects of experience create changes in the information that generates the objects upon which we act. While unseen information is the source of the observable objects of experience, those objects are also perceived as connected to the underlying information so that by manipulating the objects one also manipulates the information that gives rise to the objects.

The cyberspatial is related to both Katherine Hayles' notion of "virtuality" as expressed in *How We Became Posthuman*, and Baudrillard's theories of hyperreality. These theories move in opposite directions, and the cyberspatial makes use of both movements in its articulation. We can see, therefore, Hayles and Baudrillard existing in a similar relationship to that of Pynchon and DeLillo. Though moving in opposite directions, they move within the same field, and therefore provide us with a way to see the contours of the field.

Both Hayles and Baudrillard perceive that the culture of the 80s and 90s is one that experiences a fundamental split in reality. For Hayles, culture sees information as cut off from its physical instantiation. As she puts it, information has "lost its body" (2). Baudrillard argues that the culture experiences a split between the real and the simulation

of the real. Both thinkers, however, believe that this is a false split. Hayles argues that information can never be separated from its body, despite the persistent cultural sense that it can be. Baudrillard argues that the simulation has overtaken the real, so that there is no longer a distinction that can be made between the real and the simulation. Instead, we live in a hyperreal in which the simulation seems more real than the original it is supposed to simulate. Baudrillard argues that despite the fact that there is no longer a distinction between real and simulation, the culture nevertheless tries to forget the fact that the real no longer exists by enforcing a false barrier between the two.

This sense of a dual ontology is central to the cyberspatial imagination. Hayles argues that the paradigm of virtuality takes information to be the more important side of the information / body split, and she presents a persuasive critique of this cultural paradigm. Baudrillard argues that the culture focuses all its energy on the physical instantiations of simulations, despite its attempts to maintain a split between the simulation and an essence that would mark a real object as distinct from a simulated one.

In *How We Became Posthuman*, Hayles describes a cultural paradigm developed from the theories of cybernetic researchers like Claude Shannon and Norbert Weiner in the decades after World War Two. This paradigm flows downhill, so to speak, from scientists and information theorists to the culture at large, and also in the opposite direction, moving from fiction and pop-cultural representations to scientific discourses (21).

At its most basic, this paradigm involves a split between information and the material instantiation of information. Hayles argues that “living in a condition of

virtuality implies we participate in the cultural perception that information and materiality are conceptually distinct and that information is in some sense more essential, more important, and more fundamental than materiality” (18). Hayles describes the development of this conceptual split as a story about “how *information lost its body*, that is, how it came to be conceptualized as an entity separate from the material forms in which it is thought to be embedded” (2). The “cultural perception” of virtuality sees information as a completely separate quantity that can be transferred from one “body” to another without a consequent change in the information itself. That is, it can be converted from, say, an electrical signal in a telephone wire into the percussive waves of sound we hear coming out of the telephone earpiece without changing the information itself. While some information might be lost or distorted in transit, the information is essentially the same even though its “body” and the properties of its body have changed drastically.

Furthermore, this paradigm sees information as more important than the body. In an example that Hayles takes as typical of this mode of thought, she cites Hans Moravec’s fantasy of being able to download the information contained in his brain to a computer and thus live forever. “At the end of the operation, the cranial cavity is empty, and the patient, now inhabiting the metallic body of the computer, awakens to find his consciousness exactly the same as it was before” (1). The change from biological body to computer body is seen as incidental to the static nature of the information. Hayles gives many examples of popular representations that seem to support the argument that American culture tends to deny the importance of informational bodies and focuses

instead only on the etherial information that we take to be the “real” essence of the world around us.

Hayles wants to disrupt this cultural paradigm before it takes hold too tightly. She sees the paradigm as damaging for a variety of reasons, and *Posthuman* is an effort to “show what had to be elided, suppressed, and forgotten to make information lose its body” (13). She argues that information is *always* instantiated in some physical form. Furthermore, she argues that if we change information’s body, we also change the information itself. Therefore, she wants to replace this cultural tendency with a conception that sees information and bodies as inextricably linked—what she calls “embodied virtuality.” Hayles’s proposed replacement paradigm sees abstract information and particular physicality as inextricably linked (23).

We might contrast the cultural paradigm that Hayles is trying to intervene against with the one that Baudrillard develops as the Hyperreal. In the paradigm that Hayles describes, invisible information is given intellectual priority over visible bodies. In Baudrillard’s notion of the hyperreal, on the other hand, the visible “body” is all that there is. There is no longer, from his point of view, anything real or essential lurking behind the phenomenal. He describes this within the context of simulations and simulacra, arguing that there has been a “precession of simulacra,” and that simulations have come to replace the real so that “it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore. It is a hyperreal” (2). The simulation precedes and replaces reality.

From Baudrillard’s perspective, we only have access to surfaces, to appearances, but, unlike in Platonism, there are no longer any ideal, informational forms. “It is all of

metaphysics that is lost. No more mirror of being and appearances, of the real and its concept” (2). The appearance of reality becomes reality in the Baudrillardian universe. All we have are observable bodies with no depth, no information supporting them. Baudrillard, reaching a very different conclusion than Hayles does, sees the culture as one that focuses on physical manifestations—simulations—and dispenses with any notion of a real, informational essence behind what we perceive.

One might object at this point that Baudrillard’s simulacrum is in fact informational, not bodily. We might say that, with “reality” melting away in favor of simulation, we experience an informational essence directly in the simulacrum. But we can only speak of informational essences if we assume that there is still an original that the information represents. This is exactly what Baudrillard argues we can no longer do. To see what we experience in the hyperreal as informational is to see it as a representation of an original; the information that constitutes Paris, for example, when replicated in Las Vegas, would be referring back to the Real Paris—something that Baudrillard forbids. If the Las Vegas version of Paris is a simulacrum, it is so because we no longer care about whether or not “Paris” matches up with an ideal, informational version of itself. A simulation is no longer “exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference” (6). If a simulation of Paris is more real to us than the Paris in France, it is precisely because the physical appearance of the simulation is all that matters. The Baudrillardian hyperreal is one that sees only bodies, only surfaces, only the visible, and dispenses with essences. The culture, however, still imagines that there is a difference between the real and the

simulation. Thus, “Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America that is Disneyland.... Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, whereas all of Los Angeles and the America that surrounds it are no longer real, but belong to the hyperreal order and to the order of simulation” (12).

Hayles and Baudrillard look out at the same culture and interpret it in opposite ways. Hayles sees the culture as one that focuses on information at the expense of the material world; Baudrillard sees the culture as one that can no longer sense the informational essence of the world at all. However, both make use of a dual ontology even as they deny the truth of that ontological split. Hayles sees the perceived split as one between information and bodies, and she wants to contest the validity of that split. She wants to reunite information and its body and deny the validity of the dual ontology that she sees operating in the culture. Baudrillard sees the culture’s attempts to enforce a split between the real and the simulation, and claims that despite these efforts, the simulation has come to replace the real. The dual ontology that once divided the real from simulations has broken down. In Platonic terms, we might say that he argues that the ideal forms no longer exist for us, and we only have recourse to the manifestations, the imperfect “copies” for which there are no longer any originals. Or perhaps we might say that in the hyperreal the physical body, the experienced simulation, comes to be the ideal form in the mind of the culture. We interact directly with an ideal form now imagined to be a physical, observable entity.

Both Hayles and Baudrillard argue that the split the culture perceives (either between information and its body or between the real and the simulation) is a false split. I argue here that Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo contribute to a cyberspatial paradigm that refuses to see the world as fundamentally split between information and bodies or the real and the simulation. The cyberspatial paradigm instead sees an intimate relationship between the visible, bodily, experiential realm and the hidden, informational one. The phenomenal, experienced world is perceived as *generated* by the invisible informational world beneath it. And, crucially, the hidden informational realm is influenced by changes in the physical world.

The cyberspatial paradigm does not see information as more important than the bodily instantiation of the information. Information may precede any currently experienced material reality, but it is nevertheless perceived as part of the experience of physical reality. Unlike in Hayles' formulation, information is not more essential than physical bodies; rather, information is an always-hidden aspect of reality that generates what can be experienced of reality. To put it another way, bodies are an observable mode of information, and the hidden information is susceptible to manipulation through actions taken on the physical objects of the observable universe. To act with and on physical bodies is to manipulate the underlying informational world, which in turn affects the physical world it generates. This reciprocal nature is what distinguishes it from Hayles' virtuality. For Hayles, virtuality implies that we see information as more essential, more real than bodies. Cyberspatial imagination involves seeing them as dependent on one another. There would be nothing to experience without the information that generates

experience, but it is only ever bodies that we experience. The translation of information into observable, interactive bodies is in fact essential to the cyberspatial experience. It is precisely because we can experience information as bodies that cyberspace works.

It may sound strange to claim that the cyberspatial paradigm imagines that information precedes physical reality without also giving information intellectual priority. In typical dual ontologies, priority generally implies that one side also has more reality, more direct access to the truth, or is in some other way more essential than the other. Thus the soul is prior to and more essential than the body; Platonic forms are prior to and more essential than the objects of experience. What distinguishes the cyberspatial paradigm from this, however, is that the dual ontology is not strictly enforced. The barrier between bodies and information in Hayles' terms—or between the observed, experienced, phenomenal world and the hidden variables that generate those experiences—is permeable. It is not just that the unseen and informational realm produces the observed experienced one; this would be just a recapitulation of Plato. In cyberspatial thought, the experienced world changes the informational one just as readily as the informational one changes the experienced one. It is a two-way interface rather than a one way influence. This is the paradigm that governs how we interact with our computers, for example. The graphical user interface (GUI) of most modern computers is an abstraction of information that the user neither has access to directly nor really cares about. Most users don't care about pixels, or the magnetically stored ones and zeroes inside the machine; we care about our vacation photos. That is, we care about the visible, perceivable, "body" generated by the unseen information behind the scenes. The body of the computer acts in

some way (typically this action is a mystery to most users) and transforms information into a perceivable body. The GUI similarly abstracts the underlying information stored in the computer and turns it into pixels on a screen. Again we don't typically care about those pixels, we care about the "desktop" that we interact with and periodically feel the need to clean up. True, we largely see information as transferable between different bodies. We can email a photograph from one place to another, compress it, expand it, back it up, transfer it to another computer. But none of this implies a care for the information itself. It would be cold comfort to be told, after the hard drive storing our photographs has crashed, that the information is still stored there if we can't extract it and convert it back into a body that we can interact with.

We can also see this at work in the informational models of the mind that Hayles derides. It is not the case these models see the bodily brain as incidental to the informational mind. Rather, it is the fact that the physical brain can *process* information stored within it that gives rise to what we experience as the mind. The mind isn't physical, but neither is it informational. It is a function of the processing of information. The cyberspatial paradigm therefore makes use of a trinary distinction. There is the physical, observable, bodily aspect to reality, and an informational aspect. These remain from the previous paradigms. But the cyberspatial adds another conceptualization: that of the virtual world. This paradigm sees the phenomenal world, not as bodies or as information, but as a virtual structure formed by the interaction of physical and informational realities.

The cyberspatial understanding can be conceptualized schematically by considering the experience of using a desktop computer. When using a computer, we never perceive information directly. Rather, information stored in the body of the computer is acted upon by that body, and the actions generate an experience we perceive onscreen. The cyberspatial paradigm sees this process played out in all sorts of permutations.

Hayles discusses the fantasy of downloading the information in a brain to a computer and thus transferring our consciousness from one body to another. She sees this as evidence of the culture placing an emphasis on information and neglecting the vast differences between the two bodies. However, Moravec or anyone else who enjoys this fantasy would never say that one could transfer the information from a brain into a paperbound book and achieve the same results. The reconstruction of consciousness from this perspective clearly requires some action to be performed on the information in question.

It is the processing that gives rise to consciousness in a computational model of the mind. That is, there is an intertwining relationship between the body and the information that together generates the experience of being conscious. Changes internal to the body, whether a biological body or an electronic one, also change the information encoded in that body. It is not, as Hayles suggests, that the body is seen as unessential; rather, manipulating the body is seen as the process whereby the information stored in it can be processed and thereby experienced.

Slavoj Žižek discusses this process in terms that straddle psychoanalytic and neurobiological explanations. What we experience as consciousness bursts forth from the neuronal processing of the brain (*Parallax* 210-11). In this formulation, consciousness is not purely informational; it emerges from some activity that happens at the physical level. Those physical changes also change the informational pattern, which in turn can change the physical structure. The emphasis is on the processing of information, not on the information's disembodied existence. We don't experience the physical brain. The hidden insensible information stored in the equally insensible physical brain is processed by the physical brain. That interaction between the physical brain and the information stored there gives rise to the experienced, though non-physical, mind.

It is wrong to say that the culture sees information in the abstract as the essential part of consciousness: it would be akin to saying that when we are in a virtual reality environment, or when we enter into cyberspace, we experience it as informational. It is precisely because we do not experience it as informational that it is useful. We experience it as *spatial*, therefore piggybacking on our embodied experience of physical space so that we can use that physical expertise to compensate for our lack of mastery over the information that underlies what we experience.

This is one aspect of what Marie-Laure Ryan talks about as immersion. Immersion involves forgetting about the signifier, forgetting about the informational underpinnings of what we experience and instead experiencing the phenomenal as if it were real. We forget that what we see refers to a set of numbers stored in a computer and instead respond to it literally. She contrasts this mode of thought with the interactive. This

involves paying attention to the things in the virtual environment as if they are manipulable data. We sense that we can participate in the construction of the computerized environment ("Immersion")

The cyberspatial paradigm is not about forgetting the informational world or forgetting the bodily world. It involves seeing the experienced world as what arises when the physical and informational realities collide. We know, at least abstractly, that when we move to push a button on our computer screen, that physical action has an effect on the information stored in the body of the computer. That information, in turn, is changed by our physical actions, which changing action will change what it is we experience on the computer screen.

And this is the fundamental element of the cyberspatial paradigm: the sense that what we experience is generated by physical processes acting on an unseen informational world. Unlike Hayles's situation in which information and the experienced world are seen as completely split, disconnected, and adrift from one another, the cyberspatial paradigm sees the two as connected at a fundamental level. And unlike her proposed solution in which the information and the bodily experience are inseparable, the cyberspatial paradigm involves a more complex relationship between the two. Rather than an inextricable mingling, the two are still conceived of as separate, but one generates the other, and manipulating one changes the other. By manipulating the physical world we have an effect on the hidden informational one, which in turn changes the experienced world.

This paradigm is at work, for example, in popular contemporary descriptions of the mind and brain. We know, at least on an abstract level, that thinking a thought changes something in our brains; it shifts the balance of chemicals and it sets off cascades of electrical activity. Psychopharmacology supports this idea when it describes depression as an imbalance of neurotransmitters. Taking medication affects the physical (though in this case hidden and unexperienced) brain, which in turn manifests itself as changes in experienced thought. It is not a split between information and the body, as if the brain and mind could be severed, but the information stored in the brain is altered by changing the physical structure of the brain. That is, the drug changes the way that the brain processes the information that is stored there.

As I've mentioned, the paradigm of cyberspatiality was developed between the 60s and 90s, but it required a contemporary perspective in order to discern it. The development of cyberspace as an everyday experience rather than an exotic place to visit and the infection of every facet of modern life by the computer were required before the cyberspatial paradigm could be seen clearly.

Pynchon and DeLillo help to describe this pattern of thought, but each writes from a limited perspective; each can see only part of the paradigm. Although they both describe the relationship between the visible, experienced world and an invisible generative one, they focus on different aspects of the paradigm. Pynchon is intensely interested in what lies beneath the visible, experienced world. DeLillo is concerned with the visible itself. Both, nevertheless, see the world as essentially cyberspatial.

To summarize, there are several key features of the cyberspatial paradigm. Cyberspace is an abstraction of unthinkable complexity. It is experienced as a world, as an environment with dimensionality that can be explored. It therefore requires that the user has familiarity with embodied spatiality in order for the illusion of depth to function. Furthermore, the abstraction of cyberspace is understood as generated by an unseen set of data that is unknowable (by humans) except through the illusion of cyberspace. Finally, cyberspace involves the perception of a complex relationship between hidden information, physical reality, and sensed experience. Manipulating information can influence physical reality, and manipulating physical objects can change informational reality. Those interactions between the informational and the physical in turn generate an experience of virtual space.

Intersection, Intertext, Interface

The preceding sketch of the cyberspatial paradigm will be fleshed out in the remaining chapters of this dissertation. I will argue that Pynchon and DeLillo observe this paradigm as it is taking shape, and they each respond to this development with their fiction. Neither one, however, can clearly see the structure they are attempting to describe. Only by looking at their fiction as parts of a whole can we begin to see the contours of the cyberspatial. To demonstrate that these two authors contribute to a structure that neither one of them can see clearly, I propose a modification to existing theories of literary influence. Since both authors are writing at the same time, and since

they each influence the other, we need a theory that can account for multidirectional, simultaneous, and retrospective influence. I therefore propose that we take the notion of interface rather than influence as a guide.

An interface can be broadly defined as any process that enables multiple systems to exchange information. In computer terms, the user interface, or UI, describes the way in which people interact with their computers. There are, for example, text-based, graphics-based, and touch-based UIs. They all provide a set of tools whereby the human user can give commands to the machine and ways for the machine to send information back to the user. However, interfaces involve more than just the transfer of information. They involve an abstraction or metaphor that enables the human to think about the underlying data in a more familiar way. In Gibson's cyberspace, for example, space becomes the metaphor that lets humans navigate the complex data that hides within the computer systems of the world. In our familiar laptop and desktop computers, the desktop becomes the metaphor we use to navigate the information in our computers.

The reliance on an enabling metaphor to compensate for the human inability to interact directly with information distinguishes it from notions of intertextuality or intersection. An intersection implies a crossing of two or more domains. It does not, however, need an additional metaphor in order for humans to understand it. An intersection is already a metaphor that attempts to govern the merging of multiple domains of thought. We might speak, for example, of the intersection between literature and science. In this mode of thought there is a crossing over of information from one realm to another, but this is imagined to be a relatively autonomous process. Like

intersecting lines or roads, this mode of thought simply registers the overlap of the domains.

Similarly, Kristeva's notion of intertextuality imagines that texts are autonomous. She argues that there are no boundaries to a text, and that the juxtaposition of multiple texts creates new texts. This process happens without agency. In contrast, interfaces involve at least the illusion of agency. As Mark Osteen suggests, intertextuality can only be useful to the critic if we can identify specific precursor texts that the current text references (262n). This stance implicitly recognizes the influence of an agent, whether critic or author, who limits the possible universe of intertexts.

A concept of agency is similarly essential in any interface. I act on the icons of my computer screen; the computer "understands" what I've done and presents an appropriate response. The notion of interface as reliant on agency allows us to think of authors as involved in collaborative projects in a way that intertextuality does not. The work of two authors may intersect or be thought of intertextually without having to imagine that they are contributing to a single idea. But these paradigms make it difficult to imagine a truly bidirectional interaction between authors; their *texts* may be collaborating, but their texts are autonomous, and therefore we do not have anything like influence happening. At best we have a felicitous coincidence of texts that could be understood as a whole. But this suggests a continual intertextuality whereby every text refers to every other text, and it becomes impossible to speak of a real exchange of information between any subset of texts or authors. Without something to inhibit the connections formed by a theory of intertextuality, everything becomes part of the same

text and influence is lost completely. The paradigm of interface, on the other hand, since it relies on the appearance of agency, enables us to unite projects of multiple authors in ways that might create a coherent theme. In short, it allows us to ignore some crossings and overlappings that a concept of intertextuality does not.

There are many authors who could have been included in this study of the cultural shift to a cyberspatial way of interacting with the world. However, I am not presenting a comprehensive study of the culture, instead focusing on the shared project that I discern Pynchon and DeLillo are engaged in. I am not arguing that Pynchon and DeLillo have radically altered the way we all experience reality, or that their works alone constitute strong enough evidence to conclude that the culture at large has shifted in its perceptions. But when we place their texts in an imagined interface we can see the contours of a new paradigm emerge. It does not show that the cultural paradigm has gained widespread acceptance or become the new default mode of thinking, but it does show that Pynchon and DeLillo were thinking about the ways in which American culture was being influenced by the expansion of computer technologies, and it shows that they were engaged in the process of developing new ways to live within that framework.

I will develop the cyberspatial paradigm in the chapters that follow. In chapter two, I outline the moves Pynchon makes in response to the emergence of the cyberspatial paradigm. He articulates the collaborative potential of the cyberspatial. It seems to offer revolutionary possibilities, new ways to interact with people, and new modes of subjectivity. However, Pynchon, even as he demonstrates the potential this mode of thought has for revolutionary action, argues that these possibilities are nevertheless only

temporary at best. Some critics have seen the temporary nature of these possibilities as a beneficial feature, not a bug. But I argue in chapter two that the collaboration he sees as possible—within the existing cyberspatial paradigm or within his attempted modifications to it—isn't good enough from his perspective. Computers and other technologies move too quickly and incorporate too much into the system so that a temporary rebellion against them is ultimately equivalent to no rebellion. The system, aided by technologies, incorporates resistance too quickly to enable the temporary resistance to be of value. The fact that best hope for collaborative resistance within the cyberspatial system is inadequate to the task of overthrowing the system stands as a form of rebellion in *Lot 49*. The failure of collaboration becomes a signal that the cyberspatial paradigm, as he sees it, is broken.

Chapter three outlines DeLillo's moves towards identifying another thread of the cyberspatial paradigm. He takes for granted that traditional forms of collaboration can't work, and tries to move forward from there. Technology is too firmly established in DeLillo's world to allow for the Pynchonian sort of collaborative movement, even on a temporary basis.

Since there is no longer any collectivity possible in the world of *White Noise*, (except perhaps as a refugee or as a consumer) DeLillo explores what's left over, and attempts to rehabilitate the notion of individualism. As John Duvall argues, *White Noise* is a "satiric examination" of the country's "proto-fascist urges" (433). Therefore, individuality, or what Duvall describes as "personal aura" (450), can be seen as an endorsement of fascism and something DeLillo embraces only satirically. I argue,

however, that even as DeLillo satirizes the glorification of “personal aura” as fascistic, he also emphasizes individual creativity as the only way to counteract the fascist tendencies of American culture. As Pynchon’s *Lot 49* suggests, collaboration too often becomes the totalitarianism that it seeks to dethrone; DeLillo therefore attempts to explore another path towards emancipation. He focuses on perspective as a way to counteract the totalizing forces of the culture. *White Noise* is about *Jack’s* experience, and while creativity always implies authority, perspective always implies the existence of *other* perspectives. DeLillo demonstrates the extent to which Jack is implicated in the “proto-fascist urges” of American culture through his acquiescence to the consumer marketing and advertising that constantly bombards him, but he also demonstrates the degree to which Jack is able to stand in the place of authority occupied by those same marketing and advertising forces and become a creator rather than a consumer. Some claim that Jack is just rearranging clichés, not engaging in creative activity as he tells his story. For instance, John Frow argues that Jack lives in a world in which everything that might be said has already been said. When describing the sunsets in the town of Blacksmith, for example, Frow points out that Jack lacks the ability to adequately describe them; however, “[t]he twist here is that the sense of the inadequacy of representation comes not because of the transcendental or uncanny nature of the objet but because of the multiplicity of prior representations” (418). This view neglects the importance of perspective in the novel. Jack does not just passively recapitulate what he hears around him, but engages in activities that underline his own position as a creator within the system that wants him to be only a consumer. Even if Jack’s creative attempts are

derivatives of commercials and other pieces of culture fed to him (and I argue in chapter 3 that he does more than this), we should recognize that even a derivative attempt at creativity places Jack in the position of the powerful media forces. He becomes the producer of clichés rather than just the consumer of them. Furthermore, as Michel de Certeau argues in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, rearranging the elements of a culture that one did not produce constitutes a form of production; to rearrange clichés is not necessarily *just* to rearrange them. He argues that there is a disruptive power in the drive to rearrange the pieces of a culture that people are given by an authoritarian system.

Whatever creativity Jack can muster, however, is undercut by a sense of complicity in consumer culture. If Jack gains some creative freedom as a producer within an economy of surface features, he does so at the risk of imposing that creative vision on others. If his narrative is an expression of his creative capabilities, it also runs the risk of being nothing more than an extended advertisement for his academic persona, J. A. K. Gladney.

Chapters two and three argue that Pynchon and DeLillo offer partial solutions to the problems posed by the development of the cyberspatial way of life, but that they critique those solutions as they present them. Chapter four argues that those partial solutions can be placed in an interface so that we can understand Pynchon and DeLillo as engaged in a collaborative project. This chapter combines DeLillo's exploration of individual perspective as a creative usurpation of power with Pynchon's collaborative multiplicity in an attempt to move beyond the tension between postmodern forms of multiplicity and univocal forms of authority. It therefore merges creative authority with

the realization that that authority might be wrong. It provides a way for us to think of life in the technocratic machine as a constant balancing act between individual, authoritative viewpoints (that have the potential to re-inscribe fascistic impulses) and a collaborative viewpoint (that has the potential to become monolithic and authoritative). We can use DeLillo's movements in the cyberspatial field as a model for how to take control from the system, and use Pynchon's to keep that authoritative grab for power from overrunning the other perspectives trying to do the same thing. This might enable us to think of the exercise of power as a creative act while thinking of cyberspatial collaboration as a method by which that creativity can remain vital without becoming totalizing.

CHAPTER 2

SIGNAL: *THE CRYING OF LOT 49* AND PYNCHON'S NOUMENON

Cyberspatial thought recognizes a split between the computer-generated objects that we can interact with and the hidden set of ones and zeroes that generate the objects we experience. *Lot 49* enacts the same ontological split and provides a vision of virtuality informed by this perceived split. With its insistence that hidden information lurks just beneath observable surface phenomena, the novel imagines that the objects of experience are manipulated by unseen forces. The straight world Oedipa thought she knew is only the visible surface of a hidden reality that she begins to uncover when she is made executor of her ex-boyfriend's will. As she learns about the Trystero, she encounters more and more of this hidden reality that seems to give rise to her everyday world. Her efforts to solve the mystery she encounters involve searching for deeper and deeper layers of information, and bring her into contact with a number of California weirdos who all seem to be plugged, in one way or another, into the Trystero. This search gives rise to a virtual Trystero that exists as a collaboration between Oedipa and all the people she encounters as she tries to uncover a hidden reality. Whether the Trystero is an actual conspiracy or just Oedipa's hallucination, it also exists as a virtual structure that, like cyberspace, is formed through the interactions of its various parts. The Trystero is a metaphor that describes the way Oedipa experiences the world just as space is a metaphor that governs the way we experience a virtual environment.

William Gibson has described cyberspace as a “consensual hallucination” (51), and Oedipa comes to find out that shared hallucinations are crucial to the virtual Trystero. At one point, Oedipa’s pursuit of *Lot 49*’s mystery leads her to John Nefastis, an inventor who claims to have developed a perpetual motion machine that functions when a sensitive sitting outside of the machine is able to communicate telepathically with a small being sitting inside it. When Oedipa fails to activate the device, however, she discovers that she is not a sensitive and speculates that “the true sensitive is the one that can share in the man’s hallucinations, that’s all” (86). She meets Nefastis only because she is trying to solve the mystery of the Trystero. Searching for the underlying truth, the noumenon beneath observable phenomena, puts her in a position that might allow her to join in Nefastis’s hallucination. Although she finds that she can’t join in his perception of the world, thinking the “Trystero” is equivalent to jacking in to the shared hallucination of cyberspace.

As Oedipa maps the network that she comes to know as the Trystero, it becomes clear that the word designates a system of communication that is unimaginably complex. “Trystero” exists, however, on multiple levels. At its most fundamental level, it is the spatially and temporally distributed interactions of distinct individuals and groups. The individual nodes on this network are not necessarily aware of one another. The Inamorati Anonymous member Oedipa meets in a San Francisco gay bar, for example, seems unaware of the other groups using W.A.S.T.E. to communicate, unaware of the conspiracy against the Thurn and Taxis postal monopoly, (“some theatrical agency?” he asks when Oedipa mentions it [89]), and unaware that the W.A.S.T.E. network knits him

and every every imaginable underground group in America together. This version of the Trystero shouldn't, properly, be called the Trystero at all. It is simply the "dumb" movements of numerous people and groups. It doesn't become the Trystero until we can shift from the individual perspective of any communicator to an inter-personal vision (or, perhaps, a hallucination) that can imaginatively unite the various groups under a single name; this virtual sense of connectedness between seemingly disparate people and events that Oedipa experiences constitutes the Trystero as a single entity. We can think of this second level of the Trystero as Oedipa's image of the first level. Oedipa experiences the Trystero as a shifting, ambiguous network, but that sense of interconnection is dependent on the physical moves she makes and the people she encounters as she moves about California. This is true *even if* the Trystero is an imagined conspiracy rather than a real one. This is structurally identical to cyberspace; what Oedipa experiences as the "Trystero" is an abstraction that is generated by a set of hidden, underlying connections. "Seeing through" the mapped image "Trystero" to the information below it would be a feat akin to seeing below the computer-generated images of Gibson's cyberspace to perceive machine language directly.

In attempting to mediate between the mapped, virtual "Trystero" and the underlying information that generates that map, Oedipa functions in a way that is strikingly similar to the process Žižek describes when trying to mediate between a feeling of self-consciousness and the knowledge that mental activity is produced by neurons devoid of consciousness. Although consciousness appears to be unmediated, Žižek suggests that "the 'mental' itself explodes within the neuronal through a kind of

‘ontological explosion’” (*Parallax* 210-211). That is, mental activity, while dependent on neuronal activity, is nevertheless not reducible to a neurological description. The “mental,” rather, emerges from the neuronal via a shift in perspective. Mental activity can only emerge from the mental-free activity of neurons when the neuronal activity is marshaled around an organizing image of itself. This virtual image of the neuronal system provides the organizing structure for neuronal activity. However, since the organizing image is produced by the neurological activity, we have a paradoxical situation in which mental activity, the thing generated by neural activity, is at the same time the thing that constitutes itself as mental. This leads Žižek to suggest that “the real question... is the ‘metonymic’ one: how does the emergence/explosion of the mental occur at the level of the neuronal itself?” (210-211). Žižek’s description of the process whereby the activity of a great many atomic entities working independently gives rise to something that can be considered as a unified whole applies to a range of phenomena that are generally given the adjective “emergent.” Unified activity emerges from the loosely organized activities of the individuals involved. We see this self-organization at work in Žižek’s description of consciousness, in the structure of the Internet and cyberspace, and in the Trystero. I will return to the notion of emergence and self-organization, but first I want to discuss the way in which Oedipa responds to her sense that the seemingly coherent world of ordinary experience is produced by the seemingly incoherent activity of a hidden world.

