EPISTEMIC STRUCTURALISM IN
THE POSTMODERN NOVEL: THE EXAMPLES OF
WILLIAM GADDIS, J. G. BALLARD, AND
BRET EASTON ELLIS

Dissertation

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By

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* * * * *

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Walter A. Davis
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For Gretchen Cline, who taught me so much.

There never was a more ardent anti-structuralist.
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Introduction

You'd expect, given the richness of Americans in terms of opportunity and cash in the pocket, that the U.S. would be an incredibly diverse society. It's homogeneity is peculiar; I find it fascinating, in a way. There seems to be a very strong set of psychological formulas that work well... --J. G. Ballard.

While America has always seen itself as a heterogeneous society, current academic and political discourse lays particularly heavy emphasis upon our ethnic and cultural diversity. But in such an academic and political climate, it is worth asking what sort of unity might subtend the pluralism we are supposedly privileging. I ask such a question because of an inveterate suspicion of discursive emphasis—a suspicion, in this case, that whatever is being stressed as our society's underpinning is not what's actually making the trains run on time.

Theodore Sizer takes up the problem of cultural homogeneity when he posits a uniform "megaculture" as the overwhelming fact of American life. This megaculture is centrally driven, commercial, and highly assimilative (10–11). It has a readily recognizable content--Sizer cites "The McDonald's arches. Stylized logos. The Harpers short-essay format"--but it also provides "ways of using...facts, of using style, of exhibiting habits" (12).
For me the most intriguing thing about Sizer's "megaculture" is this last, which identifies a strategy for construing culturally constructed phenomena. If Sizer is right about the kinds of phenomena which index such a strategy—brand names, logos, marketing ploys, media hype—then it is likely that we are considering a semiotics based upon familiar signs but unformulated principles of signification. That is, we certainly know what the McDonald's arches mean, but we don't necessarily know a) how they mean or b) how they themselves participate in shaping our decisions about how things mean generally. The epistemology implied by this megaculture would therefore be informal and diffuse, no more manifest than a silent background of beliefs and assumptions informing our judgments.

This dissertation attempts to come to terms with the megaculture's epistemology and the ways in which it has been subjectively experienced by examining its traces in three postmodern novels that appeared at successive stages of its historical development: William Gaddis's The Recognitions (1955), J. G. Ballard's The Atrocity Exhibition (1970), and Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho (1991). These novels are excellent sources for examining that epistemology because in them it emerges through the actions and words of characters who more-or-less consciously commit themselves to its strategies for knowing.

Before entering into a discussion of the novels themselves, I include a preliminary chapter which identifies and describes contemporary social epistemology in terms of its correspondence with theoretical structuralism. Structuralism has been applied in very different ways to all the human sciences, but it can be generically characterized as any analytical approach which dismisses content and considers only the structural relationships
which inhere in phenomena. My thesis is that contemporary social epistemology has much in common with the structuralist enterprise and therefore I call it *epistemic structuralism*. I try to approach the problem of epistemic structuralism dialectically, moving among Foucauldian, Marxist, existentialist, and even structuralist methodologies in such a way that the insights each affords can impinge upon the others. The necessity of my doing so stems from a recognition of the problem of endogenous criticism—that is, the problem of my own situation within the epistemology I am examining and of the impossibility of establishing a position of objective detachment from it.

In the rest of the dissertation I devote a chapter to each of the aforementioned novels, attempting to explicate the traces of epistemic structuralism within the narrative and to explore the novel's success at articulating an intelligible alternative to our socially informed ways of knowing. We will see in *The Recognitions* that personal identity gives way to expressive performance, a structuralist attempt to evoke a persona through empty signifiers which circulate among people like commodities. In the *The Atrocity Exhibition*, the revolutionary potential of desire ultimately capitulates to "reterritorialization" within the structures of media-generated images. And in *American Psycho*, the need to maintain a thoroughly structuralized self in a thoroughly structuralized world results in panic, boredom and eventually homicidal compulsion.

By the fact of their situation within the social epistemology they betray, then, these novels also inevitably confront the problem of endogenous criticism: each author is a white male, clearly writing for white
male readers conditioned by a white-male-dominated culture. ¹ How can these authors hope to transcend what is after all the epistemological ground for their novels' reception? Gaddis takes an openly adversarial position to epistemic structuralism. His narrator is caustically judgmental; and the narrative world of The Recognitions is as full and complex as our own, inviting the reader to make sense of it while frustrating any attempt to do so. Ballard, however, does not attempt to oppose himself to his epistemic commitments; rather, he constructs a schizophrenic narrative that invites the reader to immerse himself in his own perverted desires as a way of coming to terms with them. Ellis, apparently recognizing that there is no position beyond experience, so thoroughly speaks the language of epistemic structuralism that the reader's response of disgust and fascination may constitute the only intelligible form of critique left to us.

I have tried to treat each novel in the terms best suited for illuminating the particular conflict it stages and the knowledge situation it entails. While structuralist analysis plays a large role in each chapter, other discourses apply variously to individual chapters. Thus Chapter Two, on Gaddis's The Recognitions, takes up existentialism and psychoanalysis; Chapter 3, on Ballard's The Atrocity Exhibition, takes up Deleuze and Guattari's blend of Marxism and psychoanalysis; and Chapter Four, on Ellis's American Psycho, makes use of Marxism, Hegel’s dialectic of subject, and, once again, existentialism. Walter Davis’s Inwardness and Existence relates

¹That the reader is so conditioned is the reason I retain "he" as the generic pronoun, contrary to present academic use of "she" and the more informal "they." And because this dissertation concerns the epistemological commitments of the dominant culture, all second-person plural pronouns refer to members of that culture only. By neither convention do I mean to imply universality.
the thinking of Hegel, Heidegger, Marx and Freud dialectically, and thus provides me with the metamethodology I have tried to employ here.

In the final analysis, however, my strongest commitments lie with Marxism and existentialism, which, as Sartre knew, are together capable of transcending their individual limitations. Together they raise the possibility of endogenous criticism, a criticism which begins with a recognition of what Walter Davis calls our "situated subjectivity." Social conditions do indeed produce consciousness, as Marx says; but consciousness is not limited to its social construction, however entrenched that construction may be. In the novels of Gaddis, Ballard, and Ellis, we shall see in what forms the appeal to transforming our situatedness can be made.
Chapter I

"I'll Die Like Socrates": Structuralism as Episteme

Beginning Tuesday, the Leavenworth Detention Center will house Federal prisoners for the Government. The center... is the first maximum-security prison in the nation to be built, owned, and operated privately. Peggy Wilson Lawrence, spokeswoman for the Corrections Corporation of America, likened the center to Sam Walton's concept for Wal-Mart: bring jobs and money to small communities.

---The Kansas City Star, June 27, 1992

[Political organizer Tom] Luce promised an unconventional campaign, should [third-party Presidential candidate H. Ross] Perot formally launch a bid for the White House. "I think Ross will be the UnCola to Coke and Pepsi."

---UPI Newswire, May 10, 1992

---What I mean is, do we only know things in terms of other things? Well then, I'll die like Socrates, there's dignity.

---Do you think they'll let you?

---William Gaddis, The Recognitions
Reconsidering Structuralism

Structuralism is arguably the most influential methodological development of the second half of the twentieth century. Because it accommodated the fashion for scientism prevalent during the 40s, 50s and 60s,¹ it was taken up by a variety of disciplines, including psychology, anthropology, sociology, and literary criticism, in ways so diverse they cannot be handily catalogued, and in any case by now needn't be. ² In practice, however, this wide diversity tended to reduce itself to a narrow range of results. At the conservative extreme, structuralist methodology was characterized by great descriptive detail but small explanatory value—as in the early structuralist literary criticism of Barthes, Todorov and Genette—and at the radical extreme, by cryptic formulation and finally deconstructive implications—as in the later Barthes, Lacan, Foucault and Derrida. And somewhere between pointless descriptive tedium and deconstructive non-affirmation lay the suggestive yet finally untenable conclusions of thinkers like Lévi-Strauss and Chomsky, who sought "deep" structures that were universal and psychologically basic. In sum,

¹For examples of overt attempts, among the "human sciences," at scientific legitimation through an attachment to structural linguistics, see Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," Roland Barthes, "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" and Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Structural Analysis in Linguistics and in Anthropology" in Structural Anthropology; for an indication of the predilection for scientism among Anglo-American critics, see Northrup Frye's influential "Polemical Introduction" to his Anatomy of Criticism. And for a more general overview of this "crisis in criticism," see Jonathan Culler, Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature.

²Instead I refer the reader to several surveys/critiques of structuralism: Jean Piaget's Structuralism, Edith Kurzweil's The Age of Structuralism, Manfred Frank's What is Neostructuralism?, and Leonard Jackson's The Poverty of Structuralism.
structuralism was susceptible to charges of theoretical impoverishment on
the one hand and, finally, incoherency on the other—charges levelled both
from within its borders (consensus among its practitioners never having
been strong) and from without.

The heyday of structuralism is past, as Anthony Giddens (73) and
Peter Dews (xii) have pointed out. Nonetheless, in this chapter I want to
undertake a broad reconsideration of its intellectual compass. This
reconsideration is warranted, I feel, because in spite of theoretical
structuralism's decline, we are still very much subject to the episteme
which underwrote it. It is my hypothesis that structuralism's popularity
was in fact determined by a fundamental way of thinking I will call
epistemic structuralism. Epistemic structuralism is the model or pattern for
knowledge—-that is, for construing data meaningfully—-available to members
of post-industrial societies. Like theoretical structuralism, it tends to
discard content, making identifications and drawing conclusions by
considering phenomena exclusively in terms of the relationships among
their constituent parts. Epistemic structuralism assumes that all things
are situated and that situations are really structures—therefore, according
to epistemic structuralism the identity of a thing, an adequate
understanding of what it is, what it is likely to do or how it is likely to
affect me, how I should behave toward it, what I should do with it, or what
I can say about it, depends upon the structural context which I can assign
to it. The impulse is to reduce situations to structures which are then
understood as the structures to which they are assigned, not just as
situations which belong to a class of situations. In other words, in epistemic structuralism the situation is its structure in the sense that it is exchanged for its structure or—and here is the distinctly "structuralist" aspect of epistemic structuralism—for the structure of something categorically different.

In this chapter I argue that epistemic structuralism "determined" theoretical structuralism in the sense that it provided the ground for theoretical structuralism's reception—in other words, it was epistemic structuralism, rather than scientism, which underwrote theoretical structuralism's popularity. The purpose of this chapter, then, is to explicate epistemic structuralism in terms of its connection to and intersections with various more formal philosophical and sociological formulations. As I hope to show, theoretical structuralism reflects epistemic structuralism in its assumptions, its procedures, and particularly, in its aims.

Though epistemic structuralism authorizes the conscious structuralization of reality, it is by no means a self-conscious methodology. In fact, epistemic structuralism does not refer to an orderly system of thought but a very loosely circumscribed body of practices. It does not have the same status as the formal theories and methodologies of figures like Lévi-Strauss, Todorov or Barthes, nor is it an epistemology. Such theories and methods are products of the kind of critical self-awareness

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3This assumption is not the same thing as a categorical assignment of the sort George Lakoff describes in Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things, since in that operation a category is a class of things to which a given thing belongs. The idea of class is based upon criteria which exceed those of structure, and therefore belongs more to an Aristotelian system. See my discussion of Aristotle, page 29.
that is never antecedent to the epistemological background which they in turn attempt to schematize. Thus, although it schematizes, epistemic structuralism is not itself schematized at all: though it tends to construe data in terms of structures, it is not itself "structuralized." Perhaps, then, the best way to situate epistemic structuralism is to consider the term a trope, that is, as a formal-sounding term borrowed from formal theoretical methodology but referring to a knowledge paradigm which is critically unexamined and epistemologically prior to the methodology from which it borrows its name.

Though epistemic structuralism continues, late in the twentieth century, to provide a uniform pattern for thought, we don't think of its formations as related; rather, we tend to consider them wholly independent of one another—as consumerism, pop psychology, pornography, the work ethic, and the entertainment industry. Some of these may suggest their latent structuralist implications immediately. For example, the work ethic: it is certainly a common tendency of those who earn their living through labor to refer to themselves as cogs in some encompassing machinery—that is, as elements within a structure. However, I will try to illuminate the unifying concept of epistemic structuralism by discussing two of its less overt formations from the foregoing list, the entertainment industry and pop psychology.

The entertainment industry is the best example with which to begin because the traces of epistemic structuralism can be gleaned from its very terminological surface. There each term transforms the other: the connotation of inconsequential leisure activity associated with "entertainment" is legitimized by adjectival subordination to "industry," the
unimpeachable basis for the American way of life: simultaneously, "entertainment" explicates the ostensible purpose of industry, to gratify the needs of consumers. Yet at a deeper level of investigation, the conjunction of these two terms is possible only because of an underlying mentality which provides the principle for bringing them into relationship—this principle is, I maintain, not a structural principle (which would imply scientific necessity) but a principle of structuralization which authorizes a micro-structure, "The [function] Industry, in which any number of items which can by any conceptual stretch be considered products may be inserted into the "function" slot preceding "Industry." 4

But it is the operations of the entertainment industry which especially betray epistemic structuralism's agency, which we see operating clearly in Frank O'Hara's ludic paean, "To the Film Industry in Crisis" (99-100). The speaker explains how scholarly journals, the theater, grand opera, his childhood nurse, the Catholic Church, and the American Legion have failed him. They lack the power to create the broad conventions that ultimately constitute his knowledge and values. The Film Industry, however

4Though I begin with a consideration of some of its language-effects, I do not want to suggest that epistemic structuralism can be reduced to language. Indeed the general scope of my argument is the reverse: rather than regarding language as the model for all social formations, I want ultimately to situate Saussure's view of language within epistemic structuralism. Language is constrained by and within epistemic structuralism, the episteme of production relations. Consider the present example: in any formation involving a modification of "Industry" the modifier is constrained to function materially as a product of that industry. Thus the term "Health-care Industry" is a commonplace today (offensive as it is) whereas the term "Cancer Industry" is not. The point is that while the construct "Cancer Industry" is possible linguistically, it is not possible as a concept within epistemic structuralism—except perhaps as a cynical reference to the prosperity of the American Cancer Society. But even in that case the joke would consist of using epistemic structuralism's rules of transposition incongruously.
has that power, and the speaker offers his love and thanks to the
celebrities who have achieved mythic stature:

[To] Clark Gable rescuing Gene Tierney/
from Russia and Allan Jones rescuing Kitty Carlisle from Harpo
Marx,/
Cornel Wilde coughing blood on the piano keys while Merle
Oberon berates,/
Marilyn Monroe in her little spike heels reeling through
Niagara Falls,/
Joseph Cotten puzzling and Orson Welles puzzled and Dolores
del Rio/
eating orchids for lunch and breaking mirrors. Gloria Swanson
reclining,/
and Jean harlow reclining and wiggling, and Alice Faye
reclining/
and wiggling and signing. Myrna Loy being calm and wise.
Willam Powell/
in his stunning urbanity, Elizabeth Taylor blossoming, yes. to
you/
and to all you others, the great. the near-great. the featured.
the extras/
who pass quickly and return in dreams saying your one or two
lines,/
my love!

At first celebrities signify by association with particular roles. Thus Clark
Gable ("rescuing Gene Tierney") is not merely a hero but the signifier
through which we understand the concept "heroism." Similarly, Cornel
Wilde as Chopin ("coughing blood on the piano keys") signifies melodrama,
and Marilyn Monroe ("in her little spike heels reeling through Niagara
Falls") is the code for the American male fantasy of the seductive-yet-
vulnerable woman-in-distress. But as the poem progresses celebrities begin
to operate as signifiers independent of associations with any particular role.
Thus Gloria Swanson ("reclining"), Jean Harlow ("reclining and wiggling")
and Alice Faye ("reclining and wiggling and singing") themselves become
signifiers for various aspects of beauty and seduction. Myrna Loy ("being
calm and wise") and William Powell ("in his stunning urbanity") signify
through the cumulative effect of their several "Thin Man" portrayals. And finally, Elizabeth Taylor, "blossoming" as America watched her grow up on screen, signifies puberty. O'Hara ends by positing a sort of Hollywood cosmology, in which the universe becomes a metaphor for the celebrity sign system: "but the heavens operate on the star system. It is a divine precedent / you perpetuate! Roll on, reels of celluloid, as the great earth rolls on!" The star system operates beyond the boundaries of the films where we encounter it to encode and inform reality, the "great earth" itself. It doesn't matter whether or not O'Hara is using irony; the fact that this poem is comprehensible, even as hyperbole, says a lot about our structuralist commitments. If there's a "David Letterman" smirk behind this poem, that smirk is only the standard response to the knowledge, on the one hand, that our reality is constructed (though it might be better to say manufactured), and on the other that we have no other reality.

Thus O'Hara playfully points out how we are conditioned to thinking in terms of Hollywood's "star system," a structural constellation in which the concept of "image" introduces a crucial diremption of a particular person and the "type" he evokes. The "star" is a sign in the sense posited by structural linguistics, i.e., an unmotivated fusion of two aspects: image (signified) and physical person (signifier), who evokes the image, partly through physical appearance, partly through gesture and pose, and partly through the roles the star customarily plays. Any number of persons may suggest roughly the same image. More to the point, any number of Elvis impersonators may suggest precisely the same image—and for that reason, celebrities signify one another ceaselessly, both through their similarities and their differences, in a structural system of deferrals
and transpositions with an infinite capacity for self-referential innovation. For example, Madonna, who is more a multi-media image-event than a just singer, actress or author, evokes the images of Marilyn Monroe and Mae West, among others, through overt imitation. Moreover, her popularity depends upon her fans' conscious recognition of that fact: Madonna's "image" is explicitly a collage of images which, far from making any claims to originality of type, banks upon its explicit derivativeness. On the other hand, she also signifies through difference—the fact that her image is radically different from Cindi Lauper's projected innocence or K. D. Lang's androgyny, and somewhat different from Pat Benatar's less impudent worldliness (the difference here is largely one of degree).

But celebrities also signify on another level—and here is the true "function" of the star system—as indexes within the entertainment marketplace. In other words, as signs, celebrities direct consumers to particular products (movies, videos, television programs, recordings, endorsed items) on the strength of image and what sorts of expectations (read: desires) they incite about those products.

Pop psychology, another of epistemic structuralism's formations, follows the tradition of American normative psychology in that its basso continuo is "adjustment." But in addition, pop psychology appeals to epistemic structuralism's strategy of positing a behavioristic langue with which to confront complex emotional experiences. This langue is usually seen as the "healthy" coefficient in a broad contextual structure of behavior, both solitary and interpresonal. Twenty-five years ago, for instance, Transactional Analysis (T.A.), the pop counterpart to ego psychology, sought to help us all restructure our psyches. The idea was
that it is more accurate to describe human interactions as transactions in which you and I strive to "get" something from one another—in Eric Berne’s words, there is always a "payoff." Because payoffs are often covert, the superimposition of the transaction model provides a way of identifying them by authorizing a reduction of nearly every human encounter to one or more possible schemas. These schemas are taken as structures in which participants occupy various functional positions (different ones at different times) in order to secure a payoff.

In 1969 Thomas Harris introduced another structural wrinkle into T.A. In his I’m OK/You’re OK Harris reinterpreted the id-ego-superego model as child-adult-parent. He thereby replaced Freud’s purely discursive and relatively value-neutral structure with a clearly hierarchized and value-laden triad in which the role of rational mediator (ego) is transformed into the real you. Even if you happen not to be an adult, Harris’ "adult" holds structural primacy because its remission—its displacement by "parent" or "child"—is what defines mental illness (33). In this schema, transactions can be structured intricately in terms of which "voice" is speaking and when. In the heady days of T.A.’s popularity, people were heard telling one another, "Your Parent said that" or "That’s your child talking. How does your adult feel?" It was even possible for those serious enough about it, to track and configure the posturings in any "transaction" in a series of charts that Lévi-Strauss would not have been ashamed to pin onto his wall.

More recently, we have seen the appearance of "Mood Therapy," a popular form of cognitive psychology (which is itself a sort of behaviorism without the courage of behaviorism’s convictions). The idea of mood
therapy is that since thoughts are responsible for the symptoms of depression, adjusting thoughts to better reflect reality will alleviate those symptoms. Mood therapy offers a dysfunctional structure of 10 cognitive distortions ("All-or-nothing thinking," "Overgeneralization," "Emotional Reasoning," etc.) and advises readers to create charts for logging, mapping and correlating behavior patterns and thoughts by matching them with the archetypes from the list (Burns 39–41, 59–65, 79, 186–189, 280–283).

If my accounts of the entertainment industry's operational structure or pop psychology's structural analytics were simply an "objective" description of unconscious or preconsciously processes, in the tradition of structural anthropology or Barthes' Mythologies, then there would be little point in my reconsideration of structuralism. But the distinctive thing about the communicative structure of the entertainment industry--and this distinguishes all of epistemic structuralism's formations--is that it is consciously interpreted as a structure by the people who use it. It is hardly an intellectual breakthrough for me to point out that the conjunction of image and physical presence is unmotivated or that stars function to aid in consumer choices; the point is that moviegoers already know that and fully expect the world of entertainment to operate that way. Similarly, pop

5Author David Burns reports that "research has documented that the negative thoughts which cause your emotional turmoil nearly always contain gross distortions" (12). Among the principal assumptions of this dissertation are 1) that an accurate awareness of reality—the dismal truth of our collective political, environmental, historical reality—is always the product of considerable effort and 2) that the impetus for this effort is personal emotional pain. Thus I would argue that the to accept Burns' empirical assurances that such pain is a product of "gross distortions" is to forego an opportunity for growth, let alone eventual praxis. But even setting those assumptions aside, it seems to me that disavowing one's emotional reality on the strength of some irresponsible, quasi-scientific generalizations amounts to a massive exercise in denial.
psychology's appeal to structural analysis for adjusting behavior and mood is very much an overt one: people are openly asked to consider themselves as functions within a range of structural possibilities, homologies, and transformations. As I said, there would be little value in describing these operations as corresponding to unconscious mental operations which reflect the deep psychological structures of the human mind: there is, however, considerable merit in referring to a conscious structuration of reality which projects objects and ultimately the self into a variety of functional arrangements with other objects or selves. The value of such reference would be to raise the possibility of rooting out its basis in our thought—and it needs to be rooted out, for epistemic structuralism encompasses what is assumed to be irrelevant to postmodern life, existential bad faith.

Epistemic structuralism reifies desire and anxiety in service of a division of psychological labor in which others are assigned the role of doing our agonizing, suffering, and ultimately our dying for us. We are daily witness to the political implications of such thinking, consecrated as the "American way of life." In the final analysis it is nothing less than what Foucault has described, in reference to an epoch supposedly less kind and gentle than our own, as the police—"the totality of measures which make work possible and necessary for all those who could not live without it" (Madness 46).

Some clarification regarding my use of the term "epistemic" is in order here. Of course, Lévi-Strauss and others, claiming a physiological basis for their theories, have argued that structuralism is epistemic to begin with. Thus taken at face value the term "epistemic structuralism" not only seems redundant but may connote orthodox structuralist principles. However, neither is my intention. The basis of an "epistemic structuralism,"
as I take it up, is sociological—"epistemic" here refers to Foucault's concept of the *episteme*, a given epoch's historically determined ensemble of conditions for producing knowledge. These conditions form a "network of necessity" which "renders an interplay of simultaneous and apparently contradictory opinions possible." Thus the vast array of thought in a given age—at times apparently disconnected, divergent, or even outright contradictory—is actually contained within a uniform set of assumptions about the nature of sameness and difference, about what counts as a rational, reasonable, plausible, or self-evident proposition or judgment, and about what forms are valid for framing and arranging such propositions or judgments into discourse. The *episteme* is a historical *a priori* that

... in a given period, delimits in the totality of experience a field of knowledge, defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in that field, provides man's everyday perception with theoretic powers, and defines the conditions in which he can sustain a discourse about things that is recognized to be true. (*Order of Things* 158)

In *The Order of Things*, Foucault undertakes to write a history of knowledge by tracing the shifting configurations within the *episteme* in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. But he considers only these historical shifts, discontinuities, and reconfigurations as they appeared *in discourse*, without referring their appearance to external causes. This archaeological method requires him to argue that the *episteme* not only authorizes scientific understanding, produces the very objects of its study, and creates the metaphysical space it exploits in order to do so, but manages all this without reference to the necessity of any historical situation. However aesthetically appealing it is to imagine a strategy for knowledge production that produces all of its own elements from within its
own formal configuration, such a conception of *episteme* ultimately implicates Foucault in what he elsewhere criticizes as an "analytic of finitude," since he grounds knowledge within the *episteme* as both origin of knowledge and condition of its possibility. As Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow express it: because the archaeologist maintains that discursive practices do not derive from nondiscursive practices, "The result is the strange notion of regularities which regulate themselves" (84).

Of course, Foucault began to transcend this formalistic methodology even as he began to explore its operations in detail. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he began to take into account certain external factors which shape discourse: who is speaking and by what authority? under what institutional aegis? in what situation? (50-53). This sort of broadening of the archaeological approach eventually led him to take up power relations as the focus of his work. While the analysis of power never led to a reconciliation with Marxism, exactly, it certainly constituted a significant *rapprochement*. For although in his "archaeological" phase, Foucault had charged Marxism with being unable to transcend bourgeois economics, he came to acknowledge the principle of class struggle as a legitimate angle from which to approach the analysis of power ("Subject and Power" 226). Ultimately, then—and admittedly with a certain amount of stretching—I take my justification for relying on the Foucauldian *episteme* from the proposition that archaeology contained, unknown even to itself, an internal contradiction which demanded that it move beyond its formalist restrictions
to consider the external factors—*both* political and economic—which
determine discourse and inform knowledge.⁶

Therefore the Foucauldian concept of *episteme* operates in this study
as follows: it is historically determined, discursively mediated and
institutionally sanctioned *but materially grounded as well*. The last
qualification represents my dialectical departure from Foucault’s brilliant
analysis of the history of strategies for establishing sameness and
difference in *The Order of Things*.⁷ Thus in the second half of this
chapter I will argue in detail that the *episteme* of epistemic structuralism is
grounded in the relations of production that came to prominence in the

⁶Historical materialism has become unfashionable. For instance,
Foucault’s definition of power never actually admits material considerations:
"The exercise of power ... is a way in which certain actions modify
others" ("Subject and Power" 219). And more recently, Mark Poster has
argued that "the whole intellectual apparatus of historical materialism, as
well as that of the theory of political economy" is "put in doubt" by recent
technological developments which have supposedly obviated the concept of
production relations. Poster summarizes that today "Machines 'work'; human
beings supervise" (31-33)—as though operating a drill press on an
assembly line were the equivalent of joining the leisure class. But while I
don’t dismiss such theoretically sophisticated reconsiderations of
nineteenth-century economics, the stubborn reality is that there is still a
class of people who earn their living solely by means of their labor, that
material well-being, however taken for granted and removed from many
(well-fed) people’s everyday awareness, is still the most powerful force in
shaping social relations, and that the seduction of materialism is the
principal means by which power is wielded in our time. These factors
therefore need to enter (or re-enter) into consideration.

⁷Over against Foucault’s internal contradictions, it may well be that
Marx’s over-reliance on materialism reflects his nineteenth-century
orientation. Nonetheless I argue (page 59) that Marx’s theory of history not
only contains but depends upon the role of power relations because power
relations actually constitute production relations. Therefore I will make
the same claim for Marx that I make for Foucault: by taking power relations into
account, even in an understated way, Marxism contained within itself, and
perhaps unknown to itself, the means for overcoming its historical
limitations. It is true that Marx tended not to see power as an end in
itself, but it would be as big a mistake to dismiss Marxism by hypostatizing
power—the way Foucault seems to—as it would be to accept Marxism’s
overly rationalized conception of it.
latter part of the nineteenth century—specifically, the mass production of brand-name commodities and the "corporatization" of American business. Negotiating these relations gave rise to a new way of knowing, in which phenomena are seen primarily in terms of their internal structural relations and hence are exchangeable with other structures. This way of understanding provided the ground for reception of theoretical structuralism, the popularity of which was a function of its similarity to this materially grounded *episteme*.

Several writers have more or less directly touched upon the idea that theoretical structuralism was historically conditioned by an epistemic progenitor which continues to shape our thoughts: Roland Barthes, Richard Harland, Henri Lefebvre, Jean Baudrillard, and Walter Davis. Of these perhaps Baudrillard is the most abstract. In "For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign," he glancingly asserts that structuralist linguistics amounted to an uncritical economics:

> The sign economy exists, more or less, in the form of theoretical linguistics and, more generally, semiology. But these latter carefully avoid placing their analyses under the rubric of *political* economy (which implies a critique of political economy of the sign, following the same theoretical procedure as that of Marx). This, however, is what they amount to without knowing it: they are simply the equivalent, in the domain of signs and meaning, of classical bourgeois political economy *prior* to its critique by Marx." (61)

The context for Baudrillard's claim is his innovative materialist semiotics, which affords him a great deal of explanatory power. But it finally does not take into account subjective experience: and because Baudrillard treats semiotics generally and does not consider structuralism in particular, he never explores the connection between theoretical manifestations of
structuralist thought and the unarticulated patterns involved in everyday thinking.

Richard Harland's thesis is almost identical to mine. He argues that by privileging langue over parole, Saussure inaugurated a form of thinking in which "what we used to think of as superstructural actually takes precedence over what we used to think of as basic." In this respect, Superstructuralism represents what Foucault (in any case other than his own) would call an *episteme*..." (2). But as with many volumes of Routledge's *New Accents* series, Harland's book enlists a very suggestive thesis in the unworthy service of unifying an overview of critical theory. To be sure, Harland's review is responsible and informative, but it makes poor use of this principal idea. More than this, Harland derives his "superstructuralist* episteme directly from formal theoretical discourses without seeing them either as outgrowths of more basic popular epistemological configurations or, despite the considerable attention he pays to Marxist critical theory, as grounded in material causes. Foucault says that *episteme* obtains "whether expressed in a theory or silently invested in a practice" (*Order of Things* 168), and for me the intriguing thing is not the former but the latter. As will become apparent throughout this chapter, I have therefore set myself the task of trying to find traces of this silent practical investment lurking within several formal theoretical articulations. Perhaps most limiting about Harland's study is that it criticizes dialectic as an overly self-assured method for deriving truth from

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8 Compare this idea to my account of Saussure's analogies involving iterative identity, pp. 66 and 83.
error. This critique leaves Harland with no means for proceeding from the indeterminacies of structuralist and poststructuralist methodologies: like a superstructuralist with no ground to stand on, he is forced to conclude that philosophy is a relativistic succession of ideas and that superstructuralism will just "peter out" (185).

In contrast, Walter Davis takes great pains to affirm the possibilities of dialectic, and for this reason his *Inwardness and Existence* provides the broad methodological foundation for this study. With regard to epistemic structuralism in particular, Davis provides me with a cue by addressing the phenomenological roots of theoretical practice. He implies that the ethos of structuralism is stoicism, the moment within the dialectic of subject when "abstract thought tak[es] revenge upon experience" (51); and as a revisionist Marxist, he refers to the internalizations of capitalism as structural ones, which have made us all "structuralist beasts":

The battle with ideology would be fairly simple if we internalized only contents. But we don’t. We internalize structures and rules, which control our thought and our experience without ever having been articulated or requiring articulation.

Structure isn’t what is unthought finally, but what is unthought initially. Its articulation is the first order of business—a sine qua non for reflection—because only through that act does the "structuralist unconscious" become an object accessible to critique. (206–07).

It will be the business of this dissertation to explore Davis’s suggestive remarks in greater detail. But in addition, I hope to consider the extent to which Davis’s "structuralist unconscious" has been superseded by distinctly

9It is true that dialectic tries to derive truth from error, error being the only point of departure available. But in the present study, at least, there is no overweening confidence in the powers of dialectic. On the contrary, I try throughout to remain alive to the danger that error only begets more error. See this chapter’s conclusion (page 84).
more conscious modes of informal structuralist thought, so that perhaps we can more accurately speak of a structuralist non-conscious. We will see, in the novels of Gaddis and Ellis especially, that characters take up a structuralist mode of thinking in constructing an identity or understanding their world. The evacuation of content and the concentration upon empty signifiers for negotiating reality becomes, for these characters, an increasingly conscious activity, though because they don't express any critical awareness of their thinking processes as specifically structuralist, it makes sense to place them in Freud's in-between world of background consciousness.

Roland Barthes actually does speak of a structuralist consciousness in "The Imagination of the Sign." According to Barthes, there are three relationships within the sign, the symbolic (signifier to signified), paradigmatic (signifier vertically to the group which makes up its field of connotative and denotative equivalence) and syntagmatic (signifier to signifier) (206). Of the forms of consciousness associated with each, the "paradigmatic consciousness" is closest to epistemic structuralism: the paradigmatic consciousness "substitutes the bilateral relation of [signifier to signified] with a quadrilateral or more precisely a homological relation" (208). The allusion is to Levi-Strauss' method of comparing dissimilar signifying relationships by means of vertical correspondences between pairs or complexes of relationships. But while Barthes took pains elsewhere to situate semiotics within an materialist framework (for instance, in his Mythologies), "The Imagination of the Sign" stays squarely within an ahistorical structuralist analytic. Though he mentions in passing that
paradigmatic consciousness is ideologically informed, he does not really pursue the matter.

Henri Lefebvre also considers the ideological dimensions of structuralism. In his *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, Lefebvre describes structuralism as an ideological formation which attempts to validate and lend scientific status to the quotidian—"the quotidian" being roughly analogous to my "epistemic structuralism." Both the quotidian and epistemic structuralism refer to a form of consciousness which by nature eludes discursive conceptualization because it resides in the periphery, and thereby forms the ground of, what can be isolated and "said." But whereas I want to establish an archaeological affinity between epistemic and theoretical structuralism, Lefebvre is more concerned with disrupting any connections between the two in the interest of exposing the facticity of everyday reality. Therefore he emphasizes that structuralism's attempt to reduce reality to a global systematics of experience is fallacious (86-98). My emphasis is different, since for the purposes of this study it is not important that everyday life is not systematically consistent or unified in fact; what is important, rather, is that most people have come to regard everyday life as though it were systematic, thanks to the offices of certain informal and of course highly inconsistent patterns for construing everyday life, patterns which are historically specific and which we have internalized. I place my emphasis on the subjective not because it matters more or because it can unilaterally afford a more responsible account of contemporary reality but because the novels I will examine in the ensuing chapters ultimately base their appeal in that quarter.
In the first section of this chapter, my purpose will be to bring to light the conceptual contours of epistemic structuralism. Since it is my thesis that epistemic structuralism is a Foucauldian *episteme*, I will accordingly undertake an archaeological investigation of its presence within a field of discursive formations. (We might also think of it as a field of possible formations—see page 39.) Of course, the principal formation within that field will be theoretical structuralism, the vehicle for the metaphor I have enlisted as an initial step in bringing the *episteme* to light. But I will also consider the conceptual boundaries of the *episteme* by comparing it to classical (Aristotelian) formalism. Finally, I will trace the affinities between epistemic structuralism and systems theory. We will see that a consideration of systems theory, as articulated by Niklas Luhman, not only completes the archaeological investigation but also provides the strongest justification available within that methodology for my claim that epistemic structuralism is the determinative agent of everyday thought.

As I develop this comparative analytic, I will also be moving toward a marxist/existentialist clarification of epistemic structuralism’s methods and aims, which is the subject of this chapter’s second section. In it I will make a case for the force of epistemic structuralism by considering theoretical structuralism’s historical situation—specifically, that of structuralism’s relationship to contemporary production relations. This assessment of the material force behind epistemic structuralism will prepare the way for an evaluation, in the ensuing chapters, of the extent to which the fiction of Gaddis, Ballard and Ellis can stand as critiques of this *episteme*. 
It may be apparent, judging from the strategic opposition between the first and second sections of this chapter, that my method is dialectical. I trust that in many ways my methodological decision is entirely appropriate: if my thesis is correct, structuralist analytics is necessarily the starting point for any epistemological investigation of the episteme's aims and operations. But in a largely epistemological dissertation, a dialectical methodology requires some justification. Dialectic attempts, through successive investigations coupled with self-conscious interrogations of those investigations, to arrive at an account of the fullness of reality. There is therefore not a little about such a methodology which contradicts the fundamental presupposition of epistemology, the duality of subject and object. It is not too much to say, in fact, that the eradication of epistemology is the project of dialectic. Yet dialectic is the only means by which to proceed to a position which can regard the aims and operations of epistemic structuralism without treating them as conceptually "other."

Dialectic does not allow us the comfort of imagining that the critical advantages of one position can be fixed in perpetuity as the space which defines our actual relationship to any other position. More to the point, dialectic will not allow us the comfort of imagining that any position wholly and permanently disjoined from the episteme in which we are immersed is conceivable.

Thus the real justification for proceeding from an archaeological investigation is that we need, momentarily at least, to investigate epistemic structuralism as it asks to be understood: ahistorically, experienced not as a mystification or a seduction but as the conceptual ground for modern and postmodern thought. In other words, we need this investigative moment
because that is the condition in which we all begin. The Marxist investigation of Section Two will allow for certain kinds of illumination--illumination of historical processes and social formations. It illuminates them, as it were, from the outside. But as Walter Davis says, our task is one of "rooting out and reversing the capitalist internalizations that structure our inwardness in ways we have scarcely begun to realize" (176, my emphasis). In order to create the conditions for the kind of deracination Davis describes, then, this dissertation will inaugurate what we might call a "regressive" dialectic, in which the objective, historical account of the episteme as a set of capitalist introjects which this chapter develops will prepare us to receive the full impact of the novels I take up in the ensuing chapters.

In the novels of Gaddis, Ballard and Ellis, immersion in the episteme is nearly total, for their mimetic space, true to the conditions of our actual existence, excludes any position outside epistemic structuralism. But when we turn to these novels in the ensuing chapters, we will carry archaeological analytic and historical awareness into the interior of the episteme, where their conflicts will create a new kind of immersion, one which thrusts upon us the knowledge of an epistemological configuration but also the totally incompatible awareness of its actual material constitution. Rather than leaving us with the comforting feeling that we had transcended epistemic structuralism, overcoming experience and making it easier to deny our own participation in and colonization by the episteme, this dialectic will implicate us in the episteme's operations. A dialectic of subject must regress, returning us, full of irreducible conflict, to our
experiential starting point. In this way will we be more likely to make ourselves available for the work that awareness demands of us.

The Shape of the *Episteme*:

From Aristotle to Experience

In this section I will define the features of epistemic structuralism by means of an archaeological investigation of the intellectual formations which bear differing relationships to it. What follows, then, will be largely devoted to demonstrating the more intricate contours and implications of epistemic structuralism as I have described it so far. I will try to shade in the blank spaces of my working description (see page 8) by marking correspondences with and distinctions among the *episteme* and Aristotelian formalism, theoretical structuralism and systems theory. Aristotelian formalism, despite some apparent affinities it has with epistemic structuralism, might be said to define epistemic structuralism's boundaries insofar as it resists the rules of formation which constitute epistemic structuralism's interior. I will then consider epistemic structuralism in relation to two intellectual formations which reside squarely within its field of possibilities, theoretical structuralism and systems theory. Theoretical structuralism, as we might expect, bears obvious structural and methodological resemblances to epistemic structuralism, and so in it we will find some of the strongest clues as to the *episteme*'s nature. I will compare epistemic structuralism and systems theory in order both to
complete our picture of the *episteme* and to provide the strongest case for it as the basis of everyday thought.

Aristotle and Form

Formalism is often associated with Kant, who would be the likely candidate for discussion here if my object were to compare epistemic structuralism with a specific solution to a particular problem within Western philosophy. Instead, my object is to compare epistemic structuralism with an epistemic predecessor which betrays a different set of commonly held assumptions about sameness and difference, and I have taken up Aristotle for three reasons. First, Aristotle stands out in the history of Western philosophy as an empiricist who bases his judgments upon observation. His philosophical system can with considerable justification call itself natural, for his judgments often refer their validity to human, contingent, and undemonstrable elements like consensus (the *Ethics*), plausibility (the *Rhetoric*), affective response (the *Poetics*) or perceptual familiarity (see Taylor on *gnosis* and *nous*, 122). Though it always progresses toward scientific certainty, Aristotle's epistemology derives plainly from a tendentious metaphysics rather than from one of rigid philosophical precision, and for this reason merits comparison with epistemic structuralism. Second, Aristotle's profound influence over Western civilization has transformed him into what Foucault calls a "transdiscursive author-function"—the nexus of a range of beliefs, theories, texts, and practices which exceed his actual discursive output but which are associated, largely for categorical convenience, with a proper name ("What is an author?" 131). Therefore, as I did epistemic structuralism, I will use
Aristotelian formalism as a trope: in what follows "Aristotle" is taken less as a historical person than as a species. If I refer to specific texts, it is because they provide a precise way of talking about beliefs and knowledge formations which, though they have been author-ized by Aristotle's having codified them, are widely held. Finally, Aristotelian formalism encompasses certain important analytical anticipations of epistemic structuralism, along with several contradictory elements, both of which help illuminate the features of epistemic structuralism.

Of course, Aristotelian formalism anticipates epistemic structuralism in that it strives for "scientific knowledge," the knowledge of the structural connections among the elements of a phenomenon. For such knowledge, form, the arrangement of parts, is crucial, as Aristotle's example of a deranged shoe indicates:

... and we sometimes say that [a thing] is not one, if it be not a certain whole. that is, if it does not possess one form; for instance, we would not say that ... a shoe is one, when looking at the portions of that shoe any way whatsoever put together, although there may be continuity involved therein." (99)

Indeed it appears that for Aristotle the very apprehension of the whole resides in the recognition of the arrangement of its parts. This strongly suggests the structuralist principle that a phenomenon's essence is that aspect by which it could be related to any other phenomenon similarly arranged and ordered, though the two be in any other respect generically incommensurable. In other words Aristotelian formalism, like epistemic

10See R. S. Crane, The Language of Criticism, p. 44: Poems are things "of which we can give an adequate account only when we specify both the matter or elements of which they are composed and the form, or principle of structure, by reason of which this matter has the character of a definite existing thing, the two aspects of matter and form being inseparable in fact but separable analytically in our account ... ."
structuralism, looks for a level of abstraction which will allow for the comparison of unlike things, and it tends to take the formal abstraction it derives for the phenomenon's essence.

Yet in spite of this concern with structure and the translation of phenomena, there are four important respects in which epistemic structuralism differs from Aristotelian formalism. First, because epistemic structuralism considers only the relationships among constituent parts, it does not consider content, as does formalism. In the *Metaphysics*, his inquiry into the nature of being, Aristotle concludes that the intelligible and the sensible are fused—that form, matter and energy are indissociably concurrent in *substance*. The gist of his argument is as follows: 1) structure must be realized in *matter*; 2) if structure can be said to account for things, then things with identical structures can be exchanged for one another (which is not the case, for instance, when we try to equate Callias with another person by virtue of their structural similarities alone); 3) this means that there will always be something in excess of structure, something which must also be taken into account (991b). As a result, the particular, historical existence of a given phenomenon is its *primary substance* and has ontological priority over its species being or secondary substance (*Categories* 1b–2b).

Therefore Aristotle's view requires any investigation of a concrete whole to consider the qualities\(^\text{11}\) of the parts themselves, not just their arrangement. In his discussion of plot structure, for instance, Aristotle

\(^{11}\)In the *Categories*, "quality," while by no means a precise term, is distinct from predicates like "quantity," "relation," "duration," "position," etc. Quality refers to those attributes which individuate phenomena without removing them from the species to which they may be said to belong. See 8b 25–11a 40.
may relate the form of tragedy to that of epic, but he maintains qualitative
differences between them. And whatever their formal similarities, the
individual differences between two tragedies—say, *Oedipus* and *Hamlet*—are
primary. Of course it is possible to *discuss* a concrete whole solely in
terms of its formal properties—indeed Aristotle maintains a strict conceptual
separation between form and quality (see the *Categories* 10a)—but the point
here is that in Aristotelian formalism such an inquiry cannot arrogate
explanatory completeness to itself.

Epistemic structuralism, on the other hand, deliberately disregards
quality and reverses the Aristotelian hierarchy of substances in order to
make possible the transpositions and substitutions that are central to all
structuralisms. It operates at a level of abstraction which will allow it to
equate things to one another, and so tends to dismiss qualitative
distinctions in favor of functional analogizing.¹² Consider, for instance, the
often-cited propensity of today’s college students to predicate their
understanding of the university on the "banking model." Those students
tend to consider their education an "investment" which they pay for and
from which they expect to realize a return with interest. This means that
for them education is a strictly capitalist undertaking: they buy a
commodity (a degree) in order to sell it, so to speak, to an employer. The
kind of degree they pursue is significant only insofar as it has exchange
value, and its use value—the *quality* of the experience of acquiring it—is
immaterial to them.

¹²See page 80, where I discuss the analogizing of "family" and
"business."
The second difference between Aristotelian formalism and epistemic structuralism is that formalism sees a mutual determination of parts and whole. For Aristotle, the parts are the material cause of the whole, yet the whole is the formal cause of the parts (Metaphysics 1013b). Formalism accordingly identifies wholes and parts by moving recursively between them until it can reconcile them a posteriori. But epistemic structuralism doesn't posit any such sunolon; it tends toward an a priori determination of things by means of a structuralizing operation that assumes the whole of a phenomenon to be whatever structural whole can be assigned to it. In the example of university students mentioned above, the "banking model" is assumed prior to entering college; it is part of the students' world view and figures prominently in their long-range plans for situating themselves in that world. On page 8 I said that epistemic structuralism assumes that all things are situated structurally. The significant thing about that assumption is that the parts of the situational structure do not aid in this structuralizing operation—they are not even parts at all until epistemic structuralism makes a structural assignment. This is why, as any humanities teacher probably knows, students' conception of the university as bank resists a developing awareness of what else a university can be. While it would be tempting to say that elements of their experience that can't be reconciled to the banking model don't exist at all, it would perhaps be most accurate to call them potential data. They become parts if they can be reconciled to the imposed structure. But if not they can be disregarded, for epistemic structuralism is procrustean in the extreme. 13

13Only an extremely dysfunctional assignment, one in which irreconcilable data cannot be ignored, will force epistemic structuralism to revise itself. But even then the incongruous datum does not constitute
Therefore because epistemic structuralism bases its determinations upon a fixed, a priori structural whole which is imposed upon a phenomenon, the phenomenon itself is a product of exigent structural pressures.

