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The concealed dialectic: Existentialism and (inter)subjectivity in the postmodern novel

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The Ohio State University, 1993
The Concealed Dialectic: Existentialism and (Inter)Subjectivity in the Postmodern Novel

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

Oscar De Los Santos, B.A., M.A.

* * * * *

The Ohio State University
1993

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Walter A. Davis
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With Love and Gratitude
I Dedicate This Work
to
My Wife
Andrea
and to My Parents
Petra and Santos De Los Santos
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Can one adequately explore existentialism, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity in a postmodern framework? It appears, if we look at some recent novels, that it certainly is possible, and that some authors have come to feel that postmodernism may be one of the most effective ways to study the self and reach a contemporary audience. In this dissertation, I plan to explore existentialism, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity in the postmodern novel. The existential and the postmodern are often seen as divergent concepts/forms of discourse. However, in recent years, some writers have begun to bridge the gap between the two. I believe that we can attribute this partially to our increasingly escalating media-oriented culture. As Mark Poster notes in *The Mode of Information*, "Time and space no longer restrict the exchange of information. McLuhan's 'global village' is technically feasible and as such has important consequences that call into question the adequacy of existing theories and positions" (2).

With the increase in technology comes increasingly rapid access to information and entertainment. Postmodern
writers are aware of the crucial need to alter forms -- or to amalgamate existing forms in order that they may be better understood today. To keep up with the "improvements" -- and to combat the increasing competition for an audience -- some authors have begun to alter their texts in a way that is reflective of our rapid-change society. The existential concerns in some postmodern novels may not be readily obvious, and the form that some postmodern books take may seem to subsume any study of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Nonetheless, I believe that a concealed dialectic exists in certain postmodern books, and that (inter)subjectivity can be traced in them. The subjects in these works are not so much being marginalized as approached differently. Postmodern texts often explore subjectivity and intersubjectivity by using concepts and forms of discourse that are more readily accepted and understood by today's culture, which is not only accustomed to rapid-fire information and technological changes, but has come to expect and demand them at the touch of a button on its television, VCR, stereo, and CD remote controls.

Chapter One will attempt to detail my objectives, using Jean-Paul Sartre's *Existentialism* and *Being and Nothingness* as my cornerstones. It will examine postmodern theory and criticism, address the notion that the subject has been lost in works of postmodernism, and argue that the subject may have been marginalized, but has not disappeared altogether.
I will show that postmodern authors are approaching subjectivity through easily recognized, contemporary metaphors and modes of communication. These modes include popular culture, television, and film. Since images and dramatizations figure so significantly in postmodern communication, I will discuss the influence of the media and performance on our assimilation and interpretation of information. Finally, I will attempt to show that the collage of images, mediums, and genres inherent in postmodernism, together with the ambiguity and uncertainty in many such works, combine to create a multiplicity of possibilities or outcomes for the self. In lieu of said ambiguity, there are those texts which are left "open ended" and subject to interpretation. Resolution is not clear-cut because the writers are attempting to accurately reflect the uncertainty -- the continuous change and plethora of possibilities -- prevalent in our postmodern times.

In Chapter Two, I will examine Marguerite Duras' The Lover, The Malady of Death, and a longer version of the latter, Blue Eyes, Black Hair. More than anyone else on my list of authors, Duras dispenses with story embellishment and narrative backdrops. The outcome is a tale of subjectivity/intersubjectivity reduced to its bare minimum -- in The Malady of Death, the story of a man who objectifies a woman by paying her to stay with him to do with her as he wishes, and in Blue Eyes, Black Hair, the story of a man who
substitutes the presence of a woman for the person whom he truly desires, a young man he spotted in a cafe. In both stories, the man finds that the woman's constant presence and perceptive appraisal of his life complicate his original intentions. The woman forces the man to engage in introspection and gaze upon the alienated, isolated and dead quality of his existence. This chapter will also explore the authorial voice which intrudes at the end of The Malady of Death and throughout Blue Eyes, Black Hair -- a voice which comments that the story could be performed on the stage, and then proceeds to disrupt the narrative repeatedly with set/stage directions, as though the book were already a stage presentation -- in order to better understand the instrusive presence of the author in some works of postmodernism.