At the start of the novel, Oedipa is placed in an official position as executor of Pierce Inverarity’s estate. She sees it as “part of her duty... to bestow life on what had

persisted, ... to bring the estate into pulsing stelliferous Meaning” (65). Her response to her sense that that meaning hides behind what she can easily see is to pursue that meaning in a search for the hidden, underlying truth. The longer she persists in this official capacity, however, the less certain she becomes about what she discovers. This makes her an odd sort of detective, one who multiplies uncertainties rather than removes them.

Ambiguity, Uncertainty, and *Lot 49* as Detective Novel

The uncertainty in the novel is perhaps best considered in the parallel between Oedipa’s uncertainty about her mental state and the reader’s uncertainty regarding the status of the Trystero conspiracy. The novel repeatedly raises the possibility that the conspiracy is only Oedipa’s hallucination with no reality beyond her damaged mind. While Pynchon holds out the possibility that on the next—unwritten—page, Oedipa will gain the information she needs to make a determination about the conspiracy’s status, he withholds that information from his readers. Pynchon’s readers have only the text of the novel with which to attempt to determine if the conspiratorial system Oedipa refers to as “The Trystero” is actual or an artifact of her attempts to decipher the “hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning” she repeatedly feels (14).

Reading the novel, therefore, places us in much the same position Oedipa is in as she attempts to bring order to her experiences. Since Pynchon never reveals the conspiracy’s ontological status, we can never be certain that the Trystero exists outside of

Oedipa's imagination. This uncertainty about the Tristero tends to bleed out into our confidence regarding all sorts of interpretive activities. As Maureen Quilligan points out, exploring Pynchon's texts can be a chilling experience in which "Pynchon's reader often finds himself feeling paranoid long after reading the books when he stumbles on some fact he had thought was part of the (wildly improbable) fiction" (193). While Pynchon's novels reward readers who have an encyclopedic knowledge of the real world, they also profoundly question the relevance of tracing connections from text to world or even of tracing connections within the text. All interpretations of *Lot 49* face the same question that Oedipa's interpretations of her experiences do: are they accurate or are they delusions generated through the act of searching for meaning?

John W. Hunt suggests that this uncertainty is part of a "strategy of anti-vision... [that keeps] sheer boundless multiplicity of both event and meaning before the reader" (35-6). He goes on to note that while Oedipa "does make the connections and discover their meaning,...a full disclosure is withheld from the reader" (38-9). Thomas Schaub also notes the uncertainty in *Lot 49*, arguing that "*The Crying of Lot 49* may be understood as the education of its central figure, Oedipa Maas; but it is an education which Pynchon complicates considerably by the uncertainty he introduces into every perception allowed to Oedipa and the reader. The major source of the ambiguity is Pynchon's figurative use of the concept of 'entropy'" ("Chill" 51). Oedipa tries to counter the drift towards entropy by ordering "the signs and symbols around her into some kind of operational meaning" (Schaub 57). Reaching a different conclusion than Hunt does, Schaub argues that "the Tristero [may be] pattern of Oedipa's own weaving, imposed on

the world outside...[or] a pattern which inheres in the world outside, imposing itself upon her[,]” but that whichever it is, “[n]either she nor the reader is allowed by Pynchon to ascertain the stable meaning of the blossoming pattern” (58-9). Like *Lot 49*’s Randolph Driblette, who claims that the words of the play he directs are just “rote noises to hold line bashes with” (62), Pynchon’s readers are faced with the possibility that all meanings they find within the text are self-projected.

For Driblette, though, the self-generated nature of textual meaning does not lead to paranoia¹. On the contrary, he views it as liberating and exciting. As he puts it, “I’m the projector at the planetarium, all the closed little universe visible in that circle of stage is coming out of my mouth, eyes, sometimes other orifices also” (62). He admonishes Oedipa that she “can put together clues, develop a thesis or several” about the play, she “could waste [her] life that way and never touch the truth” (62-3). Driblette’s rebuke that Wharfinger, the play’s author, “supplied words and a yarn” while Driblette “gave them life” (63) suggests that any potential meaning a commentator might produce from Pynchon’s text is likewise “given life” by the reader herself.

When readers attempt to deal with some of the text’s uncertainties by re-reading or by interpreting the text, we produce meanings just as Driblette does. We become the projector at the center of the textual universe, and move from ambiguity towards univocality as we see the Trystero as a conspiracy or only as Oedipa’s paranoia. In the

¹ Or, at least, not just paranoia. Although Driblette kills himself by “walk[ing] into the Pacific” (125), he is nevertheless excited by the possibility of being in control of his own universe. As Emory Bortz says of Driblette, “It was up to him. He was both director and actor, right?” (126).

final pages of the novel, Oedipa is faced with a decision between remaining passive and letting the ambiguity of the Trystero remain intact or “creating a scene violent enough to bring the cops into it” and therefore discovering through their investigation whether there is a conspiracy or only a delusion at work (151). Without either textual authority or the extra-textual authority of the critic’s perspective—without the authority of “the cops”—the text and its potential meanings remain inaccessible. Only through the force of authority can we attempt to understand anything that happens in the novel; we apply the violent force of our perspective to the vibrant multiplicity of the text. Although each interpretive act removes some of the text’s possibility, it always contains a store of potential meaning left behind. But without an authoritative perspective, all possibilities counteract each other. Paradoxically, only by closing off some of the possibilities of the text do we stay true to Pynchon’s vision of ambiguous possibility. Without the interpretive act we have only a lifeless potential.

In attempting to understand the text, readers mimic Oedipa’s actions. She reviews the events in which she has participated in an attempt to bring order and meaning to her experiences; we review the text to try to understand its complexities. Both meaning-making processes require a shift in vantage point. Oedipa’s experiences make sense to her only as she reconstitutes them in memory. As events unfold, Oedipa’s experiences are confused and chaotic. Similarly, readers can only sense the depth of the potential conspiracy after re-reading the novel. For example, the commercials on the TV at Echo Courts motel can only seem significant after Pynchon reveals, later in the novel, the

source of the skeletons lining the bottom of Fangoso Lagoons. This is as true for Oedipa as it is for Pynchon's readers.

The meaning-making process Oedipa engages in and the one Pynchon's readers engage in are similar to the process John T. Irwin uses in his book connecting Faulkner, Freud, and Nietzsche, *Doubling and Incest / Repetition and Revenge*. Irwin argues that in Freud's writing, "a patient's story is presented, and then by an active repetition in the form of a linguistic analysis is transformed into another story, different and yet the same" (4). For Irwin, the act of linguistic repetition and analysis changes the original story. In the same way, we also change Oedipa's story when we respond to the novel's undecided ending by returning to the text of *Lot 49*. The structures Irwin sees at work are too large to be grasped all at once; they are always in some sense "virtual": "...it is precisely the impossibility of seeing the structure from all sides at once that allows us to take a further step, allows us to see why structures are always virtual, always *to-be-known*, or more exactly, always *to-be-inferred*" (6). Slavoj Žižek articulates a similar position in *Parallax View*. There is always, he claims, a gap between an event and our understanding of the event. "[A] catastrophic X occurs, but the affected agent remains unaware of it and goes on with life as usual; only when it registers/perceives its state is the catastrophe actualized, does it strike with full force.... Consciousness is in itself deprived of any substantial role, merely registering a process that goes on independently of it—yet this registration is crucial if the 'objective' process is to actualize itself" (201). Events remain virtual until they have been actualized by an animating consciousness.

Similarly, the “to-be-inferred” structures that Irwin describes emerge only when we look back upon them from a later perspective.

In an attempt to describe the virtual structure of Faulkner’s novels, Irwin mimics this structure in his own book. The structure he describes parallels Oedipa’s experience when she attends the play during which she will first hear the word “Trystero.” Compare Irwin’s discussion of his book’s structure to Pynchon’s narrator’s description of *The Courier’s Tragedy*:

Indeed, the way that the reader will experience this procedure during most of the book, or perhaps during his entire first reading of the book, is as a deferment of meaning: he will feel that elements are being presented to him whose exact point, whose relationship to one another and to the novels, is continually being withheld, continually being deferred. (Irwin 8)

And here is the description from *Lot 49*:

It is at about this point in the play, in fact, that things really get peculiar, and a gentle chill, an ambiguity, begins to creep in among the words. Heretofore the naming of names has gone on either literally or as metaphor. But now, as the Duke gives his fatal command, a new mode of expression takes over. It can only be called a kind of ritual reluctance. Certain things, it is made clear, will not be spoken aloud; certain events will not be shown onstage.... (55)

Irwin needs to continually withhold meaning because all the elements of the structure must “be simultaneously suspended in the imaginative space of the text” in order for

“their relationship to one another and to the novels” to appear. The structure he identifies is only manifested “by the interaction of all [the elements of the structure] at once” (8). By assuming that there is a virtual or “imaginative space” in which we can stall the reaching of conclusions, Irwin makes it possible to adopt something like Keats’s negative capability and hold conflicting accounts of an event in the same mental space. The virtual space is a tool that enables thinking in a way that does not require coherence and certainty—does not require “the cops” of interpretation. And it is the same tool that Pynchon tries to push his reader to use in *Lot 49*. When Oedipa identifies the elements of the Trystero conspiracy and when we, as readers, interpret the text of *Lot 49*, we are faced with incompatible possibilities that all seem equally likely. The competing elements that must be imaginatively held together simultaneously include the competing actions and desires of everyone Oedipa meets as well as the interpretive acts of multiple readers. *Lot 49* provides the virtual space that enables these multiple perspectives to come together.

Thinking about the Trystero lets Oedipa consider the multiple meanings that the word holds simultaneously. The Trystero system is only revealed when Oedipa imaginatively re-encounters its various elements. When Oedipa tries to determine the start “of what she was to label the Trystero System or often only The Trystero” she looks to her first night at Echo Courts motel and her sexual encounter with her co-executor Metzger: “that night’s infidelity with Metzger would logically be the starting point” (31). However, it is only from some undefined future perspective that this beginning seems logical. The narrator informs us, “That’s what would come to haunt her most, perhaps: the way it fitted, logically, together. As if (as she’d guessed that first minute in San

Narciso) there were revelation in progress all around her” (31). That is, as Oedipa initially experiences it, this night with Metzger does not seem to be the start of the discovery that brings “an end to her encapsulation in her tower” because Oedipa has yet to discover The Tristero (31). It is only later on that the night at Echo Courts seems like the beginning of things. The narrator, in fact, hints that there are other, earlier events that could logically be the beginning. He refers to Oedipa’s first sight of San Narciso which reminds her of a printed circuit she saw some time even earlier. While Oedipa looks to the first night with Metzger as primary, the narrator’s reference to earlier passages in the text opens the possibility that we as readers can revise our understanding of the Tristero system and look at it as something that begins far earlier. There is a gap, then, between Oedipa’s construction or uncovering of the system and our own. From our vantage point, Oedipa’s experiences mean something different than they do to her. With something like the temporal shift that Žižek and Irwin describe, readers are in a position, especially upon a second reading of the novel, to re-interpret events that Oedipa experiences *as* she experiences them. The retrospective possibility that emerges—what Žižek describes as a “radically New” idea that “retroactively changes...past possibilities” (201)—can be an actual possibility for Oedipa.

When we look to this earlier moment in order to hold open the possibility that the Tristero has been influencing Oedipa before the night at Echo Courts, we engage in an activity similar to the one Oedipa engages in when she reviews, as she does periodically, her evidence for the existence of the Tristero Conspiracy. Sometimes she writes down pieces of information in her notebook, and sometimes the information is summarized by

the narrator. But this information creates new possibilities within the old experiences. For example, Oedipa wonders

Where were Secretaries James and Foster and Senator Joseph, those dear daft numina who'd mothered over Oedipa's so temperate youth? In another world. Along another pattern of track, another string of decisions taken, switches closed, the faceless pointsmen who'd thrown them now all transferred, deserted, in stir, fleeing the skip-tracers, out of their skull, on horse, alcoholic, fanatic, under aliases, dead, impossible to find ever again. Among them they had managed to turn the young Oedipa into a rare creature indeed, unfit perhaps for marches and sit-ins, but just a whiz at pursuing strange words in Jacobean texts. (83)

The branching train of events that has brought Oedipa to this moment can now be seen to have been, all along, preparation for her discovery of the Trystero. Similarly, when Chris Hall argues that Oedipa experiences "a fundamental loss of innocence throughout this undertaking (this is surely the figurative impact of her seduction by Metzger at the start of her 'quest')" (65-66) this possibility emerges, not just for us as readers, but for Oedipa as well. In both cases, new sets of meanings are generated retroactively through actions undertaken within a virtual space that forbids authority and certainty, and therefore enables contradictions to remain unresolved.

In denying a satisfying solution to the mystery of the Trystero, the novel is also frustrating the typical ending promised by the detective genre. As Debra Castillo argues in "Borges and Pynchon: The Tenuous Symmetries of Art," the ambiguity of names in

Lot 49 demonstrates this deviation from the norm of the detective novel since the names provide

both too much and too little nominative significance. In hesitating between dream and materiality, the overdetermined and the literal, he [Pynchon] provokes a ritual reluctance to choose a single story, a single identity, an unequivocal name, a clear motive, a definitive solution. It is in this respect that Pynchon's plot, while following the outward form of the detective novel or quest narrative, denies that form's most basic expectations for a final revelation... (28-29)

Castillo, quoting Michael Holquist, notes that in a "traditional detective" novel, "there are no mysteries, only incorrect reasoning" (qtd. in Castillo 30). However, *Oedipa*, as a "postmodern detective" is faced with

clues [that] either point too clearly and too obviously in one direction—the Tristero, the postmodern equivalent of "the butler did it"—or proliferate in a branching labyrinth of potential directions too multiple to be followed, The clear, strong impetus of the formulaic novel is somehow diverted into its near opposite; rational reconstruction falters at the edge of a shimmering void, a mirage of understanding.... (30)

The traditional detective novel, then, desires a solution that involves the subordination of chaos to reason. *Lot 49* frustrates this desire by replacing a solution with an impenetrable indeterminacy. We can then look at *The Crying of Lot 49*, not as a detective novel with desire for a solution at its center, but as a novel of *drive*.

Žižek reminds us that “desire is grounded in a constitutive lack, while drive circulates around a hole, a gap in the order of being.... [I]n the shift from desire to drive, we pass from the *lost object* to *loss itself as an object*. That is to say: the weird movement called “drive” is not driven by the ‘impossible’ quest for the lost object; it is *a push to enact ‘loss’—the gap, cut, distance—itself directly*” (*Parallax* 61-62). Drive is not, Žižek continues, a goal that is

not realizable, that...gets blocked, stuck to a ‘partial object.’... [D]rive is not an infinite longing for the Thing which gets fixated onto a partial object [as desire is]—drive is this fixation itself in which resides the ‘death’ dimension of every drive. Drive is not a universal thrust (toward the incestuous Thing) braked and broken up, it is this brake itself, a brake on instinct.... The basic paradox here is that the specifically human dimension—drive as opposed to instinct—emerges precisely when what was originally a mere by-product is elevated into an autonomous aim.
(61-62)

This is likewise Oedipa’s relationship to the Trystero: while at first the Trystero, or, rather, the solution to the puzzle of the Trystero, is at the heart of her quest, by the end of the novel Oedipa has moved from following a desire to solve the Trystero to a drive that continually re-enacts her failure to solve it. The “by-product” of Oedipa’s quest—the increasing complexity and ambiguity of every clue she uncovers—becomes the “autonomous aim” she seeks to preserve. No longer replacing the Void at the heart of her quest with a partial object of desire (another clue, more information, a signal from the

dead Driblette), she turns this very Void into an object. Rather than being in the realm of desire, which would correspond with the search for the Truth—to find the Conspiracy or else to disconfirm the existence of the Conspiracy—she slips into the realm of Drive: she maintains the frustration of her desire to find the Truth, changing the meaning of “Trystero” from the imagined truth that exists beneath illusory experience into the frustration of her attempts to find the Truth.

Žižek makes a further distinction between drive and desire when he compares Lacan to Badiou:

while, for Badiou, the unnameable Real is the *unfathomable external background* to a process of Truth..., for Lacan, the Unnameable is *absolutely inherent*, it is the *Act itself in its excess over its namings*.

Badiou’s rationalism remains at the level of the external opposition of Reason and the Unnameable (the Unnameable as the obscure background of Reason): there is no place in it for the moment of “madness” at the very core of Reason itself. (64)

In this sense, Badiou’s position can be aligned with a reading of *Lot 49* as a traditional detective novel: there is some obscure unnameable at the bottom of the Trystero mystery. Oedipa in her drive to keep the Trystero open, however, ultimately rejects the idea of a solution—even an unnameable, unreachable one. For example, after dancing with deaf-mutes in San Francisco, the narrator claims that “Jesus Arrabal would have called [the collision-free dancing] an anarchist miracle. Oedipa, with no name for it, was only demoralized. She curtsied and fled” (107). She has rejected “anarchist miracle” as an

explanation of what she has just seen. Instead she flees, knowing that, had she remained, she would eventually have to give a name to it, to explain this experience in other terms.

She also begins

to feel reluctant about following up anything. She hadn't asked Genghis Cohen, for example, if his Expert Committee had ever reported back on the stamps he'd sent them.... She knew she ought to write to K. da Chingado, publisher of the unaccountable paperback *Courier's Tragedy*, but she didn't.... Worst of all, she found herself going often to absurd lengths to avoid talking about Randolph Driblette.... [She was] anxious that her revelation not expand beyond a certain point. Lest, possibly, it grow larger than she and assume her to itself. (137)

This reluctance to follow up on anything is an indication of her attempts to circle around the solution to the Trystero. It is similar to the "ritual reluctance" in Driblette's production of *The Courier's Tragedy*: both create a space in which a variety of possibilities arise, but both ultimately reject attempts to create a complete description of that space.

We might see Oedipa's hesitancy as a free act in Žižek's sense. According to his analysis, the "free act fundamentally changes the coordinates of the entire situation" (202). A deviation from the "'spontaneous' realization of an impetus" is something "radically New" and has the ability to alter "past possibilities." Žižek cites Bergson's formulation of the "unpredictable and new reality" that retrospectively alters the past: "Insofar as unpredictable and new reality creates itself, its image reflects itself

behind itself in the indefinite past: this new reality finds itself all the time having been possible; but it is only at the precise moment of its actual emergence that it *begins to always have been*, and this is why I say that its possibility, which does not precede its reality, will have preceded it once this reality emerges” (Bergson, qtd. in Žižek, 202).

Žižek extends this mode of thought to include free acts that retrospectively determine the individual. As he puts it, “I am determined by causes (be it direct brute natural causes or motivations), and the space of freedom is not a magic gap in this first-level causal chain but my ability retroactively to choose/determine which causes will determine me” (203). Because of the ability to retroactively determine those causes, the “temporal loop is the minimal structure of life” (204). “At the level of reality, there are only bodies interacting; ‘life proper’ emerges at the minimally ‘ideal’ level, as an immaterial event which provides the form of unity of the living body as the ‘same’ in the incessant changing of its material components” (204). He discusses Francisco Valera’s conception of “autopoeisis” as the process by which a network of forces and materials emerge to create a boundary between self and other (205).

The conclusion to be drawn, therefore, is that the only way to account for the emergence of the distinction between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ constitutive of a living organism is to posit a kind of self-reflexive reversal by means of which—to put it in Hegelese—the One of an organism as a Whole retroactively ‘posits’ as its result, as that which it dominates and regulates, the set of its own causes (that is, the very multiple process out of which it emerged). (205).

Or to put it another way, the Self emerges when it asserts control over the process that controls or constitutes it. The Self, in effect, says, “That I control” while pointing to the network of causes that controls the Self.

Pynchon’s commentators frequently interpret the suspension and ambiguity of the novel, especially Oedipa’s uncertainty at the conclusion, as the culmination of his fictional enterprise; they see his fiction working towards moments of ambiguity during which his prose is suspended between seemingly incompatible perspectives. Typically, this tension is described as emancipatory. For example, Thomas Schaub’s study, *Pynchon: The Voice of Ambiguity*, argues that “The experience of ambiguity in the reading of Pynchon is essential. It is a necessary result of his design to bring readers to the uncertainties of the precarious balance where possibilities abound” (ix). Similarly, Katherine Hayles has argued in “A Metaphor of God Knew How Many Parts: The Engine the Drives *The Crying of Lot 49*” that Pynchon’s metaphors oscillate between an “expansive” and a “reductive” phase as a way of breaking “the tyranny of either/or” (101). The indecision Pynchon’s narratives display forces us, we are told, to suspend judgment, resist the totalizing forces of repressive regimes, and generally keep an open mind about the world we experience beyond the borders of the book.

Hayles argues that metaphors in *Lot 49* work as a “two-cycle engine” to power the novel. “Like less complex metaphoric structures, *The Crying of Lot 49* works by overlaying a physically immediate reality—Oedipa’s quest through the parking lots, motels, bars, flophouses, and auction rooms of Southern California—onto another, more abstract series of junctions, crossings, and divergences grouped under the signifier

“Tristero” (100). Hayles goes on to argue that the Tristero is a “process” since, once it “comes into view as a comprehensible object[,]” it loses its abstractness and becomes “the concrete term of a metaphoric joining that points to something more abstract” (100). Each time that this new abstraction becomes concretely graspable, it shifts to become the concrete part of a metaphor that points towards something that is more and more abstract. Hayles calls this the “expansive aspect of Oedipa’s quest... [that takes] us to the verge of what cannot be spoken, but only gestured towards (100). However, Hayles argues, metaphors in *Lot 49* also work in the other direction, moving from abstraction to concrete idea. She calls this the “reductive movement” of Pynchon’s metaphors (101). Together the expansive movement and the reductive movement create a “two-cycle engine, whose motive power derives from the differential between the concrete and abstract polarities within metaphor” (101). The reductive and the expansive movements each have the potential to reverse directions and become the other type of movement. So the expansive metaphors that seem to point to an increasing abstraction can begin to move in a reductive way and point towards a concrete entity. “The reductive movement would construct the Tristero as a historically specific entity with no significance beyond its existence as a conspiracy against Thurn and Taxis... the expansive movement by itself would construct the Tristero as an increasingly remote abstraction with little or no efficacy in the world. (101)

Hayles’ reductive movement is akin to Marie-Laure Ryan’s notion of immersion²: when Pynchon’s metaphors move in this reductive way, the Tristero becomes a concrete,

² See Chapter 1 for a discussion of immersion and interactivity.

literal entity, and Oedipa becomes immersed in an environment in which this concrete reality does not refer beyond itself to a hidden reality. The “depth” she finds—for example, more clues that point to the existence of a historical Trystero—serves to anchor her into the world as it is presented to her. The world she encounters becomes evidence of a literal Trystero rather than pointing to a hidden reality outside of the world she can directly experience. When his metaphors move expansively, by contrast, the Trystero refers to another level of complexity that exists beyond itself, and Oedipa has the potential to intervene in that complexity.

At the “cusp” between these two movements, Hayles sees them interacting in such a way that the language involved “acquires the extraordinary power to reach beyond itself into its own ground of being. These transformative moments open a window on another order of reality and rescue the narrative from the tyranny of either/or” (101). One such cusp is Oedipa’s encounter with the sailor in San Francisco.

In this passage of the novel, Oedipa discovers a sailor living in a flop house, and imagines the mattress he sleeps on contains coded information in the form of bodily secretions. As Hayles analyzes this passage,

The text constructs the mattress as a material object, saturated with bodily fluids whose chemistry is encoded with the history of the sailor as a physical being who sweats, urinates, ejaculates. At the same time, of course, the mattress is a verbal structure, as the text acknowledges when it is used metaphorically to anticipate the sailor’s death. Likening the burning mattress to a ‘Viking’s funeral,’ this metaphoric construction

evokes the loss of the mattress as object, and with it the loss of the information that defined the sailor as a living being. The metaphoric reading points toward dispersal, the literal toward contraction and recuperation. At this moment of turning, both senses are strongly present. Intermingling and interpenetrating, they signify loss as well as retrieval, connection as well as alienation. (116-117)

The cusp, then, is a moment during which the text's language points in both directions: contraction and expansion, a historical Trystero and an invented Trystero. "At the cusp, when the outward expansion is halted and the inward contraction has not yet begun, there is an explosion of metaphor, as if all the complicated crossings and junctions were for an instant overlaid upon one another" (102). Hayles develops this dual movement of the text's metaphors into a discussion of language itself:

The double readings, one suggesting that language can point toward ultimate reality and the other insisting that it must always fall short, point to a fundamental ambiguity. Although the text's language acknowledges that its constructions do not constitute reality as such, there is an intense desire at critical points to drive beyond language, to rip through it to what lies behind.... In the expansive phase, the Tristero is a signifier for this desire. It stands for taking the risk of jumping off the world as it is consensually constituted. But as Tristero emerges from the shadows into actuality, it necessarily enters into the theater of representation and thus

loses its power to signify beyond. Precisely because it can be talked about, it is not that which lies beyond language. (116)

Again, Ryan's terms and Hayles' seem to address the same extremes: in one term (reductive/immersive) signifiers have a solidity and an opacity such that they tend to signify only themselves or they cease to be signifiers at all; in the other term (expansive/interactive) signifiers draw attention to themselves as such, and this attention indicates the existence of a world beyond those signifiers.

Hayles's formulation provides a useful way to think about the tensions between these two modes. Rather than seeing this tension as something that needs to be explained or resolved, she describes it as fundamental to the structure of Pynchon's language. The cusp between the expansive and the reductive turn of Pynchon's metaphors becomes a moment during which language reaches "beyond itself into its own ground of being," and has something to say about itself as language. At these points, Hayles concludes, it becomes clear that the novel is "[i]nterrogating the conditions of possibility for its utterances, it is never able to resolve whether its language play is a postmodern excursion into consensual constructions or a thrust through the theater curtain to a higher order of reality, in which we may, after all, be mere playthings. Either possibility has its chances for joy and despair, grief and liberation. The only unthinkable option is not to question, to remain insulated within placid acceptances" (121-122). The cusp, then, is a suspended moment during which the language refuses to resolve itself into a metaphoric or a literal reading, and instead it suggests both simultaneously.

However, while Schaub, Hayles, and others demonstrate Pynchon's commitment to ambiguity, critics are typically vague about just how to make the jump from fictional and rhetorical ambiguity to real-world experience. They tend to overlook the complexity involved in trying to negotiate between the narrative and the world outside the novel. One notable exception is Shawn Smith's *Pynchon and History*, in which Smith presents a convincing argument that Pynchon's rhetorical strategies of suspension and ambiguity represent a philosophy of history that enables him to engage with actual historical events. While Smith's book demonstrates Pynchon's commitment to historical realities, it, too, falls short when attempting to explain how this ambiguity translates into a forward-looking philosophy of action:

The way his novels are written and structured do not present overt exhortations to avoid such catastrophes in the future, but the way in which they rethink narrative representations of history is subtly didactic. Pynchon's texts force us to see history in a different way. In doing so, they suggest that "what ought to happen" in the future must be qualitatively different than what came before if we are to survive physically or psychologically. (11)

Smith concludes that Pynchon's talents are mobilized in an attempt to "increase our sensitivity to the suffering that people throughout history have been forced to endure" so that we can mitigate similar suffering in the future (182). While Smith has admirably explicated the details of Pynchon's historical philosophy, and expressed the idea that the understanding of history that Pynchon presents might help us make better decisions than

we did throughout the twentieth century, he leaves relatively obscure what we might call Pynchon's philosophy of action.

Pynchon's novels demonstrate the interlocking complexity of the modern world, an opaque connection between cause and effect, and the epistemological muddle in which humans find themselves. The difficulty of acting in such a world is not mitigated by Pynchon's commitment to a recoverable past; neither do notions like Schaub's that Pynchon places us in a position "commensurate with Oedipus's" (*Voice* 41) inability to act at the end of *Lot 49* necessarily translate into a useful model going forward. While there may be some value in countering a false sense of moral certainty by "stak[ing] out the necessary ambiguity in which moral actions must take place[,]" as Schaub argues *Lot 49* does (41), Pynchon's fiction, especially *The Crying of Lot 49*, does more than sensitize us to ambiguity in the present and human suffering in the past. While Hayles is right to suggest that *Lot 49*'s language combats the "tyranny of either/or," suspension between the two possibilities, a gesture that points in both directions simultaneously, doesn't adequately demonstrate just how radical a move Pynchon is trying to make. The unsolveability at the center of the novel is not just a matter of tension between extremes or suspension around a cusp point.

To stop at suspension is to see Oedipus as indecisive, oscillating, perhaps even afraid to make a decision. While these terms provide some insight, they also suggest that Oedipus's main problem is a lack of information: gaining more information, or at least, encountering a crucial piece of information might let her make a decision and end her suspension under this scenario. This would suggest a re-inscription of the traditional

desire-based novel for a postmodern age: there is a solution, an “obscure background,” we just don’t have access to it. Oedipa’s situation, however, is far more complex. The more information Oedipa gains, the more clues she discovers, the more uncertain she becomes. The overabundance of information, rather than collapsing a fragile suspension of the two possibilities, *sustains* the suspension. I would like to suggest that the oscillation between reductive/immersive and expansive/interactive creates a situation in which Oedipa has the potential to experience reality in a way that is very different from either possibility. Rather than existing in a suspension between the two, Oedipa has stumbled onto a way to break through the boundaries imposed by both. The gap between these possibilities becomes the reality Oedipa encounters.