Though they represent themselves as natural or necessary, these structural pressures are conventional, which points up the third distinction between epistemic structuralism and classical formalism. In spite of its taking into account the contingent and the conventional, Aristotelian formalism is foundationalist, giving pride of place to perception. 14 Epistemic structuralism, on the contrary, subordinates perception to cognition, not because of any methodological quarrel with foundationalist assumptions but because epistemic structuralism is consciously conventional. If it were an epistemological theory proper, epistemic structuralism would approximate a coherence theory, according to which beliefs are valid if they are consistent with the network of beliefs within which they reside (see Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* 20-22)—except that, as I have indicated, epistemic structuralism is not a theory and it doesn’t concern itself with coherence. In making its determinations, epistemic structuralism privileges the consensus, the effects of power, the influence of appealing structural models, or simply an individual’s need to complete some kind of cognitive circuit. All of which is to say that epistemic

what Aristotle would call a material cause; rather it constitutes an anomaly. The reason an anomalous datum is not a "part" is that a structural reassessment may not necessarily mean that the datum will reside within the new structure as a part accounted for; the reassessment may simply provide a way to disregard the datum successfully.

14In the *Metaphysics*: "In general . . . are those things one of which the perception is indivisible; I mean, that which perceives what the essence or formal principle is, and which cannot be separated either in time, or place, or definition; these most especially, I say, are one; and of these as many as are substances" (99).
structuralism comes closer than Aristotelian formalism does to recognizing that the configurations which it evolves are contingent upon desire. To be sure, epistemic structuralism maintains a nostalgic reverence for dogmas like objective realism and individualism, and these serve primarily to stave off full recognition of its will-to-knowledge; but much of the time there is a conscious appeal to structures which clearly have no other reality than that of the opinions and beliefs of others. Without the least embarrassment (because it refuses to face the implications), epistemic structuralism relies on the Heideggerian "They," only a "They" which is updated—devised and maintained not by the community, as Heidegger would have it, but by the Culture Industry, what Grabel calls "The Firm."

Finally, epistemic structuralism differs from Aristotelian formalism in that it imagines an ontology which is primarily experiential, not metaphysical. Of course, much of what I have already said suggests that formalism would claim that its tenets are also grounded in experience; but in formalism experience, and even perception as well, is always referred to some metaphysical standard which makes for a graded ontology. For instance, Aristotle argues that the quality of unity is graded, the highest kind depending upon natural or essential integrity or continuity (1015b). Similarly, excellence is determined along lines which refer to metaphysical perfection in several senses, particularly those of doing things perfectly or having attributes which are neither deficient or excessive of the metaphysical model to which a phenomenon is referred (1021b–1022a). Thus even if formalism is initially foundationalist/realist, its aim is to arrive at reliable judgments which entail metaphysical/idealistic criteria. Therefore formalism strives for a precise investigation of experience, but one which is
inevitably prescriptive in that it moves toward a higher reality which can dictate to our processes of felt knowledge.

None of this is to deny the metaphysical dimension of epistemic structuralism; and it is certainly not the case that epistemic structuralism's ground of experience is natural or unconstructed. For as I will show (page 60), epistemic structuralism is informed by a metaphysics of consumption, which is determined by the nature of production relations in our century. Nonetheless, epistemic structuralism imagines itself grounded in a value-neutral experience which discards the need for formalism's "good" forms.

From the foregoing we can pinpoint the incompatibility of formalism and epistemic structuralism: in spite of apparent similarities, formalism's metaphysical models cannot be reduced to the aforementioned structural models of epistemic structuralism because formalism refers to models which stand in relation to a subject as species or genus predicated of a subject, whereas structural models are imported from different realms, their aim being a functional transposition of the nature of one thing to the nature of another—or in other words the superimposition of one phenomenon onto that which formalism would designate as incommensurable with it.

The Structure of Structuralisms

The previous comparisons can help better to situate epistemic structuralism relative to theoretical structuralism. As I have explained, because epistemic structuralism is not a theory or a methodology it is tendentiously less coherent than either formalism or theoretical structuralism. Yet in spite of this fundamental difference, there is worth mentioning a number of general affinities between epistemic structuralism
and the more familiar theoretical derivations of theorists from Saussure to Todorov. I've already mentioned the most general and most obvious one, the emptying of a phenomenon's contents in order to make possible the transpositions and substitutions that are central to all structuralisms. In addition, we can speak of three more: epistemic structuralism relies on binary oppositions, its investigations are synchronic rather than diachronic, and, most general of all, it is the ground of possibility for the structure of structuralisms.

Epistemic structuralism shares theoretical structuralism's tendency to construct binary oppositions—or to be precise, it shares what is at bottom of that tendency. The reason most structuralisms construct binary oppositions stems from their dismissal of content: once a phenomenon is emptied of content, all that was formerly thought to inhere in the thing itself belongs to the relationships that make it possible for the thing to be a part of some larger system of structural identities. This requires reducing the complex idea of quality to that of presence or absence—a structural component is either there or it isn’t—and the gain in this primordial binary opposition is descriptive simplicity and functional transposability that is crucial to epistemic structuralism. In the ensuing chapters, we will see how, because of reduction to the binary opposition of presence and absence, the characters in the novels under discussion become increasingly vacant, imagining themselves devoid of qualities and projecting themselves into the roles and objects they desire to adopt or have, in a general scheme to become functions.

Second, epistemic structuralism and theoretical structuralism are similarly synchronic and ahistorical, qualities noted by Derrida. In "Force
and Signification" and "Structure, Sign and Play," Derrida criticizes theoretical structuralism as the spatial transposition of inherently dynamic processes. Similarly, epistemic structuralism is an essentially synchronic, ahistorical pattern for knowledge, an *ad hoc* strategy for constructing data. It is what we use at a given moment to figure things out, disregarding the phenomenon's diachronic dimension—that is, its historical determination. Thus epistemic structuralism provides, in effect, an epistemological *langue*. It is accordingly static—ultimately, it is part of an attempt to deny time itself and therefore death by fixing the subject and its objects within stable relationships and patterns.

Finally, epistemic structuralism is the *episteme*—that is, the conceptual ground of possibility—for the structure of structuralisms. Epistemic structuralism is the field within which theoretical structuralisms attempt to distinguish themselves. In their book on Foucault, Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow describe a three-term metastructure consisting of two kinds of theoretical structuralism (atomistic and holistic), and Foucauldian archaeology. In atomistic structuralism, they explain, "the elements are completely specified apart from their role in some larger whole." Their example is the sort of structural elements Vladimir Propp specifies in his *Morphology of the Folktale*, elements which are taken for the "atoms" which compose larger narratives. In holistic structuralism, on

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15Foucauldian archaeology is an analytic of pure discourse, bracketing truth and meaning in order to derive the rules of formation and combination which in a given epoch permit serious statements. While Foucault vehemently maintained that archaeology is not a brand of structuralism, his claims do not really bear up under scrutiny. At any rate, he approved of Dreyfus and Rabinow's critique, and as I shall demonstrate, that critique does not really mark out for Foucault's methodology a significant departure from structuralism.
the other hand, "what counts as a possible element is defined apart from the system of elements but what counts as an actual element is a function of the whole system of differences of which the given element is a part." This is a description of Lévi-Strauss's brand of structuralism, in which the construction of tables of structural permutations permits comparisons among disparate structural systems. In Foucauldian archaeology, however, "[the] elements are the product of a field of relations" (54). Therefore

Archaeological holism asserts that the whole determines what can count even as a possible element. The whole verbal context is more fundamental than its elements and thus is more than the sum of its parts. Indeed, there are no parts except within the field which identifies and individuates them. (55)

In spite of the distinctions Dreyfus and Rabinow cite, archaeology finally collapses into atomistic structuralism once we consider that whether or not an atomistic structuralist insists that the elements he specifies could exist apart from an actual system of differences, the fact is he does not derive them except from such a system. For once he hypothesizes about possible combinations of elements—say, about sequences which have never been found in any folktale—he moves into holistic structuralism, and if he sticks to actual combinations, they are always absolutely all there is to work with. All archaeology has done, then, is to reject holistic structuralism's distinction between the possible and the actual, and thereby silently slip back into atomistic structuralism, adding to it an awareness of the way the structural environment determines the elements which compose it. Atomistic structuralism works from parts to the whole and archaeology works from the whole to the parts. This is not an insignificant distinction, especially in that it implies a methodological affinity between atomistic
structuralism and formalism. But the greater significance is that for both atomism and archaeology, the actual is all that is possible.

The structure of structuralisms then, collapses into a binary opposition between two concepts of immanence. We have already seen how epistemic structuralism relates to this binary structure. In making its determinations, epistemic structuralism does not recognize parts until they can be fitted to an a priori structural model. It works from a priori wholes to parts in such a way that there are no parts which cannot be reconciled to the whole in which they are situated. Thus epistemic structuralism evinces the most remarkable aspect of archaeology. But epistemic structuralism is also like holistic structuralism in that it seeks to equate disparate wholes to one another on the basis of structural abstractions, which epistemic structuralism takes to be their fundamental reality. It departs from both archaeology and holistic structuralism in that it is unconcerned with a precise investigation of the whole in question, either in exhausting its possible permutations or in identifying the totality of combinatory rules by which its elements make their appearance. Therefore, because it entertains both concepts of immanence epistemic structuralism is the structure of structuralisms. It might be more accurate, however, to say that epistemic structuralism inaugurates a dialectic of structuralisms in that it contains the initial contradiction—the two concepts of immanence—out of which the significant moments of theoretical structuralism have grown.

16I am overstating the case somewhat; but Russian formalism did contribute significantly to literary and linguistic structuralism. See Todorov, "The Methodological Heritage of Formalism."
Luhman and the Experiential Justification

My purpose here will be twofold: first, to establish the relationship between epistemic structuralism and systems theory; and second, to enlist the work of a particular systems thinker, sociologist Niklas Luhman, in support of my general claim that epistemic structuralism informs everyday thought as a form of experience which, increasingly, does not require the comfort of imagining itself natural. This second aim, which considers Luhman's justification of systems theory in terms of our lived reality, will expose the conscious constructedness of that lived reality. In this way I will begin to move away from analytic and toward critique, thereby marking a transition to the second section of this chapter, a historical-materialist account of theoretical and epistemic structuralisms.

Systems theory, in the work of Ludwig von Bertalanffy, James Grier Miller, and Niklas Luhman, might legitimately be called "dynamic structuralism," because it attempts to explain systems as evolving structures. It also attempts to explain the complex, non-linear relationship between those systems and their environment. Most important, it seeks a single, meaningful explanation for all complex phenomena, living or nonliving. These aims are inaccessible to structuralism, for various reasons, although systems theory does not pursue them by means that are fundamentally different. My argument is that systems theory's methodological departures from theoretical structuralism are only apparent departures; and once we consider the archaeology of systems theory, its kinship to epistemic structuralism will be clear.

Saussure insisted that linguistics could be approached either diachronically or synchronically, but not along both axes simultaneously. In
other words, either the genealogy of a word could be traced through time or the momentary structure of an entire system could be plotted (80).

However, systems theory maintains that the evolution of an entire system—that is, the changes in its structure—can be traced by comparing successive "time slices" of its structure. As a result, not only can systems theory account for a change in a single structural element, but it can trace the overall structural change such individual changes produce, as well as the system's efforts to limit or nullify those changes.

Systems theory has attempted to substantiate its claims by resolving the difficult problem of the relationship between structure and function. Briefly: theoretical structuralism emphasized structure but quietly folded function into it. It therefore stood open to the criticism that while every phenomenon may be structurally similar to language it doesn't follow that every phenomenon is functionally similar to language (see Jackson 28-34). Systems theory shifts the emphasis from structure to function by substituting a biological model for structuralism's linguistic one. On the strength of this shift, Ludwig von Bertalanffy argues that

The antithesis between structure and function, morphology and physiology is based upon a static conception of the organism. [...] What are called structures are slow processes of long duration, functions are quick processes of short duration. If we say that a function such as a contraction of a muscle is performed by a structure, it means that a quick and short process wave is superimposed on a long-lasting and slowly-running wave. (134)

Clearly, the "static concept of the organism" Bertalanffy refers to is structure as it is usually thought. By divorcing the term "structure" from its conceptual constraints, he frees it up for insertion within a different model, one based on function. But Bertalanffy still collapses the two
concepts, for if the function of a thing is really a dynamic structure, then structure is nothing more than its function at a given time. In other words, Bertalanffy's and Saussure's definition of structure are identical, except for a change of emphasis.

Is this change of emphasis from structure to function significant? It might seem so, in that it apparently parallels the epistemic shift between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, when natural science abandoned morphology in favor of biological function. Foucault says that once organic sameness and difference are distinguished according to function, "[structural] differences proliferate on the surface, but deeper down they fade, merge, and mingle, as they approach the great, mysterious, invisible focal unity, from which the multiple seems to derive, as though by ceaseless dispersion" (Order 269). But ultimately nineteenth-century biology sought to establish discontinuous groups of organisms--"not the narrow thread of resemblances that may attach [one group] to another group, but the cohesive force that folds it so tightly in upon itself" (Order 271). Systems theory's project, according to Bertalanffy, is the opposite: to establish "isomorphisms" which unite all complex phenomena, including those which aren't strictly biological (82). Yet what is this functional morphology that is capable of translating any system into any other, if not some internal formal arrangement of functions--that is, if not a structure of functions? In spite of appearances, then, systems theory represents less a general epistemic shift backwards to nineteenth-century functionalism, as Robert Lilienfield charges (32), than an axiological shift within the general twentieth-century episteme. Its aim is to establish the sameness within all difference, as was that of theoretical structuralism; only instead of relating
different structures to each other, as did Lévi-Strauss’s structural
anthropology, systems theory relates all phenomena to a single structure,
an ultimate structure of functions. 17

The kinship between systems theory and epistemic structuralism now
becomes clear: in its most basic assumptions about sameness and difference
systems theory resides squarely within epistemic structuralism’s field of
possibilities. But it is when systems theory intrudes upon the social
sciences that the connection between systems theory and epistemic
structuralism becomes most forceful. Niklas Luhman stands out as a
principal exponent of sociological systems theory, and the appeals he makes
to the lived reality of modern life go a long way toward solidifying the
connection I am seeking to establish.

According to Luhman, the whole/parts phenomenology of Aristotelian
formalism is too limiting. Even the modal variations we saw in the
structure of structuralisms do not provide sufficient flexibility to account
for a system’s boundary formation, maintenance, and change. Instead of
conceiving of system as a whole which relates to its parts, general systems

17The results are the same whether a systems theorist collapses
structure and function or takes pains to differentiate them. James Grier
Miller takes the course opposite to Bertalanffy’s by restricting the concept
of structure, defining it as a momentary arrangement in physical space (22).
The relationship of structure and function is then distributed over the
following series of determinations: 1) sampling at least three structural
moments of a system indicates 2) the operation of processes which in turn
3) define relevant subsystems as parts. It is only by virtue of his
restricted definition of structure that Miller can claim that systems as he
describes them are not structures; but they are nonetheless abstract
structures, those whose defining internal relationships do not depend upon
physical space. For instance, Miller identifies 19 critical subsystems for all
living systems, from the single cell to geopolitical organizations. Though
the relationships among the parts of these systems do not depend upon
their distribution in physical space, their relationship to one another is a
distribution in the functional space that defines the system and analogizes
it to all others.
theory thinks in terms of system and environment, a relationship which might be more properly expressed as system and tendentious not-system: "Environments have no clearly defined boundaries but only horizons that imply further possibilities while making it meaningless or inconvenient to pursue them indefinitely" (230). This phenomenology allows Luhman to stipulate the crucial feature of complex societies, which is their ability to effect internal differentiation, the "replication, within a system, of the difference between a system and its environment" (230). In other words, . . . each subsystem reconstructs and, in a sense, is the whole system in the special form of a difference between the subsystem and its environment. Differentiation thus reproduces the system in itself, multiplying specialized versions of the original system's identity by splitting it into a number of internal systems and affiliated environments. (231)

For Luhman, the significant consequence of differentiation is that "through the construction of diverse internal versions of the entire system . . . facts, events, and problems obtain a multiplicity of meanings in different perspectives." His example is a familiar one:

Compulsory school attendance and mass education are different environmental problems for the political system, for the economic system, for families, for the religious system, the medical system, and so on. (231)

The real yield of differentiation is that subsystems which adopt the system/environment phenomenology afford themselves increased selectivity about what in their environment constitutes a meaningful subsystem and what does not. And therefore, for all of the subsystems represented in Luhman's "mass education" example there are conceivably thousands more for whom the issue of mass education is not a meaningful fact at all (for example, one supposes, the Loyal Order of Moose). For in differentiated societies "subsystems can tolerate indifference toward everything except
very special features of their respective environments." Moreover, the yield for society (that is, the encompassing global system) is that through differentiation of its subsystems it can "reduce its internal complexities" (237-38).

Clearly, sociological systems theory concentrates on global systems and on the middle ground of subsystems, where individual desires and intentions play little part. Luhman accordingly insists that experience, conceived as Husserlian transcendence, cannot be the ground for any social phenomenon. Nonetheless, he cannot altogether ignore the experiential justification for his ideas, for his argument must appeal to some version of experience in order to convince:

> Actors in our society, of course, are conscious of this condition. We are all aware of the unsurveyable complexity of our world. For highly differentiated societies, in fact, the world can be meaningful only as an indeterminate horizon for further exploration. (232)

Ultimately, Luhman's sociology is compelling, in spite of its highly abstract character, because it describes the way complex societies experience themselves. For instance, the foregoing "mass education" example succeeds because we are used to thinking in terms of discreet social organizations which define themselves in terms of their "special interests."

The strength of sociological systems theory, then, is that it explicates the unarticulated conceptual operations by which people apprehend and negotiate their social environment. But it does so without much attention to the fact that they apprehend themselves "in" something, or the fact that

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18In systems theory, the meaningful can only be meaningful for the system. James Grier Miller explains: "Meaning is the significance of information to a system which processes it; it constitutes a change in that system's processes elicited by the information, often resulting from associations made to it on previous experience with it" (11)
they apprehend what they are "in" is an environment, or the fact that for
them the environment contains systems which, while being wholly "other,"
are somehow structurally and functionally analogous to each other and to
themselves. We may be used to thinking in terms of subsystems defined by
their respective special interests, but what we are not used to thinking of
is the way each of those organizations apprehends the others as structural
microcosms of the greater social system and as structural analogues of
itself. In other words, we are used to focusing on the differences among
these subsystems defined by their special interests, without thinking about
how in doing so we have reduced them all to an identical model.

However, the epistemic significance of social differentiation is that
"facts, events, and problems" do not obtain "a multiplicity of meanings in
different perspectives" because these different perspectives are conceived
of differently from one another, but because they have already been
equated to one another on a more basic level. The political subsystem
does indeed have different goals from those of the family, the individual,
or the religious subsystem. That much is indisputable; however, it is only
indisputably true once these entities are conceived as subsystems
differentiated from one another within the mise-en-abîme created by the
system/not-system phenomenology. I have already made plain the capacity
of that phenomenology for leveling its objects: systems theory imposes a
single structure, an ultimate structure of functions, upon all phenomena.
Therefore though the subsystemic replications of the system/not system
model are "diverse," as Luhman says, their diversity consists solely in the

19 Announced goals, at least. See Chapter 3, in which I draw upon
Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of the ideological interconnections between
the family and the socius.
different functional positions they occupy relative to one another. The endless perspectival shifts of these functional positions only create differences *in the second place* because each subsystem sees itself *as a subsystem* and has attributed to all else the status of environment *in the first place*. This operation bears the traces of epistemic structuralism, which thereby reveals itself as the ground of possibility for erecting systems theory over the form of experience it authorizes.

But epistemic structuralism is *no more* than the conceptual ground from which systems theory springs, and it is important to point out the significant ways in which the formality and scientific precision of systems theory have systematized the merely tendentious operations of the *episteme*. Systems theory reflects an attempt to elaborate upon epistemic structuralism's assumptions, in order to account for what the assumptions cannot explain, without violating them. Thus, as I have already pointed out, systems theory has found a way to consider structure dynamically by plotting successive structures, thereby superadding a diachronic dimension to its operations by compiling synchronicities. Systems theory is also able to conceive of change in terms of the nonlinear relationship between system and environment, and in terms of complex operations internal to the system. It can address the phenomenon of equifinality—when and to what degree a system can resist exigent environmental pressure to change, and by what process it does this. Systems theory also transcends epistemic structuralism's limited terms of cause-and-effect thinking by investigating the phenomenon of feedback, according to which systemic activity is both a stimulus and a response. Systems theory and its correlates in cybernetics and chaos theory have even found ways to account for the
unaccountability of complex systemic developments. Epistemic structuralism, on the other hand, is only the loose pattern for everyday thought; it does not attempt anything so sophisticated. It concerns itself exclusively with the synchronic, though of course it recognizes successive synchronicities. What was true yesterday may not be true today: the kinds of structural models available may be different, the sort of knowledge one wishes to produce or which can be authorized by the socius may not be consistent with former sorts, etc. But epistemic structuralism doesn't take change into account with the complexity and precision of systems theory.

Systems theory, like theoretical structuralism, consecrates a set of assumptions which, at the level of *episteme*, are content to operate without theoretical sanction. As we will see in the next section, however, the critical legitimacy of formal articulations like theoretical structuralism and systems theory actually depends upon epistemic structuralism's refusal to interrogate itself.

Theoretical Structuralism in History

In the last section's archaeological analytic, I attempted to chart epistemic structuralism through its similarities to and departures from theoretical structuralism and systems theory. Archaeology was able to illuminate epistemic structuralism as a field of possibilities for discourse, but only in relation to the discursive formations it authorizes. Therefore, though archaeology is able to trace the conceptual contours of epistemic
structuralism it is completely incapable of accounting for it in terms of historical necessity. I can argue best for that necessity by once again turning to theoretical structuralism, grounding it this time not in an abstract set of tendentious rules but in the production relations which obtained at the time Saussure was giving his lectures in Geneva. In light of the previous analytic, this section's historical analysis will implicate epistemic structuralism in production relations also, as the intermediary between economics and theory. In other words, I will now show that if epistemic structuralism was the ground of possibility for theoretical structuralism, production relations are the ground of that ground. I will argue for a historical-materialist account of the rise of theoretical structuralism by demonstrating how its proponents have appealed to popular assumptions which derive from the relations of production which then predominated. In the process of this demonstration, the traces of epistemic structuralism lurking within the theoretical formulations of writers like Saussure and Lévi-Strauss will begin to reveal themselves.

The justification for this approach comes from Marx's preface to _A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy_, in which the notion of non-manifest social formations plays a crucial role in explaining social structure. Marx posits that "the totality of production relations" is the "real foundation" of society. Yet production relations are nowhere manifest; rather, they must be extrapolated from the legal and political articulations which they inform: those predominantly textual productions of the "whole immense superstructure" which are not themselves part of the production relations but from which, Marx implies, those relations can be surmised. So too, I contend, with epistemic structuralism, which is likewise nowhere
manifest: its scope and nature must be extrapolated from that which it
determines—legal documents, religious dogma, artistic production or, as I
have tried to do in the previous section, from theoretical and philosophical
disquisition. To appropriate Marx's structural metaphor: epistemic
structuralism is an intermediary formation which lies between the base and
the superstructure in the sense that its principles derive from the relations
of the former and underwrite many of the articulations of the latter.
Therefore I will turn to a consideration of structuralism's historical moment.

At least two writers, Eve Tavor Bannet and Frederic Jameson, have
already offered historical contextualizations of theoretical structuralism. In
Structuralism and the Logic of Dissent, Bannet argues that structuralism
was a reflection of the government of postwar France, with its central
administration dedicated to transforming an agrarian economy to an
industrial one. Poststructuralist thought, according to Bannet, was a
reaction to that government. She feels that America does not compare to
such an administered culture, that our society is plural rather than
centrally controlled (232). For Bannet, then, a consideration of France's
postwar political situation constitutes a historical analysis—an implication
which betrays a strikingly superficial concept of history.

What's wanted, rather, is the depth of analysis that a materialist
consideration of structuralism can offer, and in this regard Frederic
Jameson comes much nearer to the mark. In The Prison-House of
Language Jameson situates theoretical structuralism historically as "a
distorted awareness of the dawning collective character of life, as a kind of
blurred reflection of the already collective structure of . . . the mass-
production commercial network into which our individual existences are
If this is not a deliberate misrepresentation of Derridean "free play" in service of a trendy embellishment upon Marxism--one which subtracts the "materialism" from "dialectical materialism" and hopes no one will notice that it thereby subtracts the dialectic as well--it is at the very least misleading. True, a dynamic "operation in time" has an advantage over structuralism's static, spatialized metaphors. But it ought to be obvious that if free play doesn't "necessarily" imply a relativistic production of equally strong and valid "truth-effects, it necessarily foregoes the possibility of underwriting \textit{any} "truth-effect" whatsoever--that is, neither can it hope to ground any attribution of \textit{unequal} strength or validity among its productions. Contrary to Jameson's claims, the whole operation is a despairing parody of Marxist dialectic. The only thing which can provide such a ground is that which exists both \textit{beyond} the "prison-house of language" and \textit{within} it--viz., the material conditions of our existence. In other words, Jameson only eludes economism by failing to mention that the relations of production are the ground to which any attempt to determine "truth" must return. And it is for this reason that he fails to historicize structuralism, his glancing references to "the mass-production commercial network into which our individual existences are organized" notwithstanding.

But I don't want to convict myself of economism either. References to the primacy of production relations in the preceding paragraph are unfortunate insofar as they suggest a hypostatization of what I actually see as a much richer interaction between the economic relations of the base and the legal, institutional, and intellectual formations of the superstructure. But that rich interaction does not by any means amount to free play. There is a meaningful if not easily justified distinction between the
dynamism of dialectic and the energetics of endlessly signifying circuitry ultimately leading to intellectual paralysis. The basis of this distinction is a retention within dialectic of some notion of 1) the determinative primacy of the economic base, and 2) the secondary or derivative nature of ideology. With that provision in mind, I will pursue the case for a historical-materialist account of theoretical structuralism—and the informing presence of epistemic structuralism—on the following fronts. First I will posit a functional explanation for structuralism. Then I will adduce a particularization of structuralism's historical situation along guidelines laid down by Marx. Next I will argue that theoretical structuralism's consistent exploitation of economic analogies are indexes of its true historical context.

A functional explanation for theoretical structuralism would be as follows:

    Structuralism rose to prominence because of its propensity to reinforce prevalent economic relations.

In his defense of Marx's theory of history, G. A. Cohen notes that functional explanation, while formally valid, requires historical reference for confirmation (261). Therefore, in the case of my own functional explanation, it remains to be shown that structuralism has in fact the propensity to reinforce prevalent economic relations. The case for that propensity is difficult to make except by matching the features of those relations, in their historical specificity, to those of structuralism as revealed in the articulations of its leading theorists.

20] I find further justification for this move in Theories of Surplus Value I, page 285. There Marx argues that ideological production (his actual term is "spiritual production") is not comprehensible without a careful consideration of the "specific historical form" of the production forces and production relations which give rise to them.
First, then, I will trace the features of the economic relations which were coextensive with the rise of structuralism. The turn of the century is roughly the time when Saussure was giving his lectures on linguistics in Geneva and when "mass culture" and "consumerism" (the superstructural effects which derived from these economic relations) came to the fore, both in the U.S. and Europe. Historian Rosalind Williams locates the introduction of mass marketing techniques in France between 1889 and 1910. Williams claims that in France technological developments like cinematography, electric lighting, and automated mass production, combined with an increase in workers' "discretionary spending" were the primary reasons for the establishment of mass culture and the techniques for the manipulation of desire that go with it, techniques like advertising and the creation of department-store "dream worlds" (64–94). Williams concludes that when Charles Gide and Edouard de Boyve founded the Nimes School of Consumer Cooperatives in 1885, consumer capitalism and mass culture attained self-consciousness (287).

Richard Ohmann, T. J. Jackson Lears, and Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen cite the same years for analogous U.S. developments. Ohmann, Lears, and the Ewens also stress the role of advertising and technology in the rise of mass culture, but they also cite economic factors. Ohmann argues that in America "mass culture first arose as an adjunct to the circulation of commodities and as a partial solution to problems encountered by early capitalists" (147), problems which climaxed in the 1880s and 1890s. These problems are familiar to historians: overproduction, unstable markets, decline of profitability (due to the inherent contradictions of industrial capitalism), and labor unrest (see Ohmann 143, Ewen 30–31). Moreover, by
the end of the nineteenth century labor had become the means of subsistence for the majority of the population. This meant that urban working families produced fewer and fewer of their own goods (Ohmann 148, Lears "Salvation" 6-7).

Ohmann, Lears and The Ewens each stress a different aspect of this situation's complex resolution. Ohmann emphasizes marketing strategies used by corporations in conjunction with the new professional advertising agencies to alter the buying habits of the working class. Chief among these was the creation of a national marketplace in which commodities became universally recognizable by means of uniform packaging, brand names, trademarks, and "further mythicizations" such as slogans, jingles, and cartoon characters. These strategies instilled trust of strange products, loyalty to familiar ones, a kind of aggravated commodity fetishism, and a dependency upon advertising (145). The Ewens, who consider the broader category of information technology, show how capitalism began to co-opt all forms of opposition by fusing desire and social control in a "dialectic of mass culture" (37). Through manipulative public relations strategies, potentially frightening aspects of modern life—corporate giantism, technological intrusion, and the erosion of ideological mainstays like privacy and autonomy—actually became desirable to the very people whose lives they increasingly controlled. Jackson Lears, emphasizing ideological formations and subjective experience more strongly yet, shows that "To thrive and spread, a consumer culture required more than a national apparatus and marketing and distribution; it also needed a favorable moral climate." Lears argues that in response to city dwellers' feelings of "unreality" (occasioned by increased alienation of labor), there
arose a volume of popular "therapy literature." This literature in turn gave rise to a new ethic, according to which "self-realization was the largest aim of human existence" (11). Lears then shows how this ethos was appropriated by advertisers "as a new mode of adjustment to the developing corporate system" (4).

Taken together, and considering their many points of overlap, these accounts give a very full picture of the shift in production relations that determined the rise of mass culture. As is well known, in Marx's theory of history the functional "flow" from determinative to derivative elements of the social structure is as follows: Forces develop, causing relations to strain until they change, giving rise to new ideological formations which conform to, articulate, and validate the relations. Thus in the example of the rise of mass culture we can identify, on the one hand, the significant development in the production forces: as I mentioned above, a majority of the population had become workers. The proportional growth of the work force represents a twofold development in the forces of production, insofar as there was more available labor power which had simultaneously been developed for greater efficiency. We have likewise identified some of the ideological formations—e.g., the predominance of a "therapeutic" literature; the rise of popular magazines for explaining the mysterious operations of society, technology, and economics (Ohmann 149–50); the appearance of national brand names, etc. But what are the changing production relations that correspond to these forces and ideological formations?
In the "Preface" to *Political Economy*, Marx implies that production relations are relations of power. Yet he is not specific about the precise manifestations of those power relations. A clearer account comes in Volume III of *Capital*, where Marx says that production relations are "the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short the corresponding specific form of the state" (791). If production relations are the basis for political, i.e., chartered "relations of sovereignty and dependence," it follows that the relations of sovereignty and dependence which obtain in unchartered form comprise part of the relations of production.

In the case of the rise of consumer capitalism, the increased worker population coincided with an unprecedentedly high division of labor. Therefore, as Ohmann and Lears point out, the needs of this working class began to change in that they depended more and more upon strangers to produce the things they used. Therefore we can say that there was a shift in the features of production relations insofar as the workers' growing dependency upon brand-name products was coextensive with the corporate capitalists' growing sovereignty.

To sum up the features of the economic relations which were coextensive with the rise of structuralism: a development of production forces (with respect to the greater availability of more efficient labor power) conditioned a shift in production relations (with respect to an increased consumptive dependency among workers, and simultaneously, a

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21That is, according to the "Preface," rights of ownership express production relations in "merely" legal terms, which indicates that production relations is a more encompassing concept. For a detailed account of the role of coercive power in defining production relations, see Cohen. pp. 216-223.
productive sovereignty among corporations). The superstructural formations determined by this shift in production relations include "therapeutic" and "self-help" literature, the ethos of "self-realization," and aggravated commodity fetishism, i.e., "consumerism."

My claim is that theoretical structuralism rose to prominence because of its propensity to reinforce these production relations by modelling a methodological discourse upon them and then designating the discourse "scientific." But I need to be more specific about what these production relations entailed. A relation of dependency among workers as consumers and sovereignty of producers as providers entailed fundamental changes in the way those workers perceived the material world around them—and ultimately in the way they understood themselves. First, they became conscious that the world consists of commodities, of course; but experientially that means that each thing is an instantiation of some generalized product-concept. In other words, the most significant thing about any product is its equivalence to any other instantiation bearing the same brand name. The fact that every Uneeda Biscuit corresponds to hundreds of thousands of other Uneeda Biscuits is not just a circumstance of mass production; it is the most significant thing about the Uneeda Biscuit. Second, any product could also be supposed to be of the same quality as any other line of products made by the same company. One would suppose, for example, Rolex pens to be as well made and prestigious as Rolex watches. Third, a brand-name product can be compared to products bearing different brand names; but though the comparison would be made through the products bearing the names, the comparison would bear upon the brand names themselves. This point follows from the
previous two so that, in other words, if I determine that a pair of Nike running shoes is better made than a pair of Reeboks, the comparison reveals not something about the shoes used to make the comparison but about the companies that manufactured the shoes (or those companies’ comparable product lines). Of course the comparison may lead me to buy one of the shoes used in the comparison; but the significant knowledge derived from the experiment bears upon the superiority of one company or product line over another.

The difference between this knowledge situation and the ones involved in buying shoes from an individual shoemaker in a handicraft economy or from a local merchant in a mercantile economy lies with the depersonalization of and separation from the shoes’ production source. I may determine that John Smith makes better shoes than John Brown and the significant knowledge of that determination may bear upon John Smith’s skill rather than the particular shoes he makes. But in that case Smith is still a person, present and known to me, whereas if I determine that Nike shoes are better made than Reeboks, I am comparing labels or signs, abstracted not from the skill of any one person but rather from the production values of corporations, distant and impersonal. The abstraction results in a fetishizing of the label as a signifier for values which do not appear to me as connected with human labor.

Thus there arises in the consumer’s mind a network of brand names and their relative merits, real or imaginary. The sole purpose for this epistemological configuration of commodities is to determine their exchange value, because, in a consumer society, that is the only sense in which
commodities can be "known." Money is not the arbiter of exchange value here, for late capitalism has imported into its highly developed economic structure an evolutionary recession. That is, money certainly underpins the economy of consumer society—on the level of economy qua economy; however, on the phenomenal level, consumerism is experienced as a subsidiary economy, one which corresponds to Marx's intermediate stage of economic evolution, the "total or expanded form of value." In this form every commodity "becomes a mirror" of every other commodity's value. In such an economy, Marx says, we become conscious of the background of values which determines the value of the commodity before us (Capital I, 69-70). This background or network operates for the consumer as a complex of value ratios which exist among commodities for the purpose of underwriting choice—choice being the significant activity in consumer society, where Eudaemonia emanates exclusively from making informed choices based upon a thorough acquaintance with the subsidiary economy of commodity relationships.

I have on the one hand argued for the theoretical validity of my functional explanation for the rise of structuralism; and on the other I have tried to substantiate the argument by citing specific historical examples, showing which production relations were coextensive with the rise of structuralism and what they entailed (and continue to entail). But clearly a gap remains: if structuralism did in fact become prominent because of its propensity to reinforce prevailing production relations, what affinities did structuralism share with those production relations and in what way do

22Moreover, as I will argue below, that is the precisely the sense in which they are owned.
those affinities suggest structuralism's propensity to reinforce the production relations? I can best address this gap by matching up the discursive features of theoretical structuralism with the features of those production relations. The extent to which theoretical structuralism naturalizes the metaphysics of consumption elaborated above will provide a strong index to structuralism's functional propensities.

There is no shortage, in the discourse of theoretical structuralism, of examples which treat late capitalism's production relations as natural: but I will confine myself primarily to a discussion of structuralism's two most influential exponents, Ferdinand de Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Saussure, of course, became the posthumous founder of structural linguistics when in 1916 his students' lecture notes were published in book form under the title *Cours de linguistique générale*. Lévi-Strauss, more than anyone else, was responsible some fifty years later for expanding the principles attributed to Saussure, applying them to all social phenomena that could be said to betray the operation of unconscious structures. Though these two theorists are separated by quite a bit of time, their respective theoretical pronouncements suggest a fundamental continuity between the material conditions of turn-of-the-century industrial society and those of today's post-industrial society.

Saussure's most salient innovations were his ideas about the roles of opposition and difference in language, and his analytical distinctions—those between *langue* and *parole*, between signifier and signified, between the synchronic and diachronic dimensions of language, between value and meaning, and between syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations. But the justifications for these innovations depend upon analogies which are drawn
primarily from game theory, metaphysics, and economics. As I consider each of these analogies and its correspondence to consumption metaphysics, my general thesis will be not that the analogies are incorrect but that they appeal to material considerations deriving from production relations which obtained at the time Saussure delivered his lectures, and that the analogies simultaneously naturalized those relations.

More than once, Saussure compares language to the game of chess, citing similarities meant to bear out the nature of language as he conceives it. Chess is like language in the following ways: 1) At any given moment, the disposition of the chess pieces determines the range of possible moves; but once a move has been made, the new disposition creates a new range of possibilities, entirely unrelated to the previous one. 2) Changes in the range of possibilities suggest nothing about the game's outcome, only about the present state of the game. 3) The rules of the game alone determine its existence, and they apply uniformly and everywhere. Saussure qualifies this analogy between language and chess in only one respect: chess moves are intentional, whereas changes in the state of language are not (23, 88).

This analogy is meant to describe langue, not parole; therefore it has two immediate implications. In the first place, language exists as a network of predetermined alternatives, any alternatives to which are inconceivable. Moreover, the individual is powerless to modify the available choices within language at any given moment even by the act of choosing—i.e., by speaking—for in the analogy the "chess player" is not a person nor even a linguistic community but the unknowable forces which alter language through time. Moreover, knowledge of the state of things is always only present knowledge; and history, however determinative of the state of
things in some abstract sense, becomes irrelevant. Therefore the analogy implies, in the second place, that the only role for speakers within the "game" of language is that of choosing, and specifically not that of choosing so as to affect the nature, outcome, or even the momentary disposition of language but of choosing pure and simple.

The similarities between these implications and some aspects of the metaphysics of consumption are striking. Consumerism, as I have said, was actually a shift in production relations characterized by greater dependence of workers upon producers. It followed closely upon the evolution of corporate capitalism and grew up within the conditions of increasing centralized control (see Mandel, Late Capitalism). It certainly serves the interests of such relations to emphasize language as the product of unseen and unknowable forces. Similarly, the concept of pure choice—of choice which completely disregards any consequence of making choices—aligns perfectly with what I have already called the Eudaemonia of consumer society. There may be nothing inaccurate in describing language as a network of commodities possessing transient relational values, over which language users—we may as well call them language consumers—can exert nothing closer to control than acquiescent participation; but certainly the appeal of such descriptions derives from their resonance with the production relations of consumer capitalism. Those relations have, since the turn of the century, assumed the aspect of phenomenal necessity, and that is why Saussure's analogies seem so compelling. However, the compulsion operates dialectically, since the analogies' seeming aptness works to naturalize and thereby reinforce those entrenched production relations
which underwrote the analogy to begin with—especially when the person striking the analogies repeatedly refers to himself as a "scientist."

Saussure's ideas about identity in language are based upon analogies which suggest a metaphysics in which entities are defined by conditions and in which material aspects of entities are completely interchangeable. His famous example is that of the 8:45 train from Geneva to Paris. Today's 8:45 is identical to tomorrow's, even though every material component of the two trains may be different (107). It will be readily apparent that such a concept of identity, which differs radically from the sort in which substance is determinative, has a strong affinity with that aspect of consumption metaphysics according to which every commodity is primarily an instantiation of some generalized product-concept. Saussure does not disregard the material aspect of entities which identify one another in this way, but he stresses that their material substance must be constantly renewed by iteration—a train must depart for Paris regularly at 8:45 in order for the 8:45 train to Paris to exist. Once again, the appeal here is to a metaphysics already firmly in place, that of a limitless multiplicity of brand-name products the existence of which determines the significance of any single instantiation. The only difference—and it is after all minor

23Saussure contrasts his example of the 8:45 Train to Paris with that of a particular suit of clothing:
A quite different kind of case would be, say, a suit of mine which is stolen, but which I find subsequently on a second-hand stall. That suit is indeed a material object, made up simply of various inert substances—cloth, lining, facings, etc. Any other suit, however similar, would not be my suit. Now linguistic identity is not the kind of identity the suit has, but the kind of identity the [8:45 Train to Paris has]. (107).
This is perhaps the crucial archaeological moment for structuralism in that it privileges what Aristotle calls secondary substance over primary substance. See page 32.
in the context of structuralism—is that the material renewal of trains to
3 (or of words) takes place in time, whereas commodities can express
material multiplicity simultaneously. Nonetheless, the simultaneous
ral of the uniformly produced and packaged objects constitutes an
-ve identity exactly like the consecutive renewal of words in speech.
Campbell’s Soup begins to signify from the moment uniformly labelled cans
of it are first seen stacked at the grocery. From that moment on, as
Warhol showed, any single can of soup signifies on the basis of what we all
suppose to be its true—that is, its multiple—reality. And this signification
would obtain even if not another can were ever manufactured again.

Of course, a can of Campbell’s Soup, taken as either soup or as a
reproducible work of art, really does signify a mass-produced commodity;
but my point is that in a consumer society objects of all kinds are assumed
to signify the multiple reality of mass-produced commodities. Whether they
really do have a multiple, mass-produced reality is not as important as the
fact that they are apprehended as if they did. This assumption, this way
of understanding phenomena of all kinds, is precisely what underwrites
"scientific" accounts which, while claiming to prove something new about
language, simultaneously validate the metaphysics of consumption. Thus
structuralist theory appears to underwrite the structuralist episteme, the
strategy for thought that was beginning to emerge at the time Saussure
gave his lectures on general linguistics.

Of the analogies Saussure employed, the most telling, from a
historicist perspective, was his characterization of language as an economy.
The characterization is questionable, presupposing a very odd kind of
economics; but as we shall see (p. 71), the characterization is entirely
congruous with the consumption metaphysics mentioned earlier. Now it is true that Saussure's economic characterization of language is meant to be a terminus ad quem insofar as it proceeds from certain carefully reasoned "foundational" points about the arbitrariness of signification and about langue as the proper province of linguistics--that is, if language is a system of differences and if that system exists only in the conventionalized imaginations of its speakers in a given epoch, then it is reasonable to claim that "a language is a system of pure values, determined by nothing else apart from the temporary state of its constituent elements" (80). But the characterization at times also seems a terminus a quo, as eventually value becomes its own justification. For at one point Saussure argues that thought and sound are amorphous elements which mysteriously and arbitrarily delimit each other by a process which marks them off into discreet units of thoughts-and-words. He argues this on the basis of the claim that without exclusive reliance upon internal relations the concept of value would not obtain (111).

But this circularity is not critical, for it is easy enough to grant Saussure the arbitrariness of signification on the strength of casual linguistic observation. It is even easy for us to grant the point that "The content of a word is determined in the final analysis... by what exists outside it" (114). What is critical, however, is Saussure's insistence upon "value" as the property which derives from this arbitrariness. Saussure defines value generally—and linguistic value particularly—as a conventional assignment of difference and similarity along separate axes. Linguistic value obtains, in other words, 1) when a signifier becomes equated with a (dissimilar) signified to form a sign and 2) when that sign compares to
other (similar) signs in the linguistic system (113). The description makes sense; but the question remains, *Why name the outcome of this process "value" at all?*

The answer might seem, from a linguistic perspective, straightforward enough. It makes more sense to talk about the value of a sign rather than, say, its expressive potential, precisely because the sign's internal relationship is arbitrary, whereas the concept of expression implies the fixity of an essence. Signifiers do not relate to signifieds uniformly from language to language, and what they can refer to in a given language depends upon the number of comparable signifiers available for delimiting the signified more narrowly. Therefore some signifiers have greater value than others. (Saussure's example is that in English we have the words *sheep* and *mutton*, which affords us greater referential specificity than the single *mouton* in French (114)).

My argument is that when Saussure brings this method of valuation to bear upon the linguistic system he strikes a mystic chord in the minds of readers who, though conditioned *rationally* by a more advanced economic system—i.e., the monetary form—are *emotionally* attuned to Marx's expanded form of value. For it should be fairly clear that the system of values implied by Saussure's linguistic economy parallels the subsidiary economy of consumerism (p. 62), in which the background of values determines the value of a given commodity.

In order to see this parallel more clearly and to delve into the implications of consumption metaphysics, it will be necessary to clarify Saussure's idiosyncratic blurring of the distinction between use value and exchange value. Saussure only describes value generally, referring to it as
a term which "involves" an exchange and a comparison; but by implication that general term is actually a use value, since the delimitation of the signifier determines how it can function in language. Again: if the signifier mutton is exchanged for the concept "sheep which is eaten" instead of simply "sheep," that ratio of exchange is exactly how the signifier can be used. In other words, in Saussure's economy, the exchange value of a linguistic unit is its use value. But the two types are in theory incommensurable within the same entity. Marx has shown that the exchange value of a given commodity can only be expressed by the use value of another commodity, so that "every commodity is compelled to choose some other commodity for its equivalent, and to accept the use-value, that is to say, the bodily shape of that other commodity as the form of its own value" (Capital I, 56).