Chapter Three will focus on Paul Auster's The New York Trilogy, a text which consists of three short novels, City of Glass, Ghosts, and The Locked Room. It will use Raymond Chandler's The Long Goodbye as its primary example of the modern detective story and then juxtapose Auster's novels with it in order to prove that Auster deviates from the modern mystery and ends up writing postmodern existential detective fiction. Auster's novels operate by using some of the conventions found in modern detective novels and then branch off into deeper mysteries than the ones presented on the surface. Auster creates a surface mystery in each of
his stories which he uses to engage the reader. In City of Glass, Quinn, a writer of pop detective fiction, turns investigator in order to trace a disturbed man who may soon try to kill his own son; in Ghosts, Blue is hired to spy on a man who seems to do little more than sit at a table and write for months at a time; and in The Locked Room, the nameless narrator embarks on a search for a missing childhood friend. However, in each novel, the focus of the story eventually shifts away from the surface mystery to the deeper mystery in the text: the people doing the sleuthing. The true mysteries in The New York Trilogy are the protagonists themselves, and the books become inquiries into the human subject.

My goal in Chapter Four is to examine subjectivity and intersubjectivity in Thomas Pynchon’s Vineland, specifically how the electronic image (television, film, computer generated photographs) can trigger significant recognitions -- moments of subjectivity and intersubjectivity -- for the characters in the novel. Since the bulk of our society relies so heavily on television and film for entertainment and information, it is no surprise that what the characters in Vineland see is often as important as -- or more so than -- what is said.

Chapter Five will focus on Robert Coover’s Pinocchio in Venice. Coover combines the famous fairy tale and animated film and continues the character’s story in postmodern
fashion, presenting us with a thorough exploration of Pinocchio's ontological breakdown and reformulation. Philosophical concepts are useless, the puppet-turned-man-returning-to-puppet comes to realize, unless they are put to the test and implemented within the context of our own lives. *Pinocchio in Venice* postulates that a blend of theory and action -- i.e., engagement with another human subject -- is the key to a fulfilling existence.

Finally, my conclusion will briefly mention other postmodern novels and films which explore existentialism, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity. I will also re-stress my belief that some authors are using postmodern literature to explore existentialism because they feel that postmodernism is one of the most effective ways of discussing the ontological growth of the human subject with today's society.
CHAPTER I

Tracing Existentialism and (Inter)Subjectivity
in Today's Postmodern Culture
and Its Literature

Introduction

In this first chapter, I will highlight those principles of Jean-Paul Sartre's existential philosophy on which I will focus in the examination of the novels in the coming chapters. I will then explore the ways that the subject has been decentered but not completely eradicated as an area of concern in postmodernism. Since we live in a world that relies so heavily on popular culture and electronic visuals to convey information, and since some postmodernists reflect this fact in their texts, I will show how popular culture has come to affect our (inter)subjectivity, then gauge the impact of the electronic image on each individual in our postmodern culture. Finally, I will study the ways postmodern artists blur boundaries between fiction and non-fiction in order to call into question the concepts of author(ity), history, omniscience, and reality, and to stress the fragility and indeterminacy of our existence. Once I have focused
attention on each of these topics individually, I will use my conclusion to show how each one problematizes the philosophy of existentialism, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity in ways that are, if not entirely new, heavily grounded in today's media- and technology-oriented culture. If I succeed in adequately developing my theory, I believe that the chapter will ultimately 1) show that existentialism, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity are still "alive and well" in postmodern discourse, and 2) produce a better understanding of the ways that existentialism can be applied to postmodernism in order to deepen our understanding of the decentered subject.