Oedipa’s position is crucial to the creation of this space beyond the boundaries of either possibility. Pynchon’s narrator likens the Trystero to a striptease (40), but I’d like to suggest that this peep show has certain affinities to Žižek’s conception of childhood seduction. Žižek notes that there is an aspect of both fantasy and reality involved in cases of childhood seduction:

While “seduction” cannot be reduced simply to the subject’s fantasy, while it does refer to a traumatic encounter with the Other’s “enigmatic message,” bearing witness to the Other’s unconscious, it cannot be reduced to an event in the reality of the actual interaction between child and his or her adults either. Seduction is, rather, a kind of transcendental structure, the minimal *a priori* formal constellation of the child confronted

with the impenetrable acts of the Other which bear witness to the Other's unconscious... (*Parallax* 20)

This dual irreducibility is at work in *The Crying of Lot 49* as well. Regardless of the Trystero's ontological status, it cannot be reduced to Oedipa's fantasy or delusion. It also cannot be reduced to an actuality. Žižek describes this irreducibility in terms of the Kantian transcendental: "Far from designating a 'synthesis' of the two dimensions, the Kantian 'transcendental' stands, rather, for their irreducible gap 'as such': the 'transcendental' points to something in this gap, a new dimension which cannot be reduced to either of the two positive terms between which the gap is gaping" (21). *Lot 49*'s "Trystero" is likewise situated within this gap. The "Trystero," that is, the mapped image that Oedipa constructs, emerges via the interaction of actual events and Oedipa's relation to those events. It exists in the "new dimension," in the gap between actuality and fantasy, noumena and phenomena. Like the cases of childhood seduction Žižek discusses, Oedipa's construction of the "Trystero" is a result of "a traumatic encounter with the Other's 'enigmatic message.'" Nevertheless, it cannot be reduced to a historical Trystero. The "ultimate parallax, the third space between phenomena and the noumenon itself, is the subject's freedom/spontaneity" (22). The space for freedom thus does not emerge as an oscillation or suspension between these two poles, but is rather the gap between them. To see the Trystero as pure fantasy or "true paranoia" (150), as Oedipa sometimes does, cannot describe all the features of the Trystero that she encounters. Neither can a description of the Trystero as historical reality. And this is why Hayles' description, while rightly rejecting the "tyranny of either/or," doesn't go far enough.

Positing a “both/and” suspension at the cusp between “either” and “or” leaves Oedipa caught, as it were, on the horizontal axis; though suspended between either/or, she is still implicated in that binary logic.

This is also why the question of whether or not the Trystero exists is the wrong question to ask. Oedipa’s virtual map of the Trystero, regardless of whether or not the map refers to an actual conspiracy, is generated by the interference created when Oedipa interacts with the world. This map cannot be reduced to the actual events that she encounters, nor can it be reduced to Oedipa’s fantasies. The virtual “Trystero,” the map Oedipa generates, is an interference pattern created by the interaction of the Trystero Conspiracy (the actuality of a conspiracy, something that corresponds with Hayles’s “reductive movement” in the novel) and the Trystero Hallucination (the idea that the map Oedipa has generated has no reality outside of her mental world; this corresponds to Hayles’s “expansive movement”). The virtual “Trystero” exists because of the “ontological difference” between the Conspiracy and the Hallucination.

The Virtual “Trystero”

According to Žižek’s construction of Heidegger, “‘ontological difference,’ is... the difference between the entities’ stupid being-there, their senseless reality, and their horizon of meaning” (*Parallax* 24). That is, there is a difference between the whole object, and that part of the object that can be symbolized. This difference is the “ontological difference”; it exceeds meaning. This is also where I would like to situate

the virtual “Trystero.” Oedipa has attempted to name this gap, to symbolize the difference between the brute actuality of events and the perspective that can make sense of that actuality. “Trystero” is the term she uses to point towards that gap.

This is similar to a formula Žižek uses to discuss linguistic meaning. In order to create meaning, we presuppose that we all mean the same thing when we use language. Thus, this assumption “is both necessary and productive (enabling communication) precisely insofar as it is a counterfactual fiction: its ‘truth effect,’ its positive role of enabling communication, hinges precisely on the fact that it is *not* true, that it jumps ahead into fiction—its status is not normative because it cuts the debilitating deadlock of language, its ultimate lack of guarantee, by *presenting what we should strive for as already accomplished*” (52). That is, we assume that we have a shared meaning rather than striving for a shared meaning; it is virtual, a “consensual hallucination.”

All these formulations have in common the same idea. Something is presented that can be seen from two mutually exclusive points of view. For example, childhood sexual abuse can have actually taken place or it has been imagined. Žižek then points to a “new dimension” that emerges from this gap, something that cannot be reduced to either alternative.

In extending this mode of thought to *Lot 49*, the virtual “Trystero” becomes the thing that emerges out of the gap that exists between Oedipa’s two possibilities. In effect, there are three different Trysteroes: a Trystero Conspiracy, a Trystero Hallucination, and a Virtual Trystero. Under the Conspiracy version of the Trystero, there is an active network of underground communication that opposes governmental monopolies. Under this

system, actual events and people generate the “Trystero” that Oedipa attempts to map out. Under the Hallucination version, Oedipa is imagining the existence of the Conspiracy version of Trystero. The hallucinated conspiracy that Oedipa attempts to map has no relation to actual events and people; the conspirators are connected only through Oedipa’s consciousness. However, under both possibilities the virtual image she creates is the same. The difference between the two versions of Trystero thus leaves the image or map, “Trystero” untouched. Or, to put it another way, “Trystero” as a virtual construct exists regardless of the Trystero’s existence beyond this construct. To formulate it in a way closer to the way Žižek might formulate it: the gap between these two perspectives allows a third space to open up out of which a virtual “Trystero” emerges.

Schaub comes close to arguing for a virtual element to Pynchon’s fiction when he argues that Pynchon is “committed to a fiction of social fantasy which in varying ways and degrees is revolutionary and enlivening, social and energizing. [Pynchon’s] ... writing represents an expression of opposition whose value lies not so much in any literal alternative [his] ... fiction offers as in the charisma of its opposition, and in the paranoid energies of its existence as a kind of renegade fiction” (*Voice* 140). This suggests that the power of Pynchon’s social vision lies in its status as a motivating fantasy. However, the “ad hoc opposition” to totalizing forms of authority (140) is a fragile one that is particularly susceptible to corruption, as Schaub suggests when he contends that the Counterforce of *Gravity’s Rainbow* is originally a loosely connected coalition, but that the “dialectics of routinization undermine even the Counterforce.... The Counterforce, which goes into the Zone looking for Slothrop, is consciously disorganized. By the end of

the book, the Counterforce has become legitimate.... Tyrone, the initial object of their quest, has become only a 'pretext' or 'microcosm'" (59; 61). However, the value of Pynchon's fiction is not to embody an easily absorbable opposition to homogeneity, but to provide a virtual structure around which real opposition can be organized *without* running afoul of the forces that seek to assimilate cultural dissidence.

This virtual Trystero is one of Pynchon's attempts to imagine a beneficial role for the emerging cyberspatial sensibility. During the mid-1960s, as Pynchon writes *Lot 49*, computer researchers at Stanford and UC Berkeley develop the technologies that will become the modern Internet. John Markoff argues, in *What the Dormouse Said*, that these researchers were heavily influenced by the California counterculture, and that these countercultural sympathies helped to shape computer technologies as they emerged. Perhaps the biggest influence anti-establishment thinking had on the technologies of cyberspace during the '60s was the sense shared by many researchers that a new computing paradigm that was emerging had revolutionary potential. As Markoff describes it, "Personal computers that were designed for and belonged to single individuals would emerge initially in concert with a counterculture that rejected authority and believed the human spirit would triumph over corporate technology, not be subject to it" (xv). The idea of computers that were small and inexpensive enough to be purchased and controlled by an individual rather than a corporation or government was empowering.

Coupled with the shift to personal computing was a vision that all these individual computers could be linked together. One influential computer scientist, Doug Engelbart,

suggested that computers could be used to augment human intelligence, and he “always couched his vision in terms of a work-group community and not the isolated individual” (Markoff 43). Another researcher imagined “an ‘intergalactic computer network’ that would weave together an expanding community of scientific researchers and engineers” (Markoff 43). This virtual community of researchers would work with computers to think in ways otherwise impossible. While not quite intergalactic in scope, Pynchon’s Trystero and the WASTE postal system also present us with a virtual community; fittingly, he introduces us to the WASTE network in the Scope, which “proved to be a haunt for electronics assembly people from Yoyodyne[,]” the defense contractor that employs many of San Narcisisco’s inhabitants (34).

Pynchon and the computer scientists of the 1960s both want the new technologies to enable a revolutionary joining. If we all have access to a decentralized network with no one perspective dominating, we can all contribute to the creation of a virtual structure even if power and authority constantly try to oppose those efforts. Pynchon’s novels present a theory of virtuality in which ambiguous and shifting perspectives cohere, on an ad hoc and temporary basis, to create a virtual construct the meaning of which is never final or complete. This has implications for Pynchon’s sense of Truth or History, for the noumenon that Oedipa and Pynchon’s other seekers pursue is nothing other than a virtual entity that enables people to come together and shape the meaning of that virtual construct. It enables collaborative action, and it is also the object acted upon by collaboration. Shawn Smith has argued that Pynchon is concerned with presenting a historical philosophy that addresses an actual and recoverable past; in a similar manner I

am arguing that Pynchon is also concerned with presenting a philosophy of the moment that addresses a potentially livable present.

The metaphor I would like to invoke to describe this virtuality within *The Crying of Lot 49* is that of the oscilloscope, from which the bar where Oedipa first sees the post-horn symbol takes its name: “The green neon sign outside ingeniously depicted the face of an oscilloscope tube, over which flowed an ever-changing dance of Lissajous figures” (34). Lissajous figures are “patterns formed when two vibrations along perpendicular lines are superimposed” (Maor 145). That is, the figure is the visual trace of the relative motion between two oscillating objects. As Eli Maor describes in his textbook, *Trigonometric Delights*, working in 1855, Jules Lissajous

devised a simple optical method for studying compound vibrations: he attached a small mirror to each of the vibrating objects (two tuning forks, for example) and aimed a beam of light at one of the mirrors. The beam was reflected first to the other mirror and thence to a large screen, where it formed a two-dimensional pattern, the visual result of combining the two vibrations. This simple idea—a forerunner of the modern oscilloscope—was a novelty in Lissajous’ time, for up until then the study of sound depended solely on the process of hearing, that is, on the human ear. Lissajous literally made it possible to “see sound.” (145)

The oscilloscope traces Lissajous figures on a phosphorescent screen by measuring the frequencies of two oscillating signals. The two variable inputs create a third element that takes the form of a Lissajous curve on the screen. The figures are generated by the

fluctuations being measured. However, the figures are not the fluctuations themselves, but a virtual representation of those fluctuations that exist in a format that is entirely other: no longer fluctuations of voltages over time, they have become patterns of photons on a screen.

One feature of the curve traced in this manner is that if we divide the frequency of one incoming signal by the frequency of the other and obtain a rational number, the Lissajous figure traced on the oscilloscope screen “—no matter how complex—will eventually repeat itself, causing the motion to be periodic” (Maor 146). That is, the virtual construct created by the superposition of two signals whose ratio is rational will become a fixed pattern, endlessly repeating itself. If, however, the ratio is irrational—that is, if it produces a number in decimal notation such that there are no repeating patterns in the numbers after the decimal point—then the point tracing the curve on the screen “will never retrace its own path... However, as time progresses the curve will gradually fill the rectangle bounded by the” maximum amplitude of the individual signals (146). That is, only if the ratio of the two periods is irrational, will the curve that is traced on the oscilloscope be “an ever-changing dance”; and, over time, since the point tracing the curve “will never retrace its own path,” the rectangular screen of the oscilloscope will become completely filled with light. Thus, the sign outside the Scope, though presenting dizzying complexity, is on its way to a uniform and static glow. The Scope will temporarily be alive with the dance of harmonic motion, but will eventually fill the space allotted to it.

Both Scope and oscilloscope are metaphors that describe Pynchon's philosophy of virtual collaboration. The oscilloscope unites two distinct signals into one visual representation. It therefore shares certain affinities with cyberspace in that it translates the complex interaction of these two signals into a visual, spatial representation of that underlying complexity. Inside the Scope, various forms of collaboration take place. As a "hip greybeard" tells Oedipa, the bar is the only one "in the area...[that] has a strictly electronic music policy. Come around Saturdays starting midnight we have your Sinewave Session, that's a live get-together, fellas come in just to jam from all over the state...." (34). The Scope has a back room full of "audio oscillators, gunshot machines, contact mikes, everything man. That's for if you didn't bring your ax, see, but you got the feeling and you want to swing with the rest of the cats, there's always something available" (34). This musical collaboration is possible only because of the readily available electronic machines hidden in that back room. This is one of Pynchon's models for collaborative virtuality. If we take the Scope as the meeting place for various flavors of oddball, we can see their interactions within the bar as producing, on the sign outside, the Lissajous figures endlessly dancing in neon. Each occupant of the Scope is there for his or her own reasons. They are a multivocal multiplicity, each member of which has his or her own agenda, but the interactions between these individuals also produce the virtual "Scope." The structure produced in this way serves as a collaborative space that allows people to join in various ways. Nose pickers, communists, and technology workers all come together under the sign of the Lissajous figure. This radical shift in perspective from the individual inputs of people in the bar or signals fed into the machine to the

Scope as a space created by collaboration or a curve traced on a screen is part of the experience of virtuality. Comparable to a shift from speech to text that makes a speaker virtual—both present and absent at the same time—we are dealing with a virtual construction whenever we make this sort of conceptual leap. The physical desktop becomes the virtual desktop on our computers, the oscillating inputs become the Lissajous curve on the screen of the oscilloscope, and the activity of everyone in the Scope becomes the constantly changing neon sign outside the bar. In the case of the Scope, this shift to a virtual construction also enables us to see the individual actions of participants as part of a collaborative whole, without having to imagine a central organizing authority that guides the whole.

The Trystero is also structured like the Scope and the oscilloscope: the varied actions of the individuals engaged in individual pursuits coheres, along another plane, and becomes a virtual entity that has the capacity to name all those individuals without becoming authoritative. Everyone Oedipa meets—and she begins to suspect by the novel's end, all of America—is subsumed into the Trystero, but they are not forced to give up their individuality in this process. The Trystero itself is created through the combination of the individual vibrations of everyone belonging to it. They produce the “Scope” as such, as a “haunt for electronics assembly people from Yoyodyne”; as a space for various sorts of collaboration; as a highly connected node on a communications network; as all the things “Scope” might mean. They produce a virtual structure that, in turn, provides the organizing principle around which the individuals gather.

The virtual structure produced in this way serves as a collaborative space that allows people to join in various ways. However, like the figures drawn on the oscilloscope screen, the various configurations will either fall into a pattern and repeat themselves endlessly, or else never repeat but fill up the allotted space with sameness. As with Pynchon's focus on a cultural drift towards entropy, the patterns generated by these interactions must continually be renewed. Schaub's discussion of entropy in Pynchon's novels indicates that, in order to regenerate a system, "energy must come from the Outside, and it must be different from the energy present Inside" (*Voice* 32). The virtual construct of the Lissajous figures provides a way for Oedipa to transfer her energy to the Scope's system. She brings the energy of her own interpretive perspective to the Scope and what she finds there, and thus changes the pattern of the virtual construct "Scope." This virtual paradigm also influences Pynchon's conception of history.

Shawn Smith sees in Pynchon's complex and difficult-to-unravel historiography a commitment to a recoverable past. He calls Pynchon "the exemplar of postmodern fiction... of the demystification of grand narratives and other totalizing systems of knowledge," but argues that, nevertheless, there is "a fixed point of view, a historical consciousness, lurking beneath the surface of Pynchon's notoriously playful and indeterminate texts" (1). The fractured mode of representation that Pynchon employs to describe the past is an attempt to represent "the flavor and texture of a world transformed by nuclear energy, global war, and the technocratic reorganization of society" (2). Smith goes on to argue that Pynchon makes use of two "antithetical approaches to historical knowledge" in order to show "how historiography has been co-opted by power interests

to make unethical behavior acceptable, and, on a more personal level, how the seemingly remote and all powerful processes of history intimidate us into accepting them as inevitable, and indeed ‘natural,’ phenomena” (3-4).

For example, in *V.*, Smith argues, Pynchon is “using the omniscient point of view to narrate the novel’s ‘real-time’ chapters” (29). This gives us “what *seems* to be a purely ‘objective’ narrative consciousness,” but is really another subjective viewpoint since “Pynchon quite subtly ‘personifies’ his objective narrator through interjections and asides” (29). However, “[e]ven though we can intuit a subjective consciousness behind Pynchon’s ‘omniscient’ narrator, we cannot identify its character and its motives like we can with Stencil. Pynchon therefore leaves us with both an awareness of the narrator’s subjectivity and a reasonable approximation of ‘scientific’ historiography’s mechanistic perspective” (30). The tension between these points of view represents a unique historical consciousness that acknowledges the constructed nature of all perspectives and simultaneously respects the existence of real historical events. This conflicted historical point of view is better able to represent the “flavor and texture” of the world Pynchon is trying to describe than another narrative voice might be. This view of Pynchon’s historical consciousness is an outgrowth of Smith’s understanding of Hayden White’s view that recent history is dominated by

the ‘modernist event.’ These ‘holocaustal’ events—Hiroshima, the Holocaust, Nanking—have, in White’s estimation, lead to a crisis in historiographic representation. Empiricism and realism, the tools of traditional historiography, can neither represent in any meaningful way the

immense suffering and inhumanity of these events nor adequately explain, at least in a manner that satisfies the moral indignation and horror these events provoke, why they occurred at all. In fact, White argues, those who write about such history have a moral obligation *not* to narrate these events conventionally, for to do so would stamp uniquely irrational events with the quotidian imprint of the conventional, the normative, the real. (6)

The implication White and Smith are making is that “realistic” narratives ignore the true complexity of historical events. Underneath these simplified narratives lies a complex historical event that defies symbolization in a straightforward way. Smith is arguing that a historiography that simplifies an underlying complexity does injustice to historical reality. On the other hand, historiography that is multiple, shifting, and contradictory is better able to reflect historical reality. As Smith puts it, “Pynchon’s refusal to make his texts transparent or conventional, then, is an innovative way of representing modernist events without smoothing over their irrationality or neutralizing the painful lessons they teach us about the failings of human nature” (11). Also, Pynchon “does linguistic ‘violence’ to these facts” of the historical past in that the “text re-visions the world ‘out there,’ which paradoxically may be the only way of recapturing the wounding immediacy of such cataclysms. Textual ‘violence’ occurs in the imaginative collision between what is real and the distortion of reality, the torturing of time and space in narrative, to conform to a damaged perception of the world” (11).

However, while it is true that realistic narratives gloss over the realities of historical events, it is not at all clear that a fractured point of view that does “linguistic

‘violence’” to these events can do any better. If it is true that the “modernist event” cannot be adequately represented by realist narrative techniques because the events being described are irrational and fractured, then adopting an irrational and fractured point of view from which to describe these events simply re-inscribes realism into the structure of the narrative. In an attempt to avoid the distortion of reality that arises from efforts to realistically describe events, Pynchon adopts an anti-realistic point of view. The structure of his novels, then, has become like the “realistic” descriptions he is trying to avoid in that they have acquired a mimetic dimension. Smith claims “textual ‘violence’ occurs in the imaginative collision between what is real and the distortion of reality, the torturing of time and space in narrative, to conform to a damaged perception of reality” (11). But this “violence” can only occur if the historical events are coherent to begin with. That is, to see the fractured world-view as a distortion, as the result of “textual ‘violence,’” is to assume that the underlying events have coherence and wholeness, an assumption Smith has already rejected. If the events themselves are rational, then distorting our description of them might be seen as textual “violence;” but if the events are irrational, distorting our description of them isn’t a distortion at all; it is a mimetic enterprise that threatens to gloss over the events in question in the same way that a realistic description might.

At the same time, Smith seems right to conclude that Pynchon is committed to the actual existence of a recoverable past, and to insist “that intimations of truth exist behind such quests in Pynchon’s texts” (4). He sees previous attempts to look at Pynchon’s use of history “from a solidly relativistic/postmodern perspective” as misguided (4). These views of Pynchon’s historical consciousness “assert that the quest for historical

knowledge in Pynchon's texts, and his metafictional perspective on such quests, are symbols for our misguided search for the transcendental signifier, the metaphysical Idea, the absolute Truth: in short, symbols of precisely the sort of meaning Pynchon suggests is hidden within, but not lost to, the processes of history" (4). While I agree that Pynchon's complex textual form is a representational technique that attempts to refer to an actual historical past, I do not agree that Pynchon's techniques represent a necessarily better mode of historical description because of their complexity. Rather, Pynchon's complexity needs to be seen, not as a mirror of the actual complexity of historical events, but as a virtual history that stands apart from both the actual events and a totalizing master narrative. That is, Pynchon's histories are themselves virtual structures that mark a space open to collaboration. They represent the incompleteness of all attempts to describe historical events. If Pynchon's histories are better than "realistic," empirical historiographies (and I think they are), it is not because they more closely conform to the structure of those realities, but because they recognize their failure to accurately capture historical reality. They therefore invite others to form new attempts to collaborate in the recovery of historical reality.

In this sense, their structure is the same as the structure of consciousness as described by Žižek, and of Oedipa's virtual "Trystero." Each of these structures arise when the underlying parts that generate them form around a unifying image of themselves; the structures arise, in Žižek's phrase, at the "minimally ideal level" (204). Pynchon's histories are the result of the interactions that take place between the "brute reality" of the world and Pynchon's consciousness. They are the trace of Pynchon's

travels through the historical record; *Lot 49* is also the trace of Oedipa's travels through the world. Smith is right that Pynchon's texts share a relationship to the actual events they describe, however, they do not just reflect in an oblique manner the events they describe. Instead they represent an image of the past that has the potential to gather others around it in a collaborative way. The collaboration it enables can be seen as a function of what Phillip Gochenour has described as Pynchon's use of "nodal subjects" (para. 1).

In "Anarchist Miracles: Distributed Communities, Nodal Subjects, and *The Crying of Lot 49*," Gochenour argues that only recently has culture been able to catch up to Pynchon's vision of subjectivity: "In the era of virtual communities, nodal subjectivity, and broad-based cultural movements such as rave culture, we have now reached the point where we can derive relevant political content from *Lot 49*" (para. 8). He sees Pynchon concerned with "networks of consensus" in *Lot 49*. For example, Jesus Arrabal's "anarchist miracles," Oedipa's swing through the dance floor at the convention of "deaf-mute delegates," and Mucho's LSD enabled "vision of consensus" all have "consensus" at their center (paras. 9-14). This consensus

implies a complex system of individual parts that simultaneously function both separately and together. This consensus can also be described as "phasing," or "phase-locking." The dancing deaf-mutes, all following different beats and different sets of steps, are nonetheless able to phase together in the dance, avoiding collisions. Shuffling time lines sideways until they coincide is a process by which waves moving at different frequencies can be manipulated until they phase together to become the

same frequency. This phasing, then, is the anarchist miracle. Though the dancers express their own individuality through the form of their dances, the way their chosen dances phase together produces a new order, "spontaneous and leaderless," where "the masses ... work together without effort, automatic as the body itself." [...]

Pynchon's anarchist miracle can be characterized as a new type of relation established among individual elements, each of which functions as a node or relay point in a complex network. As they are linked together, a new order of relations, beyond the immediate and face-to-face, emerges in the form of a distributed network. (para. 14-15)

A nodal subject, Gochenour writes, is part of a "distributed network" in which "not only must each individual be willing to work with other individuals to create an order of consensus, but all must also understand that they themselves are not singular, but multiple" (para. 16). The multiple selves of the nodal subject function "in concert to create the illusion of a unified subject" (para. 17). Awareness of the multiplicity of the subject enables the possibility for the nodal subject to "create a new external order, one in which radically different elements can nonetheless cooperate to create a higher order of complexity without necessarily losing their own identities" (para. 17). In other words, the deep complexity and multiplicity of the subject generates what Gochenour calls an "illusion of a unified subject." The nodal subject can, by rearranging the multiple components that create that illusion, generate a new illusion without compromising the individuality of the nodes. Gochenour notes that

[t]he meaning of [the W.A.S.T.E.] system, which Oedipa so diligently pursues, is not traceable to merely one element or another, one single node in the network, but derives from the higher order ('the separate, silent, unsuspected world') that arises as a result of these elements' creating systems of relation—phasings and interfaces—among one another.

Meaning and identity emerge from within the system as such rather than inhering in a part or being imposed from without. (para. 21)

Gochenour's nodal subjectivity is comparable to Hayles' notion that the posthuman subject is involved in "a distributed cognition [which is] located in disparate parts that may be in only tenuous communication with one another" (*Posthuman* 3-4). That is, in both critics' formulations, subjectivity is not necessarily a unitary event, but something that emerges through the interaction of various parts.

As with consciousness as Žižek describes it, and Oedipa's virtual "Trystero," under a model of nodal subjectivity, the subject has no meaning, no existence, apart from the complex interactions of the network. While these high-level virtualities create, as Gochenour calls them, "illusions" of a unitary nature, they nevertheless are entirely dependent on the multiple reality that underlies them. To talk about Oedipa's virtual "Trystero" apart from the interactions she has had throughout the novel is meaningless. At the same time, the virtual "Trystero" necessarily leaves out part of those experiences. It is a map of her experiences; as such it is not generated by her alone, but is the result of collaboration between Oedipa, Mucho, Pierce, the old sailor, and all the other people Oedipa meets. It is the trace of all these experiences symbolized by the map Oedipa has

made of the Trystero. Its relationship to real events is, at best, ambiguous. It reflects real experiences, but presents them as a gap; it represents the fact that it is not identical to the things it represents. This is why there is so much ambiguity in the novel, and why the virtual “Trystero” needs to be conceived as standing apart from Trystero as conspiracy and Trystero as hallucination, even as it depends on both for its existence. Oedipa’s virtual “Trystero” has no existence, no meaning apart from these other two Trysteros. In mapping this virtual “Trystero,” Oedipa has generated the necessary scaffolding that allows her to organize the experiences she has had. It is a vantage point from which she can look back at the interactions she has had and choose which of these interactions will have determined the “Trystero.” At the same time, she is not the sole proprietor of this virtual “Trystero.” It has been constructed with the help of Bortz, Arrabal, and others. Like a Lissajous figure on an oscilloscope screen, it has no meaning without these separate inputs. It therefore has a direct connection to them, but at the same time, it does not *represent* them, since it cannot resolve itself into any existing singular interpretation.

This is also the case with Pynchon’s histories. Their power does not come from the similarities in structure they share with the events they describe, but from their ability to mark a space of possibility: they are signs that indicate that Events have happened that can’t be adequately described.

In *Inherent Vice*, Pynchon’s recent attempt to write a history of the 1960s California counterculture, he explicitly examines the computer technologies that were emerging while he was writing *Lot 49*. The technologies that would become the Internet and the personal computer were developed in California during the 1960s, and it seems

likely that Pynchon was aware of at least some of the work happening at Berkeley and Stanford at the time. As Markoff has argued, California's counterculture shaped the development of the technologies that would become the Internet and the personal computer. Those working on creating these technologies were influenced by drug use and the revolutionary politics of the era; they saw computers as tools that would help expand consciousness and enable new ways of communicating and new ways of aligning interpersonal relations. A decentralized network of interconnected computers—each of which was controlled by an individual rather than a corporation or government— could perhaps enable a network of people to come together in ways previously impossible, and might be especially good at avoiding authoritarian control. The technology, however, was funded by the department of defense and corporate america. According to Markoff, the miniaturization of computing components is the direct result of efforts to send a manned flight to the moon and to control ICBMs. For Pynchon, this association taints the unifying promise of the technology with the stench of what he calls in *Inherent Vice*, “the ancient forces of greed and fear” (130).

Doc Sportello, the dooper private investigator at the center of *Inherent Vice*, represents the revolutionary ethos of the era. He frequently works without hope of reward, trusting in karmic justice to balance the universe in the end. Just as the Trystero is a metaphor for the emerging global communications network, the LA of *Inherent Vice* is a metaphor for a developing cyberspatial one, and Doc is a master of traveling LA's varied and hidden paths. Doc's main investigative skill is knowing the ways in which people are connected to one another, and what information each has access to. He knows,

for example, that his Aunt Reet is the person to go to for information about “anything touching the world of property” (6). She predicts that the sort of information she has access to will be replaced with computer technology, but as the narrator informs us “Till then, in the real non-sci-fi world, there was Aunt Reet’s bordering-on-the-supernatural sense of the land” (7). This prefigures Doc’s encounter with what was then called ARPAnet, the pentagon funded forerunner of today’s Internet. Knowing that Fritz, a skip-tracer that Doc knows from his pre-PI days, will have some information he needs, Doc visits Gotcha! Searches and Settlements to get a lead on the whereabouts of his “ex-old lady,” Shasta Fey Hepworth. In response, Fritz throws open a door to a back room, revealing a bank of computers. The collaborative set of electronics in the back room of The Scope has been supplanted by what the novel describes as “a science-fictional Christmas tree. Little red and green lights were going on and off everywhere. There were computer cabinets, consoles with lit-up video screens, and alphanumeric keyboards, and cables running all over the floor among unswept drifts of little bug-size rectangles punched out of IBM cards...” (53). This bewildering set of electronics has replaced the gunshot mikes and sound oscillators of the Scope’s back room. There is still a sort of collaboration at work in this technology, though. Doc asks if the network knows about Shasta, and Fritz replies ““Can’t know till we look. All over the country, in fact the world, there’s new computers gettin plugged in every day”” (54). This recalls Lot 49’s Scope, and the fellas coming from all over the state to plug in and jam together, but rather than a revolutionary collaboration, the military funded ARPAnet is a tentacle of the State. This

technology serves to locate and monitor individuals rather than to create a collaborative virtual space.