Of course, it is entirely possible that language is a special case; however, Saussure does not make his appeal to a special economics but to a general one, comparing the determination of linguistic value to that of a five-franc coin. If Saussure's theory of value is inconsistent with Marx's, the other prevailing theory of value, the law of supply and demand, does not apply even remotely to synchronic linguistics. A signifier certainly could have greater linguistic value because of its demand, but only by virtue of its usage through time. The concept of langue, however, forbids such a consideration, just as Marxian theories of value concern the way value is fixed at a given moment. Hence my claim that Saussure's appeal to general concept of value is theoretically heterodox: it does not conform at all to one school of thought and very idiosyncratically to the other.
I contend that the appeal succeeded in spite of its theoretical heterodoxy, partly because it was able to explain a great deal about language; but it also succeeded because the context of its reception was a new understanding of value, one which departed from either traditional brand of economic theory. Marx showed that in the mid-nineteenth century "All commodities are non-use-values for their owners [who intend to exchange them], and use-values for their non-owners [who intend to acquire them]" (89); but contrarily, in the consumer society which succeeded the production society of Marx's theory, people began wanting to experience owning the non-use-values of commodities—not as values to be exchanged, but as values retained.

The desire to own exchangeability is the result of the aspects of consumption metaphysics I catalogued earlier (p. 60). First, I mentioned that in the metaphysics of consumption every commodity is primarily an instantiation of every other. This is what Saussure would call the "material aspect" of such a concept of value. That is, acquiring a commodity which is only an instantiation of all others primarily means acquiring its iterative identity—in other words, its exchangeability with any other object in its class. The point is not, once again, that anyone wants to exchange the object; what people want is to own its potential for exchange.

The second aspect of consumption metaphysics entailed by the desire to own exchangeability corresponds to what Saussure calls the conceptual aspect of value. With the establishment of iterative identity through mass production, objects become signifiers, mirroring one another and existing
primarily as abstractions. As abstractions, they can become attached to any concept whatever as signifiers of that concept. And this is why, as I mentioned earlier, when brand-name products are compared to one another, the comparison is made through the products but bears upon the brand names themselves. The result of such comparisons is that the consumer constructs a network of product-concepts--exactly like Saussure's langue--in which use value derives from exchange value, just as it does in Saussure's linguistic economy. The comparisons among similar signifiers (the object-instantiations) define and delimit the signifieds (that is, the brand-name concepts) to which they refer. In my earlier example involving a comparison between one brand of shoes and another (p. 60), the use value of the shoes is no longer that they protect the feet, since in a consumer society it is generally taken for granted that there are plenty of shoes, and plenty of kinds of shoes, available for such use; rather, their use value, within the context of perceived affluence, derives from the degree to which they perform those functions, the difference between the brand-names under comparison being the value that attaches to the brand-name concept. It does not matter that such a scheme for determining value is incoherent, for as long as the shelves at shoe stores are overstocked

24Lefebvre draws the same conclusion, though he arrives at it from a different direction. He argues that technological developments have altered human perception so that "... objects, in practice, become signs, and signs objects; and a 'second nature' takes the place of the first, the initial layer of perceptible reality" (113). Insofar as this technological account interfaces with my more material explanation, I don't believe there is any real contradiction.

25It doesn't matter in the least that increasingly large segments of our population cannot actually get any of these shoes onto their feet. Only the impression in the minds of most people--amazingly, even in the minds of some of the shoeless themselves--that shoes are nevertheless plentiful is significant here.
with a dizzying multitude of brand names, use value remains transformed—it derives from exchange value, very much in the way Saussure describes, where the metaphysic is one of iterative identity and praxis is nothing other than informed choice from among pre-determined alternatives, exchange value and use value coincide. And where exchange value constitutes use value, acquisitiveness is the desire to own exchangeability. 26

Thus Saussure’s appeals to common sense depend upon three analogies which do not transcend the historical context of the Course in General Linguistics. The chess analogy depends upon a covert resonance with centralized corporate control and administered culture. The analogy used to demonstrate iterative identity (The 8:45 Train to Paris) is drawn directly from the same sorts of centralized control and in any case depend upon a newly developed, historically conditioned metaphysics which privileges abstraction over material presence. And finally his economic analogy is based upon a heterodox concept of value which nonetheless conforms perfectly to that of the subsidiary economy contained within consumerism. True, the first of these comparisons only obliquely draws upon structuralism’s historical context. That is, the comparison to chess would have held sway at any time since the 13th century. But it would not have done so with the same sort of force. The second comparison seems transhistorical, even if the locomotive itself is not, because the concept of iterative identity bears some resemblance to Platonic form. But it would not make complete sense in any but a contemporary metaphysics. And the third

26 Jean Baudrillard explores the way advanced consumer societies expand the limits to which this value scheme can be taken in his consideration of waste and ostentation in La Société de consommation, pp. 48-56.
comparison, the economic analogy, would have been altogether senseless prior to the rise of consumer capitalism.

To various degrees, then, these comparisons reveal theoretical structuralism’s link to the production relations which obtained at the turn of the century both in America and in Europe. Moreover, consistent parallels between theoretical pronouncement and the metaphysics engendered by those production relations begin to provide some fairly strong clues about the nature of an episteme which derived from them. If anything, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s appropriation of structuralist linguistics some fifty years later suggests still more strongly the presence of a kind of exchange-value episteme predicated upon these production relations as they further evolved within postwar capitalism.

Lévi-Strauss insisted that theory should not intrude upon empirical observation (*Structural Anthropology* 280), which prevented him from seeing that most of the structures he observed in the cultures he studied reflected primarily upon those he imported from his own. For it is important to remember that Lévi-Strauss disregarded ethnographic considerations like the express function of a social formation and instead sought to find its underlying structure (21). That underlying structure had to be sufficiently abstract as to be translatable on some level and in some form into structures from other cultures, including those of industrial and postindustrial societies. Thus the structure of kinship relations he plotted among the Trobriand Islanders ultimately supported his contention that their function was to insure the circulation of women because of his own essentially economic conception of social activity and communication:
[The "endeavor" to interpret society in terms of communication theory] is possible on three levels, since the rules of kinship and marriage serve to insure the circulation of women between groups, just as economic rules serve to insure the circulation of goods and services, and linguistic rules the circulation of messages. These three forms of communication are also forms of exchange which are obviously interrelated (because marriage relations are associated with economic prestations, and language comes into play at all levels). \textit{(Structural Anthropology 83)}

Lévi-Strauss makes two distinct moves in this passage. First, he assigns the insurance of circulation as the function of economic rules. The assignment is disingenuous if Lévi-Strauss really understands Marx as well as he claims \textit{(Tristes Tropiques 61–62)}; but in any case, it seems plain that reducing all social activity to the function of insuring "circulation" of one kind or another is an effective way to underwrite the construction of a host of structuralist inter- and intra-cultural homologies like the above. Kinship rules may indeed insure the circulation of Trobriand women, but that does not make it anything like an economic rule, at least not to the Trobriand Islanders, whose "economics" are nothing like those of late capitalist societies.\textsuperscript{27} By disregarding the conscious apprehension of social phenomena Lévi-Strauss gains a blank functional space onto which he can project metaphors borrowed from his own culture—specifically, economic metaphors. Projecting such structural metaphors constitutes the second move in the above passage: folded neatly into the economic conception of

\textsuperscript{27}In light of my own reading of structuralism, I ought to be the last to deny the role of economics. Still, the kinds of economic relations available to a society like ours and those which form the base of pre-industrial communities are hardly reducible to one another without grotesque distortions, particularly on the side of the latter. I don’t mean to imply that to avoid such distortions we should take any socially informed activity simply as it asks to be taken—only that we should consider dialectically the relations between a social phenomenon as it is understood and experienced by its participants \textit{as well as} what appear to be its deep-structural implications. Indeed such an investigation is the business of this dissertation.
things here presented, as a sort of adhesive between two tenuously joined
terms of comparison (kinship rules and economic rules), is the notion of
structuralist linguistics, the appeal of which, as I have already argued,
depends upon an economics coextensive with the production relations of
consumer capitalism.

But Lévi-Strauss's contribution to the laundering of consumer
capitalism's ideological formations is actually twofold: 1) he granted the
structuralist view of language architectonic status and 2) he created a
meta-structuralism which subsumed linguistics into its abstract methodology.
I will discuss these moves separately to show how each contributed to
covering the tracks of the material origins of an emerging episteme while
simultaneously naturalizing it.

Instead of merely appealing to a tacit consumption metaphysics, Lévi-
Strauss exploited its by-then established legitimation within structuralist
linguistics by placing the structuralist view of language at the center of all
social phenomena, as both model and medium. Despite appearances,
language is not one term among others in the foregoing quotation (page 75),
but actually the central term, having displaced economics as the arché of
theoretical structuralism. Elsewhere Lévi-Strauss shows the central role of
language more explicitly:

... language can be said to be a condition of culture because
the material out of which language is built is of the same type
as the material out of which the whole culture is built: logical
relations, oppositions, correlations, and the like. Language,
from this point of view, may appear as laying a kind of
foundation for the more complex structures which correspond
to the different aspects of culture. (Structural Anthropology
68-69)
Of course, since the structuralist view of language is itself based upon economics, the displacement of economics by language actually represents a further naturalization of the ideological superstructure of consumer capitalism.

Lévi-Strauss hastens to add that, in spite of the "foundational" status of language, language does not cause culture; rather, language is the place for locating structural principles which inhere in the human mind (Structural Anthropology 71). This disclaimer is crucial for his second contribution to the laundering of consumer capitalism’s ideological formations, because it allows him, without really relinquishing the architectonic status of language, to subsume linguistics into a meta-structuralist discourse which extrapolates the principles of difference and value as abstractions which guarantee the positing of the sort of homologies we saw earlier in the equation of economics, kinship rules and language. It is this move to a meta-structuralism which marks Lévi-Strauss as the leading force in legitimizing the production relations which obtained in postwar consumer capitalism. For Lévi-Strauss didn’t just relate myth to ritual or kinship to language; he undertook to show that even linguistics itself was a signifier, an instantiation of certain principles which applied universally and which could be expressed by a host of similar scientific disciplines--it was a question of adopting the form but not the content of structural linguistics (Structural Anthropology 34–37). He thus inaugurated a radical relativization not just of social phenomena but of entire systems of thought, raising to a new level the methodological implications of his claim that
... the question is not to substitute one particular content for another or to reduce one to the other, but, rather, to discover whether the formal properties present homologies, and what kinds of homologies: contradictions, and what kind of contradictions: or dialectical relationships that may be expressed as transformations" (*Structural Anthropology* 85-86).

In other words, provided we can divine the structural underpinning of the terms in question, *nearly anything can be exchanged for anything else*. More important still, finding the means by which such exchanges can be arranged is the legitimate business of science insofar as it exposes the "true" nature of the terms under comparison.

Thus science ratified the kind of exchange-value thinking a world of commodities seemed increasingly to demand. For in that world, nearly everything already was exchangeable for everything else within the subsidiary economy of commodity relationships, where every commodity mirrors every other commodity's value (see above, p. 62). The idea of origin is unthinkable in such an economy, the infinite play of exchange being the only principle that operates, and it is no casual coincidence that Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myth led him to the same conclusion when he claimed that a given myth consists of all its variants. All versions, early and late, can be exchanged for all others within the myth's "structural law"—the totality in which "any difference [between elements in one version and those of another] may be correlated with other differences" (217)—in order to show that the versions are functionally interchangeable.

Though Lévi-Strauss insisted that not all structural analysis will yield functional exchangeability of the phenomena under analysis, all of his examples handily support the opposite. And the success of such demonstrations reinforces and naturalizes the production relations of late capitalism, particularly when we consider the enormous interdisciplinary
influence Lévi-Strauss enjoyed. The popularity of methodological
developments like making language architectonic or subsuming the
structural linguistic projects of Saussure and others within a meta-
structuralist methodology both depends upon and contributes to the
subjective experience of late capitalism’s production relations as I have
described them.

By the 1950s, nearly every aspect of life in capitalist societies was
susceptible to treatment in terms like the ones Lévi-Strauss developed and
in fact was best understood in such terms by the members of those
societies who wished to be effective or at least needed to appreciate the
means and methods of the structures which controlled their lives. In 1902
Durkheim predicted that the increased specialization of labor would create a
sense of purposive individualism which would give workers a sense of
community within the corporation (333, xxxix); but instead the result, by the
time Lévi-Strauss wrote Structural Anthropology, was that increased
specialization created further alienation because of workers’ increased
detachment from the corporation’s larger aims and their tendency to think
in terms of modular functionalism, in which jobs are niches defined by their
structural environment, so that workers at all levels, from management on
down to rank-and-file labor, are by definition perfectly exchangeable for
anyone with the requisite knowledge and skill to fill the niche.

Of course in one sense this has always been true, and the more
recent forms it has taken in industrialized society have been decried by
Erich Fromm and the others of the Frankfurt School since the 1920s; but
what I want to stress is that now so narrowly defined are the attributes
(skills or knowledge) required to do a given job, so uniform the scope and
nature of specialized training, that people have come to see themselves as interchangeable work modules, and moreover to see that view of themselves as inevitable if not natural.

From a materialist point of view, the functional significance of this modular functionalism is that Lévi-Strauss's homologies and transformations are now supposed to abound. All social situations can themselves be related to all others of all levels. These "naturalized" relational principles make the structure of work relational to the structure of leisure, the structure of family relational to corporate structure (and vice versa—a corporation or group of corporations can style itself a family, so long as "family" is already understood in homological relationship to corporation). Lovers are now "partners," as the rich, ambitious project of intersubjectivity is displaced by the impoverished concept "relationship," and so accustomed are to radical relativization that we are unembarrassed by it. Particularly useful in legitimizing such cognitive operations and semantic devaluations was the lending of "scientific" status to the notion that entire systems like structuralist linguistics could be folded into meta-structuralist procedures which effaced their family ties to consumer economics and production relations in the very act of enfolding, since with each level of abstraction and change of conceptual register we are removed farther from the material bases of our social existence.

We have seen that the production relations which obtained at the turn of the century are perfectly matched in the theoretical pronouncements of Saussure, such that many of his strongest points appeal to what was coming to seem the phenomenal necessity of those relations. The popularity of structural linguistics, as my expressly functional
argument has it, derives from that conformity insofar as structuralism had the propensity to reinforce the production relations by legitimizing them scientifically. We have also seen that structuralism's capacity for self-transformation into a meta-methodology—a capacity teased out principally by Lévi-Strauss—mirrored the radical relativization of all aspects of life within late capitalism.

Thus structuralism conforms appropriately to a popular view of life as a thoroughly structured, systematic collection of phenomena which relate to one another ceaselessly. Henri Lefebvre correctly points out that there is no such systematicity to everyday life, that everyday life is fraught with gaps and incommensurables which refuse the supposed reducibility and exchangeability of phenomena (27). But there doesn't need to be any such structural integrity in fact for us to consider the way in which the assumption of structural integrity operates powerfully to shape our thinking. Seen in my terms, theoretical structuralism was the dream of an emerging way of life that could only realize itself consciously by the evasive means of applying its peculiar exchange-value idealism to language, thereby making language the false ground of its operations. Thus that way of life legitimized itself by hiding its material basis from itself so that it did not appear too transparently to derive itself from itself—an ideological laundering that seduced generations of theorists and critics from diverse disciplines.

This account is a materialist way of considering Derrida's remark that when structuralism attempted to transcend metaphysics by dismissing origin, it only exposed language to a critique which it must henceforth forever level against itself ("Structure, Sign and Play" 284). It was as
though structuralism assumed the burden that ideology needed to disown, that of providing a self-grounding positivity which could in turn provide a ground for ideology. Structuralism did for ideology what ideology must necessarily never do for itself, but at the cost of a vulnerability to criticism which dismantled not just structuralism but all of Western metaphysics. Language with only its own internal relational dynamic as arche or telos most certainly demands such a critique, but then language so considered is language naively considered. Ironically, the deconstruction of metaphysics did nothing but strengthen the ideological formations structuralism supported, since, first, the infinite relational properties of consumption metaphysics accord perfectly with deconstruction, and second, by thus providing a new ground for ideology, deconstruction solved the problem of self-grounding as well as structuralism before it had—better in fact, since deconstruction is, on its own terms at least, unassailable.

Of course, deconstruction has been criticized as apolitical, ahistorical sophistry, and so it is; nevertheless, it is valuable as the first step in undoing the political naïveté of structuralism and, better still, of uncovering its metaphysical assumptions. The limitation of deconstruction is, plainly, that whereas it can be shown that structuralism's assumptions do not hold, it only follows that they cannot be sustained according to the stereotypical formalistic scientism that structuralism inaugurated. After all, Saussure said that language is only intrinsically defenseless against the slippage that results from the arbitrariness of its internal relations (76). But language does not operate only intrinsically at all, Derrida's arguments about the inexhaustibility of linguistic context notwithstanding. It is as though Derrida confronted a theory that said the world is made of snow
and concluded that since the world is not made of snow the world does not exist. Similarly, Foucault argues that Saussure's separation of signifier and signified was the consequence of the failure of successive analytics of finitude (Order 294); and archaeologically speaking, at least, that may be true. But what made that shift in the episteme possible (and Foucault never talks about the causes of epistemic shifts; he merely describes them, because archaeology doesn't recognize cause) was a qualitative change in the separation of what people made from what they used. When that change occurred, identity shifted between the two types Saussure describes: from that of an object in its historical particularity to that of a signified with primarily iterative identity. Once we consider the material implications of structuralism, its relation to new forms of production relations and radically altered patterns for shaping desire, we realize that the semiotics of consumer capitalism may indeed unravel endlessly, as poststructuralism would have it, but for reasons which are distinctly functional.

Conclusion

I do not mean to imply that epistemic structuralism is the only mode of experience available to us, or that it is the chief cause of all our social ills. First, as we shall see in Gaddis's *The Recognitions* (Chapter Two), the doctrine of individualism exists alongside epistemic structuralism, though the tensions between the two are considerable. And while epistemic structuralism strives to codify and "territorialize" desire, desire is not so easily contained and can reassert itself, as it does in *The Atrocity Exhibition* and *American Psycho*, in perverted and horrifying ways (See
Chapters 3 and 4). Second, epistemic structuralism, whether considered as Foucauldian _episteme_ or as a Marxist "social consciousness," cannot actually be said to be the cause of all our social ills insofar as it is a reflection of production relations. It would be much more accurate to say that production relations and epistemic structuralism together, through their mutual interaction, form the cause of our social ills.

It might well be objected that epistemic structuralism is an unnecessary preoccupation in this study and that consumerism or corporate gigantism explain the mentality I wish to examine without recourse to a factitious theoretical construction. Nevertheless I am not content simply to cite these phenomena, and I do not apologize for factitious theoretical constructions—that is, at least not insofar as an adventent investigation of social reality’s seamless surface seems to demand them. It is possible, of course, to rest upon an objective, Marxist description of the conditions which determine knowledge production, but it is difficult for such a description to make plain what Marx himself said is equally true, that knowledge also determines material conditions. In spite of having argued against Jameson for a dialectic capable of distinction, I now return to an Althusserian conception of ideology, one in which the relationship between economic base and ideological superstructure is non-linear and cannot be summed up mechanistically as cause and effect. This moment too is necessary in a dialectical investigation—I have called it a "regressive" dialectic—which, while maintaining the primacy of economic relations, also demands that at some point we immerse ourselves in the _episteme_, which is after all our actual condition, and take it as it asks to be taken.
What is perhaps most extraordinary about ideology is the way it surreptitiously folds its actual grounding into its discourse and praxis, silently relegating its *primum mobile* to the epiphenomenal so that, like the purloined letter, it may be hidden in plain sight. So it is with epistemic structuralism, which *appears* to make consumerism or corporate capitalism knowable as one class of phenomena among others, even though it can be argued that the former, considered historically as a set of production relations, actually determined epistemic structuralism. If we are to examine the experiential dimension of epistemic structuralism in the novels of Gaddis, Ballard and Ellis—as a way of coming to terms with our own structuralist commitments—we need temporarily to give free reign to epistemic structuralism's deceptions while retaining an awareness, perhaps at the deepest level of our conceptual acquaintance with it, of the historical understanding which is anathema to it. Therefore over against the strictly objective Marxist view I adopted in the previous section, I retain the concept of epistemic structuralism as a sort of "subjectivist mistake" which somehow understands itself as such. So conceived, epistemic structuralism will provide a way, in the ensuing chapters, for us to understand the *episteme* of late capitalism as it understands itself *even as* our understanding reaches out beyond the experiential boundaries which are the *episteme*'s business to maintain.

For epistemic structuralism resides in a rarified atmosphere, hermetically sealed off from social realities which seem to have nothing to do with the abstractions it takes to be the defining qualities of human relations. Once define society as a system which processes information, and Niklas Luhman's clinically dispassionate discussion of the systemic necessity
for "unequal distribution of communication chances" makes it easy to forget that what he's saying means that some people have to live in cardboard boxes and beg for food—or else, presumably, the system will succumb to communication entropy.

Such pronouncements have sound methodology to recommend them. Offhandedly enjoining us to leave the "game" of moralizing to the Marxists, Luhman insists that such things are none of his methodological business:

> We can, of course, always moralize about the problem of unequal distribution. But we cannot actually advance from unequal to equal distribution. The moral problem of equality and inequality is a problem inherent in stratified societies. It has been articulated in terms of a theory of justice, but it certainly cannot be "solved" in these terms. Moralizing has only secondary or attenuating functions—or as some critics might say, ideological functions. The structural problem of stratified societies is that the identification of subsystems requires a hierarchical definition of their environment in terms of rank order or equality/inequality. (234–35)

I haven't found any more compelling example of methodological good faith than the above: Luhman's business is structure, not ideology. What that means, apparently, is that he can "solve" the problem of unequal distribution by calling it a structural necessity. If that's the case, if this is an example of methodological good faith, then what we need is methodological bad faith. For methodology is bad faith from the moment it disallows questions which would force it to transcend itself. Walter Davis argues that Marxism cannot escape Althusser's "infinite regress of ideology" by seizing some sort of scientific high ground—there is no high ground to seize. We should embrace ideology in order to develop "through its study . . . a distinctly Marxist concept of critical reflection" (182). This is not a reflection in which an a priori, ahistorical subject critically considers its own transcendent being; rather, "Subject must be conceived
of as something that arises in the course of experience, not as something we begin with" (175).

Experience, here defined, is neither a priori romantic transcendence nor epistemic structuralism's constructed, constrained and rarified forms of knowledge but a developing experience in which even structuralism plays a part. Derrida shows that structure can only be perceived in the moment it is menaced with collapse or disruption and that structuralism is the methodical menacing of forms to get them to yield their internal coherencies (6). Accordingly, and on another level, the historical appearance of structuralism signaled the collapse of a way of thinking, which we might call formalism. That disruptive moment not only illuminated the past and the present but constituted the possibility of critical reflection of the sort Davis calls for. We must risk the methodological bad faith of using structuralism not as a sterilizing attempt to tie down reified internal coherencies but the inauguration of a conflict between what has been thought and what is thought, a conflict capable of calling forth what can be thought. I maintain that this is the implicit possibility of the novels of Gaddis, Ballard and Ellis.
Chapter II

_Semper Aliquid Haeret:_
The Remnants of Ontology  
in William Gaddis's  
_The Recognitions_

...in so far as the expressive bias of performances comes to  
be accepted as reality, then that which is accepted at the  
moment as reality will have some of the characteristics of a  
celebration. To stay in one's room away from the place where  
the party is given, or away from where the practitioner  
attends his client, is to stay away from where reality is being  
performed. The world, in truth, is a wedding.  

---Irving Goffman

To be entangled in hundreds of pages of a writing  
simultaneously insistent and elliptical, imprinting...even its  
erasures, carrying off each concept into an interminable chain  
of differences, surrounding or confusing itself with so many  
precautions, references, notes, citations, collages,  
supplements--this "meaning-to-say-nothing" is not, you will  
agree, the most assured of exercises.  

---Jacques Derrida
When William Gaddis was writing The Recognitions in the early 1950s, it was possible, for the first time in the history of the novel, not merely to create that literary effect called realism but to reproduce reality itself. Marx's insight that reality is socially constructed had never intruded more forcefully upon everyday experience: the expansion of the postwar federal government, corporate gigantism,¹ and explosive technological innovation had altered human environment such that there was no aspect of that environment which was not either manufactured, administered, or conventionalized. Reality had become an artifact, and therefore it was possible for other artifacts, like novels, to reflect it faithfully and fully. Monstrosities like The Recognitions began to appear—huge, complex novels written with sedulous disregard for artistic proportion, balance, or unity.² The reality produced in these novels is not the reality of Dickens or Dostoevsky, a positivity governed by rational principles which preclude the co-existence of contraries; rather, it is, as Gaddis's narrator describes it, "an intense quality of immediate realization," "filled out to embrace those opponents which made its definition possible" (The Recognitions 561). Reality is a totalizing artificiality, untroubled by the contradiction between its claim to ontological plenitude and the purely consensual nature of its

¹Olivier Zunz writes that the rise of corporate capitalism in American was "a crucial element in social change" with "powerful sociological and ideological consequences" (68). "By the middle of the twentieth century, the corporate reorganization of American society was a fait accompli. In 1948, the corporate sector held almost 60 percent of national income-producing wealth; the largest 200 employers in that sector accounted for one of every five private nonagricultural workers. By the 1950s, corporations had become part of the daily life of ordinary Americans, and Americans had grown used to them" (1).

²See Tom LeClair's The Art of Excess. LeClair argues that the "big books" of authors like Gaddis, Coover, Pynchon, and McElroy are not instances of self-indulgence but attempts "to represent large cultural and often global wholes" (2).
elements. It consists entirely of an interpenetration among institutions, practices, rituals, texts, and fetishized physical objects (understood primarily as signifiers) which circumscribe and define human existence. Because they are purely social constructs, these elements refer to one another for their meaning, in what would be a massive, orderly cultural edifice if there were anything like a uniform coherency binding them together. But the referrals, deferrals, parallels, duplications, interconnections, oppositions, and homologies among these elements fail to provide the sort of reticulate consistency which is the condition of their ability to bear meaning in the first place. As Henri Lefebvre argues, everyday life has no overarching system, merely disparate subsystems separated by unbridgeable gaps (86).

Thus insofar as a novel like The Recognitions reproduces reality, it fails to cohere; it refuses to corroborate the claims of the social order by virtue of its very faithfulness to that order. As Stanley, one of the novel’s characters particularly troubled by this postmodern dilemma, complains, "—This self-sufficiency of fragments, that's where the curse is, fragments that don’t belong to anything. Separately they don’t mean anything, but it’s almost impossible to pull them together into a whole" (616). Without either the reductive apparatus called realism to circumscribe them or a coherent totalizing schematic to sustain them, the welter of social constructs of which The Recognitions is composed implodes—as is dramatized on the final page, where Fenestrula Cathedral collapses upon

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3It also refuses to corroborate the ironic obverse, a systematic frustration of order. In short, Gaddis’s universe is neither mechanistic nor ironic; it simply doesn’t "add up."
Stanley as he performs his organ concerto, intended as a self-sufficient, coherently ordered work of art.

Joel D. Black finds an occasion for criticism in *The Recognitions'* lack of cohesion. Decrying Gaddis's "hubris" for attempting a "cultural encyclopedia" that is "doomed to failure," Black maintains that "*The Recognitions* presents its own encyclopedic enterprise as a playground of isolation and inundation upon which the central oppositions of Gaddis's text--originality and imitation, genuineness and forgery, the sacred and the profane--are dialectically dis-played" (27). Black sees nothing productive in the energetics of deconstructive play--and he confuses it with dialectic in any case--at the expense of an understanding of how the intradiscursive relationships of the novel, and especially the interdiscursive relationship between the novel and the reader, interact to establish an experience the yield of which is more than a ceaseless deferral among its elements.

It is important to remember in this regard that the magnificent collapse of order in *The Recognitions* resides not so much in the narrative as in the reader's apprehension. Jean-François Lyotard argues that by "opening the box" of representational space, postmodern painters "cause the scenic space to spread out and surround the spectator," introducing distortions which insist upon calling attention to the spectator's presence as part of the artistic experience (*Dispositifs* 9-10). Analogously, Gaddis foregrounds the reading experience by making the reader conscious that he, the reader, is the (ultimately failed) composer of the novel, in much the same way that Stanley's musical composition contains dissonances which cause the architecture housing his art to come crashing down upon him. What this means in novelistic terms is that the reading experience becomes
part of the novel's dramatic process, which is why "plot" is really too meager a concept where Gaddis is concerned.

Wolfgang Iser provides a way to think of Gaddis's novel in terms of this dynamic. Iser claims that "The convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence, and this convergence can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader" (275). The reader sets the text in motion, and the text in turn affects the reader. One of the consequences of this dynamism is that the reader must "think" and thus "create" what is "unformulated though nonetheless intended" (31). However, when a text like Gaddis's responds to the reader's creative pressure by delivering back a surfeit of near-connections, meaningless correspondences, and cryptic doublings, it is the reader himself who is ultimately delivered back—to himself, as the frustrated desire to resolve the text's challenges. This reading experience resides at the core of the novel's structure—which, to repeat, is the structure of reality itself. The purpose of this chapter will be to explore the significance of placing the reader in such a difficult position, though, as I will show, it is not possible to specify the content of any "message" to be derived from that position. My thesis is that the disorientation and frustration are at the crux of the novel's subversion of epistemic structuralism. In the previous chapter I argued that in the late nineteenth century a shift in production relations created an unprecedented dependency upon mass-produced goods and that the effect of negotiating a life informed by such goods was a new kind of social epistemology or *episteme*. On page 16 I suggested that this *episteme*, which I call
epistemic structuralism, has ontological implications in that it provides the strategy for people to establish an identity by projecting themselves into the structures configured by other objects and other selves. By mid-twentieth century, these implications had become manifest, and they furnish the primary object of (and vehicle for) Gaddis's social criticism.

The concept of epistemic structuralism provides me with a means for describing that criticism, which begins superficially, at the level of character, where the actions of fashionable hypocrites and the uncritical attitudes of the docile masses are subjected to the narrator's undisguised contempt. The criticism also occupies the novel's thematic middle ground, where both the foundation and the deconstruction of the original/counterfeit dualism—which is the impetus for so much of the novel's action—is seen to be possible only because epistemic structuralism has transformed the idea of immanent form into structure, making it the principle of exchange. Finally, Gaddis's criticism works its way to the core of the narrative as a conflict which ultimately disrupts the reader's attempt to construe the novel he has been reading. Thus by implication reading itself becomes a suspect activity insofar as it construes a socially constructed object by means of the dominant logic of a socially constructed world. In other words, reading reveals itself to be implicated in epistemic structuralism.

Beginning with the question of character, I will explore Gaddis's critique by considering the interplay among three entities. The foremost is painter Wyatt Gwyon, whose preoccupation with authenticity constitutes the principal interest (it would not be accurate to say the focus) of the narrative. Here again, internal dissonance or conflict plays an important
role. Wyatt grows up defined by psychological conflict—conflicts of internalized religious inculcation enmeshed with unresolved Oedipal desires—which he attempts to reconcile through artistic expression. But in the age of art-as-consumption, his work can never be recognized. He therefore makes a Faustian pact with millionaire Recktal Brown whereby he passes his work off as "newly discovered" Flemish Renaissance paintings. Brown and Wyatt work in tandem with Basil Valentine, an art critic who excites market interest in the forgeries by first doubting their authenticity and then declaring them genuine. The whole business gradually takes shape as an ethical crisis for Wyatt, but he learns that the art world, dedicated to its own fraudulent machinery, will not allow him to make a clean breast of it. Nevertheless he takes a personal revenge upon Brown and Valentine and flees the country. He goes to Spain, where he is enlisted in another forgery plot—this time the manufacture of an Egyptian mummy—but backs away from it suddenly. Finally, he turns up in a Spanish monastery where he "restores" old pictures by scraping the paint down to bare canvas.

Over against Wyatt's sullen and troubled autism—"a nervous combination of insistence and uncertainty" (863)—is another entity involved in the novel's subversion of epistemic structuralism. The Recognitions presents a cast of social adepts, principally composed of poseurs like Otto Pivner and artist Max Schling, who populate its interminable cocktail parties. These characters are the novel's blatant epistemic structuralists, and they are the objects of some of the narrator's direct contempt. The group also includes the hapless Mr. Pivner, a one-dimensional mass man whose unexamined life, the narrator makes plain with brutal, unforgiving
comedy, is not worth living. As I will show, the text dramatizes the *episteme* which underwrites these people's ways of knowing and acting. The contrast between these characters and Wyatt provides Gaddis with impressive leverage for social criticism; and he does not shrink from exploiting it.

Yet taken on these terms Gaddis's would be a decidedly negative critique. The primary difficulty of endogenous criticism is that of articulating locally meaningful alternatives to those cultural formations under scrutiny. How, in other words, can Gaddis's text expose our strategy for thought in ways that would be meaningful to us? If we let the matter rest here we would have to say that Gaddis has failed to overcome that difficulty, for though Wyatt's struggle toward "living deliberately" stands in clear opposition to the inauthenticity of the epistemic structuralists, Wyatt himself is an unknowable entity throughout the novel. He goes unnamed for over 700 pages, slipping in and out of scenes unannounced by either narrator or characters. He is often drunk or delusional, and is himself so convinced of his own non-being that he expresses surprise that he is physically visible at all: "Little dogs in the street bark at me," he announces to Recktall Brown, as though such an event were miraculous (357). Echoing *The Recognitions* own internal dynamic. Basil Valentine informs Wyatt, "We decided to write a novel about you, since you don't exist" (247). Wyatt can serve as an example of nothing, and it is for this reason that a subversion of epistemic structuralism entails a third entity, the narrator.

The complexity of the narrator's role is easily indexed, though not easily accounted for, by the many stylistic shifts in narration throughout
the novel. I will investigate the way these shifts relate to different modes of knowing which the novel makes available. Of particular concern will be not so much a Bakhtinian analytic of the narrator's internally stratified speech—though certainly *The Recognitions* is rich in dialogism—as the explication of a *mood* into which the narrator frequently lapses, a mood characterized by elegiac tone, an uncharacteristic absence of wit or sarcasm, and an especially powerful use of metaphor. It is this narratorial mood which on the one hand complements Wyatt's subjective vacancy, and on the other stands in constructive opposition to the strategies of epistemic structuralism employed by the aforementioned group of characters.

At the risk of "structuralizing" the relationships among these three entities, we might describe their interplay as a triangle of opposition and complement, schematized thus:

![Triangle diagram](image)

**Figure 1: Principal Intradiscursive Relationships of *The Recognitions***

This schema illustrates that the narrator (N) and the epistemic structuralists (ES) are incompatibly opposed: many of the epistemic
structuralists imagine Wyatt (W) their complement, whereas Wyatt insists upon his opposition to them; finally, Wyatt and the narrator complement each other. 4

The schematic is provisional; it is not altogether misleading, but it certainly fails to convey the dynamism of the relationships involved, which I hope to make clear as this chapter progresses. For these relationships function dialectically to overcome the inherent epistemological problems of endogenous cultural criticism. The narrator brings the epistemic structuralists' hypocrisy and inauthenticity into sharp focus, but without providing a true alternative. This is because the object of criticism, the characters' actions and attitudes, derives from an episteme which engulfs not just them but us as well—it is what both "socializes" us and equips us with the means for construing the novel in the first place. The opposition between the narrator and the epistemic structuralists is therefore insufficient. At the same time, the core of the epistemic structuralists' desires is a longing for the sort of authenticity which Wyatt seeks, which is why characters like Otto, Esme, and the "distinguished novelist" Ludy look to Wyatt as their complement. In a much less direct manner, Stanley and Anselm stand in just such a relation to Wyatt; and in a sinister way, so do Recktal Brown and Basil Valentine. Summing the matter up, Gaddis

4At first glance there may seem something odd about the proposition that Wyatt and the narrator stand in relation to one another. But Wyatt Gwyon, perhaps more than any character in modern fiction prior to Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*, somehow senses that he is being narrated: "Yes, I don't live, I'm ... I am lived, he whispered" (262; see also 868). The source of this sensitivity is his childhood traumatization by the inscription on Bosch's "Seven Deadly Sins," Cave, Cave Dominus Vidi ("Beware. Beware. God is Watching"). The sensitivity is most strongly expressed by the narrator's Lacanian description of Wyatt as inhabiting the "Diaspora of words," an alien to the image in which language casts him (for further discussion of Wyatt's alienation through language, see page 116).
himself has said that "the body of the novel has not been squarely about [Wyatt], it has been about the others, and he only insofar as he was the spirit they lost" (Koenig 28). In spite of their impulse toward Wyatt for self-fulfillment, these characters simply lack the inwardness which would help them recognize what this impulse means or how misdirected it is. On his own side, Wyatt recognizes the profound difference separating him from other people but is unable to explain, by virtue of that very recognition, what the difference is. The narrator, however, can provide the missing component through mood, and insofar as he can do so he stands as Wyatt's complement; the problem—and it is a paradox worthy of Hermann Hesse—is that insofar as the narrator can provide it he also vitiates it. What Wyatt comes to understand about himself is, within the fully produced social reality of Gaddis's text, unsayable. To provide access to it through language, as the narrator does, is to say something else instead. And it is for this reason that Wyatt's subjective vacancy also stands as complement to the narrator.

Taken together these relationships—narrator/epistemic structuralists, Wyatt/epistemic structuralists, and Wyatt/narrator—operate dialectically to create the sort of conflict within the reading experience which has the potential, in the irreducible privacy of an alternate experience, to gainsay epistemic structuralism. But taken separately they cannot promote any such experience, since they fail to disrupt sufficiently the reader's socially informed strategy for construing them. For instance, by relying too much upon the opposition between the narrator and the epistemic structuralists, Elaine B. Safer argues that Gaddis's "mission" is to satirize American materialism (112): "By defamiliarizing the present reality for readers, he
calls attention to the need for an inner reality that has traditional meaning and basic truths" (114). It's hard to tell which is more limiting, Safer's complacency about what American "materialism" is and what might constitute a meaningful criticism of it, or her modernist reading of the novel. Joseph Salemi also reads The Recognitions as a modernist text, but his conclusion about "art as expiation" seems based upon stressing the opposition/complement relation between Wyatt and the epistemic structuralists while ignoring the complementarity of the narrator and Wyatt (56). Stephen Koenig also focuses too much on the complex of opposition and complementarity between Wyatt and the epistemic structuralists. He claims that Gaddis "made Wyatt the symbol of what all the others had lost, so that his sin and their loss would be mutually instructive to the reader" (31), as though the novel did not suggest an existential alternative to both loss and sin. By concentrating on the opposition between narrator and characters while assuming too much about the affinity between Wyatt and the narrator, John Leverence is able to adduce a totalizing pattern within The Recognitions. Leverence does a stylistic analysis of the novel's densely allusive narration, which leads him to conclude that Gaddis is not an obscurantist:

[The allusions] integrate epistemological, aesthetic, and philosophical substance into an occult pattern of spiritual exaltation that operates in a sphere of unfolding possibilities. The sturdy harmony of tradition and individual talent that all the interlocking elements achieve is not a muddle of obscurantism, but a straightforward solution to the novelistic problems Gaddis confronted" (45).

Leverence takes into account the dynamism of the text, but as I have indicated, the problem is that its myriad associative clusters never quite coalesce into a "sturdy harmony" at all; we do indeed get a "muddle of
obscurantism" at the end—and that's the point. I would argue that Gaddis is indeed an obscurantist, though not at all of the same stamp as, for instance, Joyce. Gaddis has produced a reality which is dense, not with a mythic substructure, ironic or otherwise, but with the same overdetermined and contentious intertextuality as our own social reality. The reader makes what he can of Gaddis's production, just as he makes what he wants of reality: it depends upon what kind of cultural literacy he's got to work with. But the more he has, the more maddening the text's near-connections, pointless correspondences, and seductive incoherencies become. In other words, the more you are like Wyatt's father, who undertakes a disastrous structural anthropology of religious practices in search of their pure spiritual origin, the more this novel will confront you with the unraveling of the knowledge you have stored up.

Leverence also maintains that The Recognitions shows how "the 'last things' of modern life are drear deceptions, [whereas] the life that is full and significant is spiritually derived from the resources of our deepest and purest humanity" (32)—as though the novel showed either that "our deepest and purest humanity" were not just another (socially perpetrated) "drear deception," or that Wyatt's actions evoked an inner affect capable of social significance. Neither is the case, as I will show; but nonetheless Leverence touches upon the aspect of The Recognitions which marks the limit of the text's subversion of epistemic structuralism: the repeated intimation that beneath all of the posturing which constitutes participation in the social schematic, there is some essence of selfhood which cannot dissemble and cannot be effaced. In each of Wyatt's forgeries there lingers some trace of his past and of his desires—indeed something of himself, for
not only do these conflicted elements define Wyatt, he has even interpolated images of his own face into all of his forgeries. And when Basil Valentine recognizes in an uncompleted sketch of Wyatt's mother the model for a "Stabat Mater" Wyatt is forging, he comments

Your work, it's old isn't it but a little always shows through, yes something, semper aliquid haeret? something always remains, something of you. (336)

As I have indicated, the nature of the _semper aliquid haeret_, the something which always remains, is indefinable: it has no content and is in any case unavailable to the reader as a positivity within narrative discourse. I will conclude this chapter by arguing that, in spite of its emergence as existential _néant_, this essence reflects Gaddis's historical moment within the general co-optative sweep of late capitalism and the level of cultural criticism that moment availed him. Being, for Gaddis, is still a given, something which precedes the social constructs layered over it and which, among the characters who look to Wyatt as their lost authenticity, has been reduced to a remnant of the desire for its own unconditional recognition.

_Epistemic Structuralists, Pernicious and Benign_

Though Wyatt's appearance precedes that of the epistemic structuralists and though his centrality to the novel is beyond question (Gaddis's remark notwithstanding), I will begin out of order by discussing these minor characters with an eye toward explicating the incidence of epistemic structuralism as it informs their behavior. For in spite of their delayed appearance, they provide the backdrop for Wyatt's story.
In *The Recognitions*, personal identity is a matter of great moment to most characters, even among those with a determined lack of integrity. For instance, at the Greenwich Village party given for Max Schling's new painting (Chapter I.5), Herschel introduces Max, Hannah and Stanley to Adeline Thing, "giving them all Christian names which he supplied himself" (191). The three who are misnamed are seriously affronted by this and hasten to correct Herschel. Herschel himself suffers from "dissociated personality" brought on by ghost writing political speeches and movie-star confessions for a living—he is no longer at all sure of who he is and wants to get a tattoo for "ego identification" (181). Later he even strikes Hannah for demanding that he explain how he knows who he is.

Yet the structuralist economics through which these characters establish their interchangeable identities inevitably leads to ontological atomization. In this section I will show how the range of strategies for identity construction the novel exposes—strategies grounded in expressive performance—suggests the operation of epistemic structuralism and the characters' more-or-less conscious exploitation of it. From a cast of minor, often wholly anonymous personalities will emerge three chief exponents of this sort of identity construction: Mr. Pivner, his son Otto, and artist Max Schling. Mr. Pivner comes across as a "benign" epistemic structuralist, not because he is any less duplicitous or manipulative than the others, but because he is largely unaware of the social forces which both shape him and allow him to refuse the burden of consciousness. Otto and Max—the "second generation" of epistemic structuralists, as it were—come across as comparatively pernicious insofar as they consciously exploit the manipulative possibilities of what sociologist Irving Goffman calls "impression
management," that is, the strategies for identity construction which epistemic structuralism makes available.

In a series of inordinately long and seemingly pointless scenes of casual social interaction, Gaddis employs an array of techniques for character construction, including idiosyncratic speech patterns, titles and epithets, and appropriated discourse. For instance, Ed Feasley's idiolect--his discursive signature--is the ivy-league drawl of the "Chrahsht" with which he prefaces every utterance. Similarly, Herschel calls everyone "baby" and keeps repeating the story about how he bit his wet nurse on the nipple. A would-be author interested in attaching his identity to some distinguishing epithet asks, "--That's the plot, briefly. Now do you think I can call myself a negative positivist?" When he is told, "--I think you'd be safer calling yourself a positive negativist" (178), he immediately takes up this structural innovation and offers it several times throughout the evening (and several chapters later--see II.i, p. 306). The epithet becomes this otherwise anonymous character's functional place holder, his identity, even though--or perhaps especially since--it is at bottom meaningless.

(The other guests remain unsure as to which structural permutation marks his identity: "--I don't know, he told me he was a negative positivist. --Well he told me he was a positive negativist" (194).) On the one hand this character is content to construct an identity based on a structural permutation of some sort--and the fact that he is indifferent to which one suggests that he is primarily, if not hysterically, attached to the idea of titular identity construction, apparently too fearful to go around without a factitious categorical badge. On the other hand, the construction conveys
nothing to the people he is trying to impress. Consequently, in terms of meaningful identification he remains nobody at all to the others in spite of his efforts, save for the respectable image he garners by occupying a structural slot the only significance of which is the principal of différence suggested by the syntagms positive negativist / negative positivist.