The new technologies that seem to offer new models of collaboration also have a disunifying aspect. Fritz and Doc discuss the new person Fritz has hired to run the computers for him:

“...just got this new hire in, name of Sparky, has to call his mom if he’s gonna be late for supper, only guess what—we’re *his* trainees! he gets on this ARPAnet trip, and I swear it’s like acid, a whole ‘nother strange world—time, space, all that shit.”

“So when they gonna make it illegal, Fritz?”

“What. Why would they do that?”

“Remember how they outlawed acid as soon as they found out it was a channel to somethin they didn’t want us to see? Why should information be any different?” (195)

Fritz and Doc see the technology as a trippy and anti-authoritarian pathway to an altered perception of the world. Sparky, however, sees it differently. In the final chapter, Doc pays a visit to Sparky, who explains, “The system has no use for souls. Not how it works at all. Even this thing about going into other people’s lives? it isn’t like some Eastern trip of absorbing into a collective consciousness. It’s only finding stuff out that somebody else didn’t think you were going to. And it’s moving so fast, like the more we know, the more we know, you can almost see it change one day to the next” (365). This is like a description of the Trystero from *Lot 49*: revelations “seemed to come crowding in

exponentially, as if the more she collected the more would come to her, until everything she saw, smelled, dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Tristero” (64). As Sparky puts it about the network, “it all moves exponentially, and someday everybody’s gonna wake up to find they’re under surveillance they can’t escape” (365). The exponential growth of both networks threatens to overpower any revolutionary potential they might have.

Nevertheless, Pynchon concludes *Inherent Vice* with an image that hints at a balance between collaborative potential and isolation. Doc, driving in an unusually thick fog, becomes part of a spontaneous caravan of cars trying to make their way safely through. “It was one of the few things he’d ever seen anybody in this town, except hippies, do for free” (368). The caravan, like the Scope’s Lissajous figure, is a spontaneous creation of a virtual unity out of the activity of individual Angelenos. From within this caravan, Doc speculates that he might run out of gas before the fog clears, and that he would be forced to “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 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” (369 emphasis added). This time, Doc hopes, the “regional dream of enlightenment” will not turn out to be another “false dawn” (207). “This time,” however, does not refer just to Doc’s experience of the caravan, but also to Pynchon’s virtual reconstruction of the past. Pynchon is suggesting that the 1960s still hold potential for enlightenment, even if the 1960s in question exist only as a virtual construction. The ‘60s

are still inhabitable as a virtual space even if it is unclear that they can sustain enlightenment.

Pynchon's noumenon turns out, like his histories, not to be a stable, authoritative Truth, but an unstable, always-contested, virtual one. As Oedipa searches for a stable truth, she engages in a process in which she collaborates to generate the meaning of the Trystero. Pynchon provides us with a virtual version on the 1960s that might enable a collaborative possibility to emerge. Truth and authority stand in as objects towards which we must move, but Pynchon is arguing that these objects are only the bait in a complex bait-and-switch con. He holds out ultimate truth as the object of inquiry and then lets that authority dissolve into a virtual structure that can be collaboratively constructed. The question of whether Pynchon's commitment to ambiguous and virtual structures can be sustained remains, however. As we will see in Chapter 3, DeLillo is skeptical about the possibilities of radical multivocality in the face of an ever-more sophisticated techno-capitalist system that exerts control over a delicately constructed virtual ambiguity.

CHAPTER 3

NOISE: *WHITE NOISE* AND CREATIVITY

Jack Gladney, Don DeLillo's narrator in *White Noise*, is confused and distressed by the world around him. While the most disturbing aspect of his world is his relationship to death, he is generally unable to figure out the meaning of much of what he experiences. Even his own utterances are frequently beyond his ability to comprehend. After telling a class that "plots tend to move deathward," for example, he asks himself, "Is this true? Why did I say it? What does it mean?" (26). Tom LeClair has commented on Jack's general confusion, describing Gladney's narrative as one written in "a primer style, an expression not of ignorance...but of something like shock, a seeming inability to sort into contexts and hierarchies the information he receives and the thinking he does" (391). The only solution to Jack's dilemma that his culture seems to offer is to consume, to purchase items that will, in turn, tell him who he is and where he belongs. Jack's confusion persists, though, despite the purchases he makes; the culture's authorized method of eliminating his anxiety fails to have the desired effect. In this chapter I argue that, while his inability to adequately categorize American culture, death, and his relationship to both initially is the source of Jack's anxiety and pain, he will come to see that confusion as the first step towards a creative approach to living in a culture that has no adequate tools at its disposal to relieve his existential distress. Jack will adopt a limited form of creativity as a counter to the confusion he faces. This creativity is not total, but it does let him begin to reject the oppressive systems of control that enhance his

anxiety and replace them with a continually creative relationship to his environment that stands in opposition to the cultural systems he encounters. Although he spends most of the novel oblivious to the fact that his confusion harbors the key to moving past his paralyzing panic in the face of his mortality, he will come, in the closing chapters of the novel, to recognize confusion as a prerequisite to creativity. Confusion and the anxiety he feels when confronted with that confusion indicate an area where the cultural systems of control have not yet been perfected, and therefore an area where he can combat those systems.

Lacanian Understanding and *White Noise*

Jack's initial discomfort is the result of an inability to understand in the Lacanian sense of the word. For Lacan, "to understand" is to accommodate one signifier (or string of signifiers) within the pre-existing network of signifiers with which one is already familiar. Bruce Fink explains understanding as a failure of creative thought that produces no new knowledge or insight, but instead props up the "status quo": "it is precisely insofar as understanding involves nothing more than situating one configuration of signifiers within another that Lacan is so adamant about refusing to understand, about striving to defer understanding, because in the process of understanding, everything is brought back to the level of the status quo, to the level of what is already known" (71). To understand is, as Shelly Brivic has described it, to stand under, to be "dominated by

language that is external to one” (4). Understanding involves looking to a pre-existing and external system to decipher one’s own experience.

Jack’s encounter with “the most photographed barn in America” (12) is an exercise in this sort of understanding. A series of billboard advertisements line the road leading to the barn. Jack’s colleague Murray tells him, “No one sees the barn. . . . Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn” (12). What Murray seems to be saying, ironically or not, is that the signs that precede the barn irrevocably change one’s perception of it. The culture’s commercialism provides the system of understanding through which Jack will make sense of the barn once he encounters it. He is primed to be aware of the “forty cars and a tour bus” in the parking lot, “tripods, telephoto lenses, filter kits,” and an “elevated spot set aside for viewing and photographing”; he hears the “incessant clicking of shutter release buttons, the rustling crank of levers that advanced the film” (12-13). The image-capturing paraphernalia that surrounds the barn completely captures Jack’s attention. He is obedient to the billboards, the culture’s embrace of the technological reproduction of the scene, and to Murray’s guiding monologue, and therefore Jack sees only those aspects of the scene that confirm the barn’s status as the “most photographed.”

During Murray’s extended explanation of the cultural significance of the barn, Jack listens without offering his own input, as if he were a student in one of Murray’s classroom lectures. This is typical of Jack’s approach throughout most of the novel. He usually accepts the view of those around him, placing any new information or new experiences within the system they endorse. Murray frequently provides explanations that

enable Jack to incorporate his experiences into a pre-existing paradigm. Even though Murray sometimes expresses eccentric views, they nevertheless let Jack continue to see the world in familiar ways. Although Jack doesn't quite believe Murray when he insists, for example, that "people who can fix things are usually bigots" (33), Murray represents a worldview in which everything can be fit into a clear category. When Jack expresses misgivings about Murray's opinion on mechanically capable people, Murray simply responds with his customary statement, "It's obvious" (33). In Murray's world, everything is obvious, and even if Jack doesn't quite believe him, he still sees Murray as embodying a perspective from which everything can be understood. Although Murray wants to "immerse [himself] in American magic and dread," he does so from the perspective of someone with more answers than questions: "The students are bright and responsive. They ask questions and I answer them. They jot down notes as I speak. It's quite a surprise in my life" (19). The surprise isn't so much about the magic and dread of American culture as it is about his position as expert within that field; he has "immersed" himself so fully that he has become its center.

Murray intercedes with his odd ideas when Jack's paradigm is at risk. He is like a proponent of the geocentric model of the universe creating complex schemes of circles within circles in order to fit potentially disruptive observations about the world into a pre-existing framework. When Jack contemplates why families are "the cradle of the world's misinformation," it is again Murray's voice he hears providing the answer: "Murray says we are fragile creatures surrounded by a world of hostile facts. Facts threaten our happiness and security... I tell Murray that ignorance and confusion can't possibly be the

driving forces behind family solidarity.... He asks me why the strongest family units exist in the least developed societies.... Magic and superstition become entrenched as the powerful orthodoxy of the clan. The family is strongest where objective reality is most likely to be misinterpreted” (81-2). Murray has explained away the mystery at the heart of family unity, and although Jack thinks this is “a heartless theory,” he concludes the paragraph by saying “Murray insists it’s true” (82). Even if Jack doesn’t completely believe Murray, he nevertheless sees him as the all-knowing expert who has the knowledge Jack lacks, the key that will explain away his uncertainty.

When Jack’s fear of death seems to reach a crisis point, Murray tells him, “there are two kinds of people in the world. Killers and diers”; he urges Jack to become a killer in order to avoid his own death (290). While this advice seems shocking, it nevertheless has the effect of soothing Jack’s fears and eliminating the need to construct a new method of interacting with the world. Murray tells Jack that he wants him to admit that he harbors a secret ability to kill, what Murray refers to as “a sludgy region you’d rather not know about” (292). Jack at first equivocates, saying “I suppose so. It can be. It depends” (293). When Murray pushes, Jack responds, “It’s there, Murray. So what?” (293). Murray then reveals the reason he has tried to elicit this response from Jack. “I only want to hear you say it. That’s all. I only want to elicit truths you already possess, truths you’ve always known at some basic level” (293). Murray espouses a view that frames Jack’s revelation about himself as something he has always known, part of a pre-existing body of knowledge. He has helped Jack to overcome the initial strangeness of the idea by placing it within a familiar context. After this conversation Jack receives a note from his bank

warning him not to reveal his secret code to anyone, since “only your code allows you to enter the system” (295). The secret code that Jack harbors is no longer just the access number to his bank account, but the idea instilled by Murray that “the more people you kill, the more credit you store up” (290). Jack explicitly links this idea to “a bank system,” and Jack has previously felt a sense of mystic wholeness while checking his balance at the ATM (291, 46). To follow Murray’s advice is to buy into his system of belief; it is to believe that Murray has the key to explaining away Jack’s symptoms. When Jack follows through on Murray’s suggestions, he enters into Murray’s system, just as entering his secret code gains him access to the legitimacy granted to him by being part of the financial system.

Early in the novel, when Jack is faced with something that he doesn’t understand, he works to bring that experience into the fold of an existing explanatory system. He typically employs one of two explanatory paradigms in this attempt. The first mode of thought he relies on is one that LeClair has identified as way of thinking “rooted in mechanistic science, that extension of common-sense empiricism which defines the world as a collection of entities, a heap of things like the Gladney’s compacted trash, rather than as a system of energy and information” (406). When operating within this paradigm, Jack is confident that there is some stable vantage point from which everything can be explained and understood, even if that understanding is beyond his own ability to comprehend.

While some of Jack’s experiences, like his trip to the barn, are easy for him to assimilate into his current organizational structure with a little help from Murray, other

aspects of his life resist this assimilation with greater force. Even though he sometimes has trouble understanding these events, Jack proves to be resourceful in his efforts to eliminate the troublesome mystery or uncertainty he experiences. Having a conversation with his daughter Steffie while in the kitchen with her and her stepmother Babette, Jack comments, “I wasn’t sure whether my replies were meant for Steffie or Babette” (48). This ambiguity about the status of his own replies suggests Jack’s difficulty fitting this experience into a theory powerful enough to explain language, psychology, and family relations. Jack seems to momentarily advance the notion that his motivations are simply beyond rationale. In this and similar situations, however, Jack quickly finds a way to incorporate his initially ungrounded bits of experience into his system of understanding. In this case, his explanation for the ambiguity surrounding his utterances is that “[t]his happens in the kitchen, where the levels of data are numerous and deep, as Murray might say” (48). Faced with a blockage, an ambiguity in Jack’s model of his own behavior, he explains it as a function of the way the information in the kitchen is encoded, as if he lives in a computer simulation and the kitchen is a particularly well-rendered area in which statements can be lost amidst the torrential flow of information in the room.

Even if Jack intends his statement to be humorous, it serves as a method of ignoring his inability to understand to whom he is speaking. Ambiguity arises here not because of the nature of language or because of Jack’s imperfect mastery of it—that is to say, not because he is in thrall to a powerful Other—but because there is an overabundance of information in the kitchen. Jack takes another step towards taming his sense of confusion by distancing himself from responsibility for this statement. He

imagines that Murray (an external authority who can legitimate Jack's interpretation of his own actions) is the one who makes this statement. Jack is imagining that from another perspective, namely Murray's, this gap in his knowledge of his own intentions is explainable. Jack imagines that, through Murray's eyes, his motivations are completely rational ("It's obvious," Murray might tell him) in much the same way that an analysand might imagine that the analyst has the key to explaining his symptoms. Murray functions for Jack as the Lacanian "subject-supposed-to-know," the subject who holds the answers, the expert authority who knows in the patient's stead. That the analyst has this knowledge is an "illusion... that leads the subject to believe that his truth is already there in us, that we know it in advance" ("Function" 254). One of the aims of Lacanian practice is for the analysand to come to realize that the analyst does not hold the knowledge she is supposed to hold—in fact no one has this knowledge; the analysand must invent it for himself. At this point in the novel, Jack has identified many subjects-supposed-to-know.

When Jack has trouble identifying what perspective has the knowledge he lacks, his entire fantasy of knowing threatens to crumble. These moments push Jack towards the fundamental Lacanian move of becoming a subject himself by reconfiguring his relationship to his symptoms. The novel sometimes presents Jack's family as the source of mystery that resists his attempts to understand and therefore threatens his illusion that his life is understandable. When his stepdaughter Denise brings a bag of trash into the kitchen, Jack thinks he discerns a moment during which she makes a connection between the trash and her mother's workout clothes. Jack senses something "extrasensory" in the moment: "I watched Denise make a mental comparison between her mother's running

clothes and the wet bag she'd dumped in the compactor. I could see it in her eyes, a sardonic connection. It was these secondary levels of life, these extrasensory flashes and floating nuances of being, these pockets of rapport forming unexpectedly, that made me believe we were a magic act, adults and children together, sharing unaccountable things" (34). Jack has no system through which to explain this experience. As he tries to come to terms with the unaccountable, he gives his readers the narrative equivalent of the loads of items he brings home from the supermarket, which he feels give him spiritual succor in "the weight and size and number" of his groceries (20). He rapidly moves through a series of descriptions, shifting from "secondary levels," to "floating nuances," to "pockets of rapport," and ultimately to "magic act" and "unaccountable things." Finding that his experience exceeds his symbolic grasp, he attempts to cover this lack with a verbal abundance. The term Jack first uses to describe this unaccountable experience—"extrasensory"—is closest to indicating the disruptive potential in the moment. It is beyond, or outside of, his senses, beyond any familiar or understandable model; but unwilling to rest with this mysterious experience indicating a rupture in his worldview, his linguistic legerdemain settles on a magic act, an image that mingles the miraculous and the tawdry in a way that tames his experience. Language here is a waving of the hands that distracts Jack from his encounter with the real and not a confrontation with the un-signifiable, un-simulable, "extrasensory" experience.

Even when Jack seems to accept that there is some part of his experience that exceeds his capacity to understand or that presents an anomaly his system cannot explain, he has faith that there is a perspective from which the event can be understood. At one

point during his search for his wife's Dylar, he finds himself rummaging through a mass of compacted trash:

I found crayon drawings of a figure with full breasts and male genitals. There was a long piece of twine that contained a series of knots and loops, It seemed at first a random construction. Looking more closely I thought I detected a complex relationship between the size of the loops, the degree of the knots (single or double) and the intervals between knots with loops and freestanding knots. Some kind of occult geometry or symbolic festoon of obsessions. I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness? (259)

Jack imagines that his family's trash hides a subtle logic, and even though he cannot decipher the message embedded in his refuse, he imagines a subject who has the knowledge to do so.

While Jack is usually very good at fitting anything that seems inexplicable into the mechanistic paradigm authorized by his culture, his ability to work from within this paradigm is imperfect. He sometimes senses that the systems and categories he uses to make sense of the world cannot accommodate the totality of what he experiences, and despite his best efforts, he cannot bring these experiences into alignment with a pre-existing system or imagine a subject with the ability to do so. During these moments, Jack shifts from a paradigm of scientific rationality to a second one that LeClair describes as a mode of thought capable of "extracting from... initially satiric materials a sense of wonderment or mystery" (394). When operating within this paradigm of mystery, Jack

focuses on clues that suggest the world is beyond all understanding. In LeClair's analysis, Jack moves from feeling anxiety and fear when confronting uncertainty—a reaction characteristic of the paradigm of rational understanding—to a sense of reverential awe at the mystery revealed at the heart of all human experience. Osteen expresses the distinction between the mechanistic paradigm and the mysterious one as a difference between dread and magic, arguing that “dread gives way to magic” (5). Rather than an acceptance of magic, transcendence or mysticism, however, LeClair sees this as a shift to a worldview founded upon the scientific understanding of complexity and systems theory. Although he contends that “‘Systems theory’ is best understood as... a metascience, rather than as a scientific discipline with its own rules of experimentation and proof,” (*Loop 3*) systems theory is nevertheless firmly rooted in a scientific discourse. As he describes the goals of a systems theoretical approach, he makes the scientific foundation of the approach clear: systems theory strives to “find the essential relations among sciences”; its method involves an “approach to living systems... [that is] mathematical and speculative...; in its approach to scientific discourses it seeks to identify...isomorphisms or homologies, formal similarities and differences among systems of notation” (3). For LeClair, this “metascientific” approach better captures the complexities of the world, and therefore Jack's acceptance of a method of explanation based on systems theory counts as progress:

[Although the ending is] uncertain,... considered as the culmination of the theme of nature and mystery, Jack's final words imply that he may be ready to accept the uncertain activity below the surface of our perceptions,

activity that may—and only may—mean that the world of the living and the world of the dead are not wholly separate, closed off” (“Closing” 409).

As LeClair sees it, death is uncertain, and coming to accept life as also uncertain mitigates some of the anxiety one might feel in the face of death’s uncertainty: “If, as the Gladneys feel, the nature of the contemporary world is ‘strange,’ does not this fact, recognized and accepted, reduce the feared strangeness of death and even offer possibilities of hope? Put another way: If we are uncertain about life, wouldn’t our uncertainty about death be natural and less feared?” (406). Systems theory, with its devotion to uncertain relationships between cause and effect, seems to acclimate one to the uncertainties encountered in life and death.

While LeClair demonstrates that Jack drifts towards a paradigm that is comfortable with uncertainty, he does not demonstrate that Jack has radically changed the way he relates to the world. In LeClair’s analysis, Jack is still stuck trying to understand his experiences by fitting them into a pre-existing system. Furthermore, accepting systems theory leaves Jack alienated in relation to a scientific other—that is, it leaves him in more or less the same position he is in at the novel’s beginning when he hews to a system of explanation based on scientific rationalism. Winnie Richards, the neuroscientist Jack engages to tell him about the anti-“fear of death” drug Dylar, represents LeClair’s systems-based approach to *White Noise*. “Richards advances a systemslike position that could, if accepted, make contemporary death ‘an experience that flows naturally from life [...]’ ...as Jack says of death for Genghis Khan” (406). However, this view of death doesn’t flow naturally from Jack’s experience, but from Winnie’s commentary on his experience.

It is only by accepting Winnie's interpretation of events that Jack could come to see life and death as equally strange. This can hardly be seen as freeing or enlightening for Jack. At best it is a conceptual version of Dylar: a product of advanced science, something beyond Jack's control that may alleviate his fear of death, but also leaves him dependent on the mathematicians and scientists who can comprehend complex dynamics and systems theory. He must take the explanatory power of the paradigm on faith. In fact, the systems approach places Jack in an even more passive, powerless position than the "mechanistic" paradigm he begins with. A world that is mysterious and unpredictable is one in which Jack must give up responsibility for his actions and rely on the imagined scientific perspective that can describe in probabilistic terms why he acts the way he does. His previous paradigm, even if it is less accurate, at least had the benefit of presenting the world and his place in it as something Jack could care about and be involved with. As LeClair argues, one of the indications that Jack has accepted the new paradigm based on uncertainty is his lack of reaction to his son Wilder's "minor miracle" of riding his tricycle across a busy highway without injury: "Perhaps Jack's achievement—a possible new relationship to death—is implied by his drawing no conclusions from Wilder's feat. He simply reports it as a fact of uncertain cause and effect, finding in it no evasion or mastery" ("Closing" 402). This description of Jack's reaction (or lack of reaction) to his son's dangerous journey might also describe the reaction of someone whose fear of death has been drugged away. Systems theory doesn't let Jack embrace uncertainty, but lets him tame it by placing it within a quasi-scientific discourse.

As long as he accepts one of these paradigms—the rationalistic one or the systems-based one—Jack is ceding the power to interpret his world to experts. He either incorporates anything he cannot initially understand into a pre-existing system of rational explanation, or else he embraces uncertainty by accepting that the world is a complex system, governed not by straightforward rules of cause and effect, but by murky ones that dictate that causes have unpredictable effects. While the systems-based approach is attractive since it seems to indicate a closer resemblance to reality or a less anxiety-ridden approach to life and death, it still places Jack in a subordinate position to the scientists and mathematicians who can understand complex dynamics.

Nevertheless, LeClair is correct in his assessment that Jack moves from a mechanistic paradigm towards a more systems-like approach to reality. Jack, however, doesn't rest in this paradigm; he uses his experience of seeing from both perspectives to develop a new way of seeing that relies on his own authority rather than that of experts. In this chapter I argue that Jack is attracted to mystery not because it gives him a way to continue to understand the world through a quasi-scientific paradigm, but because mystery and uncertainty indicate a weak spot in the symbolic structure. By moving from one paradigm to the other, he gains a sense of what both perspectives cannot see. Jack's confusion and uncertainty when he cannot understand an event reveal elements of the world that pre-existing systems of explanation have failed to absorb. These failures of explanatory systems give Jack the opportunity to create meaning, rather than just fit his experiences into paradigms mastered by others.

While this new, creative perspective is most evident in *White Noise*'s final chapter, he develops this perspective as a result of his symbolic death after he is exposed to a toxic cloud of chemicals in part two of the novel. His "death" leads him to a reimagining of existing systems of explanation. He comes to see these systems as efforts to hide the fact that the systems themselves are not all-powerful. They are attempts to assert the existence of a perspective from which everything is a plot, a grand narrative.

In this process, Jack begins to become a subject in the Lacanian sense. He encounters the Real, something beyond the power of symbolic systems to describe. But rather than resting with that encounter as an uncertainty that can only be known by experts, that is, by people other than himself, Jack creates a new metaphor by which to relate to that experience, something not created by experts and not existing before he encounters it.

In Jack's reconstruction of events, he continually runs up against pieces of his world that resist all his attempts to assimilate them into either a classical cause-effect scientific understanding or a twentieth-century scientific understanding that imagines the world as a system of energy and information exchange. These events occupy a gap between his two paradigms. Recognizing this gap between what the world offers and what Jack's systems of understanding can assimilate eventually allows him to move beyond this fantasy of understanding according to either paradigm and to generate a new method of relating to the world.

“The Airborne Toxic Event Is a Horrifying Thing”: Mediation and the Real in *White Noise*

There is a third paradigm from which Jack sometimes attempts to explain what seems inexplicable. We can describe this as a transcendental perspective, adopt Paul Maltby’s view that DeLillo is espousing a Romantic metaphysics, or use Osteens’ “magic” to describe the paradigm. Indeed, Jack’s mystical or magical experiences are essential to his eventual development of a creative approach. He turns, for instance, to the ATM to confirm his existence as part of a unified informational flow:

Waves of relief and gratitude flowed over me. The system had blessed my life. I felt its support and approval. The system hardware, the mainframe sitting in a locked room in some distant city.... I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not that at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. A deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards. The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. The networks, the circuits, the streams, the harmonies. (46)

The ATM, is a representative of both technological and financial systems, but it does more than confirm the value of his electronic assets. It also confirms his position within the system of cultural value. By merging with these systems, Jack is able to momentarily alleviate his death-anxiety. However, since this is nothing more than being obedient to the demands of a technological, capitalistic, cultural system that takes the place of God,

Lacan's original "subject who is supposed to know" (*Concepts* 224), Jack's situation is fundamentally unchanged.

This experience with the ATM connects Jack with a virtual crowd of people in what Stephen doCarmo calls an "object strategy." In "Subjects, Objects, and the Postmodern Differend in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*," doCarmo argues that DeLillo's "characters are caught between two equally seductive urges, one toward autonomy and individuality, or 'subjectness,' as we can call it, and another toward absorption and dispersal of the self into larger systems—a diametrically opposed 'objectness'" (3). doCarmo sees the "objectness" in the novel as part of a process whereby individuals can join together to form a mass, a crowd that gives the individual a much-needed respite from the burdens of "subjectness." "[T]he object-izing 'networks, circuits, streams, and harmonies; Jack senses ...[connect him to] the monolithic, death-defying crowds he describes [in his lectures on Hitler]" (6). Participation in the kind of crowd that doCarmo describes requires a sense of self that has been instructed by a system of informational flow. To be part of a crowd that is distributed in time and space is to see the world in a way that is structured in much the same way as cyberspace. In a technologically enabled environment such as cyberspace, geographic and temporal location become irrelevant. One can participate in a conversation that is extended in time and space in ways that are not possible in physical space. Although not explicitly making the argument that Jack is participating in a cyberspace-like activity when he joins with these virtual crowds, doCarmo suggests that "[e]ven if they are fragmented and 'hidden,' ...these contemporary crowds, with their shared mass culture (TV, radio, and the popular press; venues for

shopping and consuming of every sort), are just as adept at relieving subjectness, or mortality, as any of those older rank-and-file ones Jack has made a career of studying” (7). Many of the crowds doCarmo describes meet in cyberspace. Cyberspace (for example, television, radio, ATMs, and other forms of technologically enabled gathering) gives Jack access to a collective consciousness that doCarmo argues is part of an object strategy. Object strategies of this sort do not actually alleviate Jack’s anxiety, though. At most, they temporarily deaden his awareness of the problem while leaving intact the systems that have pushed him to need to alleviate those anxieties in the first place. Entering into systems constructed by others is exactly what Jack has been doing, and his fear continues to emerge.

The description of the “deranged person” intrudes into Jack’s account of his mystic encounter with the cyberspatial system, perhaps suggesting the burdens of “subjectness.” The deranged person is rejected violently by the system, is rejected precisely because he is not a bank account and therefore has no existence within the simulation. To embrace subjectness is to be outside of the system that grants cohesion. By juxtaposing the deranged person’s expulsion with Jack’s account of mystical coherence, DeLillo emphasizes the extent to which Jack’s culture defines individuals as informational entities.

But this scene also demonstrates the beginning of Jack’s awareness of the paradigms he is caught between. The deranged person is deranged precisely in relation to the system out of which he has been expelled. He cannot be assimilated into the system of simulations and modeled behavior. Even at this point in the narrative, Jack is

beginning to notice the contrasting perspectives exemplified in the ATM passage. On the one hand, there is the perspective of the financial machine. This externally imposed perspective creates an artificial sense of transcendent wholeness. However, this sense of transcendence is generated only through the exclusion of anything, like the deranged person expelled from the premises, that threatens the system. Jack's objective sense of mystic unity is constituted by the expulsion of a subjective, internal perspective. While Jack seems to be aware of the multiple perspectives—or at least his narrative is aware of them—he doesn't engage those perspectives at this point of the novel. In fact, he seems, like the financial system, to expel the deranged person from his consciousness in favor of the sense of wholeness he gets from being part of the cyberspatial system.

Jack will drift from his initial acceptance of transcendence or mysticism, to a critical re-imagining of transcendent experience. John Duvall's analysis of *White Noise* typifies the current critical understanding of transcendence as a dangerous illusion that supports capitalist ideology. He argues that "Jack's false transcendence [is] a key moment in the production of consumers" since "the broad range of consumer choices in today's shopping malls, which appears as the embodiment of individual freedom, is actually a form of social control used to produce the consumers that capital crucially needs" (440-41). From this perspective, transcendence is a prop for totalitarianism, and creates a false aura of transcendence around consumer goods so that "ideology ceases to be a conscious choice, as it was for the National Socialists, and instead becomes...more like the Althusserian notion of ideology as unconscious system of representation" (433). Similarly, Marc Schuster argues that consumer culture "direct[s] the individual's attention

away from the real dimension of lived existence and toward the abstract realm...” of unseen information and quasi-mystical forces. However, even though Jack’s focus on the abstract realm is a victory for consumerist culture, Schuster concludes that Jack and his wife Babette are able to “provisionally escape the gravitational pull” of the consumer system by rejecting “value in favor of vulnerability and intimacy” (28). “Jack recognizes that some phenomena, like the confidences he shares with Babette, cannot be quantified” (29). Intimacy, therefore, counteracts the pull of transcendental illusion and allows for some opposition to consumer culture.

While DeLillo recognizes the dangers of uncritically accepting the rarefied, transcendent image at the expense of the mundane, he also sees a beneficial role for transcendence. Thus Paul Maltby contends that DeLillo has a “tendency to seek out transcendent moments in our postmodern lives that hint at possibilities for cultural regeneration” (501). From Maltby’s perspective, we should therefore read visionary moments in *White Noise* as sincere rather than ironic. While Maltby reads the transcendent moments in *White Noise* as “an affirmation that the near-global culture of late capitalism cannot exhaust the possibilities of human experience” (512), he is not necessarily at odds with critics like Schuster and Duvall who tend to see transcendence in the novel as a form of capitalist ideology. Maltby concludes that DeLillo’s “fiction betrays a conservative tendency; his response to the adverse cultural effects of late capitalism...obscures, if not undervalues, the need for radical change at the level of the material infrastructure” (512).

The mystical or transcendental perspective gives Jack a ready-made system of explanation that can explain in advance any anomaly he encounters: if an experience does not fit into any other system, then it must be mystical or transcendental. It isn't a creative perspective so much as it is misdirection. It therefore keeps Jack in the realm of understanding, beholden to a system he has not created. Nevertheless, mystical, transcendental, or magical experiences are crucial to Jack's eventual creativity. As the discussion below will indicate, mystical experience becomes a signal to Jack that he can act creatively in the world.

At the beginning of *White Noise*, Jack accepts the transcendental images his culture produces as a way to relieve his anxiety about death. Even though his narrative occasionally acknowledges that the transcendental experiences his culture offers up to him are only the simulations of meaningful experiences, he doesn't really question that these simulations are valuable. The simulations of reality, the belief in the spiritual possibilities of shopping, the commercial intrusions into Jack's consciousness: these all form the base of Jack's belief in abstract, transcendental reality. His actions in the early chapters of the novel are themselves a form of belief in the reality of the transcendental simulations that surround him. Belief, as Žižek indicates, is always manifested in social activity. For example, those who believe in the value of money do so not at the level of thought or theory, but "in their social activity itself, in what they are *doing*, they are *acting* as if money, in its material reality, is the immediate embodiment of wealth as such. They are fetishists in practice, not in theory" (*Sublime* 28). Ideology is a fantasy; it is "an 'illusion' which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some

insupportable, real, impossible kernel.... The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel” (45). Jack’s belief in transcendence, embodied in the practice of purchasing, is an ideological fantasy that presents the reality of the capitalist system as a way of protecting him from “some traumatic, real kernel.” That is, it allows him to fill out what would otherwise be a gap in his symbolic universe.

This uncritical acceptance of transcendence begins to change, however, in part two. At the end of “The Airborne Toxic Event” section of the novel, a group of evacuees has been displaced by the toxic cloud hanging over Blacksmith; however, the media haven’t sent camera crews to cover the event. One man, distraught over the lack of coverage of the disaster, voices his discontent in a rambling monologue. Duvall suggests, in his reading of this passage, that “What is perhaps most horrifying about this absence of mediation is that, for those who experience the disaster, it is precisely this mediation (and this mediation alone) that could make their terror immediate.... DeLillo’s postmoderns seek affirmation through television, the GRID who/that really cares and affirms the legitimacy of their terror. Those who encountered the airborne toxic event intuitively know that television is not a mediation; it is the immediate. Television, the intertextual grid of electronic images, creates the Real” (435-6). Only the images the system produces have the solidity of reality. Jack and the rest of “DeLillo’s postmoderns” experience the world as if they are within the cyberspatial landscape of a computer system. It is only when information has been processed through the electronic grid and interpreted by the Machine that it becomes experience.

This is a position similar to those articulated by John Frow and Laura Barrett. Frow argues that representation falls short in a postmodern world because “the multiplicity of prior representations” has eclipsed anything like immediate experience (418). Jack can’t escape the system of representations he has inherited, whether those systems are typified by Romantic novels or by electronic bits flowing through a global communications network. In Frow’s description, “The world of *White Noise* is a world of primary representations which neither precede nor follow the real but are themselves real” (424). Like Duvall, Frow argues that representation is the only hope of primary or immediate experience: “it seems that it is only within the realm of representation that it is possible to postulate a realm of primary actions which would be quite distinct from representation” (424). For example, Jack experiences events as “real” only insofar as they remind him of the movies. “It is only in the movies, only through cultural mediation, that a vision of nonmediation is possible—and therefore absurd” (425).

Barrett presents a similar argument, claiming that the novel’s “intertextuality” “places *White Noise* within a long tradition of Western literature” which highlights that “humans have never had access to the prototype; our lives are mediated. The only virgin land is death, and so the characters shuttle between simulations, afraid to face that which has not been mediated” (98).

These analyses of authenticity and representation in *White Noise* demonstrate the extent to which Jack and others in the novel are caught in a system that manufactures the experience of reality for its own gain. The evacuees fleeing the toxic cloud sense that their experience is, in some sense, “unreal” because it is not reproduced on television.

However, while the media's articulation of their traumatic experience would grant reality to the event, the stress the evacuees feel at the absence of media coverage also indicates another function served by the image-producing system. Beyond authenticating their fear, the media also eliminates the need for the evacuees to feel fear themselves. As Žižek suggests in an analysis of sitcom laugh-tracks, the TV feels in our stead: "the Other—embodied in the television set—is relieving us even of our duty to laugh—is laughing instead of us" (*Sublime* 33). The situation is the same with evacuees' desire for media coverage: if only they were suffering on television, then they would no longer have to suffer in person. They have been rejected from the cyberspatial fold, and cannot find a suitable double to suffer for them. Thus, it is not just that TV would make their fear real, but that TV would present "reality" as a way of saving them from a traumatic Real. This is precisely how Žižek describes ideology: "The function of ideology is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel" (45). The TV man's ideological belief, expressed in the fact that he acts as if TV can grant reality to his experiences, is intended to save him from experiencing the "traumatic, real kernel" directly. But in this instance, he cannot believe in this ideology any longer since there is no object that can believe in his stead—there is no "terror-track" of the nightly news to be afraid in his place. To feel the absence of mediation, to sense the lack of "reality," is to be aware of the Real. This is transcendence in reverse: rather than moving from unaccountable experience to a tepid description of that experience, we recover the traumatic nature of the event because we have encountered the failure of the symbolic system to adequately protect us from the

experience. We see through transcendence to the panic it is intended to distract us from. The TV man's speech is therefore evidence of both a desire for mediation and of an underlying encounter with the Real that his fantasy of mediation would save him from.

The man shouts,

There's nothing on network.... Does this kind of thing happen so often that nobody cares anymore?... Is it possible nobody gives substantial coverage to such a thing?... Everything we love and have worked for is under serious threat. But we look around and see no response from the official organs of the media. The airborne toxic event is a horrifying thing.

(161-2)

In the identity "The airborne toxic event is a horrifying thing," the TV man dismantles the language that the "official organs of the media" had carefully constructed. He takes the controlled language of official response and re-inscribes it as an unaccountable Thing. For Lacan, The Thing, or *das Ding*, is an object "in its 'dumb reality,' ... the thing in the real.... The thing-presentations found in the unconscious are thus still linguistic phenomena, as opposed to *das Ding*, which is entirely outside language, and outside the unconscious" (Evans 207).

Žižek describes the Lacanian Thing by exploring the response to the *Titanic*:

The wreck of the *Titanic* therefore functions as a sublime object: a positive, material object elevated to the status of the impossible Thing. And perhaps all the effort to articulate the metaphorical meaning of the *Titanic* is nothing but an attempt to escape this terrifying impact of the

Thing, an attempt to domesticate the Thing by reducing it to its symbolic status, by providing it with a meaning." (77)

The official language of the radio and of the State likewise is an "attempt to domesticate the Thing." Osteen argues that the toxic cloud is linguistically detoxified by the language "supplied by the authorities who give it euphemistic names. At first Jack sees the cloud as a 'heavy black mass' ... [but a] name so threatening surely won't do, so the authorities redub it" with a series of more easily containable terms (176-7). This re-naming culminates with the title of Airborne Toxic Event, which Osteen notes "doesn't describe the cloud, but only the 'event,' as if the poison has already been obscured by the media cloud surrounding it" (177). During the early stages of the catastrophe, Jack and his son Heinrich discuss the cloud that has been released into the air above Blacksmith: "'The radio calls it a feathery plume,' he said. 'But it's not a plume.... [It's] like a shapeless growing thing. A dark black breathing thing of smoke. Why do they call it a plume?'" (111). Here, Heinrich articulates the basic move of the official media system: it blunts the brute Thing-ness of events and labels, categorizes, and markets it. Jack's response to his son indicates, perhaps ironically, that he is aware of the ways in which economic interests shape the terms we use to understand our experiences—in this case, shaping the shapeless thing into a plume: "Air time is valuable. They can't go into long tortured descriptions" (111).

Shortly after this exchange with Heinrich, Jack's daughter Denise reveals "They're not calling it a feathery plume anymore.... [They are calling it] a black billowing cloud." Jack's response is "That's a little more accurate, which means they're

coming to grips with the thing. Good" (113). Although Jack may be partially trying to reassure his frightened children, he nevertheless expresses relief when it seems like the authorities are "coming to grips with the thing"—that is they are presenting it not as a *Thing* at all but as a packaged product. Jack no longer has to try to come to grips with this Thing because the media system already has. In contrast, the TV man in Iron City, in the absence of media coverage, must wrestle with these events himself. When Heinrich reveals that "They're not calling it the black billowing cloud anymore" but have started calling it "The Airborne Toxic Event," Jack notes that "He spoke these words in a clipped and foreboding manner, syllable by syllable, as if he sensed the threat in state-created terminology" (116-7). The state-created terminology has, as Osteen has argued, transformed this object into an event, a source for entertainment. The state-created terminology so thoroughly prepares Jack, despite his recognition that this terminology is a threat, that when he later sees the Thing for himself he sees it as "a national promotion for death, a multimillion-dollar campaign backed by radio spots, heavy print and billboard, TV saturation" (158). The Thing has gone from unnamable and formless terror to a circus-like media event. As this media description develops, Jack gives over the task of struggling to process the Thing to the radio and its official terminology. The TV man reverses this process and tries to re-establish the horrifying Thing-ness of the event: the airborne toxic event is once again a horrifying thing.

The TV man's speech thrusts in two directions simultaneously. On one hand, he is, as Duvall and others indicate, yearning for the official media outlets to mediate his experience so that it will seem to be real to him. He wants his nameless fear to be re-

inscribed in the symbolic order. This is a drive to make his experience meaningful within the system. However, it also reduces the power of the state-created symbolic system at the same time. He is removing the official terminology that blunts their fear even as he is trying to inscribe that fear into the symbolic system. This is a push to express his experience in personal terms, to express the excess of his experience over the symbolic system's description of his experience. If the TV man's speech is an attempt to fill the mediating role usually filled by the TV, it is an attempt to *immediate* their experience as well.

The TV man's rant is a potentially disruptive usurpation of the central role occupied by the god-like media system. As Michel de Certeau argues, consumers are not powerless against a system that controls their thoughts and actions. To see consumers as "passive and guided by established rules" dictated to them by powerful outsiders overlooks the various ways in which consumers use what is available to them to counteract that system. Certeau's goal is to study "the models of action characteristic of users whose status as the dominated element in society (a status that does not mean that they are either passive or docile) is concealed by the euphemistic term 'consumers.'" "Consumers" is a euphemistic term because it hides the fact that consumption is a covert form of production (xi-xii). Far from being passive consumers, people can counteract the system that seeks to inhibit them by using cultural products in ways that are not expected or intended by the system. So while the materials available to people may be limited and controlled in various ways, people can use what they have available—whether a TV

program or a language—in ways that run counter to the controls put in place by the system that produced them.

The TV man is caught within an oppressive system, displaced by a toxic spill, and herded into a governmentally constructed space; he nevertheless finds a way to make use of the void left over when the government and “official outlets of the media” construct this space. Because the media system has failed to represent the evacuees’ fear, there is a gap that lets the TV man create his own representation of that fear. In this, he perhaps reveals the extent to which he is constituted by that system: he is adopting the practices of the capitalist culture; he identifies an untapped market, so to speak, and produces something designed to make use of that market. But, crucially, he has taken over the role of producer in the system he cannot overthrow. He isn’t merely partaking in the limited illusion of freedom offered to him by the system; rather, he is encroaching on territory that properly belongs to the system, making use of a tactic Certeau calls “poaching.”

Since consumers’ activity has no proper place (as science and other officially recognized modes of production do), Certeau argues, “Everyday life invents itself by *poaching* in countless ways on the property of others” (xii). In order to study this poaching, Certeau looks beyond the images a culture produces to the ways in which consumers use those productions. “For example, the analysis of the images broadcast by television (representation) and of the time spent watching television (behavior) should be complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer ‘makes’ or ‘does’ during this time and with these images. The same goes for the use of urban space, the products purchased in the supermarket, the stories and legends distributed by the newspapers, and

so on” (xii). Thus, the fact that consumers consume the products of the culture does not mean that they are using them in accordance with the dictates of the system that produces them. In fact, Certeau contends that the use consumers put these products to is itself “a production, a *poēsis*—but a hidden one, because it is scattered over areas defined and occupied by systems of ‘production’ (television, urban development, commerce, etc.), and because the steadily increasing expansion of these systems no longer leaves ‘consumers’ any *place* in which they can indicate what they *make* or *do* with the products of these systems” (xii). The TV man is creatively producing a media-inflected narrative of his own experience, making a virtue of his forced expulsion from the media system. The “proper” place for people like the TV man is in front of the television consuming. He, however, literally stands in its place, lifting it over his head, and becomes a producer of his own mediation.

Like the TV man, Jack also recognizes gaps in the system, areas where the media system’s control is imperfect and therefore ripe to be used for his own purposes. Perhaps the best example of Jack doing this is the “Toyota Celica” moment he experiences during his evacuation. Jack’s daughter Steffie mutters the car’s name in her sleep, and Jack senses something profound in the moment. At first, he is unsure what she is saying, describing it as “a language not quite of this world” (154-5). He continues:

A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that

something hovered. But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? (155)

In the "long moment" before Jack recognizes what it is he has heard, "Toyota Celica" is not a brand name, but an indecipherable Thing; a call from the divine Jack feels his children are in contact with while they sleep: "Watching children sleep makes me feel devout, part of a spiritual system. It is the closest I can come to God" (147). However, like a microcosm of the world at large, this momentarily blank space is quickly filled in with an advertisement. The brand name steps in to protect Jack from the underlying panic of an encounter with the Other's desire; or, in Žižek's terminology, "reality" steps in to protect him from the Real. Jack recognizes the ridiculousness of sensing significant meaning in what turned out to be only a brand name: "*Whatever its source*, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence" (emphasis added 155). Jack's description of his experience borders on embarrassment. He seems ashamed to have sensed something transcendent in what "really" is a brand name. This laugh at his own expense lets him ignore the initial, terrifying phase of the experience. The social reality constructed by the media system once again steps in to protect him from the traumatic Real.

At this point, Jack can recognize brief moments during which he is in touch with an area of experience that has not (yet) been covered over with a media representation. But he does not attempt to symbolize that experience for himself; he merely registers it as it passes from unaccountable Thing to official, media-constructed event. However, in the

third part of the novel, Jack begins to encroach on the media system's territory by symbolizing these moments for himself rather than waiting for the system to do it for him.

“Everything We Need That Is Not Food or Love”: Jack “Between the Two Deaths”

In his 2001 essay “In the Ruins of the Future,” DeLillo argues that some events are so traumatic that our habitual frames of reference cease to serve their usual function. These events resist understanding through our usual explanatory systems. The 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center is such an incomprehensible event, for DeLillo. He recalls that “some of us said it was unreal. When we say a thing is unreal, we mean it is too real, a phenomenon so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can't tilt it to the slant of our perceptions” (38-9). “Unreal,” for DeLillo, signifies the fact that we have no adequate way of describing the event in question; the term emerges when there is no subjective language with which to describe an event dominated by objective fact. DeLillo locates the destruction of the Twin Towers in a limbo space between objectivity and subjectivity. The event exists as fact, but has not yet entered into the subjective realm of narrative. It is only within this space that creativity is possible. The event is momentarily free of Symbolic meaning, and it therefore can sustain the creation of new meaning. The trauma violently opens up an ambiguity and points to a portion of reality that has yet to be claimed by any system of understanding. The normal response to this sort of trauma is to symbolically mitigate its impact. DeLillo tells us that “The

narrative ends in rubble and it is left to us to create the counternarrative” (34). However, before any counternarrative that might make sense out of these “too real” events emerges, we are confronted with “primal terror” (39). The counternarrative steps in with miraculous story lines that give “us a glimpse of elevated being. For 100 who are arbitrarily dead, we need to find one person saved by a flash of forewarning” (34). The counternarrative tries to alleviate the primal terror we feel when faced with a narrative void: “People falling from the towers hand in hand. This is part of the counternarrative, hands and spirits joining, human beauty in the crush of meshed steel” (39). Counternarrative is required only when narrative strategies fail, and the writer’s duty is to construct meaning when faced with so complete a gap in narrative possibilities: “In its desertion of every basis for comparison, the event asserts its singularity. There is something empty in the sky.” (39). We see the event as meaningless, inexplicable, and “unreal,” yet we cannot deny its certitude. The writer, however, is able to see the distance between the absolute singularity of the event and the absolute unmoored confusion the rest of us face. This vision allows “The writer... to give memory, tenderness and meaning to all that howling space” (39). The writer turns the void into a creative space.

The final section of *White Noise* takes place within the same space between objective, external interpretations of the world and personal, subjective ones. Although Jack doesn’t always do a very good job of giving meaning to the howling void, he does manifest an acute awareness of the contrasting perspectives involved in the creation of that space. By identifying the objective and subjective perspectives, he outlines the shape

of the unknowable between them, and identifies that traumatic gap in the symbolic system that it is the writer's duty to define.

Žižek describes a void in the symbolic system as a "strange traumatic element" that enables "the possibility of the 'second death'" (*Sublime* 147). The "second death" is, for Žižek, the destruction of the symbolic order itself. The difference between the two deaths is "the difference between real (biological) death and its symbolization, the 'settling of accounts,' the accomplishment of symbolic destiny (deathbed confession in Catholicism, for example)" (150). This is the same difference that DeLillo has seen between the "objective fact" of an event and the "slant of our perceptions." To fit the event into our perceptual structure is to symbolize it according to rules we already know. Žižek describes this "place 'between the two deaths,' [as] a place of sublime beauty as well as terrifying monsters, ... [it] is the site of *das Ding*, of the real-traumatic kernel in the midst of symbolic order" (150). This is the place Jack Gladney occupies after exposure to the toxic cloud causes his symbolic death. His status as one "technically dead" (158) yet walking around zombie-like gives him a perspective from which he might be able to contemplate the destruction of the old symbolic order.

Jack seems to recognize a distinction between the two deaths when, while watching firefighters extinguishing the fire that destroys the town's insane asylum, a "smell of acrid matter" caused by the burning of an unidentified chemical causes the crowd that had gathered to disperse. "It was as though we'd been forced to recognize the existence of a second kind of death. One was real, the other synthetic" (240). The irony is that the smell of the synthetic chemical brings an awareness of real death. Before they

notice the chemical, they had been watching the real death in front of them as if it were synthetic, manufactured for their enjoyment like the programs they watch on television. Jack and his fellow spectators had been experiencing the destruction of the insane asylum through the “objective” frame of their televisual culture, the only frame that grants “reality” to events: “A woman in a fiery nightgown walked across the lawn. We gasped, almost in appreciation. She was white-haired and slight, fringed in burning air, and we could see she was mad, so lost to dreams and furies that the fire around her head seemed almost incidental” (239). They view the woman as entertainment and romanticize her combustion. This perspective is objective in that it is external; it is not something they work to symbolize but something that comes to them pre-symbolized, already understood. The objective, TV perspective prevents them from confronting the destruction they see before them. This is not a traumatic event that opens up a gap in the symbolic order; instead they experience it as complete narrative the way Jack and his family do when watching disasters on the news. Once the synthetic chemical penetrates their consciousnesses, however, Jack and the other onlookers gain a sense of clarity: “We hurried to our cars, thinking of the homeless, the mad, the dead, but also of ourselves now. This is what the odor of that burning material did. It complicated our sadness, brought us closer to the secret of our own eventual end” (240-241). They are forced to relate to the symbolic void that is their own real death. Nothing in their culture has prepared them to face that reality, but the odor of the burning synthetic chemicals pushes them to begin to confront it. The synthetic chemical threatens to overturn the fantasy they had been enjoying that they were watching just another representation of simulated death.

This is a moment during which they may be able to re-organize their pre-existing paradigms and construct a new way of observing that is not governed by the modes and tropes of television.

In recognizing a gap between the synthetic (and entertaining) death of “the homeless, the mad, the dead” and their own real (and traumatic) deaths, Jack is outlining the same space between objectivity and subjectivity into which DeLillo places the destroyed Twin Towers. Although this event has the potential to produce a reorganization of everything the onlookers know, they instead look away and move towards other means of consumption. Jack takes Heinrich home, and in a gesture that we can assume is typical of the other fire-watchers, gives him a glass of warm milk. The father and son discuss the fire as if it were a film. Jack says, “I almost expected him to thank me for the nice fire” (241). This ritual seems to re-establish the false objectivity of the televisual perspective for Heinrich, but Jack grasps the importance of recognizing the two poles of death better than most of the crowd, since he has already died a synthetic death as a result of his exposure to the toxic cloud. He remains caught between the objective and subjective perspectives, and sits up that night thinking about “Mr. Gray,” a.k.a. Willie Mink, the man who bedded Jack’s wife. Jack cannot maintain a unified perspective when he thinks about Mink/Gray. Sometimes he is “Mr. Gray the composite. Four or more grayish figures” (241). But sometimes this generalized and uncertain perspective collapses into “a single figure...., a hazy gray seducer moving in ripples across a motel room” (241). When this happens, Jack can feel Mink’s “mastery and control. The dominance of his position” (241). He flips between a definite, singular perspective and an

indefinite, multiple one. Jack's experiences between the two deaths have made him aware of the multiple perspectives from which he tries to understand the world. At this point in the narrative, however, Jack imagines that the definite perspective is the more powerful, which sets him up to carry out Murray's advice to become a killer. By murdering Mink, Jack believes he will take on the power of the singular perspective. He can discern the contrasting perspectives, but has yet to learn that creativity lies in the space between them.

For Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, seeing the space between the two deaths is essential to revolutionary history. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Žižek describes the revolutionary move of "isolat[ing]... a piece of the past from the continuity of history. This move counters the ruling class's view of time as "the empty, homogeneous time of continuity (proper to the reigning, official historiography) and [replaces it with] the 'filled' time of discontinuity (which defines historical materialism)" (153). A discontinuous view of time "redeems retroactively the past" by cutting through the continuous flow of (official) historical development (154). The present is connected directly to the past and is therefore able to redeem the past (157). This is a revolutionary stance because, historically speaking, "the returns of the repressed, the 'symptoms,' are past failed revolutionary attempts, forgotten, excluded from the frame of the reigning historical tradition, whereas the actual revolutionary situation presents an attempt to... realize in the Symbolic... these past failed attempts" (158). In simpler terms, by freezing the smooth-flowing narrative of history, we can, on a Symbolic level, connect the present to a repressed past directly (that is, without

an intervening historical narrative that would explain or justify this connection) and thereby recover the failed past through its repetition in the present.

This is the role that DeLillo advocates for the writer faced with a gap in the narrative structure. He gives meaning to a void in the free-flowing narrative of history. While official history will explain events as part of a continuous narrative, the writer will look to create meaning within the gaps he perceives in that supposedly continuous narrative. This involves a creative leap since we bypass the smooth connections implied by official history. A writer does not explain that gap in relation to the pre-existing symbolic structure. In *Libra*, for example, DeLillo doesn't explain gaps in the historical record according to an official system of historiography, but leaps over those gaps to assert a creativity that might disrupt the official story. This plays out in *White Noise* through the failure of the Symbolic system to include certain experiences; Jack can sense these gaps because, as one Symbolically dead, he occupies a space excluded by the system.

This method of making meaning within gaps is similar to Saul Kripke's understanding of naming. Names are not, he argues, shorthand descriptions. Instead they are "rigid designators" that become attached to their referents by stipulation (44-48). In some cases, this stipulation has occurred long in the past, but in other cases, reference is extemporaneously created via an "initial baptism." "In an initial baptism [the reference] is typically fixed by an ostension or a description.... The same observations hold for such a general term as 'gold.' If we imagine a hypothetical... baptism of the substance, we must imagine it picked out as by some such 'definition' as, 'Gold is the substance

instantiated by the items over there, or at any rate, by almost all of them” (135). There is no smooth narrative that connects the name “gold” to the pile of items indicated by the hypothetical speaker. The baptism occurs at the moment in which the speaker assumes the authority to connect word and world. However, it is precisely because the pile of objects that will instantiate the term “gold” has not yet been fixed within a system of signification that the initial baptism can take place. It is only because the symbolic system has overlooked some aspect of the world that the power to name can be exercised. To be on the lookout for these gaps, then, is to search for creative possibilities within the symbolic order.

In *The Names*, DeLillo’s James Axton marvels at a similar process that occurs when he reads his young son Tap’s novel: “I reread Tap’s pages that night. They were full of small incidents, moments of discovery, things the young hero sees and wonders about. But nothing mattered so much on this second reading as a number of spirited misspellings. I found these mangled words exhilarating. He’d made them new again, made me see how they worked, what they really were. They were ancient things, secret, reshapable” (313). In that novel’s final chapter, DeLillo gives us a section of Tap’s novel. A typical sentence, “There was a man in a daise like a drunkerds skuffling lurch, realing in the corner,” presents an almost Joycean suggestiveness (335). Axton’s reading of Tap’s errors recognizes meaning in the language that neither Tap nor the language at large recognized initially. These errors, these bits of undefined experience, demonstrate the symbolic order’s lack of completeness. Tap’s sentences strike Axton as something of great importance; they become “reshapable.” The deviations from the constraints of

official language give Axton the opportunity to shape them to his own will. He “baptizes” these words and forces them to refer to something that he would otherwise be forced to articulate through old forms and ideas. Even though he is not their author, they become, in Axton’s hands, an authentic expression of something he had previously seen as unaccountable. Tap’s linguistic confusion shows the distance between the physical reality of the words on the pages and the Symbolic constraints of an idealized language.

DeLillo indicates that these sorts of unfilled gaps become more difficult to uncover the more we are inundated by the products of a cyberspatial media system³. The technocratic culture has laid claim to more and more of the universe, leaving smaller and smaller gaps in which this sort of creative activity might occur. Yet gaps of this sort are essential to the construction of the Lacanian subject. As Bruce Fink explains, through the act of metaphor, the Lacanian subject “brings about a new configuration of thoughts, establishing a new combination or permutation, a new *order* in the signifying chain, a shakedown of the old order” (71). “[T]he subject is that which creates a breach in the real as it establishes a link between two signifiers, the subject...being nothing but that very breach” (69). The aim of analysis is therefore to bring about new metaphors. “For each new metaphor brings with it a precipitation of subjectivity which can alter the subject’s position. Given that the symptom itself is a metaphor, the creation of a new metaphor in

³ While new technologies sometimes seem to spawn their own creative use of language—for example, the abbreviations and codes commonly used in Twitter or text messages—the misspellings tolerated by the cyberspatial system don’t exist in this sort of a gap. The medium profits by the production of new meaning; it encourages and then incorporates these sorts of innovations. To adopt the conventions of the new technologies is not to engage in creative action; it is only to pick a new master.

the course of analysis brings about, not the dissolution of all symptoms, but rather the reconfiguration of the symptom, the creation of a new symptom, or a modified subjective position with respect to the symptom” (70). We might think of the subject as initially alienated, limited by the constraints of language. But the subject is also the thing that is capable of creating new meaning, of bursting through those linguistic constraints by forging a new connection through the act of metaphor. This face of the subject is short lived, though; it is quickly replaced by a chain of static signifiers. Lacanian analysis is therefore an attempt to create a continually renewed subject through the creation of new meaning.

Since encounters with these gaps in the system are harder and harder to come by as culture, influenced by the advance of cyberspatial ways of thought, applies its familiar paradigms in increasingly mechanical ways, subjectivity itself is at stake. If Jack is to maintain or create himself as a subject in a cyberspatial world, he first needs to discover untended aspects of reality on which he can exert his influence. He tells his students “All plots tend to move deathward” (26). But *White Noise* reveals that Jack has this formula backwards: in actuality, all deaths lead plotward. That is, the system quickly moves to fill in any meaningless event—a death, a jumble of trash in a compactor, a stream of language—with meaning. Jack’s dilemma in much of the novel is that the meanings he is able to produce are not his but are the product of his culture. Furthermore, since the culture has done a very good job of recruiting him to its cause, it is unclear which are “his own” meanings and which are produced by others. Jack gains spiritual satisfaction from shopping, thereby doing the system’s job. He accepts that he is defined by his products.

When he becomes symbolically dead, however, he begins to recognize that his anxiety and fear—precisely because shopping and other authorized actions do not alleviate them—provide the opportunity to generate meaning. Jack’s final chapter is the culmination of his education in how to see the gaps in the system. His language reveals an almost obsessive attention to certain events—like Wilder disappearing temporarily, watching a sunset, and shopping—that have been recurring throughout the novel. In the final description of these events he manifests an awareness of the gaps in the existing ways of describing them.

The final chapter opens with Jack’s description of his son Wilder riding his tricycle across a busy highway, somehow avoiding the buzzing cars that pass him, and landing safely in a shallow ditch on the other side of the road. This trans-highway excursion has been prefigured throughout the novel; Wilder frequently disappears only to be found in the backyard on his tricycle (6) or sitting in someone else’s shopping cart (39). Although his disappearances make his mother “routinely panic-stricken” (6), he is rarely in any real danger. Wilder’s disappearance at the end of the novel, however, is different for a variety of reasons. His performance really is death-defying, perhaps indicating that he is actually the talisman against death that Jack and Babette believe him and their other children to be (100). But more important than the dangerous nature of this disappearance from parental view is Jack’s reaction to the event. Until now it has been Babette who asks, “Where’s Wilder?”, but the final chapter presents Jack’s in-depth exploration of just where Wilder has been.

Jack begins his description in a straightforward way: “This was the day Wilder got on his plastic tricycle, rode it around the block, turned right onto a dead end street and pedaled noisily to the dead end. He walked the tricycle around the guard rail and then rode along a paved walkway that went winding past some overgrown lots to a set of twenty concrete steps. The plastic wheels rumbled and screeched” (322). This description does not jump off into flights of metaphor; it lacks strong emotional content. Jack repeats the descriptor “plastic” twice and is specific enough to mention the number of concrete steps: this is a thoroughly anti-romantic retelling.