Some characters, like the boorish American tourists in Spain or the barflies who turn up in various after-hours establishments in Manhattan, remain completely anonymous, tagged for identification by either of the preceding techniques. Yet their anonymity holds the key to the ontological inanity The Recognitions exposes: pure discourse in circulation. The Recognitions is peppered with unattributed remarks which function as "credentials" to gain an extremely transitory kind of identity. If the remark has no immediate exchange value, recognition is refused:

Someone from the neighboring international set tried to join them, offering, "Just imagine Victor Hugo wanting the whole city of Paris renamed for him! This credential earned cold stares, frightening, not for their severity, but for the very bleakness of the faces engaged. (577)

But when such remarks are passed from unknown speaker to unknown speaker, they resonate with increasing force (and with decreasing impact). A young man insists that "New York is a social experience" (176). Ironically, this proposition, which might have been worthy of serious interrogation, degenerates into nothing more than tender for negotiating that social experience, as others take it up and repeat it for effect. Elsewhere, the all-purpose French-sounding nonsense word "Chavenet" circulates like a rare and prestigious coin (it is variously an ambiance, a literary illusion, and a breed of dog). So do "The solids of Uccello." sundry (and ill-understood) lines of T.S. Eliot. the word "phobia" ("I've
just always wanted a brand new car . . . . it's been a regular phobia of mine" [608]), and a barely recognizable conflation of chacun à son goût and Mozart:

--It's a free country.
--Cozy fan tooty.
--The same to you. What does that mean?
--That's fuck you in Latin.
--That's not Latin.
--O.K., so why should it mean anything? Cozy fan tooty, that's just an expression. (645)

The circulation of speech reaches its apotheosis at the drag party. There the identities assumed through cross-dressing present themselves as valid because they are fundamentally "queer"—it is now "queer" not to cross-dress. Similarly, talk has currency so long as it presents itself as cliche and quotation, a cross-dressing of speech with subtle semantic transformations drawn from context.

Taking up the circulation of speech in The Recognitions, Steven Weisenburger points out that Gaddis's characters "enact a limited discourse within the closed system of their culture, a system in which the cash nexus presents itself as Divine Law" (148). Weisenburger is primarily concerned with the entropic tendencies of closed systems, and he raises some good points about the way circulating speech becomes meaningless as it approaches a saturation point; but I think it's inaccurate to speak of the "cash nexus" as the "Divine Law" of Gaddis's social representation. In the previous chapter (page 61) I argued that late capitalism has imported into its economic structure an evolutionary recession, the re-establishment, on a phenomenological level, of Marx's "expanded form of value." In this "subsidiary" economy, contained within the more advanced monetary economy, we become conscious not of prices but of the background of
values which determines the value of the commodity before us (Capital I, 69-70). It was my contention that consumers apprehend commodities in terms of this background of values—that is, in terms of their exchange ratios with all other possible commodities—as a means for informing their acquisitive desires and underwriting their buying choices. It was the general thesis of my chapter that this sort of phenomenology has pervaded our thinking, in an abstract form, as episteme, so that many of our judgments, perhaps most tellingly those which have nothing to do with shopping choices, are made exactly according to its terms.

Once again, these terms have not so much to do with money but with a system of values in which every element is contained within or becomes a mirror for every other. And they are the terms which inform the behavior of Gaddis's characters. As the narrator acerbically points out, the circulating utterances of the partygoers become "wares not for sale, but barter only, and in kind" (576). The characters see their social world as a finite (though fluid) system of verbal exchanges which, considered synchronically, "fix" each other within a relational structure, a background of discursive values identical to Marx's background of commodity values. In spite of the radical dynamism of this system, its momentary structures, or synchronicities, are capable of conferring identity upon those who can temporarily attach themselves to a given utterance or set of utterances. Not incidentally, the narrator describes the Greenwich Village party in 1.3 as "a room full of people who spent their lives in rooms" (176). These people are in their element, a definitely bounded space configured internally by the expectations and performances of the other people there.
The allusion is not just to spatial containment, but to the conceptual containment which shapes and defines their lives.

The exploitation of free-floating discourse within a field of conventional identity-structures is telling. But it is the fluidity of these strategies for identity construction that reveals the atomization of literary character in *The Recognitions*. Phrases sometimes begin in anonymity and eventually attach themselves to a fixed character's repertoire, or vice versa, or both. For instance, at the Greenwich Village party Hannah remarks that Herschel is probably a "latent heterosexual," a phrase which Otto Pilner decides to appropriate, hoping it will identify him as intellectual and witty. He repeats it, but before long its circulation has exceeded him, and he overhears Max Sching repeating it to someone else.

The dispersal of these utterances eventually disperses the characters who utter them—they are dispersed upon the structural field of their discourse, which they have more or less consciously made their ontological field as well. They think in terms of social structures into which they project themselves—not as "selves" (autonomous, socially constructed or otherwise) but as *functions* or place holders within those structures. It is for this reason that despite the alarming number of people who kill themselves in *The Recognitions*, there are no suicides—only, as Wyatt points out, homicides. This annihilation of self-as-other is unconsciously parodied by someone identified as "Arthur with a beard," who explains at Esther's Christmas party that he is

...writing a new life of Christ, to be published under another name, the same name he had used when he reviewed his own first book, published under his own name, a satire on the Bible so badly received that he joined the chorus of its detractors and got even with himself by quoting Charles Reade
and George Borrow, calling it an excrescence of over-
refinement. (584)

What lurks among these manifestations of epistemic structuralism is that the structural environment defines the projection. Consider the analysis of identity given by Irving Goffman, a sociologist who was studying social personae about the same time Gaddis was writing The Recognitions. In 1959 Goffman published his "report" on "impression management," The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. Proposing, with scientific detachment, that "expressive performance" has supplanted action in modern life, Goffman describes social behavior identical to that found in The Recognitions. He argues that the "expressive" individual possesses no innate qualities, only capacities—for learning roles, for imaginative desires, for fear and for shame. The rest of what we call personality is assumed, the direct product of the individual's efforts to create an impression. The object of expressive performance, the creation of a characterized "self," is to define and thereby control a given situation (9). Yet

this self itself does not derive from its possessor, but from the whole scene of his action, being generated by that attribute of local events which renders them interpretable by witnesses. A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impuie a self to a performed character, but this imputation—this self—is a product of a scene that comes off, and is not a cause of it (252).

The disturbing circularity of the arrangement Goffman describes is evident: if an individual can build a consensus about what sort of persona can function within a given situation, he has succeeded in defining the situation. But this means that the situation he desires to define has ultimately defined him, his "true" self being otherwise remarkably insubstantial.
If the identity derived from the surrounding structures is insubstantial, it would nonetheless seem that the operations of epistemic structuralism place two requirements upon the projections it makes available: narrowness and transposability. Narrowness means that the projection must have very few attributes—as few as will permit facile adoption by the role player and immediate recognition among his audience. Transposability means that both those projecting themselves and those recognizing the projection suppose the projection to be a place-holder within the social structure and therefore within the range of any number of people wishing to project themselves into it. In The Recognitions, when a bus driver with the narrow attributes of a leather jacket and “swashbuckling motions” assumes the persona of a World-War Two bomber pilot and drives recklessly through Manhattan traffic, the passengers whose lives he endangers recognize the charade and calmly "respect his right to perform in allegory" (205-206). Elsewhere, we see characters consciously choosing to play the witty socialite, the ingenue, or the bored sophisticate precisely because the few tropes and figures associated with each of these roles are easily learned or copied and are instantly recognizable; and players can take them up simultaneously with other players or discard them for other roles precisely because they are supposed to be interchangeable modules within the social structure. Uncannily echoing Goffman’s analysis, the narrator comments that human nature has been reduced to a trace, a "stain" of metal within a socially contrived alloy, "satisfied with any counterfeit of itself which would represent its worth amongst others" (293).

The characters who emerge as the most noteworthy exemplars of epistemic structuralism in this way are Otto Pivner, his father, and artist
Max Schling. The generational differences among these characters reveal much about the genealogy of epistemuc structuralism: therefore I will proceed chronologically, with the older generation in the person of Otto's long-lost father, Mr. Pivner. There is something benign, or at the very least defensive, about Mr. Pivner's participation in the social construction of his identity; but as we move into the younger generation, we will see that the latent perniciousness inherited from Pivner and his timid acquiescence in the *episteme* comes to the fore.

Nearly 300 pages into *The Recognitions*, Mr. Pivner, an accountant for an unnamed New-York firm, appears abruptly, his introduction an apparent digression from the main plot of Wyatt Gwyon's entanglement with Recktall Brown. It is immediately clear that Pivner's life is informed by a grotesque ontological contradiction: the belief in a personal transcendence capable of expression through conventional signs. The experiential conflict brought on by this contradiction is that, on the one hand, Pivner endures a vague but intense anxiety over his emotionally and imaginatively contracted existence, an anxiety which he attempts to relieve through feckless expressive gestures like the "dashing individuality" of his signature on order forms. And on the other hand, Pivner is the apotheosis of willed conformity, most at home among functionaries who, exactly like himself, do not exist "singly but only in aggregate, material for headlines" (283). The terms of this conflict are condensed in symbols like his ubiquitous necktie, which, with its "defiantly patternless botch of color," is supposed to distinguish him from the "innominate morass" of fellow tie wearers; simultaneously, it is the emblem of his corporate existence. and
references to its "pinched knot" suggest that it stands as a noose into which he has voluntarily slipped his own neck.

A second symbolic condensation of this conflict is the contents of Pivner's apartment, with which he has invested the power to define his "secret and private self" despite their mass-produced tastelessness. Here the connection between the metaphysics of consumption discussed in the previous chapter (page 60) and the ontological implications of epistemic structuralism becomes particularly clear. Pivner requires material signifiers through which to express himself; but he is only prepared to recognize those signifiers which stand as instantiations of generalized product-concepts. The mass-produced "heavy furniture" and the "flower- and hunting-prints" which adorn Pivner's apartment exist primarily as concepts and only secondarily as physical objects. As concepts, they participate in a vast immanent network of signifiers which reinforce one another as a complex of value substitutions. Thus it is that "in matching, they fulfilled their first requirement," which is to be "inoffensive"--that is, in corresponding to one another as product-concepts of similar value (and not as items with "the isolate dumb beauty of something chosen for itself") they do not disturb the interlocking structure of values which underwrites their physical conjunction under one roof and which thereby accommodates Pivner's identificatory projections. Pivner projects his "secret self" into these objects--which are not products of his own creative labor, or even of his imaginative taste--because they all corroborate one another in the immanent structure of values, the commodity-langue, to which he subscribes.
Significant here is the incommensurability between what Pivner believes about his transcendent, essential, innermost self and the terms through which he attempts to express it. It bespeaks a need for unconditional recognition and the simultaneous fear of it, a fear which propels Pivner to take refuge in the vast administered structures of modern urban life, of which commodities are the material ground. The chief of these structures, and the one that most clearly points out the ontic dimension of the epistemic structuralism, is information. Pivner pores over the newspaper nightly, looking for deliverance into his own inwardness in precisely the place he can be sure never to find it:

Fearful of missing anything, he read on, filled with this anticipation which was half terror, of coming upon something which would touch him, not simply touch him but lift him and carry him away. (288)

What the newspapers offer is not inwardness but information, presented in the narrative as a debased form of communication in which remote events gain immediacy and relevance while being simultaneously distanced and rendered irrelevant, appearing not as events at all but as an uninterrupted flow of data which undercuts the ostensible urgency of its content. The only relevance information can have is the force of its own flow, so that all content finally becomes interchangeable. Thus Pivner buys

... late editions of the same newspaper, seeing different headlines than those tucked under his arm. only to read the story from column six suddenly elevated to a banner across columns one to four. (288)

The editors transparently restructure the same information into different emphatic patterns for reconsumption in later editions. The continual restructuring of material into different unrelated informational fragments eventually leaves Pivner disoriented: "the only way he could know whether
he had read a newspaper was to turn to the comic strips, where life flowed
in continuum . . . " (288). Thus Pivner's world becomes a 'series of
disconnected images, his life a procession of faces reflecting his own
anonymity in the street, and faces sharing moments of severe intimacy in
the press' (564).

Information and the fragmentation of experience which it promotes
form the site of Pivner's benign participation in the structuralist episteme,
though it will require a dialectical consideration of Althusserian
interpellation and postmodern sociology to make this plain. Althusser
describes interpellation as the phenomenon in which a subject answers the
"call" of the ideologically informed discourse of his social environment, a
complex event which both constitutes his subjectivity and establishes that
he is "always-already" a subject (174). Insofar as it implies an infusion of
externally determined identity, Pivner's case clearly evinces interpellation:
Mr. Pivner repeatedly assumes that in turning to the endless flow of
advertisements, newspaper stories, and radio announcements he is
answering an appeal made directly to himself (291, 420, 440, 502, and 565);
at the same time, the self to which he assumes they appeal is created by
his credulous response.

Ignoring the ideological dimension of interpellation, sociologist
Kenneth J. Gergen provides a different way in which to approach Pivner's
involvement with information. Gergen describes a kind of disorientation,
remarkably similar to Pivner's fragmentation of experience, which he calls
"social saturation" or the more pathological "multiphrenia"--the "splitting of
the individual into a multiplicity of self-investments." Multiphrenia is the
"result of the populated self's efforts to exploit the potentials of the
technologies of relationship” (73-74). Gergen glosses over the ideological implications of multiphrenia. It seems remarkably positivistic to assume that the subject engages in such self-investments purely to "exploit the potentials of the technologies of relationship," especially when these technologies universally urge passivity, civil obedience, and uncritical acceptance of that ensemble of values called consumerism. Nonetheless, by characterizing the process as one of multiple self-investments, Gergen supplies what the concept of interpellation tends to leave implicit, the active participation of the interpellated subject. Beyond just submitting to ideological manipulation, even in the ontologically complex sense Althusser describes, Pivner also exploits his saturation in order to shield himself from an awareness of the irreconcilable conflict between his desire for recognition and his desire to dissolve into urban anonymity.

Pivner’s case demonstrates how, in spite of the two concepts’ incompatible explanatory gestures, both interpellation and multiphrenia point out the complex of social and psychological impulses which inform epistemic structuralism. For in addition to the clear commercial colonization of Pivner’s psyche, these various exploitative voices also, and very differently, assuage his personal conflict—a conflict formed prior to or, perhaps more likely, formed in concert with, commercial colonization—by "counting him excellently satisfactory just as he was" (566). That is, they seem to furnish him with the unconditional recognition of the transcendent individualism he cannot relinquish in spite of his desperate impulse toward conformity.

Pivner’s benign participation in epistemic structuralism becomes clear when we consider the way he unconsciously negotiates the forces of interpellation and multiphrenic saturation, bringing order to the chaotic
voices by situating himself at their center: he assigns them a structure

based upon his abiding belief in his subjectivity. On the face of it, Pivner

is subject to multiple identities:

--then and only then do you decide. The decision, my friends, rests with you. [. . .] And remember, you are under absolutely no obligation ... said the radio. (286) 5

--Friends, don’t take our word for it. You owe it to your own health... (292)

--tastes better, looks better, smells better, and is better for you... (293)

"Yes, even if your artistic talents are zero, you’ll be able to decorate your house, from wall to wall with fine paintings and be able to say: I did it myself." [newspaper advertisement] (563)

--In just a moment, Necrostyle will bring you the correct time. But first friends, do you feel dull, logy, just not-up-to-much. first thing in the morning? Well... (565).

By investing himself (to use Gergen’s terminology) or responding (to use Althusser’s) as these voices direct, Pivner is variously decisive, free of obligation to anyone but himself, empirical ("don’t take our word for it"), artistically sensitive but complacently incompetent, dependent upon the media for information as basic as the time of day, and physically run down. At times he must even assume a different gender: "--Ladies, now is the time to save and save. Women are flocking to..." (287). This divergence suggests that the structural milieu into which Pivner projects himself is peculiarly unstructured. But it is Pivner who, in responding to these voices, assumes their coherent integration into a network of related messages the ensemble of which, like the furnishings of his apartment, have

5Gaddis’s dialogue is often elliptical. When quoting from The Recognitions, I will signal Gaddis’s ellipses with three unspaced periods (...) and my own with the conventional spaced periods ( . . . ).
the power to define him—and the fact that they simultaneously count him "excellently satisfactory just as he was" betrays the desire for unconditional recognition which impels him to accept the definition.

For Pivner, the voices belonging to this structure "proved, by their own successful existence, that he was obliged to seek no further than himself for the authority which justified them both . . . ." (291). Thus Pivner's sense of self is implicated in what Foucault calls an "analytic of finitude," which grounds the knowledge of a thing within the thing itself as both object and condition of knowledge (Order of Things 278). To be specific, Pivner's sense of self, in trying to justify itself by reference to those historically specific external voices which address him and in which he invests that self, takes as its object (itself) what it simultaneously supposes to be the condition of its possibility (its ability to respond as a self). Because "All these contents that his knowledge reveals to him as exterior to himself . . . traverse him as though he were merely an object of nature" (Order of Things 313), Pivner's self is constituted by the "irreducible anteriority" of the structure of discourses and objects which surround him in spite of the fact that he imagines himself their guarantor.

Pivner ingenuously acquiesces to the episteme, structuralizing his environment and uncritically accepting that structuralization as a given, because of his complex ontico-psychological investment in it: his abiding belief in his transcendent subjectivity requires that he never question its constructedness. And this remains true in spite of his disingenuous use of the manipulative ethics derived from Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People. For if Pivner believes that "the sublime secret was to behave like a door mat. to present himself to the world as a cheerful
simpleton" in order to get from people a "yes, yes' response" (500), such a posture is not only not the least bit out of {interpellated} character, but it affords him the luxury of imagining that there is something purposive about his utter passivity.

Pivner also believes that his identity is fixed, occupying the center of the structure of objects and voices which he himself holds in place. Yet it is this article of faith, this static concept of identity, which distinguishes Pivner from the younger generation of epistemic structuralists, represented first of all by his estranged son Otto.

Unlike his father, who imagines himself "placed" at the center of his immanent structure, Otto experiences his environment as a structure of identity displacements in which his being, experienced as a discrepancy between one identificatory assignment and another, is always elsewhere. The consequence of this shifting sense of self is Otto's willingness to manipulate his structural displacements rather than merely submit to them. His manipulations are at times considerably involuted, as when he mockingly acts shocked in order to avoid showing that he really is shocked--thereby affecting a worldliness incapable of being shocked (217).

Otto does not passively submit to interpellation by the various media but actively seeks the sort of self-interpellation implicit in Irving Goffman's concept of expressive performance (discussed above, p. 108). Otto's project is to submit his constructed identity, expressed through a variety of transparent expressive gestures of the sort Irving Goffman describes, to consensual validation by his chosen social set, the Greenwich Village crowd, a group whose power lies in their potential for recognizing Otto's expressed identity. Of course this means that his affectations are constrained by the
principles of narrowness and transposability discussed earlier: and as we shall see, because his place within the structural environment is always a displacement. Otto spends much of the novel vexed by the problem of failing to coincide with his own willed identificatory projections.

Just as Mr. Pivner's world is a "series of disconnected images," the narrator says that Otto's thoughts are actually a chaotic "series of free-swimming images" (131); but the narrator also tells us that Otto structuralizes his epistemological universe with greater calculation than does his father:

Otto often disappeared at odd moments, as some children do given a new word, or a new idea, or a gift, and they are found standing alone in some private corner, lips moving, as they search for the place where this new thing belongs, to get it firmly in place and part of themselves before they return to adult assaults . . . (122)

As the emphasis on precise epistemological placement suggests, Otto negotiates reality as a space, an interlocking structure of hierarchized values. He apprehends every social situation as a clearly ordered structure of identities, a structure inferred from the signs and discourse of its occupants. Otto knows how to "place" people based upon the sort of things they say or wear, the authors they've read, the epigrams they utter about painting or philosophy, even the quality of their offhand witticisms, but especially the measure of currency these affectations command. His transparent posturing—the attempt to project an identity into his environment—strongly indicates the way he has structuralized that environment. Otto quotes Wyatt and others, without attribution, on philosophy and aesthetics: he attempts to impress people as a Hemingwayesque playwright who has just returned from Central America.
spouting plagiarized remarks about how to light a revolution. Sporting a
teigned arm injury and smoking acrid foreign cigarettes for effect: he
carries with him a copy of a French novel, which he pretends to read in
public. When he mistakenly comes upon $5,000 in counterfeit bills (which
he assumes is a gift from his father), he tells everyone the money is the
proceeds from the sale of his play.

No one appears to believe or at any rate pay attention to these
contrived performances, and there is considerable comedy in the way the
group to which Otto refers his expressive performances withholds from him
the power to define and control his social situations while granting it
readily to each other. Nonetheless, Otto's performances say a great deal
about the way he structuralizes his social life. Clearly, of the "tree-
swimming images" which pass for thought with him, he has organized the
archetypal ones into a structure of values, privileging the functions
"man of mystery," "man of means" and "raconteur." each of which is
completely transposable to anyone who, like Otto, can express them in the
narrowest suggestive terms. His attempts to arrogate these functions and
assemble them into a constructed identity demonstrate the value they have
in his schematized perception of social life; and the fact that each of them
resides at a considerable distance from Otto's self-apprehension—the fact,
that is, that Otto knows he does not coincide with them—indicates that for
him they primarily exist as signs: placeholders within some unarticulated
system of values. set off from other values by differences in the kind of
currency and recognition they garner.
Otto's obsession with mirrors demonstrates his chronic problem of non-self-coincidence. He enjoys going into lavatories because "the mirrors all in a row over the wash basins gave the pleasant illusion of passing one's self at many windows" (161). He stops and stares into mirrors, practices and memorizes effective facial expressions in them, carries on conversations through them—he even tries to seduce a woman's reflection in the mirror behind the bar at which she is seated. Otto's very name, apart from being a homonymic parody of "self," is a palindromic play of mirrors: the first two letters admire themselves in the mirror of the last two, where all they see is the "perfect lie" which a mirror image is (135). More troubling still, the last pair of letters also gaze at their reflection in the first two, so that the question of authenticity or originality is at once at issue and imponderable within the mise-en-abîme of externally mediated reflection—that is, reflection conducted through a structure of socially defined identities. Having surrendered the power of recognition to his social set and to the episteme which prescribes their rules for recognition, Otto must continually adopt an external perspective, narcissistically trying to capture the experience of being seen from the outside.

Otto's attempts to place himself within this structure result in displacement not so much because of their failure to garner recognition, nor even because of the discrepancy between them and Otto's self-apprehension, as because of the way they collectively define him as an ensemble of postures. Instead of expressing his being, every posture he affects displaces it, suggesting that his being is somehow the sum of the postures he keeps piling up. This is why, in a rare introspective moment, he complains that he feels "disjointed":
Like ... do you know what I feel like? Like when a clay reproduction is made of an original statue, and then they take the copy and cut it behind the head with fine wire, and behind the arms and the legs, and those are all moved and it's cast again. [...] To be sold as part of a series, a series of the original, a series that never existed ... . (462)

The substance of the complaint is not that there is no original--Otto clearly believes that somewhere underneath all his significations there is a "self"--but that the original itself has been altered by the re-posturing, reduced to an iterative identity: the "series" being, so to speak, of each posture is presented--indeed, sold--as its essence. That is, in Aristotelian terms, its secondary substance has assumed the status of a primary substance. Otto fleetingly realizes that he has constructed an identity which has altered what he takes to be his actual identity.

Nevertheless, he keeps hoping that epistemic structuralism will somehow provide a connection between sign (affectation) and referent (his authentic self). For in spite of his calculated manipulation of his structural environment, Otto, like his father, has at bottom an abiding if somewhat embarrassed faith in his subjective essence, which is both transcendental and immutable. His most private belief seems to be that his ceaseless, manipulative posturing will somehow express that authentic essence, even if the signs through which he attempts to express it are conventional and derivative:

The brief strokes of anxiety and sharp strokes of detail broke the fragments of expression on his face, and he seemed able to catch none of them and fix it congruent upon that image of original honesty which he clutched at so desperately beneath the surface, and the second surface, with each instant more confused in the succession of mocking streaks of parody which he could not control. (451)
Otto's affectations are unmotivated signs, that is, they are not fixed by any logical, semiotic, or metaphysical necessity to the person, the "original honesty," Otto desperately wants them to express; instead they refer to each other, as elements within a closed structure of socially recognizable identities. This structure can never express his authentic being; it can only suggest an ensemble of displacements, a "series that never existed," as the intended referent regresses endlessly through a succession of deferrals, the "mocking streaks of parody" which Otto affects.

Otto's experience of identity displacement, then, betrays an ontological conflict similar to his father's: that of belief in personal transcendence capable of expression through conventional signs. Once again, the telling difference between the two generations of epistemic structuralists lies in Otto's ease of detachment from these signs—his conscious recognition of the gap between sign and referent, and the manipulative possibilities the gap affords. However, the apotheosis of epistemic structuralism in The Recognitions comes through artist Max Schling, another member of the younger generation who is untroubled by any ontological conflict whatsoever. If Otto can't control the "mocking streaks of parody" which are the elements of his identity projections, that is only because he believes there is some referential verity which ought to constrain them. Max, on the other hand, apparently acknowledges not only the gap between sign and referent, but also the diremption within the sign, between signifier and signified. Max deals

...largely in facts, knowing for instance that most Hawaiian grass skirts are made in Switzerland, that Scottish Border ballads originated in the Pacific islands, that Scotch tartans are made in Switzerland, British army swords in Germany. (189).
Otto would cling to the idea that the "Scottishness" of a ballad can be arbitrarily associated with anyone who goes around whistling it—thereby genuinely expressing an ethnic essence if the whistler is of Scottish descent, fraudulently if he is not. But Max's advanced understanding of the *episteme* which authorizes expression in the late twentieth century permits him to see that the ballad's very Scottishness is *also arbitrarily associated with the ballad*, so that 1) the ballad can be made to express any concept whatsoever (since at one time it expressed the ethnicity of Hawaiians), 2) Scottishness can attach itself to any cultural artifact whatsoever, regardless of origin, and 3) any combination of the foregoing can suggest anything about anyone who chooses to attach them to himself as some sort of expressive gesture.

Max glibly but not insignificantly reverses Otto's complaint, telling Stanley that "Otto's part of a series of an original that never existed" (534). Indeed for Max the original, the authentic self, doesn't exist. Max understands that the past can never signify in the present except in the terms with which the present furnishes it. The original is forever lost along with its moment and is continually reshaped and misrepresented in subsequent moments. Consequently one is released from any obligation whatsoever to history, and by implication from his sense of self, which is why

Max always looked the same, always the same age, his hair always the same short length, in his smile the humorless

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6Wyatt comprehends this as well. Compare Max's account of Frazer. p. 536, with Wyatt's claim that the past is unreal because it is "being every moment revalued to make the present possible." p. 92. The difference between the two men's understanding is that Wyatt senses an obligation to recapture the past through multiple representations (113), whereas Max regards the problem as an opportune rip for exploitation.
agreeability of one who could neither suffer friendship nor
celebrate enmity, a parody on the moment, as his clothes
caricatured a past at eastern colleges where he had never
been. (525)

Max always looks the same because he is always a conscious affectation of
the present, and the epistemological langue which informs it, a present
which, whatever its disingenuous claims to continuity (significant only for
less exercised epistemic structuralists like Otto, who cling to the illusion of
history), knows only itself and what signifies within its structure. He
never changes because there is no original to deviate from. Max, the
"parody on the moment," is a master of epistemic structuralism who strikes
Otto as knowing "all the dismal secrets of some evil jungle . . . where the
fruits hung rotten on the trees" (189). The jungle is the network of
signifiers through which Max casually moves, an Eden where the knowledge
of good and evil—that is, of difference—is enough for useful purposes, no
need to taste the fruit yourself.

Indeed, to use more appropriate imagery, Max only sells and never
buys: unlike Otto, he knows better than to search for his own reflection
among his performances. His artwork is always a calculated appropriation
of other people's efforts. His painting, "the Soul of a Worker," is literally
lifted off the back of a laborer: it consists of a paint-spattered work shirt
stretched over a wooden frame. He steals Esme's poem (itself an
unintentional plagiary of Rilke) and publishes it as his own. He writes and
sells a novel based upon the "Flying Dutchman" legend (593). And in a
final refinement of the enormous con game which is Western culture, he
takes Confederate money to Paris to pass off as U.S. currency (a doubling
back of the con upon itself, for the narrator makes clear that Paris is one
gigantic fraud) (746). The end of the novel finds him in an affair with the
wife of a famous painter (Picasso?), who slips him her husband’s discarded canvases, which Max touches up and sells as his own (940). As one of the few characters in the novel who is not at the end dead or insane, Max bears out Otto’s prophetic description of him as a survivor (467); and this is so because unlike Otto he never makes the mistake of supposing that his expressive performances express anything at all.

Max remains totally uncommitted to his own artistic productions, regarding them all as empty gestures floated before a public largely unconscious of the full implications of its epistemic commitments. This advanced comprehension affords him considerable insight. Max easily fathoms the art forgery scheme perpetrated by Recktall Brown and Wyatt Gwyon—but in spite of the fact that he is the only character in the novel to make this discovery, 7 it is of no moment to him because there’s absolutely no moral imperative in sight: Max’s only commitment is to the episteme, and so he can see that the forgery scheme is merely a refinement of the way the art industry operates, an extension of the epistemic principles which govern our lives. Indeed for Max there’s no discovery at all—there is no depth to fathom, nothing to dis-cover. He asks Otto, “What’s the difference?” between the real and the fake, implying that authorship and authorization are only effects of a signifying system which has nothing to do with personal expression:

You fake a Dürer by taking the face from one and turning it around, the beard from another, the hat from another, you’ve got a Dürer, haven’t you?

—But only on the surface, Stanley said.

7Otto also glimpses the truth when he recognizes Wyatt’s face in one the forgeries. But once again, because of his conflicted participation in epistemic structuralism, he is more confused than anything else.
--On the surface! How much deeper do people go? the people who buy them? (464)

For Max the surface arrangements of signifying elements is all that matters, all that constitutes the artwork as a production not of a particular person but of a function, the artist-function, whose only ontology is the collection of traits or signifiers by which those determinations called "authorizations" can be made.

Max has the courage of his epistemic structuralist convictions and lives his life accordingly, casually accepting the nonentity that he constructs for himself as not just a social reality but the only reality we have. He seems to know that the posturing entailed by the episteme finally does define us if we let it, and so he avoids the fates of less practiced epistemic structuralists like Otto and his father. Mr. Pivner, who is figuratively lobotomized by his conflicted subscription to the episteme, becomes in the end literally lobotomized by it. Otto, for whom reality is like the play he is writing ("for once written, [a line] need be considered only for sound and character, and the scene it would best fit in") finally becomes the play he has written when after a blow to the head he assumes the identity of its lead character, ironically resolving the problem of non-self-coincidence which plagues him throughout the novel.

But Max, who totally gives himself over to the ceaseless play which is the ontological yield of epistemic structuralism, is a survivor. This yield is dramatized by a scene in which Otto, sitting at a bar, watches passersby in the street:

To his left, the mirror and the window conjoined at such an angle that vehicles on the street outside appeared to come into one another head-on. A bus telescoped and disappeared. [Otto] withdrew his bloodshot eyes and turned them straight
before him; but he did not see his face for the sign FRANKS AND KRAUT 20¢ was pasted on the mirror just above his collar.

[...]

Then a tall blonde, in a fur cape, wearing dark glasses, walked to meet herself in the glass. Otto turned and looked out the window. He could not see her. He looked in the mirrored pillar behind him, and saw her coatsleeve disappear. He looked before him, and saw her merge into herself. He looked out the window again, and saw a man in a Santa Claus suit. (473-74)

Symbol of the externally imposed self-apprehension that is epistemic structuralism, the mirror only obstructs Otto’s reflection by imposing a sign (not incidentally, a value equation: FRANKS AND KRAUT 20¢) between the referent and its self-apprehension. But if one insists upon the reflection’s capacity for expressing a personal essence, as Otto and his father do, one risks merging into that reflected displacement and disappearing altogether, as do the people and vehicles Otto sees through the window. As the narrator says, commenting on people’s need to merge into the external appurtenances which mediate reflection, "the Self... ceased to exist the day they stopped seeking it alone" (286).

Max, on the other hand, is like the man in the Santa Claus suit who survives all the ontological implosions going on around him: rejecting reflection altogether as an activity succeeded by and at any rate incompatible with epistemic structuralism, he doesn’t try to merge into the mirror in pursuit of a reified Self. He has no Self, but then he’s not only not seeking it alone—he’s not seeking it at all, merely presenting its counterfeit. Subsequently he remains, visible—it is true, as an obvious fraud (for of all the impostures perpetrated in The Recognitions, overt imposture is invariably the most successful), but after all fraud provides the only sort of presence available within the social structure authorized
by epistemic structuralism, "in which the things worth being were so easily exchanged for the things worth having" (131).

The Diaspora of Words

In his Carnival of Repetitions, John Johnston posits two types of characters within The Recognitions, inauthentic and authentic. Johnston's inauthentic characters correspond to those I call epistemic structuralists, while his other sort of character is a "seemingly authentic self on the 'schizophrenic' voyage, not so much of self-discovery as self-dispersal" (108). Johnston includes in this second type Wyatt's father Reverend Gwyon, the schizophrenic poet and model Esme, the composer-organist Stanley (who is crushed beneath the imploding cathedral at the novel's conclusion), and Wyatt Gwyon himself. In spite of the merits of Johnston's typology—and in spite of his excellent general thesis that The Recognitions orchestrates an irreconcilable "dialogic" of two metaphysical systems—Johnston refuses what seems to me the novel's clear existential dimension. For authenticity is not a failed project in The Recognitions, even if nearly all the "authentic" characters succumb to self-dispersion or die tragically. By lumping Wyatt in with the other "authentic" characters, Johnston is able to conclude that "For all its variety of characters . . . the novel does not represent a single autonomous and fully developed self—nor could it do so, given its manner of representation" (109). It is true that given the novel's "manner of representation" "Gaddis's [characters] exhibit an intensity that results from thematic and textual mechanisms intrinsic to the system of which they are part." But what about the "autonomous and fully developed self" who struggles to free himself from "thematic and textual
mechanisms" of the *episteme* in which he finds himself—a character, that is, who refuses expression altogether in terms of *The Recognitions' "manner of representation"*. In this section I will show that far from being a "voyage of self-dispersal," Wyatt's progress in *The Recognitions* is one of authentic becoming, involving a rejection of epistemic structuralism. An inwardness that is uncommunicable in terms of epistemic structuralism is what sets Wyatt apart from both the "inauthentic" and the "authentic" characters Johnston identifies.

I have already described Wyatt's own ontological situation during much of *The Recognitions* as one of vacuity (page 95). In this Wyatt appears to resemble epistemic structuralists like Otto and his father. But whereas those characters' terminal coincidence with their own identificatory projections ironically arrests the panicky mode of reflection which characterizes their participation in the *episteme*, Wyatt's ontological vacuity is practically for him a point of departure. During an extended childhood illness, Wyatt experiences "the stoppage, the entire disappearance of that deeper flow which left the particles of consciousness suspended, piling up, ready any instant to shatter with nothing to support them" (51). By inferring a suspension of the flow of time which alone delivers objects and events to subjective intentionality, Wyatt intuits the essential absurdity of the world. His response is to order the particles of consciousness himself, a Lucifer (to use his Aunt May's disapproving imagery) intent upon bringing the light of his own artistic creation to bear upon the chaos of darkness. Rising before dawn to paint, "he was most clear-headed, least feverish, in these early hours when, as unsympathetically as the daylight,
his own hand could delineate the reasonable crowded conceits of separation" (53).

The childhood experience that our conscious apprehensions are "ready any instant to shatter" is what prepares the adult Wyatt to reject epistemic structuralism as an ontological instrument. He senses that the world of social constructs around him is entirely without foundation and that the recognition such constructs afford is inevitably the sort of misrecognition that Otto condemns himself to suffer, insofar as the significations and identities that epistemic structuralism affords derive from the anonymous, corporate "They" who, like Otto's constructed identity, are always elsewhere, and who, like Mr. Pivner's structure of media-generated voices, traverse him as an irreducible anteriority. The matter for Wyatt is one of existential urgency. He complains to Recktall Brown, "... if everyone else's life, everyone else's work around you can be interchanged and nobody can stop and say, This is mine, this is what I must do, this is my work ... then how can they see it in mine, this sense of inevitableness, that this is the way it must be" (144).

This sense of urgency, and especially the lack of any such sense among other people, is the crux of Wyatt's opposition to the epistemic structuralists. "Am I the only one who feels this way?" he complains, revealing his abiding conviction that indeed he is. As long as Wyatt inhabits the world of epistemic structuralists, "Costumed in the regalia of their weary imaginations," he is misrepresented by these people, who in their discourse consign him to "the Diaspora of words which is the providential nature of conversation" (85). Wyatt is a "specter" careering through the conversations of epistemic structuralists, people who "only
know things in terms of other things" (379)—he is imaged by them. He reacts by becoming increasingly inward, neither resisting their facile characterizations nor acquiescing to them, but removing himself by stages from their scrutiny as well as the reader’s. Wyatt becomes an opacity, a blind spot within the socially structured field of vision.

Wyatt’s "story" is his progressive withdrawal into his own inwardness, approaching a point of complete unnarratability. While existentially Wyatt’s story is nothing more than the story of his un-storying, his story also needs to be viewed in terms of its overlap with psychoanalytic reversal; for while Wyatt’s existential insights precipitate his rejection of epistemic structuralism, his flight from those insights also interfaces with his core psychological conflict. Wyatt uses his childhood intuition of absurdity to construct defenses against its psychological implications, enlisting his ontological vacuity in this unworthy service. Through much of the novel he fallaciously insists that he is "free of accident," that is, free of the historical particulars of his existence. Assertions like these reveal the way in which he has used an intense existential experience for defensive purposes—specifically, the disavowal of his history, which is the history of his conflicts.

Nonetheless a series of crises force him to come to terms with those conflicts. Wyatt’s journey inward—becoming progressively less "knowable," and certainly less "tellable"—finally arrives at a confrontation with what we can call, conflating the existential and psychoanalytic terminology appropriate to his narrative, his psychological throwness. Psychological throwness is the condition of being always—already situated within the psychological conflicts that define us and constitute our self-
apprehension as subjects. I have indicated in Chapter One (page 39), epistemic structuralism is an attempt to deny time and death, which are, respectively, the medium and terrifying horizon of psychological thronwness. We can say, then, that the project of epistemic structuralism is to escape the torment of psychologica thronwness. As we shall see, Wyatt's final decision in III.5 to "live deliberately" is not a resolution of this conflict in the sense of removing or allaying it but the act of resolving to "live it through." Moreover, just as it is the necessary outcome of his lifelong deracination of epistemic structuralism, it is the terminus of his evanescent narratability.

First, let's consider Wyatt's core conflict, his guilty desire for his mother. When Wyatt is four years old, his mother Camilla dies, and her beatified memory (she is to him a goddess, his virgin mother) becomes the central object of his desire. Wyatt's Aunt May, a stern Calvinist, undertakes Wyatt's religious instruction, teaching him that he is born into sin and that if he has not sinned in fact, "the prospect of sin draws him on" (33). Wyatt internalizes this lesson, which is why he is unable to finish a portrait of Camilla begun in adolescence. Aunt May instructs him that originality is a sin against God (34), and subsequently Wyatt's "original works left off at that moment where the pattern is conceived but not executed" (52). His unfinished portrait of Camilla is central to this impasse—though it might be more accurate to say he has erected the impasse around the unfinished portrait of Camilla—as the displacement of a sinful desire which he need not confront so long as the portrait remains incomplete. His father warns him to finish the portrait "—Or she will be
with you always" (60); but Wyatt stops short of execution, so that not the sin but the "prospect of sin" does indeed draw him on.

Thus painting becomes a vehicle by means of which Wyatt evades coming to terms with his psychologicalthrownness. Painting amounts to resubmitting desire to the symbolic order described by Lacan: Wyatt exchanges his unresolved Oedipal desire for uncompleted work, a structure of deferral in which the signifier (Camilla's portrait) which is itself a substitution for a signifier (desire), is never allowed to appear (Ecrits 104, 285-88). Wyatt remains stuck, caught between desire and commission. On the one hand he professes dedication to art's capacity for triggering a recognition of the deeper reality behind the artwork; but on the other hand, he does everything he can to deprive himself of the only "aesthetic" experience that counts by refusing to complete Camilla's portrait.

The existential insights from his childhood emerge in adulthood as intellectual abstractions, defenses against the very conflicted desire they have the potential to expose. For instance, the adult Wyatt tries to reject his earlier experience, insisting that art's capacity for ordering experience emanates not from the artist's subjectivity, whose being-for-death immediately resubmits the world to its absurdity, but from God. He expresses his admiration for the detail and multiple perspective in the Flemish Renaissance paintings he forges:

Because they found God everywhere. There was nothing God did not watch over, nothing, and so this ... and so in the painting every detail reflects ... God's concern with the most insignificant objects in life, with everything, because God did not relax for an instant then. and neither could the painter then. (251)
But Wyatt's devotion to Flemish Renaissance masters like Bouts and the brothers van Eyck serves to reinforce fractionation, the process whereby he attempts to remake the world in terms of his primordial psycho-sexual repression. Walter Davis explains that in fractionation "one blindly 'assimilates' all experience to a repressed schema that is frozen in its abstractness" (259). This process leads to paralysis:

In fractionation the psyche contracts, becoming progressively more defensive as it repeats the refusal to recognize or renounce the repressed desires on which it continues to act with increasing insistence. The existential consequence is a progressive shrinkage of experiential possibilities. (258)

This is because the more one tries to renounce one's buried desires, the more they assert themselves, forcing the subject to increasingly more elaborate defensive measures.

Accordingly, Wyatt attempts further to bury and disguise his private structure of deferral by folding it into that public structure of deferral, epistemic structuralism: his abhorrence of the shallowness of public taste notwithstanding, he undertakes forgeries of those same Flemish Renaissance painters he had praised, submitting what he takes to be their artistic integrity to the kind of facile recognition conferred by market value. In the arena of epistemic structuralism, art becomes not an occasion for "deep" recognition of reality and thrownness but a kind of flattering mirror, accommodating the identificatory projections of art patrons and art experts alike (252-53, 255). Art is thus an instrument of the kind of mediated reflection practiced by Otto and his father. Wyatt submits his work to this arena because in doing so he eradicates himself completely from his work. This affords him unlimited opportunity to play out his core conflict within a defensive structure that, with the eradication of his agency, will forestall
any confrontation with desire indefinitely. For Wyatt, the defense rationalizes itself thus: forgery is that paradoxically authentic form of expression in which the artist must never be detected.

Thus painting and art forgery become implicated in sustaining Wyatt's core conflict by displacing it into structures which defend him against the very recognition he seeks. But several crises intervene, moments of unwelcome recognition which eventually force Wyatt to abandon his structures of deferred and displaced desire. The first of these unlooked-for recognitions comes when Wyatt suddenly sees Esme, his model, as the potential completion of his mother's portrait. By using her to "realize" his forbidden desires, however, Wyatt transforms Esme into a signifier whose only reality is to be imaged and to signify for him, just as Wyatt is "lived" in the conversations and imaginations of the epistemic structuralists. The cost for Esme is a schizophrenic alienation from herself, from which she never recovers.

Instead of seizing the opportunity to confront his conflict authentically, however, Wyatt is himself seized—first by the desperate urge to regress, to return home and take his father's place in the ministry, then by the slightly less desperate urge to pass off this latest forgery (his mother's imago projected onto Esme) as authentic by renouncing all his other artistic falsifications. Wyatt tries to confess his Flemish forgeries to

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8 It may as well be argued that in this, indeed in the entire defense Wyatt erects around artistic representation, Wyatt too is a structuralist. The difference between Wyatt's abuse of Esme and the epistemic structuralists' abuse of Wyatt resides in the level of privacy of the symbolic order to which Wyatt refers: as Lacan would have it. Wyatt has worked out a personal semiotic through which the aspects of his unconscious communicate to each other. Epistemic structuralism, in contrast, is an enormous public elaboration of similar principles.
a gathering of art experts, defensively deluding himself that in so doing he undertakes a "moral action." No one believes Wyatt’s confession, which underscores his entrapment within the Trinity he shares with Recktall Brown (the Father) and Basil Valentine (the Unholy Spirit). 9

Wyatt prefers to think of Brown as a "luxury," as a non-essential appendage to the artistic process. But Brown’s bizarre death precipitates Wyatt’s next crisis. Released from his entrapment and left alone with Valentine, who assures him that without the crass Brown things will be "different," Wyatt is forced to recognize that Brown’s contribution to the Trinity was crucial. He discovers that all artistic representation is necessarily a labor of alienation, inevitably dissociating the artist from the experience it calls forth. He now rejects representation as an inauthentic response to anxiety, but he still clings to the idea that "there was gold to forge," that is, to the idea of an originary moment which can be recaptured and mummified. His rejection of representation therefore causes yet another regression, even deeper than his attempt to return home: he goes to Spain and becomes involved (somewhat passively, it is true) with Frank Sinisterra in a scheme to mummify what he mistakenly thinks is his mother’s corpse. But if Wyatt (now renamed Stephen or Stephan Asche) regresses, he regresses here with a difference—as Davis says, within the process of reversal10 the larger context to which repressed motives are referred

9Wyatt is indeed the Christ figure here: as long as he remains suspended between Valentine’s sterile aestheticism and Brown’s crass materialism, his dual aspect as the Word made Flesh both unites him to and separates him from the others.

10Davis’s term is active reversal, specifying the role of agency in a subject striving to effect through determined action an autonomous ego, one which confronts its core conflicts squarely. It’s hard to say at this point whether Stephen (Wyatt) is engaged in active reversal inasmuch as the narrative does not give us an account of his motives: indeed it is far more
changes the nature of the regression to one in which denial and defense are more transparent (294–95). Thus at a critical moment Stephen abandons his "mother" when he hears that police are searching for a "falsificador," apparently recognizing in the word an accusation he cannot deny.