In the next sentence, Jack distances himself from these events by claiming that what follows is not his story but that of two women who saw it all happen: “Here our reconstruction yields to the awe-struck account of two elderly women watching from the second-story back porch of a tall house in the trees” (332). While this may initially seem to be another instance of Jack deferring to the authority of others, Jack’s “reconstruction” is clearly not written in the voice of these women witnesses. At this point, the description Jack gives us of Wilder’s approach to the highway and his treatment of the tricycle immediately becomes more poetic: “He walked the tricycle down the steps, guiding it with a duteous and unsentimental hand, letting it bump right along, as if it were an odd-shaped little sibling, not necessarily cherished” (322). The women represent the most authoritative account of what happened, the ones to whom our reconstruction must yield; they are the equivalent of the false authority of television news that grants “reality” to events. But Jack refuses to let them speak, instead placing his voice in their “empty-mouth[s]” (322).

He consistently describes them as powerless: they are “tentative,” “not ready to accept the implications of the process unfolding before them,” “looking frantically for some able-bodied pedestrian to appear,” they are “reduced to simple phrases,” and made “tired” by what they see (322-3). If they represent the best, most authoritative perspective, they are also impotent when compared to Jack’s descriptive power. The distancing-gesture of yielding to a more authoritative position is only misdirection, helping Jack to find the blank spaces that available perspectives overlook.

Opposing the confused perspective represented by the women is Wilder’s confident mentality as Jack describes it. Wilder doesn’t seem to notice the cars as they swerve around him, instead heading “straight for the median strip” with “lame-brained determination” (323). He is “extremely deliberate in his movements, following some numbered scheme” (323). When he finally does seem to recognize that he should have perceived this as an emotionally harrowing experience, Jack describes him as making a “decision to cry” (323). This adds up to a perspective marked with deliberateness and certainty; Wilder is almost robotic as he follows the “concrete steps” required to reach the highway.

The third major perspective that Jack uses to describe this event is that of the drivers who observe it. To them, Wilder is an anomaly, something they cannot begin to fathom. “The drivers could not quite comprehend. In their knotted posture, belted in, they knew this picture did not belong to the hurtling consciousness of the highway, the broad-ribboned modernist stream” (322-3). These drivers are marked by their confusion.

Jack shows the powerlessness of the perspective of the supposedly authoritative women, the single-mindedness of Wilder's perspective, and the confused perspective of the drivers who cannot adapt to a new element in their environment. But he does not adopt any of these perspectives himself. He instead struggles with his acute awareness of these perspectives and combines them in a single paragraph. He uses the externalized perspective that sees the tricycle as an object, and also the transcendental or subjective perspective that sees it as a sibling. He sees both "as is" and "as if." Jack's dual perspective indicates an awareness that the world is presented without narrative, emotion, or meaning. This is the perspective that LeClair seems to endorse when he celebrates Jack's failure to react to Wilder's harrowing trip as an "uncertain acceptance of the uncertain" (402). But Jack's narrative also demonstrates an awareness that he has the power to give narrative, emotion, and meaning to the world in a way that defies the attempted media-control of narrative. To fit his experiences into the structure of science, the media, religion, or any pre-existing perspective is to remain in the "as is." Nothing is truly unexplained and Jack's only role is to have faith that one system or another can explain anything that he cannot; his role is reduced to observing events as they pass into an official form of representation. Conversely, to re-interpret everything he experiences in terms of his personal emotions or in terms of transcendental experience is to dwell in the "as if." Neither we nor Jack can ever be sure that his emotional responses are anything other than the responses demanded by his culture. If Jack can remain suspended between these perspectives, however, he might be able to find a space within the system that might be open to creative reconstruction of the sort DeLillo describes in "Ruins of the Future."

His status as someone between the two deaths, theoretically dead yet still walking, gives him access to the gap between the two perspectives of the objective “as is” and the subjective “as if.” DeLillo has demonstrated in “Ruins of the Future” that he thinks it is the writer’s job to fill in gaps in our systems, to “give memory, tenderness and meaning” to events that are “so unaccountable and yet so bound to the power of objective fact that we can’t tilt [them] to the slant of our perceptions.” The writer thrives on “as is” events—objective, painful tears in the smooth flowing narratives of our lives—that have yet to be “understood” by fitting them into a sufficient explanatory system. This space between the brute fact of the event and the system’s ability to corral the event within the symbolic order is where both Jack and DeLillo try to exercise their creative authority, and it is an authority not granted to them but taken by them. Every act of creation is also a claim to authority. In Kripke’s hypothetical initial baptism of “gold,” the only thing that legitimates the connection between the word and the object is the subject’s intention to do so in the act of naming.

This is why Jack is so concerned with identifying differing perspectives in the final chapter. He is staking out the territory in which creativity is possible, a territory in which his actions might not be anticipated by previous representations or controlled by media simulations. The importance he gives to opposing perspectives in the final chapter indicates that he is in the process of figuring out how to grab creative authority from the media system that claims to be the only legitimate source of representation. The novel closes with a meditation on the difference between the confusion the shoppers in the supermarket face—the subjective, emotional perspective—and the perspective of the

machines that scan the items purchased at the store—the “objective” perspective of the cyberspatial system that tries to be the sole source of valid meaning.

Neither of these perspectives alone can offer any possibility for creativity, but Jack focuses on the gap between the perspectives. This is precisely the gap within which the subject can be formed. Fink describes the subject as the spark that flies across the gap separating two poles of a metaphor; Jack is becoming a subject in the act of recognizing the gap between the two perspectives. “Every metaphorical effect is then an effect of subjectivity (and vice versa). There is no such thing as a metaphor without subjective participation, and there is no subjectification without metaphorization” (70). Jack’s final chapter is an extended metaphor that bridges the gap between these perspectives.

In contrast, the first chapter is told from a single perspective that Jack has inherited. While the first chapter enters into the thoughts and perspectives of some of the people Jack observes, it does so with the false confidence and authority of someone comfortable with the pre-existing order. Jack is certain of what he sees and of what it means because the media system has already defined every object he experiences. At the end of the novel it is precisely the uncertainty he gains by measuring the difference between competing paradigms that pushes him in the direction of creating a new way of seeing the world. It is because he was not there to watch Wilder cross the highway that he creates the narrative we have in the final chapter. In the first chapter and most of the rest of the novel, Jack sees gaps in his system of understanding, but he tries to fill these gaps with already existing descriptions. He does call the sound of traffic from the highway “a remote and steady murmur around our sleep, as of dead souls babbling at the edge of a

dream” (4), but this poetic metaphor stops here. It does not exhibit the split consciousness of the final chapter’s description of Wilder, where, in a single sentence, Jack jumps from the “serial whoosh of dashing hatchbacks,” to the “mystically charged” highway, to Wilder looking “like a cartoon figure on morning TV” (322). The perspective that narrates this chapter cannot settle on a single metaphor the way it does in the opening chapter’s description of the highway’s sounds. Also, the drivers in the final chapter cannot comprehend what they see, whereas the parents of the first chapter “feel a sense of renewal, of communal recognition” as they arrive in their station wagons (3). They understand the world through their membership in the community. Jack imagines them as a group that understands, recognizes, and accepts. The drivers of the last chapter, by contrast, are marked by a failure to recognize. Jack sees the first chapter’s parents as part of a group defined by the objects they carry with them. The drivers in the final chapter are defined by their movement and their inability to comprehend. They are part of the “hurtling consciousness of the highway;” they are not defined by their objects but by their movement and their “knotted posture”—that is, by their positions rather than their possessions. That awareness of positional consciousnesses gives Jack access to creative potential.

In his discussion of *White Noise*, John Frow argues that “the postmodern sunset is another sunset, an event within a series, never an originating moment but mass-produced as much by the cosmological system as by the system of writing” (417). Each description of a sunset the novel presents refers backwards to other descriptions in the novel and to other narratives. The sense that everything has been described already leads Jack, Frow

argues, to ask “Why try to describe it? It’s enough to say that everything in our field of vision seemed to exist in order to gather the light of this event” (DeLillo 227). For Frow, “the sense of the inadequacy of representation comes not because of the transcendental or uncanny nature of the object, but because of the multiplicity of prior representations” (418). Jack feels “a kind of self-effacement before the power of the stories which have gone before” when he tries to describe a sunset (418). These prior narratives “continue to infuse the world with meaning, with a meaningfulness so total that the only possible response is ambivalence” (418). For Frow, this accounts for Jack’s contention in the final chapter that “Some people are scared by the sunsets, some determined to be elated, but most of us don’t know how to feel, are ready to go either way” (324). In the earlier description of the sunset, however, Jack is imagining a single viewpoint from which the sunset is observed. This is the perspective of an ultimate authority, a god capable of seeing the universe in its original wholeness. Everything within this field of vision is part of a single event. When Jack describes the sunsets in the final chapter he goes against this pattern. He has previously said that the sunsets are indescribable, but in the final chapter, they are only difficult to describe: “The spirit of these warm evenings is hard to describe. There is anticipation in the air but it is not the expectant midsummer hum of a shirtsleeve crowd, a sandlot game, with coherent precedents, a history of secure response. This waiting is introverted, even, almost backward and shy, tending toward silence” (324). That is, rather than saying that the sunset is not worth describing other than to say that everything exists in order to gather the light of the moment, Jack shifts his consciousness from the sunset to the spirit of the

evening surrounding the sunset. To describe the feeling of the people watching the sunset *is* to describe the sunset. While the event is “difficult to describe” because Jack cannot escape these prior representations, he can try to do so by shifting from the “objective” perspective of the accepted, prior representations to the subjectivity of the onlookers. It is true that Jack does not know what the sunset means, “whether [they] are watching in wonder or dread, [they] don’t know what [they] are watching or what it means, [they] don’t know whether it is permanent, a level of experience to which [they] will gradually adjust, into which [their] uncertainty will eventually be absorbed, or just some atmospheric weirdness soon to pass” (324-5). This might suggest that Jack is waiting for an expert analysis to tell him how to feel about the sunset. But Jack also gives the reason that people are ambivalent: the moment “transcends previous categories of awe” (324). That is, there is no precedent, no prior system that might make sense of what Jack is experiencing. Despite the over-abundance of pre-packaged metaphors with which to describe the event— and even when the subjective awe they feel is so overwhelming that they are tempted to tame it with meaningless, off-the-shelf terms like “transcendental,”— there is still a space that opens up between the subjective awe and the objective prior representations.

Jack’s newfound creativity culminates in the novel’s final pages as he navigates the recently rearranged supermarket. The market has been a place of abundance, even overabundance, throughout the novel. In an early chapter, Jack describes his grocery store purchases in terms that link volume to spiritual satisfaction: “It seemed to me that Babette and I, in the mass and variety of our purchases, in the sheer plenitude those crowded bags

suggested, the weight and size and number...in the sense of contentment these products brought to some snug home in our souls—it seemed we had achieved a fullness of being that is not known to people who need less” (20). This fullness is exactly what Jack will deny in the final chapter. He senses spiritual fullness because the products in the store have been defined by their advertisements as objects that will completely fill him, body and soul. When he describes the supermarket at the novel’s conclusion, however, he denies the fullness of being and asserts a spiritual emptiness, a confidence that there is something that the media system has not adequately defined.

He mentions the dismay in the faces of older shoppers. “They walk in a fragmented trance, stop and go, clusters of well-dressed figures frozen in the aisles, trying to figure out the pattern, discern the underlying logic” of the system (325). The rearranged supermarket represents a new order established by a powerful Other; it is a new environment dominated by technology and commercial interests. Since the checkout “terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly,” the arrangement of items in the market is irrelevant from the scanners’s perspective (326). The technological apparatus of the system is immune to the kind of confusion Jack observes in the older shoppers. Even if his final description of the supermarket is ironic, he nevertheless invites comparisons between the human reaction to the new order imposed on the supermarket and the machine’s reaction. From the “objective” perspective of the infallible machines, nothing about the supermarket has changed; but from the subjective perspective of the shoppers, everything has. Both these perspective are, of course, deadening. To feel existential angst when you can’t quickly

find your Cocoa-Puffs is to be controlled by the media system. Likewise, to adopt the machine's perspective and see the products only as a data flow is to be consumed by the cyber-paradigm. In the search to find a livable space within the technological system, Jack and DeLillo imply that the key lies in the creativity suggested by the differing perspectives.

If the newly ordered supermarket causes confusion, that very confusion also offers the opportunity to assert one's individuality against the system that seeks to erase the unique. He describes the supermarket checkout line as "where we wait together, regardless of age, our carts stocked with brightly colored goods. A slowly moving line, satisfying, giving us time to glance at the tabloids in the racks. Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for cancer, the remedies for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead" (326). The checkout's holographic scanners may be able to decode the objective, binary secret of his items but cannot extract the personal meaning Jack takes from this particular arrangement of objects. Jack has learned to be just as suspicious of that personal, emotional perspective as he is of the objective, mechanical one. He finds in the supermarket, and especially in the tabloid newspapers, what can be described as either quasi-religious fullness or an opportunity to offer an ironic comment on the culture's lack of depth. Either way, Jack is aware of a disconnect between what the machine's holographic scanners can decode and what he and his fellow shoppers experience. If the binary secret of the products represents objective reality as authorized by his culture, Jack is the linking feature between this perspective and the

emotionally charged one of the shoppers. He is in a position analogous to the one Fink describes as the “spark” that connects two poles of a metaphor. “[M]etaphor’s creative spark *is* the subject; metaphor creates the subject” (70). Jack has become the subject able to see the space between the available systems of understanding. This is a prerequisite to forging a new system of understanding. His creativity lies in pushing out the boundaries of existing perspectives, creating some elbow room in which creative activity can take place. The commercial system imagines a world in which the symbolic structure is filled, and every need is preceded by a corresponding product. When the system is rearranged, the shoppers are confused, but not in a productive way. The commercial system anticipates this confusion, in fact it produces it by changing the environment. It is a technique designed to produce confusion and to therefore keep the shoppers in the store longer, buying more products, and encountering needs they might not have known they had. The only possibility for creation lies between the supermarket’s fiction that the world is complete, and the naive—and easily manipulated—ambiguity of confusion the shoppers experience. Within this undefined space, Jack and DeLillo can exercise creative authority.

While Jack seems to have found some space within the system in which creative life is possible, it is nevertheless a solitary position. It is not a creativity that can readily be shared with others. He lacks the collaborative capability that Pynchon thinks is necessary. Without the application of a countervailing tendency towards reincorporation with a community, Jack risks becoming an authoritative force rather than a liberating one.

CHAPTER 4

SIGNAL AND NOISE: TOWARDS A USEABLE INTERFACE

Certainty and Uncertainty

Most postmodern criticism sees uncertainty and multivocality as essential principles that are opposed to univocal authority in the struggle for political emancipation. For example, Foucault warns us in his preface to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* that we should not see *Anti-Oedipus* as "that much-heralded theory that finally encompasses everything, that finally totalizes and reassures.... [We should instead see it as an art that is concerned with] the seemingly abstract notions of multiplicities, flows, arrangements, and connections" (xiv). Postmodern thought is characterized by this reluctance to embrace totalizing theories in favor of those that are committed to uncertainty and bricolage strategies.

In the mid-1990s, however, it seemed to William Rasch and Cary Wolfe that this theoretical commitment to multiplicity makes extensive use of "traditional narratives of 'rights' and 'freedom,' narratives grounded in the 18th-century paradigm of the autonomous, rational individual with its capacities, potentialities, and interests," even though postmodern theories had already discredited such a description of the human (8). 20th century criticism rejected "this humanist tradition...as a *theoretical* foundation for politics..."; it nevertheless made use of this narrative of individual authority and certainty in "the rhetoric and paradigms of political praxis" (8). Rasch and Wolfe recognized that

philosophical commitments to ambiguity and uncertainty frequently coalesce into an authoritative, individualistic, and conservative practice.

They argue that since deconstruction, historical materialism, “the pragmatist revival,” and “cultural criticism based on identity politics of whatever kind” have failed for one reason or another, we need to borrow philosophical paradigms suggested by the scientific understanding of complexity in order to reconcile the the split they perceive between critical theory and critical practice (6). This new paradigm, they argue, unites certainty and multiplicity, the local and the global (11-12). Systems theory gives us a way to avoid dichotomous thinking while still maintaining strong claims to knowledge about the world. According to this paradigm, it is impossible to predict the future state of a complex system, even if we know the initial conditions of the system to an arbitrary degree of precision. Cause and effect are not straightforward; instead, the system is sensitive to minute differences in causes so that a tiny, even immeasurable, change to initial conditions can have a profound impact on the future state of the system. This is true of a complex system even though the system may be well understood and largely predictable at the local scale. One paradigmatic example is the global weather system. Meteorologists are quite accurate at making predictions about local weather on short time-scales, but the accuracy of these predictions tends to drop off quickly as they try to extend them to longer time-scales, or to extend them to descriptions of the global climate. Systems-theory therefore seems to offer us a way to make local claims to knowledge that dissolve when we try to apply those claims to the global state of the system. This mode of thought paves the way for our statements about the world to have epistemological

relevancy without forcing a totalizing perspective on the system or making universal truth-claims.

The mid 1990s saw a flurry of literary-critical activity that tried to incorporate the paradigms of systems theory. Among the most successful attempts to apply the insights of systems theory to *White Noise* and *The Crying of Lot 49* are LeClair's celebrated chapter on *White Noise* in his book *In the Loop*, and Charles Eric White's "Negentropy, Noise, and Emancipatory Thought." LeClair argues that Jack Gladney comes to accept the mystery and possibility inherent in the system he occupies; Jack gives up on universal truth-claims in favor of a bricolage or partial understanding of the world. Charles Eric White sees emancipatory potential in the notion that, in complex systems, "Microscopic random fluctuations—purely chance occurrences—can bring about macroscopic transformation" (263); the small freedoms a system allows can bring about radical changes in the system as a whole.

One way to think of the freedom these minor changes can engender is through communications theory. In communications theory, "information...[is] subject to disorganization in transit. [Messages]...generally come through in less coherent fashion and certainly not more coherently than they were sent" (Wiener 17). "Just as entropy is a measure of disorganization, the information carried by a set of messages is a measure of organization. In fact, it is possible to interpret the information carried by a message as essentially the negative of its entropy.... That is, the more probable the message, the less information it gives" (Wiener 21). Since information is a measure of organization, and less probable messages give more information—that is, they are more organized—

“probable” means “disordered” in this context. We are far more likely to find a system in a state of maximal disorder than in a highly ordered state; noise is far more common in the universe than are highly ordered messages. The noise or disorganization that creeps into a message in transit reduces the amount of information a receiver can retrieve from the signal; nevertheless noise can also be seen, somewhat confusingly, to increase the total amount of information in the system, since it makes the signal less predictable. William Plater describes “the closed system of communication [as one] in which maximum entropy is a state of maximum information and minimum order, in which noise is associated with disorder but is actually differentiated from a signal only by the intent of the sender or the desire of the receiver” (13). Noise may increase the information in a signal, but not necessarily in a way that is useful for the recipient of the message.

In any communications channel, there is always some noise that threatens to drown out the signal being transmitted. Within systems theory, however, there are multiple perspectives from which one can observe the communication channel, and disordered noise at one level is capable of creating order or information on a different level of the system. Since complex systems have multiple levels of subsystems that interact with one another, it is possible for noise at one scale to be incorporated as a signal at a larger scale. While noise may reduce the amount of information extracted by the receiver in a communication channel, that same noise becomes information when seen from the perspective of a larger-scale subsystem. This leads thinkers like White to see potential for noise as a metaphor of emancipation. Noise becomes a method of creating new meaning by perturbing the system, in effect, hijacking the conversation and

producing a new order out of the random noise of a system. As White argues, there is some evidence that Pynchon is employing this kind of a paradigm in *Lot 49*.

While a systems-theoretical approach to resolving the postmodern tension between open ended multivocality and closed authority is attractive, it is not an adequate solution. A systems-theoretical approach does not allow us to predict the outcomes of our actions. By definition, complex systems are systems in which small changes on a local level can have *unpredictable* results on a global scale. Systems-theoretic approaches may allow us to regain some level of epistemological relevancy, but it is at the expense of practical effectivity. Furthermore, systems-theoretical and other multivocal approaches to criticism fail to adequately answer the possibility that any freedom we have at a local level could be a tool of the establishment, an escape valve that bleeds off otherwise dangerous energy. As Horkheimer and Adorno argue, once a “particular brand of deviation from the norm has been noted” the capitalist machine quickly moves to incorporate this originality into its products (132). Novelty becomes a way of re-asserting the status quo, rather than a form of emancipatory noise; the machine has learned to harness system-threatening manifestations of creativity to its own ends.

An alternative to looking to noise and ambiguity as a strategy to counteract the authoritarian forces of culture is instead to find an area not entirely controlled by the authoritarian system, to use the uncertainty found there to generate a unique vision, and to assert it with enough force that it can withstand the attempts of the system to re-absorb it. But to do so places us in the role of authority and forces us to give up on the uncertainty that enabled our revolutionary attempts in the first place. It appears that, even

with the interventions of Wolfe, Rasch and others, we have no theoretical perspective from which we can be true to multivocality while also acting effectively.

Pynchon and DeLillo wrestle within and around this situation. Pynchon's pursuit of uncertainty leads to a dissipation of cultural energy, and also provides a model for how individual concerns can be tempered through collaboration. Pynchon is pessimistic, however, about the potential this sort of collaboration contains for dramatically changing the system. While his virtual playgrounds enable diverse individuals to form ad hoc alliances that aren't created by the System, they nevertheless ultimately fall under the power of the System's certitude. They either remain ineffectual or risk becoming authoritative. As White argues, even if Pynchon does adopt a systems-theoretical approach to knowledge whereby noise can create new meaning, he nevertheless must be suspicious even of that new meaning. The new, revolutionary idea, if successful, becomes the basis for a universal system that tries to drown out noise that might overthrow the new system. Pynchon tries to avoid this later stage whereby the new world order becomes just as tyrannical as the old one it was intended to overthrow by bringing Oedipa to a point at which both a radical overthrow of the system and a reassertion of the system's authority seem equally likely, and then leaving her and his readers at that point, suspended indefinitely. However, this solution evades responsibility for taking a stand against the system that threatens to engulf both Oedipa and the collaborative freedom she has helped to create. *Lot 49*, in its refusal of authoritative certainty, may counteract the forces of the status quo, but this is a strategy that is not open to Oedipa. She is sacrificed so that the novel can succeed. While her efforts produce a collaborative framework that

has the *potential* to disturb the status quo, Oedipa's reluctance to "project a universe" enables long-established forces to project one for her. Her reluctance to act, though inspired by a desire to maintain an open, shifting, and ambiguous world, nevertheless undoes the collaborative structure she has been working towards. She and the web of individuals she has helped to connect have become vulnerable to re-absorption by the forces of authority like auctioneer Loren Passerine, who seems to be a "puppet-master" (152).

Oedipa's story closes with a sense of isolation and despair, and DeLillo's Jack Gladney begins his adventure within a cultural space almost completely controlled by the forces of a powerful system. Gladney's America is one in which the revolutionary energies Pynchon describes have been reabsorbed and defanged by a technocratic machine that carefully controls the mystical, magical, or metaphoric aspects of the objects and products through which Jack experiences reality. Duvall argues a similar point, drawing on Benjamin's concept of aura. Aura "cloaks the work of art in its cultic and ritual function.... [In *White Noise*,] reproducibility may have removed the aura of the work of art, but art's magic function has merely migrated to the marketing of consumer goods." (440) The constant bombardment by advertisements creates a mystical aura around consumer goods, and in *White Noise* this mystification of consumer goods proceeds virtually unchecked.

Jack only knows what things mean because of their advertisements, and this means he is vulnerable to being duped by the corporations that control the ads. There is more at stake than Jack's relationship to the consumer marketplace, though. Claude Lévi-

Strauss argues in *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* that “Any culture can be considered as a combination of symbolic systems.... All the systems seek to express certain aspects of physical reality and social reality, and even more, to express the links that those two types of reality have with each other and those that occur among the symbolic systems themselves” (16). So by controlling the symbolic systems, corporations are also able to control how Jack perceives physical and social reality. The invisible social content of consumer goods is controlled by the corporations that market them. While these forces are at work in Pynchon’s novel, DeLillo treats them much more explicitly in *White Noise*. It is not enough for Jack to maintain ambiguity of meaning in relation to consumer goods. To see only ambiguity or multivocality in the cultural content of a product is to leave the company that markets it the power to define it in any way it sees fit. In order to break the control of the system that defines the content of his world, Jack needs to take control of the mystical, social, auratic meaning from the corporations that seek to control that meaning.

Unlike Oedipa, who refuses to embrace a creative role out of fear of eliminating possibilities, Gladney learns to encroach on the territory of the authoritarian system and becomes comfortable projecting his own universe. While *Lot 49*’s ambiguity is valuable in that it presents opposition to an authoritative system, the system is adept at deflecting this sort of opposition. Pynchon is reluctant to have Oedipa project a universe because it would collapse the vision of an ambiguous, leaderless revolution. DeLillo recognizes the value of ambiguity, but decides that it is better to oppose reactionary authority with a new, creative authority. While DeLillo’s commitment to the individual’s creativity as the

only form of freedom we can gain from the authority of the System offers us a model that brings with it some potential for living within an oppressive regime, it is nevertheless a conservative, individualistic freedom that might prevent us from engaging in meaningful ways with other people. As Paul Maltby puts it, DeLillo's "fiction betrays a conservative tendency; his response to the adverse cultural effects of late capitalism...obscures, if not undervalues, the need for radical change at the level of the material infrastructure" (512).

Both authors attempt to address the cultural conditions of the technocratic structures of the late twentieth century, and both responses are only partial solutions. Pynchon's response to the burgeoning cyberspatial environment of 1960s America is to have his characters produce an alternate, virtual reality based on the noise in the culture. By pursuing the interference, cross purposes, and misunderstandings of the culture, Oedipa and the others in *Lot 49* create a virtual Trystero that organizes their various activities; the virtual Trystero enables interactions that are not governed by the authority of the system. Pynchon draws our attention to the outcasts and rejects of society. Many of *Lot 49*'s characters could be described with the same language Lévi-Strauss uses to explain Mauss's understanding of "witch doctors": "the categories from which witch doctors are recruited are: 'the disabled; the ecstatic; nervous types and outsiders'.... 'What gives them magical properties is not so much their individual physical character as the society's attitude towards people of their kind'" (14). Indeed, Pynchon describes the sailor Oedipa meets in San Francisco as a sort of seer: "She knew that the sailor had seen worlds no other man had seen if only because there was that high magic to low puns, because DT's must give access to dt's of spectra beyond the known sun, music made

purely of Antarctic loneliness and fright” (105). The Trystero is a network of such outsider-seers. The networked nature of Oedipa’s activities is important because as Lévi-Strauss argues, “normal modes of individual behaviour are...*never symbolic in themselves*: they are the elements out of which a symbolic system, which can only be collective, builds itself. It is only abnormal modes of behaviour which, because desocialised and in some way left to their own devices, realise the illusion of an autonomous symbolism on the level of the individual” (12). Pynchon unites all the outcasts under the banner of the Trystero, turning “abnormal modes of behaviour” in which there is an illusion of autonomous symbolism into a culture in which no abnormality is an island. The Trystero is the virtual, symbolic entity that unites Oedipa and the sailor, and it is that union that Pynchon draws our attention to when he writes that Oedipa “knew, because she had held him, that he suffered DT’s” (104). The Trystero, whether real or hallucination, enables Oedipa to interface with the old man and learn something about him. His mattress, containing “vestiges of every nightmare sweat, helpless overflowing bladder, viciously, tearfully consummated wet dream, [is] like the memory bank to a computer of the lost” (102). The man’s physical and informational essence is held in the mattress, but Oedipa is able to link directly to him through the medium of touch. While Pynchon clearly believes in the power of virtual structures like the Trystero to unite those excluded from mainstream culture, he ultimately shows that this strategy is inadequate. Insofar as the Trystero is able to link groups with anti-societal tendencies, it also manages to create a coalition of these groups, undermining their

dissenting energy, and threatens to swallow Oedipa whole; it leaves her more isolated rather than more connected, and it threatens to become the authority that it once opposed.

Two of America's most important novelists have attacked the same problem and both have succeeded only in contributing a partial solution. If we treat the moments in which each author's proposed response fails as crisis points that push us towards a new paradigm, we might be able to move beyond the impasse that exists between univocal creative authority and multivocal collaboration.

The model I propose to use to disrupt this stalemate comes from Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Kuhn argues that paradigm shifts only occur when certain anomalies in existing paradigms, or inconsistencies between competing paradigms, reach crisis level. For example, "[t]hermodynamics was born from the collision of two existing [and incompatible] nineteenth-century physical theories" (67). The collision of existing paradigms highlights the differences between the two in a way that leads to the creation of a new paradigm.

In justifying his use of the term "revolution" to describe a shift of scientific paradigm, Kuhn outlines a parallel between scientific and political revolutions: "Political revolutions are inaugurated by a growing sense, often restricted to a segment of the political community, that existing institutions have ceased adequately to meet the problems posed by an environment that they have in part created." (92). I see a similar interaction between the efforts Pynchon and DeLillo have made towards describing an adequate response to cyberspatial culture. When taken together, Pynchon and DeLillo—especially in *Lot 49* and *White Noise*—allow us to see anomalies that indicate a crisis in

postmodern thinking. As Kuhn argues, “Political revolutions aim to change political institutions in ways that those institutions themselves prohibit. Their success therefore necessitates the partial relinquishment of one set of institutions in favor of another, and in the interim, society is not fully governed by institutions at all” (93). Pynchon and DeLillo see anomalies in postmodern modes of thought. They use different strategies to demonstrate these problems, and urge us to relinquish this institutional way of thinking in favor of a not yet fully formed new paradigm. Postmodernism demands a commitment to a decentered, open, ambiguous system in which meaning is a function of power and tradition, rather than an objectively true description of reality. Pynchon shows us that this paradigm, while enabling a conceptual re-ordering that allows those on the margins of society to interact in ways that could counteract a central authority, nevertheless acquiesces to central authority by insisting on remaining perpetually open. DeLillo shows us that a commitment to projecting a universe can be equally isolating. The shifting facts and lack of central authority that allow DeLillo’s characters to make their own worlds threaten to compartmentalize people; the largest collective unit that Jack can participate in is the family unit or affinity based on consumption of products manufactured and sold by the only meaningful political players remaining: corporations. Even the University system to which he belongs is more corporate enterprise than ivory tower.

By making their texts interact in a way that their authors may never have considered, we can produce an interconnected pattern that enables DeLillo’s commitment to creative authority to provide the creative spark needed to think against the constraints of the system, and we can also provide a way to undo that authority by taking seriously

Pynchon's attempts to theorize how people may collaborate without ever being conscious of the fact that they are collaborating. The new paradigm that emerges from this examination involves seeing both authors as contributing to the construction of a single psychic space that lets Pynchon's attempts to theorize a virtual community of outsiders apply a brake to DeLillo's conservative creativity, and lets DeLillo's willingness to "project a universe" provide the focused directionality needed to keep Pynchon's inclusivity from becoming totalizing. If the Trystero comes to mean *everything*, as Oedipa fears it does, it can no longer function as the organizing image that allows outsiders to work against a totalizing system; it becomes the totalizing system itself. The Trystero risks being too good at its job and, by organizing all fringe groups under its banner, eliminating the fringe.

As long as there is an individual perspective of the sort that Gladney develops, Oedipa's sense that everything has been subsumed into the Trystero can be circumvented; something must resist incorporation. Gladney resists both a Trystero-like commitment to ambiguity and the authoritarian drive of American culture by developing a perspective outside of the existing categories given to him by the system. He attempts to construct an identity that circumvents the off-the-shelf ones his culture provides. In the final chapter of the novel, for example, he rejects the easy identifications that the culture thinks he should adopt. When Wilder narrowly escapes death while riding his tricycle across the highway, Jack does not react in the stylized persona of "relieved parent." Rather, as LeClair puts it, he "simply reports it as a fact of uncertain cause and effect, finding in it no evasion or mastery.... [It is an] uncertain acceptance of the uncertain" (402). I would

add, however, that Jack accepts that uncertainty because it provides the path through which he can enact a creative identity apart from any specific, pre-existing role. Jack similarly rejects categories of professor (neither his role as founder of Hitler studies nor the college he works for figure in the events of the last chapter), patient (he refuses the additional tests his doctor wants to run), cuckold (any marital strife arising from his wife's infidelities seem to have been resolved), criminal (there is no mention of his botched murder attempt or the consequences of those actions). In short, Jack rejects nearly all the roles he has previously assumed. One prominent exception is the role of family man, but even this position within the social order is given no more than two sentences: "We go to the overpass all the time. Babette Wilder and I" (324). It is unclear whom Jack means this pronoun to include until the second sentence removes the ambiguity. Jack has linguistically isolated the members of his family from the collective pronoun comprising them.

This series of rejections opens up the possibility that Jack has found a space within which he can create a new identity. This creativity stems from Jack's awareness of perspective. His story is related in the first person, and this is a tacit acknowledgment that other perspectives are inadequate. Though part of a postmodern culture in which his story is always already told, already preceded by other narratives, Jack nevertheless needs to construct another permutation, an articulation in his own voice. He is able to find the empty space between other perspectives, measuring the distance between them, and using that distance as the space for his creative energy. As Bruce Fink, following Lacan, argues, the subject is "a breach between two signifiers" (69). Jack is attempting to situate himself

in that breach in the final chapter of *White Noise*. For example, Jack is very concerned with the space between two perspectives. Of the sunset, he says “we don’t know whether we are watching in wonder or dread,... we don’t know whether it is permanent, a level of experience to which we will gradually adjust, into which our uncertainty will eventually be absorbed” (324-5). Jack lays out the two possibilities: Either the uncertainty will continue unabated or else it will be absorbed into a system of understanding.

Jack, by focusing on this distance between the two possibilities, is attempting to place himself in the space between them. Unlike Oedipa who is in a similar situation at the end of *Lot 49*, Jack is not dismayed by this uncertain space between the two perspectives; he actively develops this gap. His description of the final supermarket scene makes this clear. He contrasts the difficulty shoppers have understanding the new layout of the supermarket with the ease with which the computers at the checkout make sense of the products in the store. While the shoppers feel “agitation and panic,” and “walk in a fragmented trance” as they try to make sense of the new arrangement of products in the store, the machines feel no confusion (325). Jack tells us that “it doesn’t matter what... [the shoppers] see or think they see. The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly” (326). The shoppers are in a position similar to the one Oedipa is in at the end of *Lot 49*. They are confused, unable to “figure out the pattern, discern the underlying logic” of the system in which they find themselves. The scanners represent a counterbalancing certainty to the shopper’s uncertainty. By staking out these two opposing perspectives, Jack is marking the space overlooked by both systems of understanding. It is as if he is trying to

reconstruct the analog curve from which these digital possibilities have been extrapolated. Paradoxically, by taking on the authority to create, Gladney enacts the sort of mental stance needed to resist the totalizing force of postmodern multiplicity that threatens to color all critical thought. The creative authority Gladney manifests implies that there are still some things that have not been incorporated into the system's mode of understanding. However, DeLillo's creative production within symbolic gaps risks becoming totalizing without applying a Pynchonian perspective that slows down its totalizing tendencies.

Combining these authors in this way requires that we rethink what we mean by influence. By looking at Pynchon and DeLillo as contributing to a single virtual entity, we can move past the impasses in each author's thinking. The question is no longer whether we can trace influence from one author to another; influence is not the cause of certain features we discern in a text. Instead we infer influence based on the fact that the two authors can be seen as working on different aspects of the same problem. Influence becomes an effect of critical activity rather than a cause of certain features in a text, and the reader contributes the outside energy that prevents the two authors from canceling each other out. The two novelists contribute, without necessarily realizing it, to the construction of a single symbolic structure, which the critic discerns; this structure then becomes the evidence of their collaboration.

There is a certain paranoia involved in looking at a set of novels in this way. It becomes difficult to determine if the novels are connected or only seem to be connected. In this way, my method mirrors *Lot 49*: just as it becomes impossible for Oedipa to know

if she is imagining the Trystero or uncovering it, it becomes difficult to know if there is an actual relationship between Pynchon and DeLillo—or for that matter, any set of authors. The possibilities for connections of this sort to proliferate threaten to engulf any productive use that might come of seeking out those connections. My method also borrows from DeLillo's conception of creative authority in the face of ambiguity. Just as Jack comes to see uncertainty as a gap that provides him the necessary freedom to project meaning, I see the ambiguity inherent in the question of whether or not these authors are engaged in a joint project as an opportunity to pursue the consequences of that hypothetical collaboration. In this regard, Pynchon and DeLillo are perfectly paired since the ambiguities of each author's personal life make it difficult to trace any influence between them directly. A notion of influence therefore gives way to one of interface or dialogue.

Pynchon's use of the scientific concept of entropy has been thoroughly discussed by many critics. I would only like to emphasize that the second law of thermodynamics indicates that entropy always increases in a closed system. This means that eventually all closed systems come to a stable resting state described as heat-death. Heat-death is the most probable state of a system, one that can be prevented only by an influx of energy from outside the system. If we imagine the system in question as a perfectly insulated box with no access to the outside, heat-death is the point at which every air molecule inside the box has the same level of energy. There are no longer any molecules that are moving faster or slower than any others. Pynchon, of course, extends this idea to culture,

imagining a future world in which all ideas are equivalent and no new information can be exchanged.

Accordingly, dialogue in *The Crying of Lot 49* is largely ineffective. Oedipa and Mucho seem to talk past one another. The conversations that Oedipa has with people in the Scope and elsewhere are fruitless. Dr. Hilarious has given up on talk therapy in favor of funny faces; and he cautions Oedipa not to talk about her hallucinations, not to “let the Freudians coax it away or the pharmacists poison it out of you. Whatever it is, hold it dear, for when you lose it you go over by that much to the others” (113). To communicate one’s hallucination to the outside world is to submit to cultural authority; however, not to exchange ideas with others is to succumb to intellectual heat-death. To get around this dilemma, the book develops the sense that there is communication all around, lurking just below the meaningless surface text. While the things people have to say to one another seem meaningless, there is nevertheless a sense that they still need to be said and that the banal exchanges contain some hidden energy that can be exchanged outside the bounds of the Freudians or other authorities.

One way to explain the hidden energy is to argue that dialogue in the novel works only in its failure. That is, it isn’t so much that dialogue is ineffective; it’s that dialogue never reaches the goal that it aims at, instead creating something unintended. While the conversations Oedipa engages in don’t really achieve the goal that she has of deciphering the mystery of the Trystero, these conversations are the medium through which she is able to collaborate with other people. This would imply a necessary ambiguity in conversation. As long as something hidden remains to be uncovered in an utterance, as

long as there is something that remains not-understood, we have yet to reach cultural heat-death.

For Pynchon, finding out is the same as totalitarianism. To solve a mystery or to write a history is to close off possibilities, to move a little closer to maximum entropy. In this context, conversation closes off possibilities to the extent that the interlocutors understand what has been said. Therefore, only conversations that contain ambiguity and misunderstandings contain the possibility for new meaning to be discovered. This is why so many commentators have seen Pynchon's books working towards a point of maximal ambiguity or suspension: these are the moments of greatest possibility, when misunderstandings are common, when multiplicities coexist, each possibility asserting itself without constraining the others.

While containing rich possibilities for meaning to emerge, however, such ambiguity also demands a high price of the individual. Since ambiguity is the only source of new meaning, we give up our ability to communicate with other people to the same extent that we gain the ability to create. To see the novel as suspended between equally likely possibilities is to subject it to a form of heat-death. If all possibilities are equally opposed, and if this equilibrium cannot be broken, all possibilities have equal probabilities; the system is in a state of maximum entropy. Therefore, some possibilities need to be eliminated in order for communication to occur. The situation is something of a paradox: on the one hand, only through misunderstanding can there be an exchange of information; only by saying something the other person does not already know, expect, or imagine, can anything new be said. On the other hand, only by limiting the scope of the

universe of discourse do we have any hope of getting any point at all across to another. Pynchon's novel presents both these extremes: the meaningless, identical conversations that threaten to drown out actual communication, and the pervasive sense of something unknown in the world, some noise that demands attention. This is also the structure of most postmodern criticism. We espouse multiplicity and ambiguity, doubt meta-narratives, and mistrust authority at the same time that we assert the effectiveness of one or another cultural theory and argue about theoretical issues. As in *Lot 49*, criticism is in tension between multivocal possibility and univocal authority. To leave the novel at a place of maximal ambiguity is to leave it in a state of ideational heat death. Only by opening it to another system and injecting energy from outside can we re-energize it as a source of meaning. By using the affinities between the two novels, we can link them together so that *White Noise* provides the external energy *Lot 49* demands, and *Lot 49*'s commitment to ambiguity can prevent that energy from overwhelming the system. When coupled, these novels can form a more complex system capable of moving past the deadlock between ambiguity and certainty.

Coupling *Lot 49* and *White Noise*

White Noise displays a sense of tension between authority and possibility that is similar to that found in *Lot 49*. In DeLillo's novel, however, authority has taken control of culture's noise. *Lot 49*'s outsiders represent a counter force to scientific and historical certainty; they cast doubt on authoritative accounts, and threaten to drown out the signal

of those accounts. In contrast, the Gladneys live in a world of proliferating experts who produce knowledge faster than laypeople can keep pace. Furthermore, the distinction between expert and layperson is becoming so fuzzy as to suggest that everyone in *White Noise* is an expert. For example, Tweedy Browner, one of Jack's ex-wives, can send "expert streams [of smoke] from her nose and mouth" (86), his daughter Denise can put on "an expert mask of restrained exasperation" (41), there are "experts in the new science of evacuation" (128), and even though Winnie Richards—the biologist Jack enlists to analyze Dylar—tells Jack that she's "not an expert in any of this," she goes on to describe, in detail, the mechanisms by which Dylar works (188). Jack then elevates Winnie to the status of expert when he tells his wife Babette that he has had Dylar "analyzed by an expert" (190). Babette is recruited to teach a class in "Eating and Drinking: Basic Parameters" because, as she says, "Knowledge changes every day. People like to have their beliefs reinforced....[P]eople need to be reassured by someone in a position of authority..." (172). There is no longer one authoritative voice but an overlapping multiplicity of sometimes contradictory expert views. This constant barrage of information makes it difficult to attempt to counteract any authoritative voice because the postmodern production of information and knowledge has made everyone an expert. With only inadequate ways to process the incoming information, everything that might be said is equally important. *White Noise*, with its sense of competing expert opinions any one of which threatens to overturn the others, begins the way *Lot 49* ends: in equilibrium between possibilities for meaning that all seem equally likely.

White Noise shares *Lot 49*'s sense that there is some deep information hidden within that noise, but whenever this possibility arises, it almost as quickly falls away due to the fact that the culture also seems maximally ironic and insincere; sincerity is suspect because it always seems to represent the interests of the powerful. For example, commercials tout the benefits of products that continually disappoint. In this environment wherein certainty is presented, even demanded by the scientific paradigms of the day, the culture nevertheless also seems supremely unsure. The more expert advice the culture produces, the less sure people are about the world. It becomes so difficult to extract the signal from all that noise that DeLillo's strategy is to have Jack *forge* a signal of his own. From one perspective, this adds to the noise, but from another it creates a source that Jack can trust over and above the other voices competing for his attention.

Jack is by no means the only example of one of DeLillo's characters projecting an authoritative perspective rather than following the paradigms presented by American culture. *Libra*'s Nicholas Branch, for example, writing the "secret history of the assassination of President Kennedy" (15), begins to see his endeavor with the certainty of a religious adherent. From the "ambiguity and error" of reams of data about the assassination, he is attempting to reconstruct "the actual men" that produced the data (15). He starts with "bullet trajectories," expert testimony, and other data sets and follows them backwards in time in order to arrive at the men involved in the event; this is an "almost holy" process for him (15). As he moves from official history, meaningless data, and conflicting eyewitness accounts towards the creation of an unofficial—and likely idiosyncratic—secret history, he narrows down the possibilities inherent in the data. He

must close off possible interpretations of the information he has in order to create his secret history. Even though he is “in too deep to be selective” and “it is impossible [for him] to stop assembling data,”(59)—suggesting that he will never succeed— Branch’s Sisyphian task is to turn the swirl of data he encounters into a narrative.

Win Everett, at times, functions as a counterforce to Branch. Describing the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, he outlines the levels of secrecy designed to isolate knowledge and halt the flow of information. In this mode of thought, “details” become “a form of contamination” with the “White House... the summit of unknowing” (21-22). He believes that this isolation is needed because “an unsullied leader redeemed some ancient truth which the others were forced to admire only in the abstract, owing to their mission in the convoluted world” (22). For Everett, the “convoluted world” of secret information gives rise to the phenomenal world in which a president can be the unsullied leader able to maintain plausible deniability. Unlike Branch who tries to unravel layers of conspiracy, Everett constructs conspiracies piece by piece. But he sees the construction of secrets as holy in a way similar to the way that Branch sees the unraveling of secret information as holy. Everett claims that “[s]ecrets are an exalted state, almost a dream state. They’re a way of arresting motion, stopping the world so we can see ourselves in it” (26). He becomes one of a handful who know the “truth,” and therefore generates the image of the unsullied leader. He is able to construct a plot out of information. “We do the whole thing with paper. Passports, drivers’ licenses, address books. Our team of shooters disappears but the police find a trail. Mail-order forms, change-of-address cards, photographs. We

script a person or persons out of ordinary pocket litter” (28). He creates human lives out of traces of data.

Everett and his co-conspirators need Oswald, of course, but only as “a name, a face, a bodily frame they might use to extend their fiction into the world” (50). In some ways this is an inversion of the traditional cyberspace paradigm. Rather than trying to deny the flesh and transport oneself to a realm of pure pattern or data, Everett imagines data as the underlying reality that needs to be transported into physical space. But Everett’s fantasy is not incompatible with a cyberspatial mode of thought. In Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, the experience of cyberspace is likened to the experience of drug-induced paranoia. While high on speed, Gibson’s Case begins to see the physical world as a vast set of data, and the narrator describes the experience as “data made flesh” (16). This is Everett’s sense of Oswald as well. Everett sees him as the fleshy counterpart to the informational construct he has developed, and this enables him to shape reality to his will.

Jack, Branch, and Everett’s behavior is in stark contrast to that of an earlier DeLillo character, Billy Twillig in *Ratner’s Star*. Fourteen year-old Billy is unable to engage in the sort of creative world-projection that Jack, Everett, or Branch do. Instead, he is much more spiritually akin to Pynchon’s Oedipa, searching for an understanding of reality that is deeper than the one presented to him. In the opening paragraph of *Ratner’s Star*, DeLillo describes the horizon as “a fiction whose limits were determined by one’s perspective” (3). Billy’s father takes him into the subway tunnels where he works in order to impress upon the boy that “existence tends to be nourished from below, from the fear

level, the plane of obsession, the starkest tract of awareness” (4). These two passages, indicate the conceptual parameters of the novel. The horizon has a virtual existence; it is generated by the illusions presented by perspective. In other words, its existence is nurtured from below, by each person viewing it. The Horizon exists only because of the multiple perspectives that converge on it. The same can be said of the structure that provides the setting for most of the novel. As Billy, a fourteen year-old mathematical genius, approaches the structure,

He knew immediately it was something remarkable. Rising over the land and extending far across its breadth was a vast geometric structure, not at first recognizable as something designed to house or contain or harbor, simply a formulation, and expression in systematic terms of a fifty-story machine or educational toy or two-dimensional decorative object. The dominating shape seemed to be a cycloid, that elegant curve traced by a fixed point on the circumference of a circle rolling along a straight line, the line in this case being the land itself. (15)

This structure takes the place of the horizon, and dominates Billy’s visual field. At the end of the first chapter, Billy has been shown to his room, and he lies down thinking about the constant “danger linked to the science of probing the substratum” (18). As he lies in his bed, he “rested along an even line, ending at last this long day’s descent to the surface of fixed things” (18). Like Oedipa Mass, Billy is engaged in a continual search for the underpinnings of the visible. Searching for hidden meanings in numbers, words, and the world at large, Billy is part detective. He has descended from the visible, normal

world outside the structure to the hidden, mysterious one inside. But he still has the sense that he has only touched the surface of what the structure holds. As he looks at the building, he “noticed that particular surfaces seemed to deflect natural light, causing perspectives to disappear and making it necessary to look away from time to time. Point line surface solid. Feeling of solar mirage. And still a building. A thing full of people” (16). The multiple perspectives this suggests nevertheless cohere into a virtual entity, an idea of the structure and what possibilities the structure can sustain. It even gets a name, another virtual structure that is overlaid on top of the physical one: Field Experiment Number One. The scientists who inhabit the building all have their own projects, yet they all contribute to the meaning of “Field Experiment Number One.” Like *Lot 49*’s Tryster, Field Experiment Number One exists both as an object without any implications or meanings, and as a virtual, meaningful signal that provides the organizing idea under which all these scientists operate. The name marks a physical place and also a virtual one that is created by the interactions of those who dwell within the physical space. Billy even goes to school at the “Center for the Refinement of Ideational Structures” (27). One might say that the entire book is about refining an ideational structure, about creating the virtual Field Experiment Number One, giving the meaningless building meaning. We are told that one school that recruited Billy, the Institut für mathematische Logik und Grundlagenforschung, has a name that “scared him so much he never even replied” (27-8). What was it that scared Billy off other than the virtual qualities of the Institut? From his perspective, it was a place in which the possibilities that the virtual enables were not things he wanted to be a part of.

So while Jack and Branch attempt to project unitary visions onto the multiplicity of the world, Billy participates in the communal generation of a virtual structure in a way that recapitulates Pynchon's strategy in *Lot 49*. Between *Ratner's Star* and *Libra*, DeLillo is developing a response to Pynchon's attempts to solve the problem presented by a technologically mediated society. *Ratner's Star* presents a solution very similar to that of Pynchon: Decode the hidden mysteries of the universe that persist despite or because of the increasingly sophisticated methods of deciphering them technologically. With enough individual efforts along this line, they ultimately yield a virtual reality that depends on the differing perspectives of those involved in the search. These differing perspectives cohere into a virtual structure, a symbol that enables cooperation, that organizes that cooperation in a way that comes from the bottom and moves upward rather than being imposed on the bottom from the top of the hierarchy. As with "Trystero" or "The Scope," with "Field Experiment Number One," the name links the virtual reality to the physical space or to physical interactions between people. The name, rather than referring to the hidden multiplicities of history, is instead generated by those multiplicities. That is, rather than discovering what "Trystero" means by searching through the historical record, or discovering what "Field Experiment Number One" is all about by searching through its founding documents, these names are in fact defined by the attempts to discover their meaning.

In subsequent books, DeLillo runs into the limits of the Pynchonian movement. Born from the revolutionary impulse of the 1960s, Pynchon's energies end up continually recapitulating a historical moment. The failed—or at least unfinished—revolution

promised by the 60s never materializes. Many of Pynchon's efforts continue to create a virtual image of the historical moment of the 1960s. History is a virtual construction that, Pynchon suggests, can only be constructed by the commingling of competing energies and perspectives. This, of course, has some appeal. It enables Pynchon to engage in historical thinking, to respect the reality of past events, and at the same time to know that any history can only ever be partial. The communal and virtual nature of Pynchon's histories provide an antidote to the official, univocal account of history.

As technocratic methods of control mature from the 60s through the 1980s, the reactionary forces that seek to clamp down on multiplicity and revolution come to usurp the multi-perspectival image of the revolutionary moment and freeze it, draining it of its energy. As computer and video technologies proliferate, as more and more voices and perspectives get reproduced electronically and projected into the medium of television, they seem to drown out the possibility of productive collective action. The deluge of images all have the same level of importance. It becomes difficult if not impossible to distinguish between an image of history that is constructed through the interactions of numerous grass-roots actions and the top-down reactionary projection of an image designed to bleed off the energy of revolution.

DeLillo's solution mutates from the interconnected collaboration he presents in *Ratner's Star*—similar to Pynchon's solution in *Lot 49*—to the media-infused isolation of *White Noise* and the refinement of that theme in *Libra*. DeLillo senses a need to project a vision into the gaps of history that remain despite the attempts of technology to eliminate those gaps. Even though American culture has become one of constant visual

reproduction, there nevertheless remain unseen gaps that DeLillo seeks to exploit. Rather than attempting to participate in the construction of an ambiguous, conflicting and open account of history, as Pynchon does, DeLillo tries to find the holes in the official accounts of events. He seeks out blank spaces in the historical landscape and projects an individual image into those unanswered gaps.

The Penguin paperback edition of *Libra* includes a note from the publisher on the copyright page: “This is a work of fiction. It draws on the historical events surrounding the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and many of the real-life persons associated with those events appear in this work as characters. However, insofar as this work expresses any opinions or theories about the assassination of the persons involved, those opinions and theories are solely the product of the author’s imagination.” The publisher is disclaiming the novel as an attempt at an alternate history. Nevertheless, DeLillo feels it is necessary to include his own note after the text of the novel:

This is a work of imagination. While drawing from the historical record, I’ve made no attempt to furnish factual answers to any questions raised by the assassination.

Any novel about a major unresolved event would aspire to fill some of the blank spaces in the known record. To do this, I’ve altered and embellished reality, extended real people into imagined space and time, invented incidents, dialogues, and characters. (457)

While the publisher insists that opinions and theories are solely the products of DeLillo’s imagination, DeLillo makes it clear that he is filling a void in the factual record. The

events he describes may or may not have happened as he describes them, but DeLillo is placing a creative counter-vision within the gaps presented by the official story. His history stands in opposition to official narratives; it is a history that is not solely the product of DeLillo's imagination, but the product of his imagination that is possible only because the official accounts of the event have faltered.

DeLillo's 2005 introduction to *Libra* makes this even clearer, and also explains that he sees this process of filling gaps as both more important and more difficult to do as technology gets more sophisticated. He asks, "Is there something else poised at the edge of revelation, some hard clear provable reality, one that points either to Oswald as the lone gunman or to the presence of a second shooter in Dealey Plaza that day, as the motorcade moved down Elm Street?" (viii). His answer is that the question itself "suggests the final theme, which is modern technology" (viii). He describes the increasingly sophisticated and technological attempts to provide more authoritative accounts of JFK's assassination that leave less room for doubt. Once the newest technology can analyze the evidence we will be able to determine whether Oswald was the only gunman. If the high-tech attempts to reconstruct the audio of the assassination are successful, "perhaps, there will be an answer. Three gunshots, Oswald acted alone. Four gunshots, there was another shooter" (ix). For now, though, while the computer-assisted analysis has yet to be perfected and there is still room to project meaning into the lapses in official knowledge, DeLillo will create an alternative vision.

As he describes it, "In *Libra* there he is, the second shooter, a man with a name, a face and a nationality. This is how lost history becomes the free weave of fiction.... He is

not the answer to the question that investigators, scientists, historians, government officials and countless others have been asking through the decades. He is simply the man who stands in the blank space” (ix). Even though it is presented as fiction, DeLillo’s account is a personal vision. Despite the text’s many ambiguities, DeLillo has filled the blank space in the historical record with a creative re-imagining. In a sense, the official historical record is more uncertain, more ambiguous than DeLillo’s fictional account. His projection reduces the uncertainty in that record by providing an answer.

Nevertheless, his projection of a personal vision is an attempt to counteract the forces of society that seek to eliminate uncertainty altogether. He holds fiction out as a force with which to counteract the technological drift towards univocality. “Technology tends to represent a thrust toward the future, an accelerated promise of microrefined systems and networked, deeper probes into the way we live and think” (viii). While we tend to think of events becoming murkier the further removed we are from them, continual improvements in analytic technologies imply that in the future, we will have a clearer view of the events surrounding the assassination. It therefore is not enough for DeLillo to revel in the gaps and ambiguities inherent in the world; he needs to fill those gaps with a creative energy that attempts to counteract the authoritative, technocratic, version of reality. To point out the gaps that technology has left behind doesn’t prevent them from being filled in by future versions of those technologies; but to fill those gaps with the author’s vision is an attempt to foreclose the potential of the technology to look into the past and eliminate those gaps that had been, temporarily, held open. Fictional

history will compete with official accounts even after the official accounts resolve their ambiguities with advanced forensic analysis.

Five years after *White Noise*, and two years after *Libra*, Pynchon responds to DeLillo's assessment of 1980s American culture with *Vineland*. The novel is a retelling of 1960s revolutionary moment through the lens of 1980s video culture. It is Pynchon's attempt to re-interpret and re-habilitate the revolutionary zeal of the '60s for a video generation. The media system has made it impossible to imagine revolutionary energies outside of the safe borders of the television or film screen. Once defanged by the media, the revolutionary impulse becomes another entertainment venue in the service of conservative and authoritarian forces. The entire book reads like a parody of Pynchon's earlier work, suggesting that revolutionary impulse he describes in his early novels cannot be translated into another cultural moment.

Pynchon is aware that the revolutionary energies exemplified by characters like Frenesi and her daughter Prairie are easily usurped by the reactionary forces personified by Brock Vond, anti-drug FBI agent and Frenesi's lover. Brock coerces Frenesi, a member of the revolutionary filmmaking collective, 24fps, into planting a gun on Rex Snuvvle, the leader of another revolutionary group. She initially resists, saying, "I can't bring a gun in the house" (241). Brock's response clarifies the degree to which the culture of the image has been drained of any potential for revolution by the technocratic re-production of video:

But you can bring a camera. Can't you see, the two separate worlds—one always includes a camera somewhere, and the other always includes a

gun, one is make-believe, one is real? What if this is some branch point in your life, where you'll have to choose between worlds? (241)

Frenesi nicely summarizes the position that the official forces have placed her in: "So either I pussy out or become a courier of death, wow, this is some swell choice you're giving me" (241). She convinces herself to plant the gun, thinking that she can neutralize its power with the revolutionary power of film. She believes

that with the gun in the house, the 24-frame-per-second truth she still believed in would find some new, more intense level of truth.... Light this little 'sucker here about eight to one, soften the specular highlights, start in on a tight close-up... draw back, incorporating the lovely, deadly thing in the master shot of tonight's gathering, transfiguring the frame, returning at last to the invisible presences and unavoidable terms of which all she had up till now lit and made visible had been only the ghosts.... (241-2)

She believes that there is revolutionary potential in the filmmaking process even as she uses that impulse to justify her acceptance of the Devil's bargain to aid Brock in his neutralization of Rex's revolutionary movement. As Pynchon's narrator tells us, "Brock Vond's genius was to have seen in the activities of the sixties left not threats to order but unacknowledged desires for it. While the Tube was proclaiming youth revolution against parents of all kinds and most viewers were accepting this story, Brock saw the deep... need only to stay children forever, safe inside some extended national Family.... They'd only been listening to the wrong music, breathing the wrong smoke, admiring the wrong personalities. They needed some reconditioning" (269). The would-be revolutionaries,

watching their own story unfold on the Tube, are duped into believing that they are rebelling, when in fact, the forces of the status quo have learned to manipulate the tools of the revolution to recondition them. In this situation, it begins to become impossible to imagine a successful revolution at all. Frenesi's creative framing of the weapon cannot counteract Brock's attempts to control the revolutionaries.

This process of using video to take the power out of events speeds up as the technology of visual reproduction becomes ubiquitous. Television becomes capable of reinscribing events almost as they happen, replacing the event with the image. Even more dangerous for the revolutionary viewpoint, TV shuts down the possibility of creating a viable counter-narrative. One character tells Prairie that there is "a TV movie about the '83-'84 NBA playoffs—wasn't that just back in the summer? Pretty quick movie" to which Prairie replies, "They've been getting quicker over the years, from what I remember" (371). The univocal television movie replaces the collective re-imagining of events and prevents the possibility of a virtual history; the collaborative virtuality that Pynchon has previously postulated as a path towards counteracting the threat posed by authoritarianism is replaced by the ever-quicker authoritative view projected through television. While Pynchon's work has always indicated that it is likely that any revolutionary impulse spawned by a collaborative virtuality will eventually be neutralized, technological sophistication has quickened the pace with which this has happened, leaving no room for the construction of images generated by the contradictions and cross-purposes of competing individuals.