Finally, Stephen/Wyatt turns up in a Spanish Monastery, prosecuting his rejection of representation by "restoring" artworks—that is, scraping the paint down to the bare canvas. In this final defensive action, he attempts to come to terms with the artistic content which, like the "unfaded square" left on the wall where a picture has hung, is both indexed and obscured by the artwork. That content is the undifferentiated "harmony" of reality's substratum, the nothingness which Stephen experienced as a child before fleeing into representation of the "Separateness" in which "Everything withhold[s] itself from everything else" (873–74). Whereas Stephen has heretofore defended himself against the intuition of absurdity, he now strives to reestablish it. Yet this is actually Stephen's final attempt to evade psychological thrownness, in that he uses the dissolution of a lifelong defense as a defense. It is still a defense because through it Stephen merely affirms nothingness, instead of embracing it to give it the only meaning it can have, that of his conflicted desire. He tries to fix attractive to consider Stephen in a state of advanced dissipation. Still, it would be difficult to reconcile his actions in Spain with the revelations attendant upon Rektall Brown's death without recourse to the assumption that the latter were psychologically significant for him. In consideration of this ambiguity, then, and anticipating what seems to me clearly Stephen's eventual confrontation with his conflicts, I describe his process at this point simply as reversal.

11The image of the unfaded square first introduced in Chapter One, (p. 25), recurs here in Stephen's farewell chapter (p. 866). In her suicide note, Esme partially explicates the image: "Paintings are metaphors for reality, but instead of being an aid to realization obscure the reality which is far more profound" (473).
nothingness onto the canvas, static and embalmed within the penitential attitude of a possibility unrealized.

But in the monastery Stephen is befriended by the porter, an old man who raped and murdered a little girl some 27 years earlier. The old man is "still in love" with his victim, who comes to him when he prays, bearing lilies which turn to flames in his hands. In other words, the old man remains true to his obsession, the significance of which Stephen recognizes. He tells Ludy ("the distinguished novelist" who finds him in the monastery),

Look back, if once you're started in living, you're born into sin, then? And how do you atone? By locking yourself up in remorse for what you might have done? Or by living it through. By locking yourself up in remorse with what you know you have done? Or by going back and living it through. By locking yourself up with your work, until it becomes a gessoed surface, all prepared, clean and smooth as ivory? Or by living it through. [. . . .] If it was sin from the start, and possible all the time, to know it's possible and avoid it? Or by living it through? (896).

Apparently Stephen resolves to return to Pastora, a prostitute from Madrid who fell in love with Stephen during the "mummy" episode, and "live through" his core conflict. This resolution may or may not amount to once more substituting an image for the memory of his mother, but the crucial difference now is Stephen's refusal to disavow it. "Oh the lives! that are lost in confession" he exclaims, referring to most people's attempts to renounce their own agency in shaping the drama of their lives. The secret to reversal is not in deferring conflict through representations which

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12 Stephen mentions that he intends to set the diamonds he is wearing (taken from Rectall Brown's dead hand) in a pair of earrings. The earrings strongly suggest Camilla, whose Byzantine hoops, like her unfinished portrait, Wyatt has carried with him through most of the novel.
alienate the subject and impersonalize desire but in "daring to reshape the past" by "living deliberately" within the present.

Wyatt has become Stephen, the name his mother Camilla originally intended for him. He has become himself—or in words Davis might use, he has become the action of self-becoming (295); and with this he reaches the limit of his narratability, something which has been dwindling throughout the 700 or so pages in which he goes unnamed by the narrator or the other characters. His increasing vacancy certainly bears a correlation to the crises which incrementally strip away his willingness to be misrepresented in the "diaspora of words" which are not just the "providential nature of conversation" but which are the medium of the narrative in which we are reading his life. Wyatt's story can be "told," even as obliquely as the text presents it, so long as he is willing to submit to the signs which situate his actions within a structure of defensive motives, even if those signs, like his artistic forgeries, are those of his own choosing. These signs are inevitably the same stuff out of which his defenses are constructed, and as such they inevitably tell not the story of his conflict—that is, of any lived relation to his conflict, which is not narratable—but the story of his displacement of that conflict. And as soon as he resolves to "live through" that conflict, there is no longer anything he can tell or that can be said of him. Throughout most of the novel, the epistemic structuralists around him are at a loss to find an objective correlative in his words or actions. To the extent that they can, characters like Otto, Wyatt's wife Esther, Wyatt's friend Benny, and Ludy project their own conflicts onto him, that is, to put it in Gaddis's more humanistic terms, they project onto him "the spirit they lost" in their attempts to
structuralize and reify their own identities. For most of the novel, the reader is no different, perhaps smugly surveying these several misrepresentations of Wyatt while secretly contriving to do the same thing. In any event, Wyatt eventually eludes the reader as well, just as he eludes my existential/psychoanalytic synopsis of him, which begins well enough but necessarily ends by bridging larger and larger gaps of unnarratability.

Wyatt/Stephen himself cannot account for the difference that separates him from other people: he says that he has lived

... in a world of shapes and smells. The things that were real to other people weren't real to me, but the things that were real to me, they ... yes they still are. (893)

He falters here because there is no way to complete the circuit which language requires him to construct in order to describe a relationship. His opposition to the epistemic structuralists is not a structural opposition: it is not a binarism in which the presence of one term is defined by the absence of the other. Rather, it is a form of opposition in which the negative term stands completely outside the field of structural possibilities which describe relationships of all kinds, refusing that rapport with its opposite which the logic of antithesis implicitly demands. Wyatt/Stephen can serve as an example of nothing, can provide no correlatives which would bring him within the field of possibilities circumscribed by structuralist thought.

What guarantees this unnarratability is not the uniqueness of his core conflict (as I have identified it, it is certainly commonplace enough) but the fact that his existential intuitions inaugurate a form of awareness which, however resisted initially, eventually leads him to the resolution to make that conflict utterly his.
The Narrator

So far we have seen the implicit operation of epistemic structuralism in the ontological projections or "expressive performances" of several characters, most notably Mr. Pivner, Otto, and Max. These characters apprehend their environment in terms of structures which permit substitutions or exchanges between structural elements and particular persons, based upon the configuration of the entire structural field. The configuration of the structural field itself depends upon the kinds of "recognition" which other people at any given moment may be supposed to be willing to confer upon a particular identity projection—the ontological parole, as it were, of a given individual—so that identity is strictly a matter of public signification. Except for Max Schling, all of the characters who apprehend their social environment this way are driven by the desire for some more authentic form of recognition, a desire to which they cannot give themselves fully as long as they insist upon structuralist semiotics as the mode for realizing it. Yet their dream of authentic identity persists, and so within one perspective Wyatt stands as their complement, the symbol of the quest which they do not themselves have the courage to undertake.

Wyatt, on the other hand, looks inward for his own identity, attempting to express it in signs which belong to his own private semiotic. I have described that process both in existential and psychoanalytic terms as a flight (from authentic confrontation with his core conflict), but one which contains within itself, by virtue of its resistance to epistemic structuralism, the potential for reversal. Insofar as Wyatt resists epistemic structuralism—and his resistance certainly mounts during the progress of
his "un-storying"—he can serve as an example of nothing, such that there
is no way for the text to represent him to the reader.

Because Wyatt’s rejection of epistemic structuralism entails a lack of
expressive terms for articulating his lived reality, it devolves upon the
narrator to provide an alternative to the processes of epistemic
structuralism. The narrator’s ways of "knowing"—that is, the sorts of
cognition implied in the identifications, descriptions, and judgments the
narrator makes—provide the key to an epistemological alternative, as I hope
to show here. But the fact alone that the narration implies an
epistemological alternative to what has clearly become in The Recognitions
an ontological problem immediately suggests its insufficiency, its retreat
into the subject/object dichotomy which destabilizes its position as a
meaningful articulation of alterity. In an important sense, it is the
narrator’s essence qua narrator which compromises this position: for
Gaddis’s narrator, like every omniscient third-person narrator, is not
posited within the text as a historical entity but as an inferred one—
inflected, that is, from discourse which by its nature is never subject to
the aporias which characterize Wyatt’s increasing vacancy throughout the
novel. The narrator must above all narrate, fill out the silence which
inwardness, in its reticence, imposes. Wyatt’s silences make people anxious:

They walked on in silence, but any silence was a difficult state
for Otto, most especially in the company of another person it
seemed an unnatural presence which must be assailed and
broken into pieces, or at least shaken until it rattled. (134).

13 The irony here is unavoidable: what Wyatt undergoes in The
Recognitions is if anything a de-characterization, yet that process itself
must be somehow indexed or characterized in discourse, the ineluctable
medium of narration. Wyatt may remain uncommunicative to the point of
autism, but even his silence must be related in language. That is, the
narration.
yet if Wyatt’s silence is an “unnatural presence,” it is primarily the
narrator who “shakes it until it rattles.” The narrator can never remain
silent about Wyatt’s silence.

In other words, Gaddis’s narrator necessarily lacks inwardness, and
to a greater degree than the epistemic structuralists themselves. The net
effect is an inverse relation between Wyatt’s inwardness and the narrator’s
lack of it, a relation which, in terms of its role in subverting epistemic
structuralism, we can consider complementary. The narrator and Wyatt
complement each other’s insufficiencies (an ontological insufficiency in the
case of the former and an expressive insufficiency in that of the latter),
opposing as they do in different but crucial ways the epistemic
structuralists.

We have then to consider, first, the narrator’s opposition to the
episodic structuralists, and second, the way the narrator articulates what
Wyatt cannot express. The narration is itself a complex of registers. There
is of course a great deal of internally stratified speech—free indirect
discourse in which the thoughts of particular characters are voiced without
attribution. But what is of interest for the relationships of opposition and
complementarity I am trying to explicate is the register changes which
indicate epistemological shifts reflecting the three entities I have taken up
in this study. At times the narrator directly criticizes the characters I
have identified as epistemic structuralists. At other times the narrator
adopts the epistemology of the social “They,” that is, the epistemic
structuralists, usually rendered with mordant sarcasm. At times the
narrative is characterized by an access of mood in which metaphor plays a
crucial role as an alternative strategy for knowing in the sense of
"knowing as." Still at other times the narrator suggests Wyatt's consciousness by overlaying its object with multiple images, thereby saturating the object with significations which finally render it meaningless.

First, the narrator's opposition to epistemic structuralism. It principally takes two forms, direct and oblique. For example, the narrator directly attacks Mr. Pivner's allegiance to Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People:

An action book; and herein lay the admirable quality of this work: it decreed virtue not for virtue's sake (as weary Stoics had it); nor courtesy for courtesy (an attribute of human dignity, as civilized culture would have it); nor love for love (as Christ had it); nor a faith which is its own explanation and its own justification (as any faith has it); but all these excellences oriented toward the market place. Here was no promise of anything so absurd as a void where nothing was, nor so delusive as a chimerical kingdom of heaven: in short, it reconciled those virtues [Pivner] had been taught as a child to the motives and practices of the man, the elixir which exchanged the things worth being for the things worth having. (498-99)

The implication is that each of these qualities (virtue, courtesy, love, and faith) is not a signifier. But within Carnegie's book, as in epistemic structuralism in general, virtue, courtesy, love, and faith are transformed into signifiers once they are exchanged for the "things worth having"—they attach themselves to specific values based upon what sort of recognition each can command (how it can win friends and influence people) and ultimately what sort of material end it can further (what it can help us sell them). Thus the exchange is the transformation, which implies a principle of exchange or substitution underlying that action. That principle is the cornerstone of epistemic structuralism, in which dissimilar

14 This distinction is largely a question of degree, as even the direct form implies rather than states the social epistemology which is the object of its criticism.
things become systematically equated (here, behavior with the response it can produce) based upon the presumption of consensual validation. The narrator's sarcastic allusion to alchemy (the book is an "elixir") may lay emphasis on the book's agency, but that agency merely consists in the way it codifies the structural epistemology already in place in the "motives and practices of the man."

Apart from instances like the above, however, the narrator most often engages in a more oblique form of opposition to epistemic structuralism. At these times the narrator seems to adopt the *episteme*, describing people and events in terms of the ontological reifications which epistemic structuralism fosters. For instance, in a synoptic description of New York City on Christmas Eve, the narrator refers to policemen and Boy Scouts in terms which their own identificatory projections suggest:

The policemen, busy elsewhere attending the smooth functioning of that oppressive mechanism which they called law and order, looked as unlikely of ever being seen in any other combination of lip, nostril, and cold eye. badge, uniform, and circumstance, as Saint-Gaudens' statue of the Puritan; in the same way the Boy Scouts hazarded neither past nor future, heirs to all the ages and the foremost files of time notwithstanding, they composed and expressed a pattern endowed with permanency. (559)

The narrator presents these groups as they might represent themselves, in terms of the roles they adopt and apparently take very seriously: by a particular configuration of specific facial, attitudinal and circumstantial signs, the policemen not only signify their "policemanliness" but look at the moment of signification as though they could never look any other way. Moreover, in adducing the complex phenomenology of structuralism, the narrator goes further than the epistemic structuralists might: the Boy Scouts simultaneously "compose" and "express" a pattern. Just as
structuralist linguistics has it, these patterns are immanent, residing within the minds of people competent to recognize what and how Boy Scouts signify. Thus the Boy Scouts' performances draw upon—they express—a pre-extant immanent structure. At the same time the identity structure also consists in the collective performances which Boy Scouts all over the world give—the Scouts also compose the pattern or identity structure they express. The policemen and the Boy Scouts would probably not explain their performances in these terms, and in this the narrator's adoption of their epistemological point of view surpasses them.

In spite of adopting the episteme in order to describe the policemen and the Boy Scouts, the narrator clearly opposes it as well, as the reference to the "oppressive mechanism which [the policemen] called law and order" clearly indicates. But in addition, the narrator insists upon introducing the diachronic dimension into the Boy Scouts' identificatory projections, thereby introducing the ontological complication, history, that exposes the poverty of the Boy Scouts' strategy for Being: the Boy Scouts "hazarded neither past nor future, heirs to all the ages and the foremost files of time notwithstanding...." Much as Wyatt does early in the novel, the Boy Scouts reject the historical "accidents" of their Being—their own historical particularity as well as the cultural forces to which they are necessarily subject—in order to assume a one-dimensional identity which admits nothing but its own projection. But the Boy Scouts reject history much more aggressively than Wyatt does; they are closer to Max, a "parody on the moment" which need only acknowledge a static synchronicity which is permanent insofar as the past is simply removed from consideration.
The same combination of structuralist epistemology and sour disapprobation informs most of the narrator's synoptic views of New York.

Elsewhere,

The streets were filling with people whose work was not their own. They poured out, like buttons from a host of common ladies, though some were of pressed paper, some ivory, some horn, and synthetic pearl, to be put in place, to break, or fall off lost, rolling into gutters and dark corners where no Omnipotent Hand could reach them, no Omniscient Eye see them; to be replaced, seaming up the habits of this monster they clothed with their lives. (329)

The alienation of "work that was not their own" sets the stage for a transformation of reality into a reality structure which in turn transforms people into functions, perhaps distinguishable into non-functional subcategories ("some were of pressed paper, some ivory," etc.) but otherwise interchangeable. Here the narrator's vision approaches that of structuralist theorists. By suggesting a characterization of people as functional modules, each placed in its proper slot within the vast social fabric which their lives collectively compose, the narrator here comes very close to what Lucien Goldmann describes as the "transindividual" aspect of human activity. Defining structure as "the necessity to fulfil a function in a certain situation," Goldmann concludes that human beings shape their behavior into patterns reflecting the structures to which necessity gives rise; in so doing they adopt a perspective which exceeds their individual consciousness: "... individual subjects--or individual consciousnesses--by acting within behavior patterns which in turn go through the division of labor--become transindividual" (100-101). Culture, for Goldmann, entails conscious participation within a situation which is structuralized in terms of
its internal relationships, those between subject and object or subject and other subjects.

But the narrator does not say exactly what Goldmann says, of course: for the narrator of *The Recognitions*, structuralized culture becomes a monster clothed by people's lives. The imagery points up the pivotal nature of this passage, in which a sarcastic structuralist analytic merges with a poesis that defies the knowledge which structuralism yields. The narrator's "button" simile, which develops into a complex analogy building powerfully to its monstrous conclusion, suggests an epistemology different from the analytic which informs Goldmann's analysis. Structuralism is the equation of dissimilar things by reducing them to what it considers an essential similarity, their internal systemic relationships, devoid of content. The narrator's simile comparing people to buttons does not equate people to functional nodes within the network of interrelationships which constitute culture; instead, by withholding the explicit structural reduction (the one teased out in the preceding paragraph), the narrator's simile retains certain connotative qualities of buttons within the comparison. Qualities which suggest equally the dissimilarity of buttons and people. *People are not buttons*, the simile says, and as the narrator's analogy develops, the more abrasively inappropriate the comparison becomes. The narrator's disapprobation comes forth most clearly through the abrasion.

Thus it is the narrator's use of imagery, specifically metaphor, which constitutes on the one hand the alternative epistemology to epistemic structuralism and on the other the expressive complement to Wyatt's inwardness. Even the most apposite metaphor inevitably announces its own inappropriateness, thereby retaining within itself the incommensurability of
the terms under comparison. Metaphor is a self-consciously factitious coupling of ideas, paradoxical in what it simultaneously suggests and denies, giving rise to a form of knowledge in which "knowing as" retains its provisionality—precisely what is rejected within structuralism—by virtue of metaphor’s transparent artificiality. Metaphor insists upon the ineradicable phenomenal separateness which pervades the relationships among all things. As Wyatt complains, the epistemic structuralists in The Recognitions indeed "only know things in terms of other things"; but if the narrator appears similarly to know x as y, the metaphors through which the narrator articulates such knowledge just as vigorously insists that x is not y.

Of course, there is nothing innovative about metaphor per se; and as far as that goes, it may be admitted that any line of Shakespeare opposes itself to epistemic structuralism in much the same way as the narration of The Recognitions does. But no Shakespearean sonnet opposes its metaphoric activity to structuralist epistemology internally. The Recognitions, on the other hand, brings metaphor as an alternative thought process into direct opposition with the epistemic structuralism implicit in the behavior and attitudes of the novel’s characters. The epistemic structuralists simply do not speak the same language as the narrator—an epistemological opposition highlighted, at every turn of the page, by the narrative commentary that intrudes upon their conversations or renders their internal processes in starkly alien terms.

For the epistemological opposition between structuralism and metaphor is basic: as I have already pointed out, metaphor retains within itself a resistance to the metaphysics of essential equivalence which characterizes
structuralism. But further, metaphor entails a predication of concepts that is fundamentally different from that of structuralism. Relating the matter from a linguistic point of view, Jakobson describes this difference:

> The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term of the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively" (57-58).

Insofar as a metonymic or syntagmatic relation can occur at any level of organization (Jakobson 58), structuralism is a discipline grounded in metonymy. Structuralist poetics, for example, concerns itself with the syntagmatic or contiguous dimension of discursive units conceptually affiliated with what structuralist linguistics calls "syntagms"—meaningful contiguous discursive elements. Structuralist poetics analyzes discourse in terms of the relationships between its syntactic units, the content or quality of those units being relatively unimportant. This is why from its beginning structuralist poetics has shown a marked appropriateness for narrative analysis, for in narrative the metonymic principle of organization is paramount, and the consecution or plotting of events can be seen as a structure capable of accommodating any number of possible alternative events or plottings.

Metaphor, on the other hand, is the "condensed expression" of qualitative similarities between its objects, one in which a constructive force—call it poetic desire—binds objects essentially or manifestly different by virtue of hidden and hence incomplete correspondences between them. It too can occur at any level of organization; and on the level of epistemology, its claims are remarkably unscientific. consisting of intuitive
synthesis rather than predicating analytical equivalence between objects. Of course, a metaphor can be metonymically or structurally oriented, as is the one cited above (page 120), in which Otto compares himself to an artwork "sold as part of a series that never existed"; but the sorts of metaphor which oppose the structuralist epistemology within The Recognitions are established intuitively and do not depend upon structural reductions of this sort.

The metaphorical activity I am concerned with comes through most forcefully whenever the narrator, who is most frequently sarcastic and judgmental in the manner of the preceding examples, lapses into a mood characterized by a world-weary, elegiac tone. At those times two sorts of metaphor come to the fore, those based on imagistic remoteness and those based on imagistic saturation. First, the narrator’s images, however apposite finally, are often extremely remote initially. For instance, the narrator describes a ship moving southwest over the Caribbean:

The sun had melted into the shape of a keyhole on the horizon, and the Island Trader moved as though enclosed by the sea and the dull beauty of the sky, with only a glimpse, through that open door, of the outside, real world of fire. (727)

The comparison of the setting sun to a keyhole is quite a stretch; it requires some effort to imagine, since we habitually dissociate the shape of the sun from its reflection on the water. Here, however, the narrator asks us to fuse them into an image of an aperture through which we might, like a peeping tom, spy the "real world" of fire, the one which, inhabiting as we do an enclosure considerably larger than Plato’s den but no less confining, we can only glimpse on occasion.
Metaphors like the foregoing belong to what Marcus B. Hester calls "unbound" images. Hester adduces a scale of images based upon the effort required to establish the relationship between objects under comparison. At one end, there is abstract conceptualizing, and at the other are wild or "unbound" images which interrupt and distort reading, distracting rather than informing the reader. In between are "bound" images, concrete representations which neither permit nor require the reader to associate too freely or at too great a distance. Hester claims that bound images are the province of poetry as opposed to, say, dreams. The complex "keyhole" imagery above is closer to an "unbound image"; but I want to suggest that its disruption nonetheless is informative, though clearly in a surprising way. It identifies a phenomenon based upon what the phenomenon manifestly is not; more important, the vehicle of the metaphor can in no way be experienced as structurally substitutable for the tenor, as epistemic structuralism would have it.

The second means by which the narrator opposes epistemic structuralism through metaphor is imagistic saturation. Saturation suggests Wyatt’s consciousness insofar as it respects the delicacy of situations. Wyatt’s sense is that situations are not objectively fixed but fluid and fragile, "tempered by possibility," that is, of becoming radically other than they appear as they are continually being "revalued to make the present possible" (92). The answer, for Wyatt, is not to try and fix them in perpetuity within a static structural paradigm, as Mr. Pivner would have it, or restructure them by means of the amnesiac mentality of absolute synchronicity, as Max Schling would have it, but to break them apart into multiple perspectives until "you have the whole thing in all its dimensions"
Similarly, the narration frequently saturates what it describes by not just imposing a single image upon it but by multiplying images until the metaphorical similarities-within-differences finally isolate the object through the sheer diffusion of meaning that results. Wyatt himself, to pick the most heavily laden example, is compared at various points, either directly or indirectly, to Christ, the Eucharist, Budda, Krishna, St. Clement, Flora Tosca, Faust. Prester John, John Huss. The Flying Dutchman, a priest, the prodigal son, and Baal, the "self-consuming indestructible sun." As a result of this metaphorical and intertextual overloading, Wyatt becomes knowable either as himself alone or as no one—different ways. I have implied, of expressing the same thing.

Metaphor is the narrator's expressive complement to Wyatt's inwardness because, as Paul Ricoeur says, through metaphor "we are assimilated, that is, made similar, to what is seen as similar." Ricoeur maintains that Metaphor produces feelings which "interiorize" and "make ours what has been put at a distance by thought in its objectifying phase." The function of poetic feeling is to abolish the distance between knower and known without canceling the cognitive structure of thought and the intentional distance which it implies. Feeling is not contrary to thought. It is thought made ours. (154).

Metaphor involves an experience in which public significations become private ones, occasioning the sort of deep recognitions Wyatt insists it is the purpose of art to produce.

I would argue with Ricoeur's Kantian valorization of the subject-object split, however. It is not the virtue of metaphor that it maintains "the intentional distance between knower and known" but rather its
shortcoming, the inevitable compromise between, on the one hand, the
reader's private signification—inextricable from his personal, psycho-
existential history by means of which, Heidegger says, he is delivered to
the world as a phenomenon known primordially through his involvement in
it (119–121)—and on the other the public form of knowledge which corrupts
and degrades those private meanings. Metaphor's capacity for the
internalization of alien thought does not alter the fact that it is still shared
thought, or thought objectified. Within the context of The Recognitions,
then, these two aspects of the narrator's recourse to metaphor are equally
important: 1) metaphor as an alternative to epistemic structuralism makes
possible what the episteme disallows and 2) metaphor does not sufficiently
disengage itself from the episteme’s realm. As the narrator might have put
it, metaphor is a "safe sort" of masquerade in which "the mask may be
dropped at the critical moment it presumes itself as reality" (3); but it is a
masquerade nonetheless.

Conclusion

My discussion of the three principal entities of The Recognitions—
Wyatt, the epistemic structuralists, and the narrator—has at various points
touched upon the relationships among those entities. These relationships,
which were statically schematized by the diagram on page 96, can now be
considered with greater attention to their dynamism. What ought to be
apparent by now is that with respect to the reader's impulse to compose a
totalizing view of the socially constructed world the novel seems to offer,
insufficiency and conflict are the driving forces behind these
relationships. The epistemic structuralists cognitize their socially
constructed world in terms of structures and substitutions, and they establish their identities by projecting a self upon those structures. But as the narrator's sharp criticisms make clear, each of those identificatory projections results not in the intended structural placement but rather a displacement of the ontological essence they hoped to express and represent to themselves. This conflict causes them to look to Wyatt as their authentic complement. And so in a sense he is, or at least he progresses toward that position—except that the closer he approaches it, the more unknowable he becomes in terms of the *episteme* which for the epistemic structuralists is the condition of his knowability. Wyatt on the other hand feels he is not the complement to but the opposite of these characters, except that he can only express this opposition at first elliptically (with rationalizing distortions) and finally not at all. The narrator supplies the epistemological correlative or complement to Wyatt's inwardness, except that the narrator's articulation of it *ipsa facto* fails to present it sufficiently or without distortions of a more basic kind. Each of these relationships contains conflicts which compel reference to the next, where a different sort of conflict compels it to the next, and so on.

But this process is more than one of ceaseless deferrals among these relationships. The triangular schema on page 96 might be better represented as a spiral, in which the relationships deepen and become more finely etched as the narrative cycles through them. As *The Recognitions* progresses, each relationship is superseded by another, then recalled and reestablished, as Wyatt's "unstorying" alternates with the actions and attitudes of the epistemic structuralists, and as the narrator's epistemology shifts between the various modes or moods used to treat these characters
and events. Each time the reader returns to a scene or a description which re-establishes one of these relationships, the relationship is new, having been deepened and clarified by the sublation of its previous treatment.

However, this dialectic does not necessarily take into account the reader's own strategy for reading. One of the reasons The Recognitions can present reality in terms of epistemic structuralism so obliquely—the reason, that is, that it can expect the reader to recognize the actions and attitudes of its characters—is that the reader himself is a creature of epistemic structuralism: the reader employs epistemic structuralism in coming to terms with a novel which is nothing if not a faithful reproduction of the socially constructed world in which he lives. One of the implications of this circumstance is that the reader normally tends to seek a synchronic rather than a dialectical view of the novel's intradiscursive relationships, a static rather than a dynamic schematic of the interplay among the three entities I have been discussing.15 Accordingly, the triangular schematic of page 96 might also be thought of as a force field, bound together by the tensions among the relationships' insufficiencies and conflicts. The vision which each relationship imperfectly actualizes emerges as a virtual effect of the field, remotely similar to the "virtual text" of Wolfgang Iser's reader-response criticism.

The totalizing vision of the novel is nowhere present within the novel's discourse; but perhaps the reader's desire for it emerges as a

15Surely the vast majority of this century's practical criticism confirms this claim. And the often-cited principle that all criticism is, explicitly or implicitly, theoretically and ideologically informed only reinforces my position. I refer the reader to my first chapter.
reflection of his own consciousness. In other words, the reader is projected into the center of the triangle, much as Mr. Pivner places himself at the center of the structure of media-generated voices which engulf him. Here however there is no interpellation—no "implied reader" shaped and summoned by the text—and certainly there is no epistemological "content" to be derived. Rather, the reader arrives at the center of The Recognitions' intradiscursive relationships as the excess which none of the relationships can capture. The reader, in other words, is brought back to himself, as failed in his search for identity (read: sympathetic identification with one or more characters) as the epistemic structuralists, as compromised by language as the narrator, and as unpresentable as Wyatt himself, but finally, thanks to the play of intradiscursive relationships, as no one but himself.

The reader, therefore, emerges as a semper aliquid haeret, the something that always remains even after the The Recognitions causes the project of reading to collapse. The phrase semper aliquid haeret first appears when Basil Valentine notices that Wyatt's forgeries always contain some indication of Wyatt's artistic presence, the essential self which Wyatt cannot efface and which inevitably shows through in his work. The Recognitions is peppered with references to the idea that "something always remains," many of them oblique and parodic—as for instance when Otto tries to scrape some dog shit from his heel and Max sarcastically remarks "—A little always sticks ..." (466). But semper aliquid haeret usually refers to Wyatt, whose ontological "essence" is as ineffaceable as it is unpresentable. I have characterized Wyatt's being as unknowable, as a vacancy or blind spot within the text. This existential néant is the
something that always remains of Wyatt, and it parallels the something that remains of the reader reduced to the desire for a totalizing vision of this novel.

But in the latter case, that of the reader, the persistence of this "something" marks the limit of *The Recognitions*’ ability to reverse epistemic structuralism. Gaddis cogently lays out the means by which people erect counterfeits of themselves by structuralizing their environment and then projecting themselves into those structures. I have argued that the reader’s failure to make *The Recognitions* cohere delivers him back before himself, but that proposition begs the question, *what* self? Wyatt believes that it is possible to recover lost existential possibility without trying to cancel or deny the way his past has shaped him; instead, his intention to "live it through" becomes the expression of authentic, active reversal. For the reader, the matter is somewhat different. He is likely to have looked to Wyatt as his complement only to discover himself an Otto, suddenly brought before the atomization of his identity within the multiple displacements brought about by his various expressive performances (among which novel reading may be figure prominently). But whereas Otto wanted to see himself as *more* than the sum of those expressive performance, the evolution of epistemic structuralism since *The Recognitions* has been such that people aren’t much bothered by that distinction. As we shall see in the next chapter, it no longer matters whether the burden of subjectivity that Wyatt accepts and Otto rejects is too great; while individualism itself still plays an important role in underwriting epistemic structuralism, the transcendent individual does not.
Chapter III

Nightmarish Variations and Impossible Recurrences: The Tension Between Structure and Desire in J. G. Ballard’s *The Atrocity Exhibition*

In an important sense, as social saturation proceeds we become pastiches, imitative assemblages of each other. In memory we carry others’ patterns of being with us. If the conditions are favorable, we can place these patterns into action.

---Kenneth Gergen

The night will come when The Academy of Science itself will not disdain to cast its gaze on the sewers of the world.

---Max Ernst

The artist is the master of objects; he puts before us shattered, burned, broken-down objects, converting them to the régime of desiring-machines . . .; the artist presents paranoiac machines, miraculating-machines, and celibate machines as so many technical machines, so as to cause desiring-machines to undermine technical machines. Even more important, the work of art is itself a desiring-machine. The artist stores up his treasures so as to create an immediate explosion, and that is why, to his way of thinking, destructions can never take place as rapidly as they ought to.

---Deleuze and Guattari
The "scandal" of theoretical structuralism was its dissolution of the subject and consequently the scientific ground structuralism stood on. Saussure's ideas about the relationship between words and thoughts and about the structural langue which constrains linguistic choices led to the conclusion that "language speaks man," not vice versa. With man as mere language effect, there was no longer any position from which to discover the operations of language. As Derrida argues, structuralism tried to inaugurate a covert metaphysics and a "new humanism" to replace the old, conceived in terms of an absent center which grounds the play of signification described by structural linguistics (292); but this new humanism was a fiction which could not hold, and with its collapse the idea of an orderly system of language gave way to deconstructive play and the infinite regress of meaning.

The same dilemma can be detected within the historical progress of epistemic structuralism, though there the outcome is somewhat different. As we have seen in previous chapters, epistemic structuralism determines objects and makes identifications based upon structural arrangements which are socially determined—upon the assumption of an epistemological langue which exists primarily in the minds of every other epistemologically competent member of society. Therefore individual determinations cannot possibly play a meaningful role whenever they deviate from such collective determinations. Yet individualism, largely the descendent of the nineteenth-century romanticism and Emersonian doctrine, persists in post-industrial societies. Sociologist Kenneth Gergen, in his excellent The Saturated Self, describes contemporary life as imbued with three competing "languages of the self": the romantic, the modern, and the postmodern. The romantic
language of the self is characterized by "passion, purpose, depth, and personal significance" (27). The modernist language, retaining romanticism's abiding belief in the individual yet subjecting it to scientific observation and quantification, stresses autonomy and self-reliance (44). Gergen argues that postmodern dispersal and displacement are eroding the individual, so that discourse which values personal integrity is increasingly misplaced. That much, as far as it goes, is certainly true. But romantic atavism, eroding or not, is also functional: the individualism it privileges survives in order to warrant a wide variety of largely irrelevant choices we make as consumers--of goods, services, and finally, through the concept of the "lifestyle," of our own lives. It allows us to assert a personal identity capable of determining actions which are actually rigidly circumscribed by our administered culture. Walter Davis sums up the functional relationship between individualism and epistemic structuralism thus: ". . . for the most part individuality is a fallacy of misplaced concreteness beneath which lurks the generalized other of consensual validations and reflected appraisals that keep 'other people' firmly in charge as the sovereign authors of our being" (115).

Even in this eroded form, individualism stands in direct contradiction to the *episteme* of epistemic structuralism, and if the two formations ever entered into rigorous engagement, they would not tolerate each other. But I have already argued (page 41), epistemic structuralism is a very loose, tendentious set of principles and strategies; therefore it is largely untroubled by internal contradictions, successfully tolerating in practice the "scandalous" implications which have ruptured in the philosophical/scientific arena. Thus in a gesture analogous to that of theoretical structuralism,
epistemic structuralism appropriates individualism as the guarantor of its operations: the individual, with his supreme prerogative of choice, becomes the absent center of epistemic structuralism, and the new non-humanism of the consumer-function is born.

This is not to say that the contradiction thus tolerated does not produce friction. Indeed we saw in the previous chapter how what I called grotesque ontological contradictions within the reflective processes of Gaddis's characters eventually resulted in catastrophes like suicide or mental breakdown. Notable among these was Otto Pivner's amnesia and his father's eventual lobotomization. In nearly every case, the conflicted desire to express a transcendent individualism by means of conventional structures led to disaster. We saw how identity, however highly privileged and ardently pursued, tended to atomize as attributes became mere floating signifiers which, by detaching themselves from the personalities they were supposed to define, reduced identity to a collection of shifting and incoherent fragments.

In short, whereas in theoretical structuralism the "scandal" produced a breakdown of the discursive apparatus, in epistemic structuralism the apparatus survives while its practitioners tend to break down under the strain of its internal pressures. The alternatives to this dilemma, The Recognitions suggests, lie either with a conscious and manipulative exploitation of epistemic structuralism or with a total rejection of it. Yet both these alternatives remain squarely within the problematic created by the dilemma, offering no chance of overcoming it, for each depends upon the other as its defining principle. The Recognitions' arch epistemic structuralist, Max Schling, adopts the first course: he resolves the dilemma
by never committing himself in even the slightest degree to his own fraudulent posturing. But that posturing itself still depends upon the other characters' belief in his authenticity—that is, it depends upon their belief in the possibility of an authentic identity projection within the structuralist framework. His solution to the problem therefore remains squarely within the structuralist problematic. Wyatt Gwyon adopts the second course: he turns his back upon the masquerade of epistemic structuralism. But he never really removes himself from the structuralist scene insofar as he never stops talking about the inauthenticity of "other people." Furthermore, the idea that Wyatt can remove himself from the structuralist scene presupposes a neat separation of individual from society in which the solitary subject extracts himself as an existential néant. As I said in the conclusion to the previous chapter, we are left with the question, what self?—that is, what element of identity is ontologically prior to and separate from the expressive performances and externally mediated reflections of epistemic structuralism?

Therefore, though The Recognitions articulates a powerful critique of epistemic structuralism, the novel does not finally escape the problem of endogenous cultural criticism—the problem of articulating an intelligible alternative to thought processes which present themselves as all that may be thought. It is my contention that Gaddis wrote The Recognitions at a point in the historical development of epistemic structuralism when the episteme and individualism seemed relatively poised. Clearly, in The Recognitions the dissolution of identity is a keenly felt loss; and no doubt the freshness and strangeness of structuralism as a more-or-less conscious epistemological strategy suggested the possibility of a choice
between authenticity and expressive performance. But J. G. Ballard's book of "condensed novels," *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), written some 15 years after *The Recognitions*, reflects a different historical circumstance. The possibility of choice between the terms of the conflict no longer seemed apparent, and the resounding silence attending the question *what* self? had begun to constitute an answer. In the fantasy-land of late capitalism's media-generated reality, subjectivity became irrelevant, as the slogan on a sweatshirt I recently saw makes clear: "It's not who you are but what you wear—after all, who cares who you are?" The sweatshirt itself, like much informal apparel worn today, was an advertisement for some designer label.

The extremity of this new circumstance provided the possibility of a new response, itself equally extreme. *The Atrocity Exhibition* solves the problem of endogenous cultural criticism by dismissing the notion of character—character being the "self" of literature—altogether, thereby illuminating epistemic structuralism from an entirely new perspective and suggesting a more radical subversion of its influence, one that does not simply remain trapped within the problematic of individual-vs.-society. *The Atrocity Exhibition* doesn't concern itself with character at all, insofar as that term entails a self-identical, self-aware consciousness actualizing itself through determinate action or reflective self-overcoming; such characterization depends upon a depth model of the individual, in which a

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1Although J. G. Ballard is British and actually sets most of his fiction in Shepperton, the suburb of London where he makes his home, the "culture" he portrays is unmistakably American. As Dennis Foster points out, "... Ballard's vision of the world has a distinctly American cast, ruled by icons of Hollywood film (Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor) of political (John Kennedy, Ronald Reagan), and of national and international image" (519). Indeed the whole question of "culture" as I take it up assumes the erosion of national and ethnic boundaries by the exportation of American commercial entertainment and its mass-media images.
"true" inner self attempts to negotiate the external world and express itself through the means that world provides. The main "characters" of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, rather, are zones of schizophrenic intensity which operate without the organizing principle of the self and which seek some resonance with media-generated sexualized icons like Elizabeth Taylor or John F. Kennedy. These de-centered intensities obsess about the libidinal geometries expressed by photographs on giant billboards, by architecture, and especially in erotic car crashes. Their obsessions are recapitulated in each chapter as a series of erratic variations on a theme—a series each member of which renounces seriality, occurring at the level of an absolute psychotic present. With the subtraction of the subject epistemic structuralism emerges as a kind of machinery which facilitates an active eroticization of the environment—it restrains and channels the boundless cathexis of a media-controlled exteriority and provides the inevitable "backwash" or reverse energy flow by which the exteriority in turn configures the (supposedly) originary libido. In other words, Ballard exposes the structuralized libido.

For Ballard, the way out of the *episteme is further in*. As he says in his marginal commentary to the *Re/Search* Edition,

"... I feel we should immerse ourselves in the most destructive element, ourselves, and swim. I take it that the final destination of the 20th century, and the best we can hope for in the circumstances, is the attainment of a moral and just psychopathology" (20).

Accordingly, *The Atrocity Exhibition* submerges us in the social psychosis that is our own, the inseparability of internal and external impulses which the ideological residue of individualism keeps us from recognizing. The novel does this by withdrawing the ego from the operations of epistemic
structuralism and presenting the experience of socio-libidinal drives as an exteriorized interiority. As William S. Burroughs shows in *Naked Lunch*, the ego is never in charge: its actions are merely representations of the drives produced in the so-called unconscious. It is finally consciousness which is unconscious, unaware of what agency is really in the driver's seat, determining its every move; and the unconscious, as Lacan points out, is never submerged, absent, or hidden but operates out in the open at all times.² In spite of Ballard's use of depth imagery in the above quotation, *The Atrocity Exhibition* shows that the conscious/unconscious dichotomy has nothing to do with depth: in its last five chapters the minimal units of narrative gesture—mere phraeseological syntagms—are engulfed by texts of marketing studies and clinical research projects forming massive, overdetermined cultural intertexts which completely deconstruct the phenomenology of inside/outside which the problematic of epistemic structuralism and individualism upholds. *The Atrocity Exhibition* shows that the schizophrenic condition in which impulses from the unconscious are indistinguishable from those of the external world is precisely the condition we are in; the ego, and its sociological avatar, the individual, are transparent excrescences superimposed onto the libidinal operations of the psyche.

The over-cathedced world of *The Atrocity Exhibition* is one of elaborate but highly elliptical significations. These significations take the form of fusions and dispersals among signifiers in a way more closely corresponding to libidinal drives and the production of desire than any we

²"The unconscious is that part of the concrete discourse, in so far as it is transindividual, that is not at the disposal of the subject in re-establishing the continuity of his conscious discourse" (*Écrits* 49).
have seen so far, yet along lines which betray the transpositional rules of structuralism in its most aggravated form. The purpose of this chapter is to track the means by which the narrative's fusions and dispersals dramatize epistemic structuralism's involvement with psychological organization in the register of desire. The work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari will be most helpful here. In *Anti-Oedipus*, their landmark attempt to reconcile Marxism and psychoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the unconscious can never be assimilated to the apprehension of whole objects, nor is it comparable to the centered self which finds its genesis in the "daddy-mommy-me" structure of the Oedipal complex. The unconscious, they argue, should not be anthropomorphized as an entity with beliefs and ideas, as if it were a thinking, "pre-Oedipal" being. Deleuze and Guattari reject psychoanalytic theory's organization of the psyche around Oedipus, positing the psychic organization of the schizophrenic as a better model. They set out to explore

... an unconscious that is material rather than ideological; schizophrenic rather than Oedipal; nonfigurative rather than imaginary; real rather than symbolic; machinic rather than structural—an unconscious, finally, that is molecular, microphysical, and micrological rather than molar or gregarious; productive rather expressive. (109–110, my emphasis)

From this radically different psychoanalytic perspective, the way capitalism constrains the disruptive potential of the psyche becomes clear: whereas the libido stands at the limit of capitalism's power to control desire, capitalism has sought to contain the libido by "restor[ing] all sorts of residual and artificial, imaginary, or symbolic territorialities, thereby attempting, as best it can, to recode, to rechannel persons who have been defined in terms of abstract quantities [i.e., labor and capital]" (34). The
irony is that it is capitalism which has in the first place produced and promoted this libidinal limit by allowing for the complete fluidity of signification through the money-form as an amorphous abstraction of value and labor. In other words, capitalism, through its modes of production and principles of exchange, first creates schizos by unchanneling desire and then seeks to contain them by offering its coercive legal structures and immersive administrative structures as the environment for negotiating schizophrenic libidinal investment.

The connection between this double bind and what I have called the "scandal" of epistemic structuralism is also clear: capitalism's decoding of desire is the material basis for the ideology of individualism, while the coercive and immersive structures of social recoding present themselves as the epistemic correlates for recontaining desire. Deleuze and Guattari therefore provide an important insight into the scandal of epistemic structuralism: materialistically considered, the scandal issues either in a neuroticization of the schizo (the schizo made safe) or in its psychotic breakdown and withdrawal into autism. The family (as a primarily social rather than nuclear institution) and psychoanalytic practice ensure the likelihood of these outcomes by providing and privileging, respectively, the inaugural structure of daddy-mommy-me which creates whole persons and localizes the schizo. As Deleuze and Guattari state, "We are now able to surmise what Oedipus signifies: it displaces the limit [of socially tolerable desiring-production], it internalizes the limit. Rather a society of neurotics than one successful schizophrenic who has not been made autistic" (102).

By subordinating the family to the socius, by dismissing the Oedipal model of the psyche, and by privileging the decentered, anoedipal
unconscious, Deleuze and Guattari create the possibility for a radical
response to epistemic structuralism, one which does not romanticize madness
yet which names the normalizing pressures brought to bear upon the
unconscious as "illegitimate." In this Deleuze and Guattari do something
remarkably similar to what Ballard does in *The Atrocity Exhibition*: they
dismiss the ego as a mask placed over the anoedipal organization of the
unconscious, they renounce the psychoanalytic "cure" as an ideological
straightjacket, and they explore schizophrenia not as a condition but as a
process, one capable of leading to break through rather than breakdown.

On the other hand, for all its dramatic power, Ballard’s vision of life
subject to the scandal of epistemic structuralism is not as clear as that of
Deleuze and Guattari. His portrayal of the schizophrenic process fails to
make important distinctions among its impulses toward break through,
specifically between those which are revolutionary and those which are
primarily fascist in orientation. Moreover, his portrayal of desire, which is
central to the book, is limited to that of an aggressive male gaze, and if
*The Atrocity Exhibition* is not an outright misogynist book, it certainly
raises disturbing questions about Ballard’s attitude toward women, for the
climax of nearly every chapter involves the symbolic or "conceptual"
murder of a female character. It is arguable that capitalism, in which the
division of labor is subject to market relationships in such a way that the
laborer is always at a disadvantage, exacerbates forms of sexual
discrimination and male domination held over from earlier epochs, and in
this regard *The Atrocity Exhibition* reflects its historical moment. But
Ballard seems to take this situation for granted, and while he seems to
position himself critically with regard to mass media and their influence on
the psyche, he seems to treat misogyny as the neutral ground from which these perversions arise.

In spite of these limitations, Ballard’s text makes a crucial move toward exploring the possibilities of schizophrenic breakthrough, and I feel it therefore merits consideration. Instead of presenting psychosis as an aberrant, disruptive intrusion upon an ordered reality, *The Atrocity Exhibition* privileges schizophrenia. Names change from chapter to chapter; people die repeated "conceptual deaths," only to return to life later on; narrative situations dissolve and then *recur for the first time*—again and again, but never as repetitions. In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, the socializing forces generally seen as schizophrenia’s context are folded *into* the schizophrenic world view, so that schizophrenia becomes the narrative medium, one in which the voice of reason occasionally obtrudes like a feeble and ill-exercised counterstatement. Thus *The Atrocity Exhibition* retains the tension between the two mental states, that of Oedipus and that of the schizo, while achieving a radical and disturbing redistribution of their respective forces.

In many ways this tension parallels the tension between structure and desire. Structuralism is the reasonable organization of reality into comprehensible, significant and above all interchangeable units, while desire is that unruly activity which exceeds and demolishes structure, apprehending objects in the absolute particularity which attends their appearance before the desiring subject. The value of *The Atrocity Exhibition* is that, in spite of its limitations and its unconscious misogyny, it juxtaposes structure and desire in a way that reveals what is at stake in our structuralist commitments.
The defining gestures in *The Atrocity Exhibition*'s subversive explication of epistemic structuralism are the way the novel abrogates character and the way it restages the socialization of libidinal drives. These two gestures deconstruct the scandal of epistemic structuralism, that is, the problematic of *episteme* vs. individual, by revealing that its terms interpenetrate one another. In addition, we will see that the psychotic organization of the narrative and the rhetoric of its imagery invite introspection into the terms for struggling against our own tendency to structuralize.

The principal zones of schizophrenic intensity in *The Atrocity Exhibition* are called, alternately, Travis, Talbot, Traven, Tallis, Trabert, Talbert, and Travers. (At the risk of doing the text an injustice, I will follow the practice of other critics and generalize by calling him simply *T*). In two of the chapters *T* goes unnamed altogether, as does Wyatt Gwyon through much of *The Recognitions*; but in general *T*'s alienation through language is expressed in *The Atrocity Exhibition* as over coding, the dissociation not of an essential self from its inadequate social significations but of multiple denominations from each other. Any of these denominations may seem adequate, from the standpoint of a schizophrenic absolute present, as the focal point for libidinal energies which have become temporarily but also eternally organized around a given obsession; however, these energies are just as likely to change under subsequent conditions of libidinal activity and organization, and therefore so does their denomination.
Yet the novel\textsuperscript{3} also presents minimal elements of situational continuity, elements which, insofar as they compel the reader to assume that each chapter's scenario really does revolve around the same psychotic nexus in spite of nightmarish variations and impossible recurrences, function to retain the tension between insanity and reason (or desire and structure) I mentioned earlier. For instance, in most of the chapters T is associated in some capacity with the Institute, which is at times a mental hospital, at times a bizarre "University of Death," but in any case a bureaucratic entity of uncertain purpose. T usually begins as an employee of the Institute but his association becomes ambiguous or degraded. He may be either a doctor or a patient (Chapter One); he may be away on vacation (Chapter 4), resign his position (Chapter 5), or escape (Chapter 3); he may be a lecturer (Chapters 2 and 6), a "volunteer" (Chapter 9), or the subject of a voyeuristic documentary on schizophrenia (Chapter 8). The fact that the Institute stands as an organizational continuity in opposition to T's psychotic discontinuity in itself works to balance the forces of structuralizing unity and schizophrenic dispersal throughout the narrative.

\textsuperscript{3}The genre of \textit{The Atrocity Exhibition} is a tricky question. Its fifteen "chapters" were originally published separately as "condensed novels" between 1966 and 1969, and so the final product could be considered a collection of short stories. Yet several critics, and Ballard himself, have discussed the work as though it had more generic integrity than, say, \textit{Dubliners}. But is it a novel? Taken as a whole, the schizophrenic quality of the narrative, on the one hand, militates in favor of some looser designation. On the other, the many elements of situational continuity among the chapters strongly suggests some weightier principle of organization than the term "collection" offers. In consideration, first, of what sort of fragmented and diffuse texts have easily passed for novels and, second, of a progression I see in the book's action, I will treat \textit{The Atrocity Exhibition} as a novel, though clearly I use the term about as broadly as possible.
In addition, subsidiary characters remain consistent from chapter to chapter. T’s wife Margaret not only remains intact but survives her own murder; Catherine Austin, a doctor at the Institute with whom T has an "undecided" affair, appears in nearly all the chapters, with the same name and same slender attributes; Dr. Nathan, head of the Institute, never varies in his role as explicator of T’s delirium: he steps in from time to time—sometimes literally as deus ex Sirkosky—in order to diagnose the action and render it intelligible; Capt. Webster, apparently Dr. Nathan’s juridical coefficient, works closely with Nathan to head off T’s vaguely dangerous subversive activities; and Koester, T’s romantic and ideological rival, seems consistently if sporadically engaged in documenting T’s activities. Even characters whose very existence is uncertain betray sufficient consistency to balance and bind together the shards of T’s fragmented narrative. For instance, though the mysterious and uncommunicative Bomber Pilot and the young woman with the radiation burns are plainly elements of T’s own dissociated psyche, and though their purpose in escorting T through a vast eroticized landscape and "the suburbs of hell" is never explicit, their several appearances provide an element of coherence, if only of the sort generally associated with the erratic delusional systems of schizophrenics.

However, as David Pringle points out, Ballard’s central characters are "usually personifications of psychological urges rather than ‘real people’" (51). Thus T himself stands in mute contradiction to all this continuity. Indeed, it is only the foregoing elements of situational and nominal continuity which constrain the reader to suppose that T is a single entity at all. For The Atrocity Exhibition does not present T as a schizophrenic character; instead it exhibits the process of T’s schizophrenia—that is, T is
not a person but a radically transient and dynamic series of intense psychological moments. T is not a character because he is incapable of the act of consciousness which reconciles these intensities by reconciling them to one another through a series of determinations based upon exclusions or segregations. T is incapable, in other words, of the deduction that requires us to say I am the person who, a deduction that excludes another person who I am not, or was not, or could not become, as well as a whole range of alternative actions and events which I do not, have not, will not undertake or experience. Such a deduction, based upon exclusion, Deleuze and Guattari would call "illegitimate" with respect to the unconscious, because it runs contrary to the unconscious's means of producing desire, differentiating its objects and determining its experience. An exclusive determination is an act of violence which forces the psyche to submit to the established social order, an order which begins with the Oedipal triangle as its "formal cause" but which replicates itself in everything with which the subdued or "Oedipalized" psyche comes into contact. The schizo, on the other hand, apprehends the partial objects of his experience through inclusive differentiations and "nomadic" projections (Anti-Oedipus 110-111). Thus, for instance, although T's wife Margaret is concerned about whether her husband is a doctor or a patient, the question is, as Dr. points out, not valid (12), for T himself never distinguishes between his many apparent roles throughout the novel. Deleuze and Guattari explain the alternate relativity under which T operates: the schizo does not employ the rational "either/or" which insists, according to the law of noncontradiction, that a thing cannot both be and not be; instead, the schizo employs an inclusive determination in making its distinctions, the "either...or...":
The schizophrenic is dead or alive, not both at once, but each of the two as the terminal points of a distance over which he glides. He is child or parent, not both, but the one at the end of the other, like the two ends of a stick in a nondecomposable space. (Anti-Oedipus 76)

The "nondecomposable space" is T himself, an undifferentiated surface over which play the various ephemeral distinctions made possible by desiring-production. And because the world which surrounds him is a similar surface, it is finally an extension of T's being, which he negotiates by means of the same sort of inclusive determinations. A complex of the inclusive determinations I am describing occurs in an episode called "The Image Maze." T follows a helicopter pilot into a deserted exhibition hall, and in a remarkably small amount of text, a dizzying number of doublings ensue:

The pilot stepped through a doorway cut into an image of Talbot's face. He [Talbot] looked up at the photograph of himself, snapped with a lapel camera during his last seminar. Over the exhausted eyes presided the invisible hierarchies of the quasars. Reading the maze, Talbot made his way among the corridors. Details of his hands and mouth signposted its significant junctions. (21)

The mysterious pilot is a dissociated element of T's own psyche, and so by following him T is differentiating himself (or part of himself) from himself, though not exactly, or at least not exclusively and permanently, as an "other." This alternate self leads him directly back to himself, now experienced environmentally as a gigantic photograph which is negotiated by means of its "significant junctions." "[T]he invisible hierarchies of the quasars" refers to T's obsession with messages from alternate aspects of his own psyche, of which the "quasar" is an apposite image. Signals created by nuclear reactions occurring instantly and hurtling through space at the speed of light, quasars are present and instantaneous but also ancient;
they are immediate as well as distant, for in the moment of their arrival they contain the immeasurable time and space which convey them to us. Their "hierarchies" are the structures with which T imprints experience, and their status as external in origin—that is, as messages from outer space—and yet internally generated—that is, as "sections of his brain reborn in the island galaxies" (21)—points both to the inclusive determinations of schizophrenic apprehension and the profoundly dual nature of structuralist knowledge: it is primarily collective in origin but we we make it "our own." As we shall see, this is the way in which T finally capitulates to epistemic structuralism on the level of subconscious desiring-production: he eroticizes the signifying structures of social productions and makes them "his own" such that it no longer makes sense to describe T in terms of a psychological interiority opposed to his social exteriority.

The multiple dissociations and bizarre fusions of self and self (of, respectively, self from self and self into self) in the foregoing passage reveal the schizophrenic capacity for differentiations based upon inclusions, momentary distinctions which are both absolute, in that they are separated by the nondecomposable space of being, and provisional, in that the "I" who makes them may subsequently occupy any of the positions which make the experience of alterity possible. (At other times, as in Chapters 3 and 9, T is the pilot and is the messenger from the stars.) Such radically ambiguous determinations never lead to the proposition I am the person who, which is why T's manifold psyche is never localizable enough to qualify him as a "character," not even as a "schizophrenic character."

So over against the minimal elements of situational and nominal continuity The Atrocity Exhibition juxtaposes T's incapacity for identity
formation—at one point he attempts to construct an identity by taking a set
of psychological tests, but he has no way to check his answers (33). The
opposition is at least functional insofar as the elements of continuity
surround T with a more-or-less coherent tableau, virtually constraining the
reader to regard T's various incarnations (Travis, Trabert, etc.) as the same
entity. But also, as I have said, the opposition ensures the tension
between a rational world view and schizophrenic intensity, without actually
subordinating the former to the latter. If T emerges from this tension as a
single entity, he also escapes characterization to a greater degree than
nearly any postmodern fictional creation, including, perhaps, Beckett's
Unnamable.

Just as T is decentered, non-localizable and discontinuous, so are his
obsessions throughout the fifteen chapters of The Atrocity Exhibition.
Nonetheless we are likely to consider the eponymous first chapter
paradigmatic, owing to distinct repetitions of plot structure in ensuing
chapters—structural variations the detection of which are among the
primary strategies for reading in any case but which emerge in a deranged
narrative like The Atrocity Exhibition as one of the few ways to make any
sense of the text at all. In Chapter One, T's intention is to launch World
War III (10). At the beginning of the chapter T is summoned from the
Institute by those "twin couriers from his unconscious," the young woman
with the radiation burns and the bomber pilot. Like Christ, who spends 40
days fasting in the desert as a means of spiritual purification, T spends
some months in the "Suburbs of Hell," watching a neighbor waste away and
die of cancer—a memento mori who stares back at T from her bungalow
across the way. He emerges from this period of purification charged for
action and proceeds to transform the Institute into a war zone, complete with barbed wire, gunnery aisles, and bunkers. This is the externalized internal landscape where he constructs his alternate reality—an environment cathexed in terms of libidinal flows. He produces a newsreel showing tableau sculptures of film stars, politicians, and his wife Margaret in bizarre and disturbing poses. He apparently begins constructing a series of billboards, each depicting the smallest sections of Elizabeth Taylor’s body parts under magnification which makes them recognizable only as abstract geometric formations. Finally, at a climactic moment, a huge explosion fuses his wife’s body with "the rectilinear intervals through which he perceived the surrounding continuum of time and space" (16).

Here World War III is conceived as an internal struggle against unnamed occupation forces. Politics, considered as the affairs of sovereign states, is a meaningless category now that contemporary global economics have homogenized old-fashioned political entities, reducing them to structural equivalents of one another without much more than factitious and in any case minor ideological differences to distinguish them. 4 The only World War left to fight is the one between the occupation forces of global capitalist values and whatever remnant of our psyches cannot be reconciled to them, not even under the seemingly segregative designation "madness."

If, as Foucault says, civilization needs to make madness its "other," an

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4See Richard Rosecrance's *The Rise of the Trading State*. Rosecrance argues that the "military-political" model of conquest has been superceded by the "trading model," according to which countries can realize greater economic benefits through specialized production and consumption of goods. This mechanism requires an atmosphere of free trade to which war would be an impediment. Rosecrance doesn't specifically insist upon the irrelevance of political ideology or the sort of international cultural homogeneity I mention here, but I think that such consequences of the "trading model" are both theoretically and empirically obvious.
other which is imported into civilization's structures and contained there, then madness must be made to submit to a characterization which in some essential way conforms to civilization's method of forming its objects. Therefore it remains for the kinds of psychic organization that do not as yet submit to civilization's structuration to resist being brought into the fold, and the resistance must be local (though not individual!), spontaneous, and discontinuous.

This is the sense in which T wages World War III, though it is not the sense in which Dr. Nathan, the novel's invariable voice of reason, interprets T's actions. Dr. Nathan monitors T's movements throughout the novel, and his analyses are by and large accurate. But they are also insufficient, informed as they are by Nathan's perspective of reason and scientific consistency. He tells T's wife Margaret that for T World War III "has become an expression of the failure of his psyche to accept the fact of its own consciousness, and of his revolt against the present continuum of time and space" (12):

In conclusion, it seems that Travis's extreme sensitivity to the volumes and geometry of the world around him, and their immediate translation into psychological terms, may reflect a belated attempt to return to a symmetrical world, one that will recapture the perfect symmetry of the blastosphere, and the acceptance of the 'Mythology of Amniotic Return.' In his mind World War III represents the final self-destruction and imbalance of an asymmetric world, the last suicidal spasm of the dextro-rotatory helix, DNA. The human organism is an atrocity exhibition at which he is an unwilling spectator ... (14)

Dr. Nathan's analysis is compelling, especially insofar as it rationalizes insanity. As Ballard says in his marginal commentary, Dr. Nathan's analyses "are accurate, and he knows what is going on. On the other hand, reason rationalizes reality for him, as it does for the rest of us, in the Freudian
sense of providing a more palatable or convenient explanation . . . " (54). By making T appear incapable of accepting the world's imperfections, Nathan supplies insanity with a motive which is at once comprehensible—even at times philosophically attractive—and flawed. Hence in Nathan's analysis T's failure to accept the fact of his own consciousness becomes a meaningful one by virtue of its attachment to certain unquestioned conceptual correlatives.

But T's rejection of consciousness is not a failure (just as consciousness is not an apolitical given); and as we shall see, it is only meaningful to the extent that it fails. The "perfect symmetry of the blastosphere" which T longs for might be better understood as Deleuze and Guattari's "body without organs." For Deleuze and Guattari, the psyche exists in two states: the first is machinic, producing desire as a sensual flow between part-objects brought into connection with one another (these connections are called "desiring-machines"). In The Atrocity Exhibition, this sort of machinic desiring-production is the basis of many of T's obsessions. The other state of psychic organization described by Deleuze and Guattari is the absence or interruption of machinic desiring-production and is experienced as unarticulated nothingness. The body, having been organized by the stimulation of its parts during desiring-production, becomes an undifferentiated mass, a body without organs, when desiring-production comes to a halt. Neither of these psychic positions is primary or original; rather, they are mutually constitutive: the desiring-machines do not exist until they are interrupted and the body without organs does not exist until it has been articulated by desiring-machines. Thus
The body without organs is not the proof of an original nothingness, nor is it what remains of a lost totality. Above all, it is not a projection; it has nothing whatsoever to do with the body itself, or with an image of the body. It is the body without an image. (8)

The body without organs is not gone, left behind during higher-level functioning of consciousness but remains intact, the "slippery surface" upon which the forms of social cathexis are inscribed.

The psyche oscillates between the poles defined by these two states of psychic organization, poles which Deleuze and Guattari call schizorevolutionary and paranoid-fascist. The schizoid pole is revolutionary because it refuses the whole identities offered by the socius and its structures; the paranoid pole is fascist because it subscribes to certain social structures based upon group identities—races, dominant groups, etc.

In each chapter of The Atrocity Exhibition, T is described (usually by Dr. Nathan but often by the narrator) as being on the verge of mental breakdown, which is only another way of saying that he is poised between these two poles of psychic organization.

In Chapter One, T clearly gravitates toward the schizorevolutionary pole. The reason, then, that Dr. Nathan’s analysis is inaccurate—or at least insufficient—is that in Chapter One T does not accept any "Mythology of Amniotic Return." That is Nathan’s myth, not T’s, for what T desires in the first chapter is not a return to a state of quiescent auto-plentitude—though as we shall see that is precisely where he often winds up—but a schizorevolutionary rejection of the social desiring-machines imposed upon the body without organs in order to contain desire’s disruptive potential.

It is not consciousness against which T rebels in the first chapter of The Atrocity Exhibition, but a socially constructed form of consciousness.
The fundamental irony of the novel—indeed fact it is the basis for T's eventual undoing—is that the unconscious impulse which inaugurates the rebellion is itself a social construct resulting from the deterritorialization of libidinal flows which capitalism authorizes. Dennis Foster points out that in *The Atrocity Exhibition*

The car and camera provide the coherent body that the contemporary subject lacks, the image of power and independence human beings aspire to, and advertising, politics, and entertainment insinuate these productions into current habits of language and consumption, shaping individuals' capacity for pleasure. (527)

For instance, T will suddenly and unaccountably murmur names of celebrities like Elizabeth Taylor, Jackie Kennedy or Ralph Nader while gazing at the landscape, so integrated into his psyche are the media icons which saturate his environment. Cut up by tabloid photography and the innumerable perspectival shifts of cinematographic technique, Elizabeth Taylor is not delivered to our apprehension as a whole person, however we might consciously insist that she is one; instead, she comes to us as an infinite number of shifting postures, over-the-shoulder glances, and dismembered body parts. "She" is not a person at all but an ensemble, one of disconnected, incommensurable parts which do not contribute to the makeup of a whole person or object—a nonsemble, if you will. As such, "she" percolates piecemeal into our psyches, where she is fused with the molecular mechanics of desire and thus provides them with correlatives in the external world.

At this point the difference between the internal and external evaporates—or at least it would evaporate without what traditional psychoanalysis calls defenses but materialist psychoanalysis would call
ideological restraints. These restraints, primarily fascistic, are the products of a collusion between the family and the bourgeois social order to contain or "reterritorialize" desire by insisting upon the either/or determinations which give rise to whole objects, stable identities, and totalizing structures. We defend (or are enjoined to defend) ourselves against this eradication of the external/internal dichotomy as long as we "personize" the flow of media-generated fragments which washes over us. As long as we persist, contrary to our actual experience, in the conscious belief that the celebrity-fragments bombarding us belong to whole persons, we remain squarely within the safety zone of neurotic libidinal organization.

But for T, the goal is to achieve the opposite: he takes comfort when "the normal tokens of life he had accepted for so long"—i.e., the whole persons and relationships of his everyday experience—"become as fragmentary as the faces of Elizabeth Taylor and Sigmund Freud on the advertising billboards, as unreal as the war the film companies had restarted in Vietnam" (10-11). T's subversive mission is to escape the ideological defenses which require him to deny his libidinal reality. Thus he welcomes the dissolution of the world of bounded totalities and discreet entities into a world of part-objects mediated for him by commercial interests and Hollywood iconography. The juxtaposition of Elizabeth Taylor and Freud on billboards is especially telling in that Freud is not a shadowy hermeneutic inviting investigation into the depths of latency, but a fully explicit "fusing device" (to use T's habitual term) for joining the activities of unconscious desiring-production directly and unambiguously to the external productions of the culture industry. In postmodern culture the
psyche has been flattened out—it no longer corresponds to a "depth model."

T's fragmentation of experience and its subversive function in the war he wants to wage concern the situation of desire as a politically contested activity. Lacan showed that desire is founded upon lack, conditioned as it is by castration anxiety and organized around the absence of the phallus (Écrits 287–290). But Deleuze and Guattari maintain that desiring-production, the anœdipal activity which precedes the "illegitimate" introduction of the psyche into the symbolic order, has nothing to do with lack. The symbolic order described by Lacan is capitalism's primary mechanism for artificially reterritorializing the boundless, transgressive flows of desiring-production. To state the matter somewhat crudely: whole persons, not schizophrenic intensities, buy automobiles and toaster ovens because whole persons are conditioned to apprehend only whole objects, through which they find only lack within fulfillment. This means that the economic order requires the agency of the symbolic order for its successful operation. Hence the multiple and highly erratic flows of desire within T's schizophrenic semiotic runs contrary to the established structuration of objects engineered by the capitalist culture industry, which demands that such disruptive or deterritorialized flows be rechannelled and made safe for the kind of desire which its economy requires. It therefore devolves upon Dr. Nathan and Capt. Webster, as agents of the established order (it is not incidental that Dr. Nathan speaks to the reader so sensibly), to construct a counteroffensive in T's World War.

The object of this counteroffensive, then, is the reterritorialization of desire, using T's wife Margaret. Dr. Nathan realizes that Margaret's body,
"with its endlessly familiar geometry, its landscapes of touch and feeling, was their only defense against her husband's all-tooplain intentions" (12). He enlists Capt. Webster to compile a "one-man Kinsey report on her": Webster inquires about sexual "positions, planes, where and when Travis places his hands on her body" (14). Webster's clinical intrusiveness into Margaret and T's sex life calls to mind the way sex is policed by reference to universal norms established through wide-scale studies which the masses gobble up in order to see how their own appetites fit it (see Foucault, History of Sexuality, Vol. I). Here Ballard exposes the absurdity of such structural recoding by reducing it to the dimensions of one couple's sexual conduct submitted not to the clinical gaze of millions but to that of a single third party, the mere presence of which transforms, orders, sanitizes, and validates. Margaret resents Webster's intrusiveness—it is ironic that while most people would resent him as well they would also take confessional pleasure in filling out "anonymous" questionnaires of the same nature—but the object is to externalize her sexual relations with T for T in order to bring his sexuality back into the social context which presents itself as the absolute axis of reference and which demands his fealty.

Using a telephoto lens, Webster takes a number of obscene photographs of Margaret to be used on a series of enormous billboards. In spite of his characteristic verbosity, Dr. Nathan does not articulate the rationale of this counteroffensive; but clearly the plan is to fuse in T's mind the dismembered body parts of Elizabeth Taylor with a whole object—Margaret, whose complete body is both erotically invested by and "endlessly familiar" to T in a way that preserves the lines of desiring-production compatible with capital's economic production. The planned "Margaret"
billboards are meant to transform and contain Elizabeth Taylor, turn her into a complete person, an integrated object for libidinal investment and consumption which in turn integrates T's psyche and makes it safe by depriving it of its nomadic projections and promoting instead the segregative projection "If she is...then I must be...."

But Dr. Nathan realizes too late that the fusion works two ways: if one result would be Elizabeth Taylor's integration, another result, equally likely, would be Margaret's disintegration. In a release of energy in which psychic activity mimics a nuclear chain reaction, Margaret becomes "The Exploding Madonna":

For Travis, the ascension of his wife's body above the target area, exploding madonna of the weapons range, was a celebration of the rectilinear intervals through which he perceived the surrounding continuum of time and space. Here she became one with the madonnas of the billboards and the ophthalmic films, the Venus of the magazine cuttings whose postures celebrated his own search through the suburbs of Hell. (16)

As is all the violence in The Atrocity Exhibition, the action here is probably delusional, a consequence of the novel's presentation of schizophrenia on schizophrenia's own terms. What happens is primarily a change in the way T perceives his wife, and the violence faithfully indexes the psychological violence of T's schizophrenic breakdown, for in rejecting the symbolic order of whole persons, whole bodies, of stable identities and fixed knowledge, T is overthrowing some of the most powerful and ruthless forces of civilization. Here is the triumph of T's inner battle, the deification of his wife, her elevation to a state in which she is available for the sacrament of desiring-production. The "rectilinear intervals" which Margaret's exploding body celebrates are the gaps which determine T's
schizophrenic reality—his is a discontinuous continuum—and so rather than serving to bind together T's schizophrenic determinations as Dr. Nathan had hoped, Margaret affirms them with her newly schizophrenicized body. Experienced now as one of T's inclusive determinations, she is both mass-mediated Venus and Madonna. As Venus, she transcends the Oedipalized body which is bounded by the physiognomical structuration and localization that T abhors; goddess-like, she bestows the sacrament of desiring-production as pure experience: insensate and economically dangerous in its rejection of lack as the condition of its enactment. As Madonna, she is the bearer of the schizoid Christ-child—T himself, who is born into tranquil (but not tranquilized) polymorphous perversity by projecting himself into the massive dispersions around him:

Lying on the worn concrete of the gunnery aisles, he assumed the postures of the film actress, assuaging his past dreams and anxieties in the dune-like fragments of her body. (17)

But though T has won the battle, he is losing the war, as he inevitably must. The conjunctive synthesis he performs by projecting himself into the posture of his wife's fragmented body is indeed a schizophrenic breakthrough; but what is also clear from the way this breakthrough is mediated by Elizabeth Taylor is that, however closely it corresponds to desiring-production, this breakthrough is primarily an act of signification. Deleuze and Guattari insist that the unconscious does not signify or represent: it is "a factory, a workshop," rather than "a theater, a scene and its staging" (55). According to this thesis, perversion is the theatricizing of desire—it is desire delivered over to an image of itself (314). It follows, then, that perversion is the primary business of capitalism, which, having deterritorialized desiring-production in the first
place, must continually seek ways to recontain what it has set free. The most obvious ways, *The Atrocity Exhibition* shows, are the formal structures of whole bodies (Margaret as whole person), the administrative structures of large controlling bureaucracies (the Institute), the juridical structures of coercion and scientific authority (the surveillance by Capt. Webster and Dr. Nathan) which offer the "official" forms of representation for desiring-production. In the counteroffensive to T's inner World War, all of these measures fail; but in the final analysis, the cathexis of mass-media part-objects like those assumed under the category "Elizabeth Taylor" condenses both the operations of decoding and recoding into a single gesture. "Elizabeth Taylor" both decodes the psyche—as I have said, she "flattens it out"—and recodes it by providing it with a principle of structuration her own ambiguous status as a singular signifier—a proper name—composed of multiple, incommensurable, and yet *signifying* part-objects. The Elizabeth Taylor part-objects can signify in a way that the part-objects of schizoid desiring-production never do, recontaining desire by perverting it into a theater—no longer, to be sure, the classical theater that Deleuze and Guattari complain is the province of traditional psychoanalysis, but an *avant-garde* theater of disjointed representations, where the abstract, non-signifying labors of the unconscious are given an *image*.

For this reason, the deification of Margaret is not marked solely by the reversion of Margaret's body to disconnected part-objects but also by the chain-reaction of signification, that is, the correlation of elements such that the structural relations which condition one element (the Elizabeth Taylor part-object) are imported into the other (the Margaret Travis part-
object) so that the latter can also signify. As elements of the factory-
unconscious the fragments of Margaret's body do not signify; they
produce—they become parts of desiring machines which engineer the
connections, disjunctions and conjunctions of schizophrenic desiring-
production. But as an explosion of fragments fused with the signifier
"Elizabeth Taylor" they take on significance: when Margaret "becomes one"
with the "madonnas of the billboards" and the "magazine cuttings" she is
structurally assimilated to them.

The unique power of mass-cultural icons like Elizabeth Taylor
simultaneously to release and contain desiring-production doubtless rests
with their bizarre, self-contradictory status. I have already referred to
Elizabeth Taylor as a nonsemble (page 182). As such she is both molecular
and molar in that whatever the number of incommensurable elements, they
are all somehow collected under the signifier "Elizabeth Taylor." Each
over-the-shoulder glance, every pose, close-up, and gesture signifies in its
own way; and because the loose aggregate of these is somehow related
without being unified it is accurate to say that "Elizabeth Taylor"—the
molar Elizabeth Taylor—is not a person but a structure of signifiers. The
internal relations which determine the nature of that structure are of
course incoherent. Nevertheless, T's fusion of Margaret with Elizabeth
Taylor demonstrates that what I called in a previous chapter (page 144) the
foundational assumption of epistemic structuralism: epistemic structuralism
equates dissimilar phenomena based upon the assumption that structure is
the essence of the phenomena under consideration (Chapter 1, page 33). I
have suggested (Chapter 1, page 81 and Chapter 2, page 115) that this
assumption tends to hold whether or not such a structure is surveyable.
In fact, in most cases, this assumption holds up in the face of overwhelming organizational complexity—as it does, for instance, when we are confronted by vast systems like governmental bureaucracy, multi-national corporations, the relations of value among commodities, or, to cite the classic example, language itself. But at the level of libidinal activity with which we are here concerned, the assumption seems to hold up in the face of the fundamental, recalcitrant disorganization of part-objects, which themselves defy the very notion of structure. Once again, the "structural assumption" holds up here because the part-objects are collected under a proper name. It doesn’t matter that in no sense—no sense available to those who experience her through mass media—is Elizabeth Taylor a whole person; the fact that her name signifies the various elements within her structure of signifiers authorizes the assumption that those signifiers are structural elements and hence are exchangeable with other elements, like the Margaret part-objects.

Therefore the "significance" of the sign-structure Elizabeth Taylor is not that her body mediates the part-objects of desiring-production, gloriously reopening the lines of schizophrenic escape from the capitalist social order, but that its mediation reduces desiring-production to structuralism’s principle of exchange. In fusing his wife’s body with Elizabeth Taylor, T has produced one of the elliptical significations I spoke of earlier when I said that such significations are what most clearly characterize the over-cathected world of The Atrocity Exhibition. It is an act which also reveals why T must inevitably lose the World War of his

5Deleuze and Guattari refer to such disorganization as the reverse side of structure, and attribute its discovery to Lacan.
inner landscape: he has reached the limit of socially acceptable desiring-production—undeniably a milestone, one that *The Atrocity Exhibition* will celebrate again and again in several obsessive variations on this theme—only to find that the limit has already been internalized, brought into the realm of capitalist production. The conjunctive syntheses by which T finds a tolerable space for his dissociated psyche, a space of libidinal calm by projection into the exploding madonna, is already a creation of the forces he opposes. The libido has been structuralized.

And as I have said, where the principle of structuralization holds, structure is taken to be essential. That is why T, for whom reality is primarily the reality of his desires (and in this he is not really different from anyone else), doesn't merely think structure, he desires in terms of structure; and those structuralized desires, the libidinal geometries about which he obsesses, constitute the fundamental reality of his world. Once again, Dr. Nathan puts his finger directly, if insufficiently, on the nature of T's psycho-erotic reality:

"Talbert has accepted in absolute terms the logic of the sexual union. For him all junctions, whether of our own soft biologies or the hard geometries of these walls and ceilings, are equivalent to one another" (56).

But the "logic of the sexual union" Dr. Nathan privileges is the logic of whole bodies. Nathan's bias enables him to treat T's obsession for machinic desiring-production as an extrapolation of such logic; however the fact of the matter, born out by the actions and events of the novel, is the reverse, so that the conjunction of whole bodies is a reduction of the primary logic of desiring-production. That is why, for instance, T is uninterested in sex
with Catherine Austin. Her body is for him "an obscene masturbatory appliance," whereas

The concrete landscape of underpass and overpass mediated a more real presence, the geometry of a neural interval, the identity latent within his own musculature. (19)

Certainly the geometric patterns of highway cloverleafs suggests the body's neurology, especially in that they channel flows of traffic, like neural impulses, from region to region. They constitute for T a "more real presence" than does the body of a person standing naked before him because of his extreme sensitivity to the social construction of his unconscious. T is hyperaware not just of his CNS but of it as a configuration, and this fact is an index of his capitulation to epistemic structuralism. It is also why his rebellion ultimately collapses into an eroticization of the social machinery. For the complex highway junctions which represent his CNS are among the closest possible physical embodiments of pure structure available to everyday observation. In them the relations among their elements, the off- and on-ramps which compose them, determine their meaning absolutely. Like buildings under construction, they are pure relationships realized in steel and concrete; except that unlike buildings under construction, they do not present themselves as an infrastructure but as completed objects. They are, for the thoroughly structuralized libido, objects of enormous psycho-erotic significance.

During a rare communicative moment in Chapter 7 ("The Summer Cannibals"), T himself explains the consequences of this structuralization of desiring-production:
... it's an interesting question—in what way is intercourse per vagina more stimulating than with this ashtray, say, or with the angle between two walls? Sex is now a conceptual act, it's probably only in terms of the perversions that we can make contact with each other at all. The perversions are completely neutral, cut off from any suggestion of psychopathology—in fact, most of the ones I've tried are out of date. We need to invent a series of imaginary sexual perversions just to keep the activity alive.... (61-63)

Of course, sex has always been a conceptual act in the sense that sexual partners become symbolic substitutes for parental figures, themselves "conceptualized" as whole objects whose value is ascertained in relation to the Phallus as arch-signifier. In fact the only sense in which sex is not a conceptual act is on the level of insensate desiring-production toward which T seems to strive; but as I have tried to show, even that level has been co-opted by the complex gesture of capitalism which simultaneously deterritorializes and reterritorializes desiring-production. In spite of his affirmation of non-genital sex, T perhaps inadvertently discloses the futility of his liberation efforts when he insists that "We need to invent a series of imaginary sexual perversions just to keep the activity alive." In the first place, as I have said, any structuralization of desiring-production is already both perverse and imaginary: the activities of the unconscious are equated to a set of relations which thereby represent them and give them the kind of theatrical "more real presence" T seeks in the massive structures around him; then, by virtue of the principle of structuration which authorized the representation in the first place, desire becomes its image, so that highway geometries, multi-story parking garages, and the conjunctive angles of floor and ceiling assume an erotic dimension. In the second place, each invention, each "imaginary perversion" intended to escape or exceed the boundaries of socially acceptable desiring-production
will necessitate subsequent inventions as desire gets displaced back into capitalism's interior.

The way this degradation of desire comes about is shown most clearly in the second chapter of *The Atrocity Exhibition*. "The University of Death." There T is again obsessed with World War III, but this time as a lecturer who encourages his seminar students to devise a scenario involving the optimal casualty victim of such a war. The object is for them to construct an "alternate death," or death made meaningful, by reference to some cultural object or phenomenon which functions as a desiring machine. The students turn the tables on T and construct their model using their instructor, mounting fragments of his image on huge billboards. 6 One student in particular, Koester, makes the connection T is looking for by fixating on the erotic dimension of the fatal car crash, the contemporary analog of the Crucifixion in its ability to represent desiring-production in postmodern terms. T outflanks Koester, however, by fusing Koester's desiring-machine with another, equally provocative desiring machine—the assassination of President Kennedy, which is "the first conceptual car crash" (25). In the chapter's climax, T restages JFK's assassination on a triangular automobile crash-test track which retains in T's mind the structure of Dealey Plaza. The collision he stages is the structural equivalent of sexual intercourse (here expressed in its most literal sense of running together) which, like the fusion of Margaret Travis and Elizabeth Taylor in Chapter One, releases a great deal of libidinal energy. The sexual

6A psychotic rendering of what generally goes on in seminars, by the way. Instead of billboards, however, students generally use the more modest essay format.
congress of the two cars mirrors and amplifies the sexual congress of their passengers' hurtling body parts:

The dismembered bodies of Karen Novotny and himself moved across the morning landscape, re-created in a hundred crashing cars, in the perspectives of a thousand concrete embankments, in the sexual postures of a million lovers. (28) As in the first chapter, the dismemberment may be a delusion—in this case it is probable that what the narrator describes is T's projection onto test-crash dummies. After staging the sex-crash-JFK structural transposition, T lapses into a post-coital calm as the chapter comes to a close. He is somehow made whole again, which on one plane suggests that his dismemberment was actually the vicariously experienced shattering of a test-crash dummy, and on the other suggests, as do most of the mimetic contradictions in The Atrocity Exhibition, that the dismemberment, delusional or not, was nevertheless intensely real. In any case, it is obvious that in this chapter T once again seems intent upon transgressing the bounds of socialized sexuality in that the dismemberment, whether real or imagined, represents the apotheosis of his and Karen's schizophrenized bodies, their sundering into part-objects for desiring-production. Yet the sexual union he achieves is not itself an act of desiring-production but a conceptual act, made meaningful through its structural analogy to automobile collisions. The structuralization is complex, for in an additional semiotic overlay, JFK's assassination is reconstructed in terms of its psycho-erotic dimension: its own structural transposition as a car crash entails a secondary structural transposition into the sexual act. By virtue of their structural analogues in each other and through the car-crash mediating structure, the elements of both sex and the Kennedy assassination
inform and reinforce one another. This sexual climax is also conceptual (rather than productive) in another sense: it gains exchange value by virtue of its correlation with events both generically and historically distant--a hundred other car crashes, a thousand different highway geometries (Dealey Plazas?), a million other sexual postures. The psycho-erotic "value" of T's structuralized sex act is precisely its exchangeability with all of its structural cognates. Exchangeability is the foundation of the act's potential for erotic stimulation, then, which begins to explain why T insists we keep inventing new imaginary perversions like the erotic car crash: the exchange value which constitutes a perversion's use value simultaneously degrades that use value, making the perversion quickly go out of fashion and thereby, with the concomitant drop of the exchange value which conditioned its use value in the first place, fail to stimulate. This curve is identical to the non-linear relationships involved in factors which cause the rise and fall of interest rates as described by chaos theory; indeed, in a not-too-distant sense--since we are after all dealing with libidinal economy--it is a curve of rising and falling interest rates.

I have called Chapter One paradigmatic, by which I meant that what is at stake in its conflict, the possibility of schizophrenic breakthrough, is repeated in several chapters to come. Chapter Two certainly suggests this repetition, but it also betrays an important departure from the terms in which this conflict is played out. As in the first chapter, the violence of T's sexual climax is strangely narrated, so that it is both compelling and repelling, disturbingly poetic; and though he has once again eluded Dr. Nathan and Capt. Webster, the intimation that he has nevertheless only resubmitted his libidinal energies to the social structures of capitalism is
stronger. This is because the structuralization of phenomena is much plainer and the structures more orderly in the second chapter than in the first, where the relations among the Elizabeth Taylor part-objects was far less coherent. This change implies that Chapter Two inaugurates a crucial complication in The Atrocity Exhibition's action. Koestler's fixation on the erotic car crash (as erotic Crucifixion allegory) brings to the fore what is only hinted at in Chapter One's Elizabeth Taylor fusion, that is, the possibility for a kind of desiring-production which is opposed to a schizorevolutionary subversion of the capitalist episteme. As I mentioned on page 181, Deleuze and Guattari call this opposite mode of desiring-production and social investment the "paranoid-fascist" pole. It

inves the formation of central sovereignty; overinvests it by making it the final eternal cause for all the other social forms of history; counterinvests the enclaves or the periphery; and disinvests every free 'figure' of desire--yes, I am your kind, and I belong to the superior race and class. (277)

Koester's centralization of the car crash, and its investment with signifying power equal to the Crucifixion, strongly suggests this paranoid-fascist type of social investment. We have already seen that the sign-structure Elizabeth Taylor, through its categorical ambiguity, its self-contradictory status as both a molecular and a molar aggregate, contained the seeds for T's relapse into reterritorialized desire. But Koester's "lesson"--for as Dr. Nathan correctly points out, at The University of Death the students teach their instructor--is the full potential such a relapse offers. He shows T that fully integrated structural wholes like the car crash and the Crucifixion hold greater possibilities for constructing desiring-machines--desiring-machines that mean because they are based upon a high degree of consensus, that is, upon what epistemologically competent members of
society are prepared to recognize. As Deleuze and Guattari characterize such desiring-production, the paranoid-fascist "makes us spectators to the imaginary birth of the mass phenomenon, and does so at a level that is still microscopic" (281). Hence the extraordinary condensations of historical events, like the Kennedy assassination, into microcosms involving their barest structural elements. As I said above, T will oscillate between the two types of social investment, schizorevolutionary and paranoid-fascist, at times combining them as he does in Chapter 2.

However, in Chapter Three, "The Assassination Weapon," T swings unambiguously over to the paranoid-fascist position. T again is obsessed by the notion of fighting World War III (32), and once again he tries to restage Kennedy's assassination "in a way that makes sense" (36); but this time, instead of using an automobile collision, he assembles his assassination weapon from objects implying the narrative structure of the bombing of Hiroshima. They include: an electroencephalogram of Einstein, documentation from the flight of the Enola Gay, a "spectroheliogram of the sun," and apparently to indicate aftermath, a "photograph taken at noon, August 7th, 1945, of the sand-sea, Qattara Depression" (34). This narrative is, like Elizabeth Taylor and the test-crash track before it, a structure of signifiers: thermonuclear energy, which has already been associated with libidinal energy in Chapter One, is now also associated with a complex of historical and cultural elements—elements signifying desire (theory), technology, heroism, aggressivity, paranoia, and racism—broadened into a
structure capable of displacing the car crash as signifier of the psycho-
erotic dimension of Kennedy’s death. 7

In this chapter T is apparently an escaped mental patient, a former
H-bomber pilot whose obsession with thermonuclear weapons is, according to
Dr. Nathan, due to a "perpetual and irresistible desire to merge with the
object in an undifferentiated mass." Because the best psychoanalysis can
do in such situations is to "guid[e] the patient towards the choice of stable
and worthwhile objects," Dr. Nathan decides to use his assistant, Nurse
Nagamatsu, as such an object choice. Dr. Nathan’s diagnosis is similar to
the one he gave in Chapter One, but this time he is in some respects right
about the significance of thermonuclear weapons, since in this paranoid-
fascist phase of his psychosis T is tormented by the self-dispersions and
the fragmentation of his existence which formerly comforted him. For
instance, T joins one of the "municipal disposal teams" which collect and
destroy the fragments of four-hundred-foot-high celebrity billboards which
litter the streets (of his mind). He builds a mirror-box for trapping time
and climbs into it. And he attempts to integrate his own psyche by
undergoing a set of psychological tests (33). In sum, whereas he was
formerly comforted by dispersal, now he is preoccupied with eliminating the
fragmentation around him and with fusing whole objects and fixing them in
perpetuity. As Capt. Webster describes him, "he’s trying to build bridges

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7I’m speaking as though this displacement were literally a
development within The Atrocity Exhibition’s plot, but it isn’t; as I have
said, the events of subsequent chapters have nothing to do with earlier
events, and even structural repetitions occur "for the first time" within the
psychotically ordered mimesis of the narrative. On the other hand, the
reader, who is presumably rational, will relate these effaced events to one
another on some level, though, as is obvious, it is not a level which lends
itself easily to explication.
between things . . . ." (36). Therefore once again, but for different reasons, the last thing T needs is one of Dr. Nathan's "stable and worthwhile" whole objects. By using Nurse Nagamatsu as bait, Dr. Nathan inadvertently provides precisely the structural condensation of the JFK assassination and Hiroshima that T requires: after fitting Nagamatsu with a Jackie Kennedy wig, T shoots her to death.

Clearly, the fusion of the assassination and Hiroshima, and their condensation into a single whole object, is the sort of "mass phenomenon enacted on a microscopic level" which is characteristic of paranoid-fascist desiring-production: T restages two complex historical events in a way that signifies both locally (for T) and with clear structural relations to their greater social significance. In his marginal commentary, Ballard sheds some light on T's need to rewrite history: "The mass media created the Kennedy we know, and his death represented a tectonic shift in the communications landscape, sending fissures deep into the popular psyche that have not yet closed" (34). Kennedy was a media icon, like Elizabeth Taylor, presenting itself for symbolic investment. In terms of structuring the national identity, his psycho-sexual function was such that he was indissociable from his wife: as a political figure, he required Jackie (the media-image object choice of a media-image object choice) to form a binary structural relation capable, for the first time in U.S. history, of signifying a national identity that was simultaneously political and overtly sexualized. This is why Kennedy's death, and especially Jackie's surviving him, was at the very least a psycho-sexual anomaly, rupturing the structure of one of our central molar desiring-machines. In the reality of T's associative processes--not after all very far removed from our own, judging from the
innumerable tabloid articles claiming that JFK is still alive—Kenedy's assassination was an impossible event that needed to be brought back into line with the laws which determine that associative reality. Since a certain political Eros put JFK in the White House, only an equally monumental political Thanatos would have been capable of removing him from it and dissolving his marriage.

The most appropriate historical example of the latter would be the bombing of Hiroshima. Though it was not history's largest racially motivated hate crime, Hiroshima certainly captures the imagination by virtue of its sheer efficiency (corpse for corpse, the Holocaust was incomparably labor-intensive). There are so few working parts to this desiring-machine that it easily takes on the appearance of a Wish-Fulfillment—and this accounts for its fascination. As such, the bombing of Hiroshima offers T the perfect assassination weapon: the death instinct come home to roost, disestablishing the Kennedys as our eroticized imago.

T's fusion of JFK's assassination and Hiroshima betrays the operation of epistemic structuralism in a way that is much less ambiguous than in previous chapters, dealing as it does exclusively with molar aggregates whose internal structural relations are orderly. T has chosen only two signifiers, the Jackie wig and the "Japanese cast" of Nurse Nagamatsu's features, to import the innumerable structural relations within their respective historical episodes. The rest of the elements of Kennedy's assassination—not just the relation of Jackie to JFK, but all the elements included in Chapter Two, like the positioning of Secret Service Agent Greer, the geometry of Dealey Plaza, the sequence of frames in Abraham Zapruder's film, etc.—are metonymically imported into this condensation, as are, on the
other side, the political and historical elements of the Hiroshima bombing—desire, technology, racism, etc.