DeLillo's treatments of the ways in which televisual reproduction have drained the past of its revolutionary potential lead to Pynchon's attempts to think about the conditions under which the revolutionary energies outlined in his early novels could still be possible. This, in turn, leads DeLillo to reevaluate his own stance, with a detailed analysis of the interrelationships between crowds, images, and individuals in *Mao II*. Written on the heels of *Vineland*, DeLillo's *Mao II* was published in 1991, and earned a back-cover blurb from Pynchon that declared it "A vision as bold and a voice as eloquent and morally focused as any in American writing." Here, DeLillo again seems to be toying with the idea that multiple perspectives can generate a space capable of redefining the ways in which people interact with one another, producing a world rather than inhabiting one created by authoritative forces. Towards the end of the novel, Karen finds a park in New York populated by homeless people and drug addicts. As she walks among the tents and boxes people inhabit, she finds that "She realized she understood almost no one here, no one spoke in ways she'd ever heard before. The whole rest of her life had been one way of hearing and now she needed to learn another" (180). As she listens to the sounds around her, Karen discovers that this park contains linguistic possibilities beyond her capacity to imagine. The voices, each generated by a unique individual, cohere within the space of the park to create a virtual structure that encompasses all those Karen sees. This quasi-spiritual unity strikes her with such force that she has "to walk slowly to accommodate her awe" (150).

Cyberspace and the Paranoia of Influence

The influence that I have been suggesting exists between Pynchon and DeLillo is difficult to trace directly. Our understanding of the two is conditioned by a postmodern paradigm—one that the two authors show us is flawed. The influence between the two might be nothing more than an artifact generated by using the same critical tools to examine each. They may work in relative isolation neither reading nor responding to each other's works, and the affinities I have been describing may be created by my search for interaction between them. I propose, however, a model of interface rather than influence. Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* holds that "[p]oetic history... is ... indistinguishable from poetic influence, [since] strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves" (5). However none of Bloom's "revisionary ratios" describing the ways a younger poet can position himself in relation to an older one seem to apply to the relationship between Pynchon and DeLillo. Bloom's categories of "clinamen" or "tessera" might come closest to providing a way to understand how Pynchon and DeLillo interact, but neither quite applies. For Bloom, clinamen "appears as a corrective movement" in the newer poet's work, "which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves" (14). He argues that we can try "to read any poem as its poet's deliberate misinterpretation, *as a poet*, of a precursor poem or of poetry in general. Know each poem by its *clinamen* and you will 'know' that poem..." (43). He asks us to measure a poem by how much it departs from previous

work. We can see DeLillo swerving away from Pynchon's commitment to multivocal ambiguity, but to do so misses the extent to which Pynchon is also incorporating DeLillo's work into his own in *Vineland*. It also fails to capture the collaborative nature of the authors's projects. When taken together, the two authors form a more complete picture of American culture than either of them do alone.

Bloom's notion of "tessera" or "completion and antithesis" (14) perhaps comes closer to describing the Pynchon-DeLillo relationship. In this revisionary ratio, the "poet antithetically 'completes' his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough" (14). "In the *tessera*, the later poet provides what his imagination tells him would complete the otherwise 'truncated' precursor poem and poet, a 'completion' that is as much misprision as a revisionary swerve is" (66). But this doesn't quite apply to Pynchon and DeLillo either. As my discussion indicates, DeLillo does seem at times to turn against a Pynchonian movement when thinking about how to respond to cyberspatial culture; he does take up, in a sense, where Pynchon leaves off. Bloom's considerations of tessera, however, rely on a notion of priority that he adapts from psychoanalytic principles: "If this is to serve as model for the family romance between poets, it needs to be transformed, so as to place the emphasis less upon phallic fatherhood, and more upon *priority*" (64). Tessera's emphasis on priority does not capture the back-and-forth, intertwining nature of the relationship between these two authors. Neither does it address the way in which they contribute to the creation of a virtual structure that neither of them can quite see clearly. Rather than one author working to "clear an imaginative space" for

himself, as Bloom has it, Pynchon and DeLillo are instead *creating* an imaginative space together.

In order to adequately describe the Pynchon-DeLillo relationship, we need to examine the shape they have jointly given to the psychic space of cyberspace. They both imagine the invisible networks of information that surround contemporary America to be all encompassing and vaguely threatening. The cyberspatial paradigm is one of paranoia: everything is connected to everything else, a small influence can be magnified and produce large-scale effects, the cyber invades or melds with all other forms of space, and links between distinct events can be forged long after the initial events have transpired. In this situation, everything threatens to refer to everything else. The cyberspatial artistic space that these two authors have helped to create allows for influences to overlap, to run in both directions simultaneously.

Pynchon emphasizes the cooperative aspects of this space. He uses the concept of virtuality to construct an opposition to authority that is made up of the various actions of many individuals. These individuals do not need to actively or consciously collaborate because Pynchon has created a space within which all countercultural activity can be joined together regardless of the intentions of the individuals. One need not know that one is part of the Trystero to join it. DeLillo pushes the cyberspatial mode of thinking towards creativity, arguing that the only way to survive within a cyberspatial environment is to inject one's creative energy into the gaps that the system has yet to eradicate. Together they provide us with the contours of the cyberspatial. Both movements respond to what the authors see as the development of the deadening aspects of a cyberspatial

world. As such they both inevitably encounter each other. Pynchon's idea in *Lot 49* is to maximize the potential the cyberspatial mode of thought has for interaction, intersubjectivity, and collaboration if not outright cooperation. DeLillo's idea in *White Noise* is to try to find a way to avoid being consumed by the system, to avoid the tempting but deadening possibilities engendered by the cyberspatial mode of thought.

A cyberspatial way of thinking is fundamentally one in which influences overlap in ways that are difficult or impossible to untangle. As critics, we begin to see these interactions and overlappings everywhere. The postmodern breakdown of the barrier between text and world leads to a paranoia in which everything seems connected. Looking at Pynchon and DeLillo, the influence is not only on the part of the authors, but also on the part of the critic who sees connections between the authors. The nature of their novels is such that a paranoia that identifies influence all around is precisely the right response. They have helped to create a cultural understanding of the space of the cyber that we all share. We could go so far as to see their works as a collaborative effort to shape the way we think about life in a technocratic society, rather than individual works influenced by one another. The paranoia in both novels overlaps to create a virtual space in which influence is no longer a question of authorial misprision but of critics' and readers' ability to form and find links between elements of each novel. They work in the same psychic space, and they create a virtual conception that allows us to see the ways in which they overlap and contradict one another clearly. Those contradictions lead us to the realization that the existing ways of understanding them are inadequate.

For these reasons, the notion of an interface between the two novelists is more appropriate than one of influence. Unlike Bloom's conception of influence as something that is fundamentally bound up in an idea of priority, interfaces are able to deal with simultaneity. The computer screen transmits information to the human at the same time that the human is using an input device to transmit information into the machine.

All interfaces involve translating information from one format into another. Human-computer interfaces also involve a metaphor that guides human interaction with the machine. As I have argued in regard to cyberspatial interfaces, an abstract understanding of spatial systems is necessary for us to perceive cyberspace as a successful way for humans and computers to interact; space is the metaphor that allows humans to think about the otherwise unthinkable complexity that the virtual space represents. Jack and others in *White Noise* experience technology in mystical terms, and the shared mystical energy generated by crowds, advertisements, and technological apparatuses, provides the abstraction or the metaphor that is able to organize behaviors around it. While there are mystical aspects to interfaces in *Lot 49*, the organizing principle is framed in terms of paranoia, delusion, and conspiracy. This difference reflects a difference in how each author imagines the cyberspatial environment. DeLillo, sensing that American culture has already embraced a cyberspatial paradigm, writes *White Noise* in part to think about how we might be able to adapt to life in a computerized system without acquiescing completely to the corporate interests that control the computers. Pynchon writes *Lot 49* at a time when the computerization of culture seems like it might still be counteracted; Oedipa's growing awareness of something that answers to the name

“Trystero”—whether that name refers to an actual conspiracy or to a hallucination—mirrors the culture’s growing awareness of and reliance on computer technology and interconnected communications networks. Pynchon sees the cyberspatial as something that one could, potentially, opt out of; DeLillo takes it as a given of modern experience.

For Pynchon, mysticism and metaphor are forms of interface. The mystical involves the union of competing forces. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Mondaugen mentions the “german mystics” who see the rocket as a magical object; they “look at fuel and oxidizer as paired opposites, male and female principles uniting in the mystical egg of the combustion chamber: creation and destruction, fire and water, chemical plus and chemical minus” (403). Pynchon also sees metaphors as unions of opposites: “The act of metaphor then was a thrust at truth and a lie” (*Lot* 49105). The act of metaphor uncovers hidden connections between previously distinct ideas and words, as when Oedipa senses a connection between the old sailor’s DT’s and calculus’s dt via the “high magic...[of] low puns,” revealing that “DT’s must give access to dt’s of spectra beyond the known sun” (105). The act of metaphor is, at its base, a form of paranoia. Oedipa’s delusion (if, indeed she is deluded) is that the world contains an over-abundance of metaphor. She senses too many connections, is too good at making metaphors; she is engaged in an interface with too much of the world. At one point we learn that she fears that “everything she saw smelled dreamed, remembered, would somehow come to be woven into The Trystero” (64). Everything is a metaphor for the Trystero, and the Trystero is a metaphor for everything; or, as Oedipa considers it, she is “faced with a metaphor of God knew how many parts....she had nothing but a sound, a word, Trystero, to hold them

together” (87). This parallels a later formulation that describes the defiance she sees represented in the Trystero: “For here were God knew how many citizens, deliberately choosing not to communicate by U.S. Mail.” (101). The metaphor of a metaphor with so many parts only God could count them gives way to a metaphor of innumerable citizens; the metaphor of the Trystero, it seems, will continue to drift until it consumes everything. Towards the end of the novel, Oedipa considers that the Trystero exists everywhere, and she wonders “If San Narciso and the estate were really no different from any other town, any other estate, then by that continuity she might have found The Tristero anywhere in her Republic” (148). The image is clear: the Trystero is a runaway metaphor that will eventually come to mean literally everything. The metaphor that at first is endlessly variable comes to fill the imaginative space completely. Nothing can inhibit this expansion of signification except what Oedipa is unwilling to do: project a universe. Endless variability leads to homogeneity. The paranoid functions in the same way. Everything comes to be filtered through the same delusion.

Pynchon slowly constructs the metaphor of “Trystero” until it comes to represent all the possibilities that Oedipa has uncovered, all the people she has met, all the opposing forces and the force that they oppose simultaneously. He is always aware that this mystical power of the metaphor to form an interface between opposing forces is threatening. We have already seen that the paranoid action of metaphor threatens to become monolithic, but insofar as it also has a beneficial side that enables a temporary opposition to coalesce, metaphor is also threatened by technology and modern culture. At one point, Oedipa thinks that only God could figure out how many parts the metaphor of

the Trystero contains, and therefore solve its mystery. To enumerate the elements of the Trystero is to remove any doubt about it, to sort the world into boxes labeled “Trystero” and “Not Trystero.” This binary division of everything indicates why Pynchon suggests that computers also seem to hold the potential to drain the world of possibilities. While watching a hairspray can rocket around the bathroom, Oedipa imagines that “something fast enough, God or a digital machine, might have computed in advance the complex web of its travel” (25). Both machine and God are capable of determining in advance the path of the can or the permutations of metaphor. The drive to get out from under the control of technology is at least part of what Oedipa sees as the reason for the Trystero’s existence. She describes joining the Trystero as “a calculated withdrawal, from the life of the Republic, from its machinery” (101). So it is inevitable that the metaphor will be tipped in one direction or another; either it will proliferate out of control and collapse under the weight of its own paranoia, or it will be reigned in by the machinery of the state, computed out of existence by technological means of control. No metaphor, Pynchon seems to suggest, can be held open indefinitely.

By the end of *Lot 49*, the metaphor of the Trystero has exhausted its power as a source of withdrawal from the technocratic system. All possibilities for the meaning of Trystero are perfectly balanced. For Oedipa, “it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless” (150). She is, however, reluctant to tip the balance one way or another, preferring instead, to wait “for a symmetry of choices to break down, to go skew” (150). She will not project a universe, will not act in a way

that would determine the meaning of the Trystero, and therefore she allows the metaphor to mean everything. *White Noise* takes a different approach. Jack begins in a world that seems to have already exhausted all its possibilities for meaning. Science is eradicating mystery, religion has lost its explanatory power,—replaced instead with computerized simulations of reality—and the two strongest sources of metaphorical meaning are tabloids and television. Metaphors have ceased to be equally balanced, mystical interfaces but are now deployed almost exclusively in the interests of selling products. DeLillo explores the aftermath of metaphorical meaning’s destruction. Metaphoric meaning becomes literal in that every metaphor is deployed to sell a specific product or company. From Jack looking at his watch so as to give the proper “romance to [his] life” and maintain the commercial image of himself as Hitler scholar (9), to the toxic event which, while pregnant with potential metaphorical meaning, seems like a “multimillion-dollar campaign for death” (158), metaphor in *White Noise* is always also part of an advertising and marketing strategy. Lacan says of metaphor that, “any conjunction of two signifiers could just as easily constitute a metaphor, if an additional condition—that of the greatest disparity of the images signified—weren’t required for the production of the poetic spark, in other words, for metaphoric creation to occur” (“Instance” 422). The distance between a product and the metaphorical description of it has, to the extent that the system can manage it, collapsed. It is this space within which “metaphoric creation” can take place that Jack’s culture tries to eliminate.

In *White Noise*, DeLillo explores how to gain control over the metaphoric meaning again by looking closely at how the culture controls the techno-mystical

interface in order to control meaning. I'd like to contrast the techno-mystical with the purely technological interfaces we see in the novel. The purely technological interfaces often fail to provide a contextually meaningful experience for the humans that try to use them. For instance, the smoke alarm in Jack's house is intended to give the house the ability to transmit information about its state to its inhabitants. But when the alarm goes off during a meal, Jack and his family calmly continue eating. Jack tells us that the alarm goes off "either to let us know the battery had just died or because the house was on fire" (8). The interface between the alarmed house and the family living within it needs something extra before it can be perceived as meaningful. The purely technological interface is devoid of the contextual, emotional, and mystical context that turns a signal into a meaningful utterance. On the other hand, the televisual interface is both more ambiguous and more meaningful because it incorporates a mystic element into it. When Babette appears on a local cable access channel, teaching her class in posture, the family experiences it as a mystical event. Jack wonders if he is looking at "her spirit, her secret self, some two-dimensional facsimile released by the power of technology..." (104). While it is unclear what this event means, it is clear that it is meaningful to Jack. Of course, all mystical experiences in *White Noise* are tinged with irony. Jack senses the folly of reading the technological world as capable of sustaining mystical meanings. Nonetheless seeing his wife on television strikes Jack as a moment that mixes a technological interface with mystical import. Unlike the ambiguity of the fire alarm, the ambiguity of this moment seems, at least momentarily, to hold some important meaning for Jack.

That ambiguity is necessary in order for a signal to be meaningful, but the ambiguity itself is not meaning. Ambiguity enables meaning; but meaning also requires another quantity that DeLillo often associates with mystical energy. He develops this idea in *The Body Artist*, which continually oscillates between the notion that experience exceeds all attempts to symbolize it, and the idea that the world as experienced is constructed out of language. In the first chapter of the novel, DeLillo's narrator describes Lauren Hartke and her husband Rey Robles as they eat breakfast. The narrative voice flails about in an attempt to adequately describe the way Rey eats his figs: "He dropped this stuff on his toast—the flesh, the mash, the pulp—and then spread it with the bottom of the spoon, blood-buttery swirls that popped with seedlife" (17). It is as if the editorial choices between "stuff," "flesh," "mash," and "pulp" are frozen in place as we watch the sentence come together. The narrative voice similarly falters when trying to describe Lauren's breakfast. The smell of her soya is "somewhere between body odor, yes, in the lower extremities and some authentic podlife of the earth, deep and seeded. But that didn't describe it....Nothing described it. It was pure smell. It was the thing that smell is, apart from all sources" (17-18). Lauren likewise has trouble describing the sound of birds outside: "The birds broke off the feeder in a wing-whir that was all b's and r's, the letter b followed by a series of vibrato r's. But that wasn't it at all. That wasn't anything like it" (19).

These failed attempts to translate experience into language hint at the inexhaustible residue of a world that exceeds the possibility of capturing it in language. As Lacan tells us, experience always contains some ambiguous residue that resists

symbolization, and DeLillo expresses a similar idea in *The Body Artist*. However, the novel also is drawn to the way in which the experience of a three (or four) dimensional space is constructed from incomplete atoms of symbolization. For example, as Lauren reads the newspaper, the narrator relates “How an incident described in the paper seemed to rise out of the inky lines of print and gather her into it” (20). The narrator continues,

there are endless identical lines of print with people living somewhere in the words and the strange contained reality of paper and ink seeps through the house for a week and when you look at a page and distinguish one line from another it begins to gather you into it and there are people being tortured halfway around the world, who speak another language, and you have conversations with them more or less uncontrollably until you become aware you are doing it and then you stop, seeing whatever is in front of you at the time, like half a glass of juice in your husband’s hand.

(21)

The language in the newspaper creates an environment that Lauren experiences as spatial. The linguistic world of the newspaper and the extra-linguistic world of the kitchen merge together.

After her husband’s death, Lauren encounters the mysterious man she refers to as “Mr Tuttle,” who somehow is able to repeat words and phrases from conversations she has had with Rey in voices that mimic the originals. At one point, we are told that “She amused herself by thinking he’d come from cyberspace, a man who’d emerged from her computer screen in the dead of night” (47). Mr. Tuttle seems unable to experience the

world in anything like a normal way. He speaks in half phrases that are disconnected from any relevant context. “It was as if. He did this or that as if. She needed a reference elsewhere to get him placed” (47). This man, reeking of cyberspace, presents the limits of language, or at least one of them. He repeats verbatim conversations that have occurred in the house between Lauren and Rey, yet they make no sense as Lauren tries to decipher them. When he tells Lauren, “I know how much...I know how much this house. Alone by the sea,” she constructs an associative context in which to place these otherwise unanchored words. “Four words only. But he’d placed her in a set of counter-surroundings, of simultaneous insides and outsides. The house, the sea-planet outside it, and how the word *alone* referred to her and to the house and how the word *sea* reinforced the idea of solitude but suggested a vigorous release as well, a means of escape from the book-walled limits of the self” (50). Lauren senses a branching network of meaning beneath the rambling of what might be a ghost or a deranged man. But, just as is the case when Jack in *White Noise* senses transcendental significance in his daughter’s sleep-murmured repetition of a car brand name, Lauren immediately understands that it is ridiculous to impute meaning to these words: “She knew it was foolish to examine so closely. She was making things up. But this was the effect he had, shadow-inching through a sentence, showing a word in its facets and aspects, words like moons in particular phases” (50). DeLillo is drawing our attention to the portion of meaning that is not found in language. Without some extra-linguistic quantum of meaning, language is just sound. As with the tape recorder that Lauren continually has with her, or like the cyberspatial environment that she imagines Mr. Tuttle has emerged from, something

essential is missing in Tuttle's approximation of language. Meaning for DeLillo is a creative endeavor that overlooks or leaps over linguistic gaps. Normally, we do not even sense the gaps in meaning, taking our construction of the world to be identical with the world. But Lauren and other DeLillo characters are able to sense the shortfall between language and experience and they attempt to give meaning to that void. This is the creative action of DeLillo's characters. They sense the absence of meaning, the gaps in our linguistic constructions, and they—to varying degrees—are able to create meaning within those gaps.

The mystical, meaning-carrying aspect of language depends on gaps and ambiguity, but it also removes some of that ambiguity. Language, for DeLillo, is a form of techno-mystical interface that combines the dumb, technological qualities of marks on a page or sounds in the air and the meaningful, mystical ability to understand the written or spoken word.

The techno-mystical interface is potentially dangerous because, as DeLillo shows in *White Noise*, it is largely controlled by the corporations and conglomerates that control the technological part of the interface. By stressing the mystical side of things, DeLillo is directing us to a portion of the interface that is not entirely controlled by the techno-capitalists. They try to control the mystical, meaningful side of the equation through advertising and brand management, but there is always an element left over, something that remains unexamined and uncontrolled. By supplying a mystical dimension to the utterances of machines, Jack is placing himself into the position that is usually occupied

by corporate advertisers. He can attempt to control the mystical side of the interface, and therefore can intercede in the meaning-construction process.

The techno-mystical interface is connected to crowds and fascism. Masses of people behave mechanically, and the dictator at the center of the crowd uses the mystic import of the event to his advantage. The figure at the center of any crowd is imbued with mystic energy by the fact that people are massed about him. This is precisely the structure of the technomystical interface Jack experiences when visiting the most photographed barn in America. The barn becomes more than a barn by virtue of having people surround it and capture its image. It is because of its position at the center that it is meaningful. The meaning of the dictator at the center of the crowd and the barn at the center of the photographs is constituted by the crowd that surrounds them. A photograph is a perspective frozen in place, it represents the fact that there was a person standing at a particular place at a particular time; photography allows for the possibility of virtual crowds to form that collapse time in the same way that Jack experiences space collapse when he communes with the ATM. By controlling the crowds, either through authoritarian methods as in the case of the dictator, or by advertising as in the case of the barn, one also controls the meaning of the event.

At the same time, however, the dictator at the center of the crowd is controlled by the very crowd he has created. On the first day of Jack's Advanced Nazism class, he shows a film he has "edited into an impressionistic eighty-minute documentary," that focuses on "propaganda films, scenes shot at party congresses, outtakes from mystical epics featuring parades of gymnasts and mountaineers" (25). "Crowd scenes" feature

prominently in Jack's montage; it shows "Close-up jostled shots of thousands of people outside a stadium after a Goebbels speech, people surging, massing, bursting through the traffic" (25). He describes one scene by saying that it "resembled a geometric longing, the formal notation of some powerful mass desire" (26). The power of the central figure comes from the energy of the crowd. Jack, describing the crowd that forms around him and his colleague Murray as they deliver a joint lecture on Elvis and Hitler, says that the students and faculty who gather in the lecture hall were "drawn perhaps by some magnetic wave of excitation, some frenzy in the air" (72). Murray makes the degree to which the central, dictatorial figure is dependent on the crowds that surround him explicit: "Elvis fulfilled the terms of the contract. Excess, deterioration, self-destructiveness, grotesque behavior..." (72). The mystical energy of the crowd demands certain actions from the central figure they amass to see. The Nazi propaganda machine couples that mystic quality that all crowds share with mechanical means of control. Jack as the "center, the unquestioned source" of Hitler studies, finds himself in the same position as the central figures in the film he shows. He stands at the front of a lecture hall, the object that all eyes focus on. He is the center around which Hitler studies organizes itself. As Jack tells us, he is "the false character that follows [his] name around" (17). He is the physical embodiment of the possibility of Hitler studies.

As the central figure surrounded by a crowd, both real and virtual, he is engaged in an interface between himself as an individual and the crowd that surrounds him. The crowd may see the individual, as Freud indicates, as an ego ideal, but the larger-than-life figure at the center must follow certain rules as well. In *White Noise*, being involved in an

interface always requires giving oneself over to the system, to agree to play by another's rules. As with the photographed barn, it is only by virtue of the onlookers that Jack is imbued with the mystical qualities of the center.

Jack's movement throughout the novel is an attempt to find a way to make use of mystical values that departs from the attempts of the techno-capitalists to manufacture mystical energy in the products of advertising. The capitalist system places brand-name products in the center of a virtual crowd, and by virtue of the crowd, attempts to transfer the mystical energy of the crowd to the product, thereby controlling the product's meaning. Jack's obsessive hunt for mystical energies in the world around him is in part an attempt to withhold some of that energy, to divert it away from the products of advertisements, to hold some quantity of energy away from inclusion in the system. This empty space that he creates allows him to re-constitute himself as a new center, and a new source of meaning.

CONCLUSION

By looking at *Lot 49* and *White Noise* in terms of how they treat interfaces, we can begin to construct a system that describes the way the two books exchange information. *Lot 49* takes ambiguity as the primary, more important aspect of the meaning-making process. Oedipa's reluctance to project a universe stems from a fear of becoming dictatorial, removing ambiguity from the system, and becoming the central figure surrounded by a constructed crowd. We can see this in *Lot 49*'s insistence on multiple overlapping perspectives. This multiplicity attempts to counteract the authoritative, unambiguous, univocal culture that Pynchon fears technological advances have brought to America: "She had heard all about excluded middles; they were bad shit, to be avoided; and how had it ever happened here, with the chances once so good for diversity? For it was now like walking among matrices of a great digital computer, the zeroes and ones twinned above, hanging like balanced mobiles right and left, ahead, thick, maybe endless" (150). For Pynchon, the interface that holds the most promise for humanity is one that is decentralized; the dilemma he presents in *Lot 49* is that even the most decentralized system of information exchange is prone to being taken over. To construct meaning is to provide a center, and this is why Oedipa seems so reluctant to pursue the mystery of the Trystero to a conclusion. The novel shows the gradual development of "Trystero" as a symbol with revolutionary meaning, but Pynchon backs away from seeing it as a symbol and instead adopts an open ended and endlessly

ambiguous stance. He is too wary of the potential downside of meaning-production, and sees a revolutionary image as no better than a totalitarian one.

DeLillo does not share Pynchon's fear of projecting a universe in order to create meaning. In fact, for DeLillo it is only by projecting meaning into the ambiguous gaps of symbolization that we can survive in a culture that attempts to eliminate the ambiguity of the world. As the nun Jack runs into while saving Willie Mink illustrates, there is no longer an unquestioned central authority that Jack can turn to in order to settle questions of meaning. When Jack expresses surprise that she does not believe in God, she tells him that being a nun, having religious pictures on the wall, is for the benefit of other people. Her supposed belief is for "the others who spend their lives believing that *we* still believe. It is our task in the world to believe things no one else takes seriously. To abandon such beliefs completely, the human race would die. This is why we are here... If we did not pretend to believe these things, the world would collapse.... As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that *someone* believe.... We surrender our lives to make your nonbelief possible" (318-319). Jack, finding himself in a world devoid of meaning and full of manufactured beauty is able to latch on to ambiguity and find something meaningful, mystical, or beautiful in the ambiguity. When the nun begins speaking to him in German, Jack doesn't understand what she is saying, but he nevertheless convinces himself that her words carry something vital: "I failed to understand.... She grew more animated as the speech went on.... I began to detect a cadence, a measured beat. She was reciting something, I decided. Litanies, hymns, catechisms. The mysteries of the rosary perhaps. Taunting me with scornful prayer. The

odd thing is I found it beautiful” (320). Osteen suggests that “perhaps the words are compelling only because they are unintelligible” (188). I would like to add that Jack can bring meaning to the unintelligible words only if he becomes the authority that the nun has made clear is absent.

While Pynchon focuses on ambiguity as the important element in making meaning, DeLillo focuses on projecting meaning into the gap in symbolization provided by ambiguity. If we imagine these authors as interfacing with one another, we can begin to see each novel as part of a whole. Pynchon shows us that diverse, ambiguous, collective action fails because that multiplicity of viewpoints cannot be maintained. An organizing image, symbol, or virtual structure emerges from the activity of those interacting individuals, and this structure necessarily cuts, omits, and simplifies the multiplicity that produced it. DeLillo picks up the pieces of Pynchon’s attempt at multiplicity, and tries to become the figure at the center organizing the gaps in the historical record. Only by projecting an image into the ambiguity of symbolization can there be any hope of counteracting a system that has become expert at manipulating meaning.

Living successfully in a cyberspatial culture requires both impulses. The technocratic system we find ourselves in presents us with two possibilities: to pursue a Pynchonian openness whose ambiguity traps us into being beholden to the system we are trying to fight, or to become a DeLillian dictator projecting a personal meaning into the ambiguous gaps in symbolization. Alone, each strategy can only be partially successful. Ambiguity and multivocality are unable to counteract authoritative systems largely

because the systems have become adept at using multivocality against any opposition that develops. Capitalism incorporates difference into itself, and, like Brock Vond who will use the tools of the revolutionaries—the smoke, music and films they think will counteract Authority—against them, techno-capitalism turns a commitment to ambiguity into a product for consumption. Commitment to projecting counternarratives into the remaining ambiguous gaps in the historical record is likewise insufficient. This stance risks becoming totalitarian.

We need to combine the two, to have a Pynchonian collectivity committed to diversity and a DeLillian willingness to project meaning as a way to usurp the control of meaning from techno-corporate interests. This would give us a way to control symbolization, to give meaning to things in a way that at least has the potential to circumvent the System. The Pynchonian phase of this activity involves working towards maximal diversity of viewpoints, which will inevitably result in the closure of that ambiguity as those viewpoints begin to cohere into a virtual structure that organizes the activity of the individuals involved. Once the virtual image engendered by the mingling of those multiple viewpoints emerges, we then need to shift to a DeLillian mode in which we can project personal meaning in an attempt to change the center.

Of course, no such union is possible. The inconsistencies between the two movements are irreconcilable. This is why I would like to use the metaphor of the interface rather than a metaphor of merger or combination. Interfaces are never perfect. Something is always lost or omitted when we connect multiple systems together. Rather than combining the two, we need to set up a situation in which the DeLillian usurpation

of the center can add its own meanings to the Pynchonian decentered conglomerate. Energy can therefore be added continually to keep the Pynchonian cycle circulating. Conversely we need a way for the Pynchonian decentered conglomerate to transfer the awareness of other perspectives back to the DeLillian central authority. This would take the totalitarianism out of the DeLillian impulse to create authority. This interface between the two is perhaps impossible, but it presents an outline for a strategy that would enable life within the cyberspatial paradigm.

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