Thus two grand historical structures, two desiring-machines with important psycho-erotic representative functions, are fused together in an elliptical signification meant to represent the actions of the unconscious and thereby recode or reterritorialize those actions in accordance with an overall structuralist sense of the way the historical formations are ordered. Defining structure as "a set of relations among elements shaped by a historical situation," John Carlos Rowe infers that "Properly understood . . . no structure could be totalized or understood in its entirety or essence" because "Changes in history, the elements, and/or their relations would change the explanatory structure required as well" (25). Therefore T's reductive exploitation of historical structures would not be theoretically well grounded, if anything as rigorous as theory were at issue here. But once again, what is important is the assumption that historical events are structurally ordered, and as I have argued (page 34), in epistemic structuralism whatever cannot be accounted for or reconciled to the assumed structural whole is simply disregarded. Therefore it isn't important that T has no coherent understanding of an orderly structural whole; what is important here is the way T is resolving problems of anxiety and aggressivity by engineering an elaborate segregative conjunctive synthesis in terms of assumed whole objects (historical events) which can be manipulated symbolically and efficiently, and which have a capacity for social signification only available at the paranoid-fascist pole of psychic organization.
This capitulation to epistemic structuralism, though it is already present in Chapter One, is the strongest indication yet that T is losing World War III. The chapters that follow trace an uneven path along this trajectory. In Chapter 5, "Notes Toward a Mental Breakdown," T tries to rescue the three Apollo astronauts killed in a 1967 launching-pad fire by fusing their deaths with sexual intercourse, the JFK assassination, "the mutilated figure of Ralph Nader," and automobile test-crashes. In Chapter 6, "The Great American Nude," T attempts to reconcile the fragments of Elizabeth Taylor into an enormous geometric figure. And in Chapter 8, "Tolerances of the human face, T and Vaughan—yet another aspect of T's disintegrated psyche—together plan a sensual re-enactment of the death of T's wife. Throughout the chapter, T searches for an appropriate formula for fusing her death, his erotic desires, and the daily newsreels of atrocities from the Vietnam War. The formula he discovers is the structure of a multi-story parking garage, where Vaughan, representing the erotic-aggressive content of the newsreels, murders Margaret's stand-in, Karen Novotny, while the event is filmed by Koester as part of a scientific documentary on psychosis. And so the self-intensifying cycle of media-structured perversions continues: presumably, the finished documentary will be shown to the same sophisticated audiences, described throughout the chapter, who attend screenings of war footage, fake newsreels, diseased genitalia, auto disasters and plane crashes. These audiences are none other than ourselves, who excuse a lurid fascination with such entertainments as "the need to keep up with current events" and "scientific curiosity."

In each of these chapters T betrays a marked tendency toward paranoid-fascist desiring-production, as the molar organization of his object
choices indicate. All of these investments are socially derived, as of course they must be, but the significant thing is the way T increasingly chooses whole objects, or complexes of whole objects, from his social environment, fusing them with other whole objects or complexes to signify the actions of his unconscious "illegitimately," that is, in a way that reterritorializes and represses the schizorevolutionary tendencies of his libidinal drives. In this way T ultimately eroticizes the structuralized landscape against which he had originally attempted to rebel.

The apotheosis of paranoid-fascist tendencies comes in Chapter 9, "You and Me and the Continuum," in which T develops the several parallels, hinted at in earlier chapters, between his delirium and the passion of Jesus Christ into a structuralization of his life in terms of the narrative elements of Christ's. In this "botched second coming," as Dr. Nathan describes it, key events from the New Testament are fused with contemporary codes and structures as T tries "to put himself together out of some bizarre jigsaw" (81). T-Christ appears as a visitor from the constellation Vega who performs a variety of "miracles" which are obvious cognates with the structure of Christ's life—raising the Unknown Soldier from the dead, using his central nervous system to disrupt television transmissions. The preoccupations of his ministry are themes familiar from other chapters: "the plasticity of visual forms, the image maze, the catatonic plateau, the need to re-score the central nervous system, pre-uterine claims, the absurd—i.e., the phenomenology of the universe" (84). And once again he eludes the authorities who, despite some very insightful guesses, fail finally to come to grips with either his psychological state or the nature of its investments.
His disciples are a crowd of onlookers who see him as a rock star or a freak. Taking the cue from their fascination with the stigmata on his chest, hands and feet, T delivers a parable entitled "Ontologically Speaking." It takes the form of a description, luridly poetic, of an automobile test-crash in which "the plastic models transcribed graceful arcs into the buckling roofs and windshields. Here and there a passing fender severed a torso, the air behind the cars was a carnival of arms and legs" (84). The "Kingdom of Heaven" in this parable is the extreme schizophrenic dispersal of the body into parts which no longer contribute to an integrated whole. If this parable symbolizes a state of grace which is by now lost forever to T—that is, the schizorevolutionary pole of desiring-production which had once been his fond dream—it also symbolizes the ironic outcome of the chapter: completely absorbed into the social structures against which he has been rebelling, T is ultimately dispersed across their formations as a nonsemble like Elizabeth Taylor, a would-be whole person whose very constitution through dissociated signs and structures forbids the desired integration. T is thus resurrected into the false heaven of non-entity which is the final destination of paranoid-fascist desiring-production:

"As his own identity faded, its last fragments shimmered across the darkening landscape, lost integers in a hundred computer codes, sand-grains on a thousand beaches. fillings in a million mouths" (87).

The comic progression from "lost integers" to dental work in this Götterdämmerung of the post-industrial subject is telling: as the "fillings in a million mouths," T has become the unassimilable sum of the signifiers, the perversions, molar aggregates, geometric abstractions, and narrative
structures which were to represent the activities of his disordered unconscious. Like the exploding "madonna of the billboards" in Chapter One, who presides over her own media disintegration, and like the Apollo astronauts in Chapter 5, who are "diffused across the launching grounds, recreated in the leg stances of a hundred starlets." T himself is finally dispersed into the landscape which is both an extension of his desires and a construction of capitalism.

That is why in the remaining chapters T appears only in paragraph headings, his narrative broken into fragments interpolated by texts of fictitious marketing studies and obscene scientific research projects. Of these perhaps two are most interesting, "Love and Napalm: Export U.S.A." (Chapter 11) and "Why I want to Fuck Ronald Reagan" (Chapter 14). In each the complete text of what remains of T's narrative is easily reconstructed by concatenating the paragraph headings. For instance, the reconstruction of "Love and Napalm" reads:

At night, these visions of helicopters and the D.M.Z./
fused in Traven's mind with the spectre/
of his daughter's body. The lantern of her face/
hung among the corridors of sleep./
Warning him, she summoned to her side/
all the legions of the bereaved./
By day the overflights of B-52s/
crossed the drowned causeways of the delta.
unique ciphers of violence and desire. (93-95)

The narrative fragments indicate the phenomenal side of T's psychotic process—in the above, for instance, the displacement of incestuous desire
by investment in the structural elements (B-52s, the Mekong Delta, etc.) of the Vietnam War. In between these fragments, however, comes the fully articulated agenda of the social forces to which T has capitulated. These intertexts are reports of studies in which disturbed children, cancer patients, psychotics, and housewives are shown footage of Vietnam atrocities. The purpose of these studies is to find which atrocities optimize sexual stimulation and work proficiency. The conclusion is perhaps the novel’s masterstroke:

These studies confirm that it is only in terms of a psychosexual module such as provided by the Vietnam war that the United States can enter into a relationship with the world generally characterized by the term "love." (95)

Just as Elizabeth Taylor simultaneously deterritorializes and reterritorializes desiring-production, the lurid prodigality of the information age, which lavishes us nightly with a parade of atrocities called the evening news, unleashes forbidden psycho-erotic flows and simultaneously recodes them with a political significance which brings them back into the realm desiring-production compatible with, not to say essential for, the established forms of social production. The Vietnam War becomes the signifier for the only relationship expanding capitalism can have with the rest of the world, one in which the aggressive requirements of expansion are fused with a maudlin tenderness for the role of the other in providing the object of domination.

In "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan," the narrative reconstruction reads:

During these assassination fantasies/
Tallis became increasingly obsessed/
with the pudenda of the Presidential contender/
mediated to him by a thousand television screens./
The motion picture studies of Ronald Reagan/
created a scenario of the conceptual orgasm.
a unique ontology of violence and disaster. (105-107)

Here T finds himself unaccountably fascinated by the way Reagan's media-generated image suggests what he takes to be female genitalia. The intertexts reveal the forces at work behind T's obsession, a marketing research study which finds that "Powerful erotic fantasies of an anal-sadistic character surrounded the image of the Presidential contender" (105). The suggestion is that inasmuch as Reagan's face operates as a condensed symbol for anal-sadistic tendencies, his popularity was a function of the appeal of that symbol, not vice versa—Reagan was expressly marketed on the basis of that appeal. Insofar as Freud derived his well-known correlation between feces and money from anal-sadistic tendencies, it is no coincidence that the "Reagan years" were the scene of obsessive money-making schemes; indeed, Reagan's anal-erotic image appears to have authorized a structure of values expressed by the insider trading, junk bonds, leveraged buyouts and savings & loan scandals which characterized his term of office. T's "unconscious" sexual response to what is clearly a cultural code with widespread recognition is a further indication of his dispersal into the media structures which shape and condition his libidinal activity.

8At the time The Atrocity Exhibition was written, Reagan was still Governor of California. Granting Ballard's psycho-erotic explication of Reagan's appeal even partially makes Reagan's subsequent election to the Presidency as disturbing, for what it says about social psychology of our country, as it is funny; and Reagan's well-publicized bouts with colo-rectal cancer (which were deemed heroic during the unprecedented media coverage, itself deemed a "public service") are positively scary.
The Atrocity Exhibition ends in a pessimism which is only partially mitigated by the burlesque of the final chapter, "The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race," from which T is altogether absent. T has lost his inner World War because of his ultimate failure to rebel against the network of social constructs which (de)form his psyche. The implication is that epistemic structuralism, even when submitted to the revolutionary potential of molecular desiring-production, is likely to win out by virtue of its ability to infiltrate even the atomized world of part-objects. We saw, for instance, that while the mass mediation of Elizabeth Taylor entailed a fragmentation of her body into various part-objects available for forming desiring-machines, the structuralist assumption nonetheless accompanied that fragmentation and, in a manner of speaking, overruled its disruptive potential. In any case, we are more than likely to capitulate to paranoid-fascist pole of desiring-production by virtue of the greater structuralizing opportunities it presents. Of course, we rarely capitulate by becoming psychotic; rather, we capitulate daily by investing in the group fantasies which offer us socially sanctioned identification-structures—group fantasies like community spirit, patriotism, ethnic pride, gay pride, feminism, and the other fascisizing mechanisms which provide a sense of identity derived from the group.

Colin Greenland comments on the relation of Ballard’s novel to our own paranoid-fascist mode of organizing reality:

As Ballard shows, paranoia makes sense of urban chaos; on the other hand, the sense it makes is completely paranoid. Readers who can cope with the paradox by emulating Ballard’s ironic entertainment of unacceptable ideas are thereby forcibly detached from the landscape of signs. This disenchantment is
conducive to demystification and enlightenment, and at least a step towards freedom of understanding and choice in the world we have made. (120)

But as I have shown, there is no way to detach ourselves from the "landscape of signs" which does not immediately resituate us in that landscape, for the emulation of every one of Ballard's "unacceptable ideas" is itself a perverse representation of our most schizorevolutionary impulses. Rather, the subversive value of *The Atrocity Exhibition* lies with the way it stages the *possibility* of breaking through the snares of epistemic structuralism. As I have said, at the beginning of every chapter T stands poised between the two poles of psychic organization, the schizorevolutionary and the paranoid-fascist. Even if both poles are ultimately informed by the principles of structuration against which T would like to rebel, T's moment of poise is nevertheless his—and our—moment of possibility. According to my reading, T never does attain the "moral and just psychopathology" Ballard calls for, but Ballard's illumination of the *terms* for such a breakthrough makes this novel a valuable handbook for waging our own internal battles against the *episteme*. The terms for resistance and even breakthrough emerge in three different ways, and as we shall see, the chief of these is the quality of movement within Ballard's imagery, a quality which helps to keep our moment of possibility alive.

The first is a function of the psychotic organization of the narrative. Through it Ballard draws our attention to our own structuralist commitments unmistakably. As I have pointed out, each chapter is an obsessive variation on the theme of rebellion against the socio-economic order. The very act of seeing the structural relations which determine these variations, as opposed to seeing nothing but the psychotic dispersal in which each
chapter is presented, implicates us in this socio-economic order by demanding that we become conscious of the structuralizing operation by which we make sense of the novel. Even the relatively innocent assumption that the variety of characters Travis, Talbot, Traven, etc., correspond to a single entity\(^9\) implies the central principle of exchange which characterizes structuralism: in a discontinuous series of narrative constructions (the chapters of *The Atrocity Exhibition*) endowed with some elements of situational continuity, the central discontinuities (Travis, Talbert, etc.) are equated with one another *in spite of* the large number of incompatible structural elements (the nightmarish variations and impossible recurrences) which ought to prohibit such an equation. Far from prohibiting structuralization, those incompatible structural elements authorize the even more radically structuralist inference that the several chapters of *The Atrocity Exhibition* are not a series of events extended in time but a series of permutations. I submit that neither of these inferences is unusual for a reader to make and that the reader's awareness of his tendency to make them is a function of the radical distribution of the tension between sanity and psychosis in the novel. This tension is, in the final analysis, the tension between structure and desire.

The second revelation of the terms of our struggle is similar to the first in that it also calls attention to our structuralist commitments, only now at the level of individual narrative events. It concerns the affective power of T's many elliptical significations. However bizarre we may find T's eroticization of the media landscape, it is inescapable that much of it

\(^9\)An assumption shared, incidentally, not just by several critics but by Ballard himself—see his marginal commentary on T's centrality, pp. 19 & 81."
corresponds to our own socially conditioned cathexes. To pick what may appear one of the stranger examples, T's preoccupation with the erotic signifying power of car crashes and test-crash dummies is hardly idiosyncratic. As if destruction derbies, tractor pulls, and the news reports of weekend holiday fatalities were not sufficient index, the Tyco Corporation is now marketing a line of "Crash Dummies" toys, featuring a pair of plastic figurines with spring-loaded arms, legs and heads that fly apart upon impact. The figurines are fitted into a variety of breakaway model cars for staging collisions. (Peripheral items, like the specially constructed "roof-shear" bar for staging decapitation crashes, are also available.) Each package displays a few palliative words about the toys' instructional value ("Learn the importance of always wearing your seatbelt"), but the emphasis is on what the manufacturer calls the toys' "creative"--read: erotic--possibilities.

Other examples abound: T's erotic fixation on high-rise architecture and structures like parking garages or highway overpasses surely mirrors, albeit in an aggravate form, our own mixture of fascination and terror when confronting such contemporary monuments. Through the sheer obsessive redundancy with which these objects appear, The Atrocity Exhibition extracts a measure of frankness from us about the psycho-sexual source of what we would like to think of as our aesthetic sensibilities. Colin Greenland describes the Dr. Stangelove element of Ballard's preoccupation with atomic weaponry:

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10 The preoccupation is clearly Ballard's as well. At the time of The Atrocity Exhibition's publication, Ballard actually organized an exhibition of crashed cars (London, 1969), paralleling Koester's fictional exhibition in Chapter 2.
[Ballard] perceives clearly man's complicity with this catastrophe of his own making. While it seems a dreadful mistake and fills his conscious mind with horror, it is also the ultimate tool, the end product of his technological drive. Man now has absolute power over his own existence: the power of uncreation. The moral rectitude of the protest poets sometimes seemed curiously at odds with a certain relish for denunciation, as if they enjoyed having a Bomb to vilify. Ballard offers his psychoanalysis: destruction was what man wanted, unconsciously, all along. (111)

And as I have argued, the erotic power and significance of media icons like Elizabeth Taylor and John F. Kennedy is delivered to our consciousness fully explicated (even if that of Ronald Reagan does not). It is of course possible, even likely, that readers will resist The Atrocity Exhibition's call to personal honesty; but even the least susceptible reader will find himself implicated in its erotic equations to some degree.

At any rate, there is more involved here than matters of personal honesty. As I have argued, the elliptical significations in The Atrocity Exhibition betray the transpositional operations of epistemic structuralism, at both the schizorevolutionary and paranoid-fascist poles of psychic organization. At first bizarre fusions, like the assassination of JFK to the bombing of Hiroshima, imply the localized psychosis of the novel's hero; but the undeniably generalized function of the signifiers involved, and especially their interrelatedness within a cultural structure or langue which is constitutionally interpersonal, make it impossible to dismiss their potential for broader signification. In short, it is the nature of cultural objects, however oddly conjoined, to mean, and no reader is in a position to ignore that nature entirely. This is precisely the claim deconstructionists have made for texts, of course. According to that claim, most of the difficulty, if not the discomfort, of reading a novel like The Atrocity Exhibition derives from the nagging presumption that its bizarre
equations must signify because they are textual elements. Yet at the register of complex cultural codes like the historical events and celebrity icons obsessively featured in *The Atrocity Exhibition* this nagging presumption is even more compelling, since it makes it difficult to detach from these codes the sense in which they signify *for us* as well within the terms of the text. Whether or not the reader sees this nagging presumption as an explicitly *structuralist* move is not essential, for as I have argued epistemic structuralism doesn’t announce itself as a formally articulated methodology but as a mute background of tendencies; what is essential is that elements of *The Atrocity Exhibition*’s system of signification call these tendencies into question.

The third revelation of the terms of our struggle entails an entirely different use of the same sorts of cultural codes, a use that liberates them from our tendency to organize structurally. The narration of *The Atrocity Exhibition* is packed with dense, surrealistic metaphors which entail the kind of radical desiring-production that eludes T throughout the novel. In the previous chapter (page 149) I argued that the epistemological opposition between structuralism and metaphor is basic, the former relying upon an assumption of essential structural equivalence between objects and the latter a product of an intuitive poetic desire which links objects it takes to be essentially different. When Ballard’s narrator says that "The hyoid bone in [Karen Novotny’s] throat fluttered as if discharging some subvocal rosary" (31), the comparison is charged with a provisionality and an intuitive imprecision that are lacking in, for example, T’s reconstruction of the JFK motorcade as a model for the sex act or his structural reduction of Karen Novotny’s face to the geometric patterns in her apartment.
Here we have a parallel to *The Recognitions*’ articulation of an alternative to epistemic structuralism. In the last chapter I argued that in *The Recognitions* metaphor vitiates the epistemological alternative to epistemic structuralism that it articulates (page 153). This is because *The Recognitions* contextualizes metaphor as the supplement to the inarticulable ontology at the core of Wyatt Gwyon’s being; as such it can never be reconciled to that which it supplements. However, that problem doesn’t obtain in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, where there is no such private ontological core beneath or beyond the nexus of publicly authorized significations which structuralize the libido—there are only intensities, the affective states of desiring-production. In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, plainly, there is no self beyond the signs and codes which construct identity; even a private semiotic is socially constructed.

Ballard’s metaphors reveal an abiding admiration for surrealism. For instance, the comparison of a crash victim’s body placement to "some grotesque act of intercourse—Christ crucified on the sodomized body of his own mother" (26) is clearly reminiscent of Dali’s "Young Virgin Auto-Sodomized by Her Own Chastity." But even where allusiveness is not patent, the remoteness and density of Ballard’s imagery imply the dreamlike associations of what I referred to in the previous chapter (page 152), following Marcus Hester’s terminology, as "unbound" images. Hester claims that such images distract rather than inform the reader. But we might say, on the contrary, that such imagery informs by distracting, by taking us away from the controlled, territorialized knowledge patterns of administered capitalism. Surrealistic imagery, then, appeals to the unformulable sensibilities of molecular desiring-production by using signifiers available
from rational experience in irrational ways. We have seen that while leaning toward the pole of such unbounded images, Gaddis stops short of them. But Ballard doesn't hesitate. For instance, when T returns to the site of his wife's death in an auto accident some four years previous, the narrator compares the place to a "terminal moraine of the emotions that held its debris of memory and regret, like the rubbish in the pockets of a dead schoolboy he had examined" (70).

The extreme density and imagistic remoteness of surrealistic metaphor are instrumental in illuminating the terms of our struggle with epistemic structuralism. For instance, Ballard compares the human race to "Caliban asleep across a mirror smeared with vomit" (16). The associations multiply in such a formation: the human race appears as a recalcitrant creature of some benevolent but stern sorcerer (the symbolic order?), and the vomit recalls Caliban's dyspeptic reply to his master's demand for gratitude: "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse" (Tempest I.ii, 363-64). Thus the human race remains unconscious to the degraded regurgitations of its own gifts, which mask its image—an image like Caliban's, "savage and deformed" in any case?—in the mirror of culture. The associations succeed each other in a dynamic series of emotionally charged images, each adumbrating the previous in a movement which itself mimics what Ballard has called "the veronicas of our own perversions" (Crash 218).

This quality of movement is the key to articulating the terms of resistance to epistemic structuralism. It is also the key to escaping the trap in which T is caught at the end of The Atrocity Exhibition. Having argued that the unconscious is an activity, not a stable entity, that it is
thoroughly socialized and is dependent upon the signs and images it appropriates during desiring-production, Deleuze and Guattari admit that

... there is no deterritorialization of the flows of schizophrenic desire that is not accompanied by global or local reterritorializations, reterritorializations that always reconstitute shores of representation. What is more, the force and the obstinacy of a deterritorialization can only be evaluated through the types of reterritorialization that represent it; the one is the reverse of the other. (316)

Schizophrenia as process promises an escape from the territorializations of epistemic structuralism, but it must appropriate the terms of epistemic structuralism, the signs and codes which turn the unconscious into a theater, in order to do so. Every act of desiring-production flings the unconscious back into the social order against which it struggles, and thus

Schizophrenia as a process, deterritorialization as a process, is inseparable from the stages that interrupt it, or aggravate it, or make it turn in circles, and reterritorialize it into neurosis, perversion, and psychosis. To a point where the process cannot extricate itself, continue on, and reach fulfillment, except insofar as it is capable of creating—what exactly?—a new land. (322)

This "new land" is not a static extension in space. Rather, it is a Nietzschean dance; it is the activity itself, "the process of its tendency" to deterritorialize even as it must inevitably submit to further reterritorialization. As Jean-François Lyotard says, "To understand, to be intelligent, is not our overriding passion. We hope rather to be set in motion" (51). Ballard's surrealistic metaphors evoke this dynamic, with their quality of movement from association to association. Nothing could be further removed from the sterile landscapes through which T moves—landscapes filled with the static geometries and empty structures—than these metaphors. At the close of nearly every chapter, T settles back into
a catatonic "interval of neural calm" like the one described at the end of Chapter 3:

The Terminal Zone. He lay on the sand with the rusty bicycle wheel. Now and then he would cover some of the spokes with sand, neutralizing the radial geometry. The rim interested him. Hidden behind a dune, the hut no longer seemed a part of his world. The sky remained constant, the warm air touching the shreds of test papers sticking up from the sand. He continued to examine the wheel. Nothing happened. (37)

T is interested in the closed boundaries of the space created by the wheel rim, not in the dynamic radiation of its spokes. He has ensconced himself in a state of mind categorically opposed to schizophrenic desiring-production, which is why nothing more can happen. Contrarily, Ballard’s metaphors set us in motion along their shifting contours. True, as so many "veronicas of our own perversions," these metaphors reinstall us into a theater of perverse representations; but the essential thing about each is the veronica—the gyration away from our habitual, rational, structuralizing tendencies.
Chapter IV

"How Long Do We Have to Stay There?"
Inhabiting Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*

It is no accident that Marx should have begun with an analysis of commodities when, in the two great works of his mature period, he set out to portray capitalist society in its totality and to lay bare its fundamental nature. For at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of commodity—structure.

--Georg Lukács

The denial of death is the deepest subtext at work in the anesthetization that structures everyday life.

--Walter Davis

If violent movements manage to rescue a being from profound boredom, it is because they can lead—through some obscure error—to a ghastly satiating ugliness.

--Georges Bataille
When J. G. Ballard, following Conrad, enjoined us to "immerse ourselves in our most destructive element, ourselves, and swim" so as to attain a "moral and just psychopathology," he counted on our being repulsed in a way that would force us to recognize the monstrosities of our perversions, those scenic representations of desire as it is mediated by mass culture and shaped by the unarticulated principles of epistemic structuralism. Accordingly, Ballard's subversive exposition of epistemic structuralism in *The Atrocity Exhibition* took the form of an aggressive narrative presentation of significant scenes and objects drawn from the collective obsessions of mass culture. Ballard's text shows how these scenes and objects are related to each other structurally through equations and transpositions based upon an unspoken assumption that, as signifiers for and through each other, they can also signify the desiring-activity of the unconscious. The grotesque structuralizations at times seemed to extend the promise of schizophrenic liberation from the formations that contain or, as Deleuze and Guattari call it, "territorialize" desire and control behavior in terms of what is socially acceptable and economically necessary; but as we saw in the previous chapter, desiring-production constructed along these lines more often lapsed back into the capitalist territorializations which it attempted to transcend. These failures, the failures of Ballard's schizophrenic hero T (Travis, Traven, etc.), at least produced, and exhibited to our repulsed sensibilities, the spectacle of successive mass perversions elaborated on a microscopic scale: the re-enactment of Kennedy's assassination "in a way that makes sense," the construction of a gigantic sexual appliance modeled after the schizophrenized body of Elizabeth Taylor, or the eroticization of the Vietnam War.
Ballard's exposition effectively answers what Deleuze and Guattari posit as the foundational questions of schizoanalysis: "What are your desiring-machines, what do you put into these machines, what is the output, how does it work, what are your nonhuman sexes?" (322). The repulsion which attends the answer is a most forceful recommendation that we undertake the perhaps impossible and at any rate ongoing task of reversing the way we ourselves maintain our social construction through our epistemic commitments. But as I pointed out earlier, there is a great deal of misogyny in Ballard's novel. I suggested in the last chapter that if capitalism is not actually an inherently misogynist system, its relations of production are certainly congenial to historical patterns of male domination. Feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon advocate disrupting these misogynist patterns by suppressing those cultural productions which, like pornography, depict the degradation of women as entertainment, or which, like Ballard's novel, treat it as a given, the backdrop against which other themes are played out. There is sound logic to recommend this policy, because, insofar as such productions go unchallenged, they reinforce and even validate assumptions about the status of women. Feminism correctly recognizes that no cultural productions are innocent, that they all have political implications, especially those with unexamined misogynistic overtones. One of feminism's aims, therefore, is to create an atmosphere in which misogynist literature is not tolerated.

There is however another way to disrupt capitalism's affiliation with misogyny, though admittedly, for all the reasons just cited, it is dangerous and perverse. That way would be to portray acts of misogyny which so exceed the canons of civilized behavior that there is no mistaking their
thematic relevance, even if they simultaneously engage the reader by eliciting a kind of disgusted fascination. Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, a novel about a Wall-Street investment counsellor who tortures, murders and cannibalizes women, takes this approach, which continues along the lines of Ballard's aesthetic of assault. Ellis's willingness to confront the repulsive is boundless, and because of its total disregard for decency his novel has been variously taken as an act of courage and of criminal irresponsibility.

*American Psycho* created a scandal prior to its publication by Vintage Books in 1991. The manuscript was originally under contract to Simon & Schuster, where women staff members began to object to working on the publication project. Advance reviewers were likewise repulsed, and Simon & Schuster withdrew publication on November 12, 1990; but four days later, Vintage Books bought the publication rights. In December—still four months prior to publication—Tammy Bruce, president of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Organization for Women, organized a boycott of the publisher. After publication in March 1991, Ellis received death threats, "including several with photographs of him in which his eyes have been poked out or an axe drawn through his face" (Cohen 18).

Post-publication critical reaction was nearly as hostile. Jonathan Yardley dismissed it as "sophomoric pornography" ("Shock Schlock" 2) and elsewhere called it "pure trash, as scummy and mean as anything it depicts: a dirty book by a dirty writer." ("Essence" 3). Caryn James said it is "both inept and pretentious, an exploitation book dressed up with an epigraph from Dostoyevsky and a title allusion to Hitchcock" (21). Pagan Kennedy denounced it on stylistic grounds: "There's no question it's
abysmally written . . . " (427). Pico Iyer claimed "it is painfully easy to see the damage such a book can do to the way in which men see, and therefore treat, women" (94). And Roger Rosenblatt, who "in the middle of some childish gruesomely gruesome description of torture or dismemberment" found himself "chuckling with revulsion," denounced it in absolute terms: "So pointless, so themeless, so everthingless is this novel, except in stupefying details about expensive clothing, food and bath products, that were it not the most loathsome offering of the season, it would certainly be the funniest" (3).

Other critics found the book offended their aesthetic sensibilities, which in many cases amounted to their right to be entertained. Joseph Coates complained that "In all the free publicity that attended [its publication], which invariably described stomach-turning scenes from the novel, no one bothered to mention the most startling fact about American Psycho, which is that it is a stupefying bore" (1). R. Z. Sheppard said that "Instead of a plot, there is a tapeworm narrative that makes it unnecessary to distinguish the beginning of the novel from its end" (100). Expanding upon this idea, Christopher Lehmann-Haupt invoked an aesthetic argument:

... Mr. Ellis's true offense is to imply that the human mind has grown so corrupt that it can no longer distinguish between form and content. He has proved himself mistaken in that assumption by writing a book whose very confusion of form and content has caused it to fail, and for that offense and no other does one have cause to excoriate American Psycho. (18)

But if there is any validity to my ideas about structuralism as episteme, it is in fact the case that we no longer distinguish between form and content (though I don't propose it is a matter of corruption; rather, it is an
appropriate response to the forces and relations of production that control our lives and, as Marx says, determine the nature of consciousness. See Chapter One). In that case, all we have to excoriate Ellis for is accuracy.

These complaints do not suggest that critics were missing the point of the novel, as though there were some abstruse thematic significance which had gotten beyond them, for nearly every reviewer readily picked up on Ellis's "message." Terry Teachout, for instance, recognized that "Ellis's all-too-obvious purpose was to write a scathing satire of Eighties materialism . . ." (44). Nonetheless Teachout rejects that purpose out of hand. Caryn James similarly identifies and dismisses Ellis's theme: "Though American Psycho also seems to address the violence of contemporary society, in fact it is too mindless to be revealing" (21). Joseph Coates acknowledged that superficiality of character was part of Ellis's point but objects that the narrative degenerates into "self-parody" which eventually becomes "an eerie kind of inadvertent camp" (1). And Norman Mailer complained that American Psycho's "legitimate theme" needed a greater writer than Ellis to carry it off (159).

Let me say immediately that most of these complaints are indisputable. American Psycho really is artless in the extreme; it really is an extraordinarily tedious, determinedly boring read; its theme is simple and the narrative strategy for conveying it is astonishingly heavy handed; it offers absolutely no moral alternative to, or even context for, the aberrant behavior it depicts; and much of it is squarely in the objectionable tradition of pornographic fiction which perpetuates and reinforces widespread misogyny in our society by demeaning portrayals of women and how men treat them.
But rather than projecting all these deficiencies onto Ellis, it is possible to take them to heart as accurate reflections of the culture we live in. It is possible to see the novel as a radical critique of epistemic structuralism, one which takes into account the primary difficulty of endogenous cultural criticism by acknowledging that at this stage of late capitalism there is no position from which to criticize: the material forces which determine our lives and the epistemic strategies for making sense of them—for negotiating our lived reality—leave us no room for idealistic alternatives that are remotely meaningful or even intelligible. In Part I of this chapter, my task will be to explicate the operations of epistemic structuralism in the consumerist environment that *American Psycho* depicts and to account for the gruesome connection it makes between sadism and consumer culture. I will begin with a phenomenological description of the novel—a superficial account of a novel in which surface is all there is—and proceed through a series of investigations to extract the social forces which determine that surface, leading to a consideration of the novel’s juxtaposition of consumerism and psychosis in terms of Hegel’s dialectic of subject. But in light of the above-mentioned critics’ hostile and defensive dismissal of the novel’s thematic dimension, perhaps the more important task will be that of Part II, where I will try to situate the novel’s repulsive excesses within what Walter Davis calls a "hermeneutics of engagement," which entails a kind of reading that eschews defensive reaction and maintains an existential relation to texts. I will be arguing, then, for an engaged reading of *American Psycho*, one which neither valorizes the book nor abominates it—indeed which insists that the book itself is not nearly as important as what one does with it. If *American Psycho* enjoys any
distinction at all with regard to engaged reading, the distinction lies with
the book's notoriety: for while it is true that we are invariably implicated
by the fact that we have chosen to read, *American Psycho* is a novel that
makes our culpability difficult (though as we shall see, have in fact already
seen, not impossible) to ignore.

I

"Surface, Surface, Surface":

The Phenomenon of Reflected Consciousness

*American Psycho* depicts two and a half years in the life of its first-
person narrator, Patrick Bateman, a twenty-six-year-old Wall-Street
investment banker who epitomizes the unapologetic greed and materialism of
the 1980s. Bateman's circle is one of equally affluent, insensitive and self-
important simulacra of himself, and so the plot is a desultory series of
power lunches, dinners at four-star restaurants, evenings at chic
discotheques, vacations in the Hamptons, and workouts at his Upper-West-
Side health club, where the annual dues are $3,000. Beginning about
halfway through the book, however, these interminable social gyrations are
interspersed with some 30 brutal murders Bateman commits, events which
alone give shape and substance to the novel. Amid non-events like scoring
some cocaine at a nightclub called Tunnel or a twenty-five page
conversation about where to have dinner, the detailed descriptions of
Bateman's unspeakable atrocities obtrude, adding texture to an otherwise
tediously flat reading experience by raising questions about Bateman's
motives and whether or not he will be caught. Ultimately, however, these
questions go unanswered, and as the rising body count itself begins to
dissolve into the general pointlessness of Bateman's existence, unilluminated
by psychological insight and uncatharted by Dostoyevskian repentance, the
novel closes without his being brought to justice.

The key to all this pointlessness is Patrick Bateman himself—though
since he insists that "there is no key" (264), it would be more precise to
say that Bateman's character is the key to the fact that all this
pointlessness has no key. In 1909 Henry James argued that an ineluctable
feature of first-person narratives is self-consciousness (1316), which adds a
dimension of performace to the narrative. Even though, as we shall see,
Bateman lacks self-consciousness as a Hegelian subject, he is always
narcissistically aware that he is performing, as the effort of the narrative's
every sentence is directed at presenting an image to his reader. For
instance, he never fails to place himself in each scene by meticulously
detailed reference to his wardrobe:

I am wearing a lightweight linen suit with pleated trousers, a
cotton shirt, a dotted silk tie, all by Valentino Couture, and
perforated cap-toe leather shoes by Allen-Edmonds. (30–31)

Examples like this are countless, but even the most gruesome scenes are
fashion statements:

I've situated her [an unnamed woman whom Bateman has tied
up] in front of the new Toshiba television set and in the VCR
is an old tape and appearing on the screen is the last girl I
filmed. I'm wearing a Joseph Abboud suit, a tie by Paul
Stuart, shoes by J. Crew, a vest by someone Italian and I'm
kneeling on the floor beside a corpse, eating a girl's brain,
gobbling it down, spreading Grey Poupon over hunks of the
pink, fleshy meat. (328)

Bateman's fundamental narcissism requires him to present himself as though
he were being seen from the outside, precisely in the manner of the bylines
from *GQ, Rolling Stone*, and the Bachrach Menswear catalogues which are the inspiration\(^1\) for his self-descriptions: his life as described in the narrative is no less a performance than the narrative itself, a kind of ongoing fashion show for which the inner self is strictly unnecessary.

The immediate consequence of this superficial self-portrait is that Bateman is shallow, cynical, smug, fatuous, and for all his affected sophistication, comically parochial. He is incapable of, and appalling uninterested in, understanding anything which lies beyond his consumerist frame of reference. The first chapter describes a dinner party given by his fiancée Evelyn, to which are invited a pair of artists from Greenwich Village, Stash and Vanden. The artists are sullen and uncommunicative, and when Evelyn asks what kind of "sorbet" they would like for dessert—"Kiwi, carambola, cherimoya, cactus fruit, or Japanese pear"—Stash makes clear his contempt for her and her friends by asking for chocolate chip. Later, Bateman and his friend Price laugh over the Stash's ignorance, completely oblivious to the intentional insult, since a lack of appreciation for esoteric ices is in their eyes far worse than whatever defects they themselves might have.

Scenes like this show that Bateman lacks a capacity for critical awareness and all but the faintest traces of inwardness. But the startling thing is that Bateman frankly admits it: "Reflection is useless, the world is senseless," he dryly muses. "Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in ... this was civilization as I saw it, colossal and jagged ..." (175). Bateman and the other members of his milieu disregard the outmoded humanistic ideology of personal integrity, of which old money

\(^{1}\) And probably the actual sources. See below, page 275n.
imagined wealth was the concomitant and which earlier generations of *nouveaux riches* somewhat vulgarly hoped wealth might bring them. Instead there is an unapologetic premium placed on the canny assessment of the capitalist system and one's placement in it. Ultimately, there is no moral or ethical significance beyond the boundaries of the system itself, and personal value is a commodity, consciously referred to the system's functional dynamics. As Bateman's friend Timothy Price (!) complains, "I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled. In essence what I'm saying is that society cannot afford to lose me. I'm an asset" (3).

The characters in this novel correctly if cynically recognize that in a capitalist system where, on the one hand, personal integrity counts for nothing and on the other basic human needs are, for a certain class, easily met, wealth is a chain of unmotivated significations, at the end of which is the arch-signifier, money. As an abstraction representing all other values, however, money *qua* signifier rarely makes an appearance for this class. Bateman doesn't boast about his six-figure salary, since everyone in his social set also draws one. He does, however, hope that people will notice his platinum American Express Card, wonders whether buying his own private tanning bed will win him points among his associates, and fondly dreams of securing a dinner reservation at Dorsia, an exclusive restaurant where maître d' regularly hangs up on him.

In place of inner affect, Bateman is constantly negotiating a structure of exigencies which infuses his existence with a kind of urgency:

I check my Rolex while I'm buying scrubbing lotion at the Clinique counter, still in Bergdorf's, to make sure I have enough time to shop some more before I have to meet Tim
Severt for drinks at the Princeton Club at seven. I worked out this morning for two hours before the office and though I could have used this time for a massage (since my muscles are sore from the exhausting exercise regimen I'm now on) or a facial, even though I had one yesterday, there are just too many cocktail parties in the upcoming weeks that I have to attend and my presence at them will put a crimp in my shopping schedule so it's best if I get the shopping out of the way now. (178)

The run-on sentences suggest the breathlessness of panic, the desperate impulse to structure time with as many interlocking diversions as possible in order to stave off existential emptiness.

Thus Bateman is self-consciously flat and narrowly constructed, the postmodern paradigm of willed superficiality, his lack of inner affect the result of "slow, purposeful erasure" (282). For him, the Emersonian individual is a dead concept, dead because totally irrelevant to the material determinations of his life:

Nothing was affirmative, the term "generosity of spirit" applied to nothing, was a cliche, was some kind of bad joke. Sex is mathematics. Individuality no longer an issue. (375)

Bateman rejects the ideology of individualism which, as I argued in the last chapter (page 0), stands at the absent center of epistemic structuralism. This is why he is all "surface, surface, surface" and without even a spurious purpose for any of his actions is bored, panicky, and prone to break down and cry equally in the middle of ordering dinner (98) and while butchering a young woman (345-46).

However, in spite of his existential and ideological vacancy, Bateman is unlike the self-less schizophrenic T in The Atrocity Exhibition, because he is obsessed with establishing a subjectivity of sorts, within the narrowly constricted framework of his structuralist world, by making the exclusive determinations that lead to the proposition, "I am the person who." He has
a pathological need to segregate himself from those he sees as his inferiors, which the economic facts of his existence ought to render clearly unnecessary. He taunts the homeless beggars over whom he practically climbs between limo rides, refers to blacks as "the genetic underclass," is hostile to homosexuals—all of whom he assumes desire him—and deems women generally. His accesses of rage drive him to kill representatives from each of these groups, which is why Terry Teachout sarcastically refers to him as a "politically correct" killer (44).

Bateman is hardly the only character with a need to establish difference, and the following example provides some indication of why this need reaches such desperate proportions in Bateman's world of ease and instant gratification. When Bateman baits his fiancée Evelyn by suggesting that she make a play for Tim Price, she can't think of a single reason to do so:

"Oh god, Patrick," she says, her eyes shut. "Why Price? Price?" And she says this in a way that makes me think she has had sex with him.
"He's rich," I say.
"Everybody's rich," she says, concentrating on the TV screen.
"He's good-looking," I tell her.
"Everybody's good-looking, Patrick," she says remotely.
"He has a great body," I say.
"Everybody has a great body now," she says.
I place the tumbler on the nightstand and roll over on top of her. While I kiss and lick her neck she stares passionlessly at the wide-screen Panasonic remote-control television set and lowers the volume. (23)

Price's salient qualities, his money and exemplary self-commodification, do not in the least distinguish him, and there is no reason—apparently not even the fact that she has already slept with him—for Evelyn to desire him in preference to anyone else. She therefore autistically immerses herself
into the only mechanism for generating differences, consumerism—here satirically exemplified by The Home Shopping Club, which is what she is watching while Bateman tries to arouse her.

Thus in American Psycho the characters’ need to differentiate is the driving force of their life, and this is expressed in every aspect of the narrative. If there is a contradiction between Bateman’s willed existential vacancy and his need to establish an identity based upon differences, its resolution lies within the novel’s narrative technique, which shares some of the elements of literary realism. In American Psycho, as in 19th-century realistic novels, the attention to photographic detail fills the narrative space with concrete objects independent of plot significance. This is why whenever Bateman describes himself or introduces characters, it is only in terms of apparel that they have any identity at all. But in 19th-century literary realism, photographic detail was meant to convey the contingency of the material world as a sort of backdrop for the inner life of its occupants—material reality fleshed out subjective reality but essentially stood in contrast to it. In the "shopping mall realism" of Bobbie Ann Mason and others, this relationship is troubled somewhat by the brand-name particularity of concrete objects on the one side and the characters’ endearing inarticulateness on the other. But in the fiction of Ellis and the other members of the "literary brat pack" (Jay McInerney and Tama Janowitz), however, material reality wholly constitutes subjectivity: in it, as Josephine Hendin says, echoing Wittgenstein, "the world is all that is the (Gucci) case" (225).

For this reason American Psycho is perhaps more reminiscent of the nouveau roman of Robbe-Grillet and Sarrute, in which the narrative focuses
on concrete objects which exist mutely in an absurd three-dimensional space, subtracted from any knowing consciousness that might lend depth and significance to reality. Much as in *American Psycho*, the pure phenomenology of the *nouveau roman* depicts a world of surfaces. But *American Psycho* departs from the *nouveau roman* in that consumerism reinstates consciousness *in the objects and surfaces themselves*, from which the characters then try to arrogate its reflection to themselves. In my first chapter (page 60) I argued that the ontology of commodities in a consumer culture is one of iterative identity: each object exists primarily in its equivalence to the hundreds of thousands of other objects subsumed under the brand name it bears. Patrick Bateman never wears *this* Armani suit, he only wears *an* Armani suit, that is, he wears only the representative of an entire line of clothing, a representative which contains within itself the existence of *all* Armani suits. The iterative identity of commodities participates more generally in a network of value relations which is of course upheld by all other consumers, a late-capitalist Heideggerian "They." But because this "They" always exceeds the determinations of any individual consumer, who must refer his value judgments to the collective, "They" are always absent, and the value-consciousness of the "They" is transferred to what is present, the commodity-signifiers which alone convey their collective determinations. The result of this phenomenology is a sort of *environmental* consciousness to which the individual consumer must refer himself.

Of course, what is exhibited in *American Psycho* is a peculiar refinement of commodity fetishism. In 1867, Marx identified commodities as "social hieroglyphs," their signifying power a mystification of the material
relations which actually exist between men (76-80). Fifty-five years later (1922), Georg Lukács treated commodity fetishism as a "specific problem of ... modern capitalism," a phenomenon that influences "the total outer and inner life of society" (84). Lukács follows Marx in arguing that commodity fetishism determines the form of consciousness available within capitalist society, but he adds the important consideration that it does so to a degree commensurate with the extent of fetishism's domination of the conditions of social existence (91). That is, as continued refinements in the division of labor used to produce commodities cause those commodities to appear increasingly as abstractions, so does the consciousness of the individual approach a state of total reification, until

... the reified mind necessarily sees [the commodity] as the form in which its own authentic immediacy becomes manifest and--as reified consciousness--does not even attempt to transcend it. (93)

In our time the state of reified consciousness achieves a much more intense level than either Marx or Lukács describes, for while it is certain that by "modern capitalism" both Marx and Lukács were referring to the historical period beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing to the present, it doesn't follow that fetishism or reification are static phenomena--especially since, as both argued so assiduously, capitalism itself is not static. What has developed today, and is reflected so faithfully in American Psycho, is an aggravated form of fetishism, distinguished by two aspects: 1) an even more radical recession of labor from the commodity-form and 2) within the commodity-form, the complete separation of the commodity's imputed fetishistic powers from its own concrete existence as a physical instantiation of the brand-name type it represents.
As for the first aspect: Lukács recognized that in 1922 the state of production forces reflected by the extreme division of labor in mechanized industry had "atomized" the commodity, cutting it off from any perceived connection to the laborer's efforts: "In [the workers' minds] the relations between men that lie hidden in the immediate commodity relation . . . have faded to the point where they can be neither recognised nor even perceived." This is certainly true for workers employed on assembly lines, whose specialized tasks bear no perceptible relation to the final product of their collective labor. But what if the majority of the work force is not engaged in manufacture at all? As is well known, the United States is becoming what has been called a "service-oriented society," meaning that the majority of the goods we consume are manufactured elsewhere—in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Mexico, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Guatemala, Bangladesh, etc. 2 Commodities, for most Americans, no longer mysteriously appear at the ends of assembly lines; they mysteriously appear in stores. In Lukács's description, the degree of recession of labor from commodity which obtained in 1922 seems absolute, which makes it hard to argue for any qualitative development of that process since then; but indeed there have been qualitative developments, and the fact that most Americans' labor has nothing to do with the manufacture of the foreign-made commodities they consume—not because each individual's effort contributes so little to a finished product but because it is literally disconnected—attests to them.

2I confess that this list is not the result of a formal research project, though in an odd way that is precisely its warrant: I got the countries' names from appliances in my home and from labels in my clothes closet.
As for the second: once again, Lukács insightfully recognized the process of abstraction involved in mass production:

[Consumer articles] now appear, on the one hand, as abstract members of a species identical by definition with its other members and, on the other hand, as isolated objects the possession or non-possession of which depends on rational calculations. (91)

The "species being" which Lukács identifies is supposed, in what appears to me an earlier stage in the evolution of consumerism, to inhere in the mysterious duality of the commodity as an object simultaneously iterative and isolated. On the one hand the commodity contains the traces of all of the commodity's mass-produced fellows, in the manner Saussure attributes to the nature of signs. On the other hand each commodity is a concrete instantiation of that species being, and in this sense it acts as a signifier. As Lukács correctly observed, we may suppose this phenomenology to obtain whenever an article, let's say a suit, is known to be mass produced. But what happens when a number of sub-species intervenes in the suit's general species being—that is, as soon as the relative exchange values of suits in general are believed to depend on the distinctive stylistic innovation and the sheer name-recognition of particular manufacturers (euphemistically known as designers)? In that case the suit's species being would itself be divided, now into a generalized species being, as before, and a particularized species being expressed through the manufacturer's label it carries.

In other words, the commodity would then have a three-part form: it would appear as general species being (a suit), brand-name species being (an Armani suit), and as a concrete instantiation (this suit). But in the actual case today, some 70 years after Lukács, this triple form collapses,
within the consumer's mind, back into a double one: that of its brand-name species being and, in a greatly reduced and qualitatively different sense, that of its concrete existence. This is because in a society in which a) consumerism is the key to meaningful action (insofar as consumer choices are the only acts the "They" recognize) and b) general affluence is a presupposition—that is, as I argued in the first chapter (page 72), where the plethora of consumer articles in stores is taken as the index of social wealth—the general species being and to a great extent the concrete existence of the commodity are suppressed. In other words, whenever I assume that anyone can buy a suit and that this suit is only meaningful insofar as it reflects a wise consumer choice, the significance of the suit I buy—its only significance so long as I entertain the preceding assumptions—resides wholly in the brand name it carries. Of the other two dimensions, one (the general species being) simply doesn't signify at all, and the other (concrete existence) only in a limited way; therefore they recede from consideration.

This separation of fetishistic power from the commodity's concrete existence explains our preoccupation with labels, a preoccupation which actually supplants the commodity's use value (see Chapter One, page 71). American Psycho provides a telling example of this preoccupation in a scene in which Bateman is confronted by a friend who wants to know whether label-switching is legal. The friend is upset because he has discovered that the retailer who sold him a herringbone tweed jacket
removed the manufacturer's label and replaced with another. Bateman's response:

Once a line of clothing has been purchased from its manufacturer, it's perfectly legal for the retailer to replace the original label with his own. However, it's not legal to replace it with another retailer's label. (185)

Bateman speaks only in terms of a line of clothing, and his references to "the original label" imply unmistakably to a large number of labels. The particular jacket in question is of no significance here, or, to be more precise, its only significance lies in the way it refers to its particular species being, that is, to the label which associates it with all the other jackets belonging to its "line" and which constitute the repository of its value. "So what's the best solution?" his friend asks, and Bateman's reply, "Shop for familiar labels from retailers you know," has the ring of sound consumerist wisdom in that it attends, in condensed form, to the priorities entailed by the commodity-form's internal structure.

In the preceding example, the fact that the commodity-form requires a legal apparatus external to its structure in order to guarantee its fetishistic power indicates exactly how detachable that power is from the concrete aspect of the commodity-form's existence. Moreover, as my analysis of the commodity-form's internal structure suggests, the concrete aspect (this suit) is itself a signifier. In another chapter of American Psycho, Bateman and a woman named Courtney find themselves at a rock concert arguing over what one of the band members is wearing:

3Most likely culled from the "Questions and Answers" column of Gentleman's Quarterly. In an interview for Rolling Stone, Ellis admits that he lifted much of his descriptive detail from magazines like GQ, Stereo Review, and Fangoria (a juvenile movie-fan tabloid) (see Robert Love 49).
"The Edge is wearing Armani," she shouts, pointing at the bassist.
"No," she shouts. "Armani."

The grays are too muted and so are the taupes and navies. Definite winged lapels, subtle plaids, polka dots and stripes are Armani. Not Emporio," I shout, extremely irritated that she doesn't know this, can't differentiate, both my hands covering both ears. "There's a difference. Which one's the Ledge?"

Here the designer label is not available to Courtney and Bateman, so they are reduced to inferring the commodity-form's species being from its concrete existence, that is, from the physical properties and stylistic elements which act as signifiers for such crucial evaluative deductions. What is at stake here, as Bateman's irritation points up, is Courtney's ability to differentiate, which in a very real sense is the foundation of Bateman's epistemic commitments: if Courtney cannot be relied upon to interpret a commodity's outward signifiers (its concrete aspect), and thereby determine its species being, then the commodity-form itself begins to disintegrate. Courtney is the ad hoc representative of the ever-absent "They" which underwrites the value-structure in which commodities relate to one another and, as I mentioned earlier, is in turn the manifestation of Bateman's own deferred consciousness. While a certain amount of guessing based on outward appearance is inevitable, it is important to note that the debate between Bateman and Courtney entails no aesthetic judgment of the bassist's suit whatsoever--Bateman, in fact, doesn't even know which musician they're discussing; all he can see is that there is no Armani suit on the stage. Rather, the specification of the suit's stylistic elements (colors, lapels, patterns) functions exclusively to index the designer label which conveys its exchange value. The imprecision of these stylistic elements, which is actually a condition of their transposability to different
generic associations (there is no reason why, for instance, Emporio should not decide to feature winged lapels, subtle plaids, etc.), is what degrades the commodity-form's concrete aspect; it is also why designer labels increasingly appear on the outside of garments and consumer products, thereby further reducing the signifying role of the concrete commodities.

Therefore both aspects of the commodity-form function as unmotivated signifiers, arbitrarily connected to each other and detachable in different ways. The only signified here is the exchange-value of the commodity-form, its use-value having been taken for granted and eliminated from consideration. Thus we have in consumerism a peculiarly immaterial sort of materialism, a commodity fetishism in which imaginary needs are abstracted as significations. This fetishism is the controlling concept of the world of *American Psycho*. The novel's primary distinctions lie with the way its characters are perfectly conscious of the commodity-form's internal structure and with the way they use it to negotiate their lives. These characters are, to an extent much more extreme than any we have seen so far, conscious and willing epistemic structuralists. But to understand the exact nature of their epistemic commitments, it's worth comparing this form of epistemic structuralism to its earlier manifestations in the novels of Gaddis and Ballard.

In *The Recognitions*, we saw two generations of epistemic structuralists, each suffering under the strain of what I called a "grotesque ontological contradiction" in that it believed in an originary, transcendent self expressible through conventional signs. In nearly all cases, the strain of this contradiction led to madness or death. In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, a more radical capitulation to epistemic structuralism resulted in a rejection
of the transcendent individual and the reduction of the self to a schizoid desiring-machine which attempts to break through its "territorialization" by appropriating the mass-media signifiers which structuralize its experiential environment and by restructuring them for its own schizo-revolutionary purposes. Ultimately these attempts fail insofar as every breakthrough entails a reterritorialization, ultimately leading to breakdown and paralysis.

Most of the phenomena through which these characters exhibited their epistemic commitments are present in American Psycho, but in an aggravated form. Chief of them, of course, is the determination of consciousness by the commodity-forms which saturate the narrative environment. We saw, for instance, how the mass-produced contents of Mr. Pivner's apartment define his "secret and private self" (see Chapter Two, page 111). Pivner's mode of self-expression is to arrange his possessions into a relational structure of "matching objects," but the objects are by-and-large nondescript (the narrator never mentions brand names) and exist primarily in their generalized species being. Patrick Bateman's apartment is also a relational structure of "matching" objects, but 1) the brand-name specificity of those objects makes the relational value structure that underwrites their physical conjunction much more present, and 2) for Bateman these objects don't signify a "secret and private self," as they do for Pivner, but an extroverted, publicly constructed self that exists in no private sense whatsoever. While Bateman's meticulously itemized tour of his apartment (the six-page sum and substance of Psycho's second chapter) would give the fullest account of these differences, the following description of his bedroom alone is sufficiently telling:
A down-filled futon lies on an oakwood frame in the center of the bedroom. Against the wall is a Panasonic thirty-one-inch set with a direct-view screen and stereo sound and beneath it in a glass case is a Toshiba VCR. I'm not sure if the time on the Sony digital alarm clock is correct so I have to sit up then look down at the time flashing on and off on the VCR, then pick up the Ettore Sottass push-button phone that rests on the steel and glass nightstand next to the bed and dial the time number. A cream leather, steel and wood chair designed by Eric Marcus is in one corner of the room, a molded plywood chair in the other. A black-dotted beige and white Maud Sienna carpet covers most of the floor. (25)

Of the ten items mentioned here, only four (the futon, the glass case, the nightstand, and the molded plywood chair) are not identified by brand name or designer label. Actually, in American Psycho, 40% is a very high percentage, but I cite this passage to point out what happens in the mix. The no-name objects remain nondescript, nearly to the point of invisibility, whereas the brand-name ones are somehow more present, three-dimensional—finally more real—because Panasonic, Toshiba and Sony are real-life companies that all readers recognize. The names Ettore Sottass, Eric Marcus and Maud Sienna may be less familiar, but what they thereby lose in mimetic immediacy they make up for in suggestiveness: in the hierarchy of object-concepts, the esoteric designer label signifies superior taste and above all the greater wealth required to cultivate it. This passage tells us exactly who Bateman is, indeed all that he is, and it tells us that he is as real, or at any rate not less fictitious, than millions of other people actually living today.

Another phenomenon of epistemic structuralism first seen in The Recognitions is the free circulation of quoted discourse. In The Recognitions, the anonymous Greenwich Village crowd relies upon familiar but unattributed quotations, those with maximum exchange value, in order to establish a transitory identity based upon the terms for facile
recognition, narrowness and transposability (see Chapter Two, page 109). Phrases like "the solids of Uccello," "New York is a social experience," and plagiarized witticisms like "I think he’s a latent heterosexual" are used to identify oneself with a given role, usually some variation of social raffiné. There is a certain amount of obvious circulation of quoted material in American Psycho—the phrase "Did you know that cavemen got more fiber than we do?" keeps popping up—but once again Psycho surpasses The Recognitions, for in Psycho by far the greater part of unattributed quotations are not circulated within the text but between the text and the outside world. For instance, Bateman’s narrative often lapses into blurbs borrowed from shampoo bottles or instruction manuals:

[I] head into the living room and put the new Talking Heads in the CD player, but it starts to digitally skip so I take it out and put in a CD laser lens cleaner. The laser lens is very sensitive, and subject to interference from dust or dirt or smoke or pollutants or moisture, and a dirty one can inaccurately read CDs, making for false starts, inaudible passages, digital skipping, speed changes and general distortion; the lens cleaner has a cleaning brush that automatically aligns with the lens then the disk spins to remove residue and particles. (28)

And as I mentioned above (page 275n), dialogue ostensibly about the Q&A column of Gentleman’s Quarterly is interspersed with discourse taken from the Q&A column of Gentleman’s Quarterly:

"Bateman: we’re sending these questions in to GQ," Van Patten begins.
[. . . . ]
"We have this bet to see which one of us will get in the Question and Answer column first, and so now I expect an answer. What do you think?" McDermott demands.
"About what?" I ask irritably.
"Tassled loafers, jerk-off," he says.
"Well guys ..." I measure my words carefully. "The tasseled loafer is traditionally a casual shoe...." [ . . . . ]
"But it’s become acceptable just because it’s so popular, right?" Craig asks eagerly. (31-32; see also 87, 137, 361).
The transparency of these quotations makes them qualitatively different from the ones which circulate within The Recognitions. First, in Psycho the characters do not use quotations to establish an identity but to parrot the culture at large, to which they do not see themselves in individualistic opposition. Whereas in The Recognitions a quotation tends to lose social impact the more it circulates, in Psycho quotation suffers no such devaluation, and far from making any pretense of originality, the characters seem committed to demonstrating their total derivativeness. Second, Ellis's blatant extratextual borrowings create an important relationship between reader and character, one in which the reader is forced to recognize that his familiarity with the sources of the characters' quotations, like his recognition of the brand names which give the book its mimetic impact, implicate him as one of the crowd.

But of the phenomena associated with epistemic structuralism, the problem of the territorialization of desire, which emerged in my discussion of The Atrocity Exhibition, is the pivot upon which American Psycho turns. Recall that, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, capitalism continually displaces the limit of socially acceptable desiring-production by fragmenting all objects and events through its processes of exchange; it must then re-absorb that displaced limit by "restor[ing] all sorts of residual and artificial, imaginary, or symbolic territorialities, thereby attempting, as best it can, to recode, to rechannel persons who have been defined in terms of abstract quantities [i.e., labor and capital]" (Anti-Oedipus 34). The psyche formed by capitalism is caught in a series of increasingly fluid and abstract

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4The principle in The Recognitions is the same as that of the inflationary spiral of perversions in The Atrocity Exhibition—cf. Chapter Two, page 104 and Chapter Three, page 193.
scenic representations of desire, impelled from perversion to perversion as each schizophrenic "breakthrough" is re-submitted to the social structures which in fact inform it. Thus in The Atrocity Exhibition, for instance, T continually reassembles the fragments of his commercially generated media environment into desiring-machines of his own making, only to be reduced by them to a "neural calm" in which nothing can happen.

The contexts for these gyrations are T's impending mental breakdowns which, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms, are such thorough capitulations to the operations of capitalism that they threaten to rupture its structures of containment. T begins each chapter poised for schizophrenic liberation by virtue of his reduction to the pure libidinal energy of intensive states, but he moves by stages toward the paranoid-fascist pole of desiring-production, the pole in which the psyche is "theatricized" by projection into images of whole bodies, group identities, and stable structures (see Chapter 3, pp. 181, 187). American Psycho, however, involves a different kind of capitulation to epistemic structuralism, the chief indication of which is that for Patrick Bateman the paranoid-fascist pole is the point of departure, not the tragic outcome. By making the paranoid-fascist pole of psychic organization his sole province, Bateman departs from desiring-production as pure activity and introduces lack as the foundation and condition of desire. Lacan identifies this kind of desire as the difference between need and demand—that is, desire founded upon lack emerges as the difference between the impulse toward desiring-production and the distorting terms for expressing that impulse, terms which at best elicit a symbolic token of the satisfaction sought (Écrits 287).
Desire founded upon lack also differs from desiring-production in that the framing of the demand presupposes, and thereby creates, the whole self—subject alienated from its own fragmented self-experience and integrated into a totality as the Other's other. If Bateman's characterization is thoroughly superficial, if his subjectivity itself is paper thin, he is nonetheless fundamentally different from T because, far from seeking dispersal by projection into his fragmented environment, Bateman's desperate goal is to derive an integrated identity from an environment which for him is an orderly structure of whole bodies, discreet objects, and group identities, even if the reflection it delivers back to him is ultimately the ghostly image of an empty designer suit adjusting its tie:

I move over to the Marlian mirror that hangs above a Sottsass teakwood desk to make sure the knot in my Armani paisley tie isn't crooked. (361)

Bateman's project is to structure a vacant but whole "self" into the sum of the territorialized desires embodied in the consumer objects which are the horizon of his experience. This project is the pivot upon which *American Psycho* turns insofar as it reveals the logic of the novel's connection between consumerism and psychosis.

Consumerism is the final refinement of epistemic structuralism. In consumerism, the social role-playing, expressive performances, and environmental cathexes seen previously in the novels of Gaddis and Ballard are efficiently consolidated into a unified scheme for identity construction based upon the commodity object-concepts that participate in an

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5See "Function and Field of Speech and Language": "For in this labour which he undertakes to reconstruct for another, he rediscovers the fundamental alienation that made him construct it like another, and which has always destined it to be taken from him by another" (*Écrits* 42).
interlocking network of value relations primarily indexed through their brand-name labels. While the actual structure of commodity-concepts in our culture is enormous, *Psycho* enacts a condensation at once illustrative—in that simplification illuminates the structure's boundaries—and plausible—in that we can easily attribute the simplification to the discriminations of taste among wealthy characters with an overarching need to establish differences between themselves and the lower classes. For instance, certain restaurant names recur, attached to various levels of significance. Dorsia, the four-star restaurant where no one can secure a reservation, heads the list; but places like Pastel's, Harry's, Nell's, Barcadia, Zeus Bar, Turtles, Indochine, Deck Chairs, M.K., and Au Bar form the structure of acceptable eateries for Bateman and his crowd, and the endless debates they have about where to dine constitute their ongoing effort to situate themselves within this structure. The number of clothing labels Bateman recognizes is also limited, and as we have already seen, his every appearance constitutes a configuration of that closed structure's elements, whereas those who do not represent such a configuration do not signify. (One of the novel's "running gags" is Luis Carrothers, an indiscriminate dresser who can't get noticed by waiters and bartenders.)

The ceaseless rearrangement of a finite number of structural elements and the situating of the self at their center shows that in *American Psycho* active role-playing and desiring-production have been replaced by utterly passive *image-having*: as a character, Patrick Bateman buys his attributes instead of having to act them out.\(^6\) Moreover, the functional dimension of

\(^6\)This is true even for those character traits which are exhibited through his behavior—excluding for now his homicidal tendencies—such as his egotism, hypocrisy, smug fatuity, and intellectual myopia, since they are
those attributes, narrowness and transposability, reach their apotheosis in his character. As for narrowness, Bateman is not an individual with the bothersome task of adopting, evoking, or maintaining attributes; rather, he is simply a gap, a vortex into which the structural environment would collapse were it not upheld by the consensus of value relations that maintain it (it is in this sense that the environment is both Bateman's structural complement and his deferred consciousness). As for transposability, we have already seen its final refinement in the analysis of interchangeable commodity-concepts as the repository of all meaning. Thus recognition, the object of narrowness and transposability, becomes extraordinarily streamlined: one needn't even attribute a psyche to the vacancy shrouded in designer labels, for recognition of the designer label alone is sufficient. To be sure, the "ideological residue" of the essential, originary "self" I mentioned earlier (see Chapter 3, page 160) still underwrites participation in this aggravated version of epistemic structuralism. But now the self is perceived not so much as a content in need of forms to inhabit or signs through which it can express itself as pure formlessness without content, a being whose negativity is—in an age where image is the only content—the only being it has. And this negativity is all that is essentially Bateman.

It is also all he needs, or, to be precise, it is—and this is very much at the heart of epistemic structuralism—all that he wants to acknowledge. That is, with consumerism the project of denying time and death implicit in

nothing but epiphenomena of his single motivating principle, the derivation of all values from consumer values. Bateman "bought" these attributes when he "bought" into the system.

7I mentioned these earlier in this chapter on page 242, but for a full discussion, see Chapter Two, page 109.
structuralism comes to fruition with the total denial of the temporal, corporal self. Patrick Bateman's obsession with physical fitness betrays his ambition to become a "hard body," a perfectly statuesque vehicle for Ralph Lauren, Bill Blass, Gianni Versace, Saks, Luciano Soprani, and Jean-Paul Gaultier. His hair is a vehicle for Aramis; his face, for Gel Appaisant. As we have seen, he is literally nothing but an elaborate assemblage of brand names and the images associated with them, and thus people mistake him for someone else dozens of times throughout the book—they often have complete conversations with him, believing him to be someone else.

It is this simultaneous self-centeredness and self vacancy that points toward the connection between consumerism and psychosis. Because consumerism is a form of reflection in which desire is negotiated with and through objects, we can examine the problem from the perspective of Walter Davis's existential reconsideration of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind.* In his account of the centrality of desire in Hegel's phenomenology, Davis reports that desire is the foundation of self-consciousness and the initial step in a dialectic whose issue is authentic subjectivity. This is because "[Desire] is the first form taken by the noncoincidence between subject and the emerging 'logos' of experience, reflection" (26). As we have seen desire in *American Psycho* is characterized by its origin in lack, but to this Hegel adds a "negative attitude toward otherness" (27) so that fulfillment, specifically the act of consumption, results not in satisfaction but only in another "I want" as the object's otherness is obliterated. The desiring consciousness is therefore forced into choosing between a) "an endless round of dependencies" in which satisfaction fails to survive the moment of consumption and b) the possibility of overcoming the inherent futility of
object-oriented desire by seeking intersubjective fulfillment. Patrick Bateman chooses neither, or in another sense, both.

The key to understanding the connection between consumerism and psychosis in *American Psycho* lies with Davis's rejection of the regressive idealist/rationalist tendencies within Hegel's thought. Whereas Hegel contextualizes the dialectic inaugurated by desire within an inexorable progression toward Absolute Knowledge, Davis underscores the grim truth that "There is nothing necessary . . . about dialectical advance" because "it is always possible to arrest its progress or regress to a prior moment" (38-39). Patrick Bateman's compulsion to rape, torture and murder is the direct result of his willfully blocking the dialectic—of his having opted for interpersonal fulfillment while clinging fearfully to the object-oriented form of desire which strives to annihilate otherness. Bateman does not dare acknowledge the futility of desire—the impossibility of satisfaction surviving consumption—because to do so would be to confront his own mortality: the moment we recognize ourselves caught in a spiral of wants and fulfillments we are forced to project ourselves into the only event our future holds in store for us, death.

To desire, then, is to die. And this is why Patrick Bateman refuses to project a self into his desires: he does not desire, which implies a desiring subject, he *has* desires, which implies rather a relationship between objects. As we have seen, he makes himself into a statue, an object among objects with no greater attribute than negativity. To have a desire is not to act; therefore the consumer is released, not implicated, by having desires. However, the inherent nature of desire makes it impossible for him to remain comfortable in this position. Desire by its nature
demands that "Satisfaction must survive the moment of consumption. This 'standing negation'... is what makes necessary the transition from relations with objects to interpersonal relations" (31). But as Hegel's dialectic of the Master and the Slave shows, interpersonal relations are hardly an idyllic solution. One imports one's original "negativity toward otherness" into one's interpersonal relations, and the measure of the extent to which one does this is the level of one's commitment to fleeing death.

Patrick Bateman's commitments, of course, are very thorough. Of course, Bateman's refusal to implicate himself in the act of desiring is a virtual statement of his need to flee death. But several times throughout the novel he is nevertheless filled with a "nameless dread" which he manages to ride out without drawing any important conclusions. He panics in a video store because "There are too many fucking movies to choose from" but calms himself by washing down two five-milligram Valiums with Diet Pepsi (112). In one of the novel's better satirical moments, Bateman experiences angst while browsing at Bloomingdale's; however he concludes that "this emptiness has, at least in part, some connection with the way I treated Evelyn at Barcadia the other night, though there is always the possibility it could just as easily have something to do with the tracking device on my VCR..." (179-80).

The contradiction between the need to flee death and the need to transcend the futility of object-oriented desire requires him to make desire itself do the work it has disrupted, that of dissociating him from his being: if desire means death, it is a trap the only escape from which is to desire to kill. He enacts a division of psychic labor in his interpersonal relationships, making the desiring other do the dying while releasing
Bateman from any implication in the process. Bateman must kill the women he desires. He murders street musicians, beggars and gay men for related reasons. In those cases, his desperate need to differentiate between himself and them is threatened by the very mechanisms that he has employed to establish difference: in the case of the former, the material signifiers which situate him among the wealthy expose the arbitrariness of the class distinctions he desperately needs to maintain insofar as they also deprive him of his subjectivity; in the case of the latter, his fashionable attire, his blow-dried, moussed, manicured, skin-creamed good looks, and his manic devotion to physical fitness—all intended as signifiers for heterosexual desirability—threaten to collapse into signifiers for homosexual narcissism. Thus he is driven to a homicidal rage when an "aging faggot" stops him in the street to ask him whether he's a model.

The contradiction Bateman has imported into his interpersonal relationships survives in his contradictory attitude toward the other's being. On the one hand, he relates to people as objects. A desirable woman is a "hardbody" whose "tan and aerobicized and muscular and worked out" legs (100) are valuable insofar as they are repositories of labor, like any other commodity. This body-commodity does not achieve the reflected conscious of other commodities, however: "I get on top of her and we have sex and lying beneath me she is only a shape, even with all the halogen lamps burning" (213). In his most gruesome moments, Bateman muses, "though it does sporadically penetrate how unacceptable some [!] of what I'm doing actually is, I just remind myself that this thing, this girl, this meat, is nothing, is shit . . . ." (345).
On the other hand, having delivered to the other the responsibility for his own desires, he grants her the subjectivity which he cannot confront in himself. His most consistent obsession during the many mutilation scenes is the hope that his victim understands what is happening to her:

I want [a prostitute named Tiffany] to watch what I'm going to do to Torri and she's propped up in a way that makes this unavoidable. As usual, in an attempt to understand these girls I'm filming their deaths. With Torri and Tiffany I use a Minox LX ultra-miniature camera that takes 9.5mm film, has a 15mm f/3.5 lens, and exposure meter and a built-in neutral density filter and sits on a tripod. I've put a CD of the Traveling Wilburys into a portable CD player that sits on the headboard above the bed, to mute any screams.

I start by skinning Torri a little, making incisions with a steak knife and ripping bits of flesh from her legs and stomach while she screams in vain, begging for mercy in a high thin voice, and I'm hoping that she realizes her punishment will end up being relatively light compared to what I've planned for the other one. (304)

Here Bateman has further refined the division of psychic labor by creating a sort of multi-dimensional specular holograph: the object of torturing Torri is to elicit not merely anguish but the understanding that her punishment will be light compared to Tiffany's, while these in turn become the spectacle which incites Tiffany's own, anticipatory anguish. Subjectivity emerges from this arrangement as the virtual effect of the women's mutual projections and is itself cinematized by the camera filming them, a final specular captation required for Bateman both to remove himself from and establish his presence within the scene. He has separated himself so completely from his own actions that he exists primarily as the idea of being watched by some non-subjective external presence—that is, himself, displaced into some future time when he will view the video tape.
It is by these displacements that he can characterize himself as "the monster of reality." Bateman expresses more fully this need to dissociate himself from his actions in another torture scene:

... I'm hoping she realizes that this would have happened to her no matter what. That she would have ended up lying here, on the floor of my apartment, hands nailed to posts, cheese and broken glass pushed up into her cunt, her head cracked and bleeding purple, no matter what other choice she might have made; that if she had gone to Neil's or Indochine or Mars or Au Bar instead of M.K., if she had simply not taken the cab with me to the Upper West Side, that this all would have happened anyway. I would have found her. This is the way the earth works. (328)

Thus the outcome of Bateman's conflicted relationship to his desires is the attainment of the status of an impersonal force (implicitly romanticized here as a force of nature but, as we shall see, more precisely understood as the sum of social forces as they have developed under capitalism). He has subtracted himself from the act of desiring, implicated the other as the dual object/subject of desire, and transformed himself into the agency and condition of the other's subjectivity. It is an achievement that has a perverted resonance with the aesthetics of Artaud:

There is no cruelty without consciousness and without the application of consciousness. It is consciousness that gives to the exercise of every act of life its blood-red color, its cruelty, since it is understood that life is always someone's death. (The Theater and Its Double 102)

Consciousness does indeed entail cruelty insofar as it detaches itself from the horizon of its being, death, and aspires to become the reified condition of death. But my analysis of Bateman's flight from reflection places Artaud's words in a different light: Bateman has achieved a kind of reflected consciousness in the objects and desiring others he "consumes," but he has refused that internalization of dissatisfied desire which
inaugurates the burden of self-consciousness (Davis 33-34). Consciousness may understand that life is always someone's death, but only self-consciousness lives out the profound unity of this binarism by confronting the fact that this someone is never someone else: my life is also my death.

II

"The Opposite Of Civilization": Engaged Reading

As is obvious from the preceding, the mechanics of the connection between consumerism and psychosis in *American Psycho* are fairly involved. But so far my analysis has remained too squarely within the realm of the ideational. The problem can be best expressed thus. As I have already said, the thematics of the novel are artlessly simple: Patrick Bateman is a condensed symbol for capitalism. When he runs into a woman whom he had once abused, and he boldly makes reference to that previous encounter, "She says nothing, just looks at me like I'm the opposite of civilization or something" (208). The irony is that, within the general context of the novel's connection between consumerism and psychosis, Bateman is hardly the opposite of civilization, he is civilization itself. In place of the unity of self-consciousness he refuses, he embodies the unity of his social contradictions, its opulence and the brutality which creates it, its need to manufacture meaning through purely relational values and to segregate the signifiers of those values through coercion, and as Marx said, its tendency toward a continual refinement of needs among the upper class and the "resurrection of itself in its opposite" ("Human Requirements" 148).
But taken as an idea, no theme is enough to justify a book like *Psycho*. For instance, R. Z. Sheppard, who picks up on the theme easily enough, nonetheless complains, "when editor [Robert] Asahina comes to his writer's defense by claiming that *American Psycho* 'succeeds in taking readers into the mind of a madman,' the obvious question is, How long do they have to stay there?" Sheppard's conclusion is that "Ellis seems to be writing for people who take forever to get the point" (100). The problem with ideas is that they present themselves as points to be made, and once we get them, we want to move on to some other point—exactly like intellectual consumers, which of course we are. As long as novels are taken to be about ideas, there is no "point" in dwelling on anything too obvious, which is why we need to consider instead our affective response to *American Psycho* and, more important, what we need to do with that response.

While the question of affective response is theoretically complex, ultimately reducing itself to issues surrounding idiosyncratic readings, it's fairly easy to speak objectively about it with regard to *American Psycho*. As I said earlier (page 226), Bateman's atrocities obtrude in a flat narrative landscape of non-events, his endless luncheon and dinner dates, nightclub rounds, etc. This situation leaves us with only two general affects, which readers have universally reported: disgust and boredom. The two are in a functional relationship which is not a structural binarism but a dialectic, for as we respond, by turns, to the book's tedious flatness and its violent enormities, each affect transforms the other. An engaged reading of *Psycho* leads inevitably to questions about how our affective response is connected to the ways in which we use them. Disgust leads to the
question, Just whose fantasy is this? and boredom sensitizes us to our real-life epistemic commitments.

*American Psycho*'s few apologists have picked up on the functional relation between these two affects, though almost invariably their discussions are tinged with a certain defensiveness born of the need to disimpcate themselves. For instance, Nora Rawlinson calls it "a serious novel that comments on a society that has become inured to suffering" (147). Yes, when Bateman taunts homeless men and women begging in the streets, he exaggerates and exposes our own indifference to the human suffering we see daily. And when he considers that a murder he is about to commit is "going to be a characteristically useless, senseless death, but then I'm used to the horror" (329), he mirrors our complacency before suffering we witness on the evening news. But on another level it seems preposterous to say that we have become inured to suffering when it plays so large a part of our cultural repertoire. Ghastly mainstream novels like Clive Barker's *Books of Blood* series or the new literary genre "splatterpunk" (of which *Psycho* is an example—see Ken Tucker's "The Splatterpunk Trend, and Welcome to it"), popular entertainments like the many *Nightmare on Elm Street* films and "Cuisinart" flicks like *Body Double* (the video version of which Patrick Bateman has rented 50 times) or *I Spit on Your Grave*, and "real-life" television shows like *Eyewitness Video* or *Top Cops* (which feature actual footage and/or reenactments of disasters and violent police encounters) suggest rather the opposite: our fascination with human suffering has become the stuff of the entertainment industry, and we are if anything a society inured to everything *but* human suffering, which in our own carefully administered and circumscribed world
of flat, non-events (exactly like Bateman's in all respects save perhaps scale) emerges as the only entertainment left.

In a particularly dauntless review, Henry Bean comes much closer to exposing the function of disgust in the novel. Arguing that "Ellis shoves our faces into our own appetites, forcing us to see how much we'll swallow (including gross implausibilities) just to get off," Bean defends American Psycho by admitting that Bateman's "endless lists of brand names, chic restaurants and thoroughly accessible hardbodies is the stuff of our fantasy life—the lower floors, perhaps, but we spend a lot of time there" (5). Bean concludes that the book is "a satire, a hilarious, repulsive, boring, seductive, deadpan satire of what we now call—as if it were something in the past—the Age of Reagan" (5). It's true that there are elements of broad satire in American Psycho. For instance, considering Bateman's fondness for mutilation and dismemberment, there is comic irony in the name of his place of employment, Pierce & Pierce, or in his "favorite Hemingway novel, A Farewell to Arms" (280). And there's certainly an element of farce in Bateman's several attempts to confess his crimes: when he tells a model named Libby that he specializes in "murders and executions" she responds, unfazed, "Well, most guys I know who work in mergers and acquisitions don't really like it" (206). But for all Bean's honesty, there is in his attempt to laugh off what he himself recognizes as the reader's complicity in American Psycho a defensiveness not entirely unrelated to the other reviewers' righteous indignation: without projecting his own materialism onto Bateman or denying the epistemological reality the novel reflects, Bean still finds a way to disown revulsion by focusing on the exaggerated portrayal which incites it.
But as with most defenses, it is precisely when one thinks he has
distanced himself from the issue that he brushes up against it. When Bean
comments on the "grotesque implausibilities" in the novel, he calls attention
to what ought to be most disturbing about it. It is indeed highly unlikely
that a person could commit even half of Bateman's atrocities without being
caught. Two-thirds through the novel, his apartment is a slaughterhouse,
the walls splattered with his victims' blood and filled with decaying body
parts. His expensive clothing, bed sheets, and furniture are stained with
blood. But neither his maid nor his dry cleaner turn him in, and none of
his neighbors ever seems to hear the screams of people being tortured to
death. Moreover, in spite of the graphic with detail which Bateman
describes his acts, many of the dismemberment scenes seem physically
impossible. The extreme improbability of Bateman's serial murders suggest
that they are merely his own fantasies, acts that he would like to commit
but never does in fact—since most of his life is like a movie (343), and
since, as I mentioned above, he can only project himself into the scenes of
these atrocities as though he were a spectator, it seems tempting to
conclude that what we are reading is a description of his hallucinations or
fantasies rather than acts he has committed.

But the question of what we are supposed to conclude about the
"reality" of Bateman's crimes is immaterial, and instead the long stretches of
boring material which intervene impel us toward the important question.
Just whose fantasy is this, anyway? The tedium in *American Psycho* makes
it difficult to avoid the recognition that we are only reading it for the
disgusting parts. (And the novel's notoriety makes this recognition all but
inescapable.) There is no other reason to keep reading this novel, which is
twice as long as Ellis's first novel, *Less Than Zero*, and easily twice as boring. As some critics actually *complained*, we have to wade through more than one hundred pages of utterly pointless narrative before we get to the first slashing. Nan Graham, an editor at Simon and Schuster said, "I had to read for an hour and a half before getting to the bad stuff. I was bored and annoyed" (Sheppard 100). And Roger Rosenblatt advised, "Thumb through it, for the sake of *normal prurience*, but don't buy it" (100, my italics). Bateman's obsession with brand-name minutiae, his babbling, run-on prose style, his superficial self-characterization and moronic lack of imagination about those around him, the total pointlessness of his existence, the lack of any moral imperative to be inferred from plot resolution—all of which is to say, the novel's complete refusal to deliver the "literary quality" which is our escape hatch—force us to confront the possibility that the fantasy is ours.

This is why perhaps instead of disgust we ought to use a more honest term for our affective response, *fascination*. Far from excluding disgust, fascination, at least with regard to *American Psycho* or fiction like it, is the fusion of repulsion and attraction. Repulsion and attraction are

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8Because the film *Silence of the Lambs* was released at about the same time as *American Psycho* (early in 1991), it was often compared to the latter, and nearly always favorably. But as far as I have been able to tell, nearly everyone overlooked what I took to be the film's finest moment. An FBI agent (played by Jodie Foster) needs the help of an incarcerated serial killer named Hannibal Lecter (played by Anthony Hopkins). When she first confronts Lecter, Lecter is not sure whether he can trust her. He tests her by asking whether she has seen photographs of the killer's victims and how they struck her. She thinks for a moment before answering, "I found them fascinating." If everyone has been able to escape the implications of this scene, it is because the film, in spite of its disturbing blurring of the forces of good and evil, still gives us ample opportunity to defend ourselves through the polarization, all things considered fairly stable, of the characters who represent those forces.
inseparable within fascination, for fascination is the experience of repressed aggressions surfacing in a "safe" context. These aggressions are grounded, I would argue, in an arrested dialectic of desire much like Bateman's. In other words, the preservation of our "negativity toward otherness" within the civilized structures of everyday life is the source of this aggressivity, driven toward acceptable outlets like novel reading or spectator sports by the same forces of socialization that exacerbate them. However, when the outlets are marginally acceptable—and the furor over American Psycho clearly placed the novel in that category—then our security is somewhat troubled; and when the outlet keeps daring us to stop reading by boring us to tears, it becomes hard to avoid coming to terms with the what underwrites our persistence. It doesn't matter that American Psycho crosses the threshold of our tolerance for the ambivalence of fascination. Indeed it doesn't matter whether we decide to put it down in disgust without finishing it; for by the time we make the decision to stop reading in disgust, it is at least possible that we have already recognized that we have a threshold, that we have been fascinated, and that we are therefore implicated. This is why in some ways the most honest reaction to Psycho on record came from the jacket illustrator George Corsillo, who refused to complete his commission, saying "I felt disgusted with myself for reading it" (Plagens 59). Every postmodern work like Psycho is trying to be the last novel we'll ever read, the last painting we look at, the last play or movie we attend. Every such work fails at this attempt, but then every such work knows that—i.e., was constructed with that expectation in mind—because the entertainment market, creature of capitalism that it is, is a system which must continually exceed its own boundaries. This was in the
back of the minds of those people who, correctly, argued that *Psycho* would set a new standard for repulsive entertainment that would eventually become commonplace. But paradoxically, within this system, the recognition of the possibilities which inhere in the achievement of a momentary excess amounts to artistic responsibility, however irresponsible in other respects.

If in the dialectic of affective response boredom affects disgust, then it is also true that disgust affects boredom. The excess of disgust in our fascination spills over into the tedious passages which make up most of the novel. As the serial killings begin to take on the same aspect of pointlessness and futility as Bateman's other hedonistic pursuits, the narration switches between vivisection and brand-name inventory without the slightest transition. Eventually Bateman is as bored and frustrated with murder as he is with consumerism—though he only indirectly admits to either frustration—and as his initial adrenaline rushes begin to merge with the complacency of the rest of his routine, he does not bother to distinguish between them insofar as narrative technique is concerned. These abrupt alternations are the source for the novel's most startling impact. Our specific nausea becomes a sort of general, Sartrean nausea in which every object—beyond the novel, in our actual lives—begins to glow with a fetishistic aura. Suddenly, everything *is* its brand name and the relations between that brand name and all the others which condition our knowledge of it. Having immersed ourselves in a novel full of labels which refuses us the comforts of subjective essentialism, we re-emerge into the real world and find it identical to the fictional one. We are delivered into a world of relations between objects without content, a world of structure, and it is neither transcendent nor immanent but socially constructed, the
product of social relations which exceed the boundaries of individual experience and yet which are dependent upon the colonization of every one of us. Whenever I interrupted my reading of *Psycho*, every object in my own apartment disgusted me; outside, automobiles appeared grotesque; and the thought of entering a department store was repulsive. I do not propose that my reaction depends upon a familiarity with Marxism—for it was quite some time before I found the terms in which to account for it, and in any case what I am describing is much more affective than ideational. I do not even propose that my reaction was especially *idiosyncratic*: I believe that any engaged reader would react similarly.

The weakness of my argument should be apparent: it depends upon engaged reading. I freely admit this weakness but with the recognition that just as no artistic creation can shake off complicity in the social order that produced it, no artistic creation can overmaster our defensive refusal to recognize that fact. Walter Davis explains that the goal of engagement "is to reawaken that richer relationship to ourselves that is the basis for a richer relationship to texts" (7). "Its ruling assumption is that our involvement in our own subjectivity is not a barrier to interpretation but the circumstance that enables us to enter most deeply into a text" (4). Rooted in Heideggerian existentialism insofar as it continually keeps before itself the questions, "Who am I?" and "What shall I do?" engaged reading recognizes that being is at issue even while reading novels. If we are engaged readers we refuse the comforts of psychological defenses and undertake their reverse: instead of isolating the novelistic experience from our lives we seek out the connections, especially those we would rather
refuse. Instead of reading in order to close off the outside world, we read to understand it, and we reject literature which cannot help us achieve a richer relationship to our lived experience. Most important, we do not identify only with characters we admire—in fact we are suspicious of the tendency to do so—but realize that every act of recognition is an act of self-recognition. This is why insofar as we are engaged readers our understanding of *American Psycho*—that is, the extent to which we are familiar with its products and don’t need to ask what the words Sony, Brooks Brothers, and Minolta mean—is the first step in a process that implicates us in a horrifying but undeniable identification with Patrick Bateman.

Engaged reading doesn’t mean that the only meaning a text can have is the one we give it; it means rather that the only meaning it can have, or that texts *ever* have, is meaning *for us*. The being of the entities I read about is in every case mine, not some defensive, partial projection of a self I’d rather cast off, either because I love it too much or, as in the present case, despise it too much. Above all, there is nothing necessary about engaged reading, and there is nothing within the text that requires it of us. My contention that *American Psycho* disarms our defenses to a greater degree than most novels is not truer than the opposite claim, easily enough made, that it incites us to erect those defenses all the more vehemently. After all, even if it is true, as I believe, that the righteous indignation of the critics I have cited amounts to defensive dissociations, the fact remains that their defenses have easily withstood the novel’s assault—it’s just that offensiveness emerges as *Psycho*’s moment of possibility, which is ours to accept or refuse. It is also undeniable, as Roger Kimball says, that
"American Psycho is utterly unredeemed by moral sensibility or critical distance" (7). There is no moral dimension to Psycho, just as there is no moral dimension to the world it reflects, as either a description of that world or a production of it—if we want a moral dimension we will have to supply it, but not by simply ascribing it, ex cathedra, as the epiphenomenon of an economic system that reproduces itself in monstrosities of wealth and poverty or by inscribing it into novels that would tell us soothing lies about ourselves. Kimball is right again when he says that Psycho is "no more a 'commentary' than is Deep Throat." But it is no less a commentary either, and in both cases it's a question of what one does with what one is given.

As I come to the end of this study, I find that I cannot exonerate American Psycho, nor do I want to. The novel stands at the edge, if it doesn't totter over it, of what our culture can honestly say about itself without being justifiably charged with obscene self-indulgence or outright unintelligibility—so clearly and so inanely does it say to us "We are who we are." In the end I find that am in pretty much the same position as the novelist Fay Weldon, who wrote a remarkable essay on Psycho for the Washington Post. Weldon refers to the novel as a "beautifully controlled" "portrait of psychotic America, psychotic us." But after praising it as a "buzzer of a book. A seminal book," Weldon shows the same uncomfortable ambivalence I am experiencing: "Look, I didn't want you to actually read Ellis's book. I did it for you." (4). I wish I could say that. But in the final analysis no one can do your reading for you, just as no one can do Patrick Bateman's dying for him. Fortunately, you don't have to read American Psycho in Ellis's novel; you can read it anywhere.
Conclusion: The Problem of Endogenous Criticism

In the preceding chapters I have alluded several times to the problem of endogenous criticism, that is, the problem of articulating an alternative to epistemic structuralism that would be intelligible to readers who to a greater or lesser degree are committed to structuralist strategies for knowing. We have seen that in *The Recognitions* William Gaddis's narrator adopts a caustically critical attitude toward the novel's structuralist characters and that this attitude is grounded in a notion of authentic subjectivity toward which the central character, Wyatt Gwyon, progresses in his "un-storying." But not only is authenticity unrepresentable in terms of the narrative's structuralist orientation, the category itself has become irrelevant. If certain characters in *The Recognitions* foundered because of the conflict between their structuralist commitments and their abiding belief in their transcendent individualism, the postmodern individual, in his willed vacancy, is largely untroubled by that conflict.

Therefore J. G. Ballard's novel *The Atrocity Exhibition*, which followed *The Recognitions* by fifteen years, takes up a new form of conflict, grounded not in the contradiction between the individual and society, which I have called the "scandal" of epistemic structuralism, but in the fragmented psyche's attempt to liberate its desires from the confines or "territorializations" of the *episteme*. Ballard was able set the terms for this struggle by balancing the forces of structure and desire in a narrative that was nearly as schizophrenic as its protagonist. Thus his solution to
the problem of endogenous criticism was to articulate an irrational alternative, one which encouraged us to "immerse ourselves in our most destructive element, ourselves, and swim."

Bret Easton Ellis, writing fifteen years later yet, takes Ballard's dictum to its logical conclusion. He solves the problem of endogenous criticism by abandoning it altogether, creating a novel of total immersion which articulates no internal critique of the disgusting excesses it depicts. It is entirely up to the engaged reader to make the connections between consumer capitalism and misogynist psychotic rage, connections which are utterly beyond the ken of the novel's narrator, Patrick Bateman. In this Ellis has done something powerful and disturbing, though perverse and dangerous, too.

The problem of endogenous criticism, then, comes down to this: without an engaged audience—an audience prepared to recognize itself in the most unpalatable depictions the critic has to offer and to realize what is at stake in that recognition—no criticism is possible. For otherwise an author like Gaddis, who adopts an overtly critical stance, winds up depending upon categories so reified and excavated that they appear irrelevant; and, at the other extreme, when an author like Ellis simply allows the episteme to speak for itself, he runs the risk of saying nothing at all, of boring us and disgusting us without our bothering to connect those affects to each other. Clearly, in the progression of novels considered here, engagement plays an increasingly crucial role. And if each novel reflects the state of epistemic structuralism at the time of its writing, it certainly does not follow that readers are more predisposed toward engagement now than they have been heretofore. My prognosis,
then, is that we are approaching a time which will leave authors without options, at least regarding the possibility of endogenous criticism. Thankfully, there is plenty of *exogenous* criticism available, as insightful writers like Toni Morrison and outraged rappers like *Public Enemy* rail at us from the margins of culture. Failing these, there is always that most cogent form of exogenous criticism: revolution.
Bibliography