I

Jean Paul Sartre's Theories of Existentialism, Subjectivity, and Intersubjectivity

My goal here is to highlight those most significant portions of Sartre's theories that are of concern in this dissertation. I will return to these theories in the conclusion of this chapter, after I have studied the primary elements found in postmodernism that I feel complicate the concepts of existentialism, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity.

When I refer to existentialism throughout my dissertation, I am referring to the theories refined and/or formulated by Sartre after the great existentialists which
preceded him, among them Heidegger, Hegel, Kant, and Descartes. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre defines the concept of Being as such: "Being is. Being is in-itself. Being is what it is. These are the three characteristics which the preliminary examination of the phenomenon of being allows us to assign to the being of phenomena" ("The Pursuit of Being" 29). Sartre’s theory informs us that being precedes essence, and that it is up to each individual to deal with the reality of her/his existence. According to Sartre, the best way to cope with our existence is to give it meaning. One of the ways to do this is to set various goals for ourselves. Thus, we find that meaning often resides in the striving toward and accomplishment of various tasks which are both life-affirming and life-enriching for ourselves and others. As Sartre tells us in *Existentialism*, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. Such is the first principle of existentialism. It is also called subjectivity" (18). The previous statement underscores one of the most important elements of Sartre’s existentialist philosophy, one which deviates to a certain extent from the thinkers before him. I am referring to the stress which he places on moving beyond introspection, toward some kind of action which affirms the self and solidifies self-identity.

The doctrine I am presenting [*Existentialism*] is the very opposite of quietism, since it declares, "There is no reality except in action." Moreover, it goes further, since it adds, "Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists
only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life. . . . a man is nothing else than a series of undertakings. . . . he is the sum, the organization, the ensemble of the relationships which make up these undertakings" (37-39).

In Being and Nothingness (1943) and his Existentialism lecture (1947) — "the first sustained exposition of Sartre’s philosophy to appear in English" (Frechtman 2-3) — Sartre also stresses the importance of the Other in the development of the subject’s individual identity. Only by actively engaging with someone else and establishing some kind of close personal relationship with the Other can the individual hope to fully understand the significance of being alive. Engagement with the Other furthers the sense of individuality within Wo/Man and brings her/him closer to a clear and honest understanding of, and relationship with, her/himself:

In order to get any truth about myself, I must have contact with another person. The other is indispensable to my own existence, as well as to my knowledge about myself. This being so, in discovering my inner being I discover the other person at the same time, like a freedom placed in front of me which thinks and wills only for or against me. Hence, let us at once announce the discovery of a world which we shall call inter-subjectivity; this is the world in which man decides what he is and what others are. (Existentialism 44-45)
The Other is a kind of sounding board, a necessary audience which informs us that we exist by fixating us with his/her gaze and responding to our own actions.

Besides reaffirming our existence, the Other allows us the possibility of deepening our own consciousness even as we help the Other do the same. If our engagement with the Other is honest and sincere enough and runs deep enough, then "the Other has not only revealed to me what I was; he has established me in a new type of being which can support new qualifications" (Being and Nothingness 302).

Because of the value of the Other in our lives, Sartre sets out "to posit a real, extra-empirical communication between consciousnesses" (Being and Nothingness 310). The notion that there will be "communication between consciousnesses" is extremely important because up to this point the philosophy of existentialism may sound noble but selfish and egocentric. After all, using the Other to further develop one’s own consciousness is little more than objectifying the Other and using her/him to serve one’s purposes. If, on the other hand, there is some kind of reciprocation involved -- an exchange of information and feelings -- then the whole dynamics of the situation is altered, and contact with the Other becomes just that: communication on a multi-level dimension. Intersubjectivity is attained and a genuine relationship is formed as spiritual, and in some cases, physical communication is
established and deepened between oneself and the Other. When this is the case, both subjects benefit from the relationship established. It is for this reason that Sartre notes that we should be constantly aware not only of what the Other is doing for us, but what we may be doing for the Other: "What I constantly aim at *across* my experiences are the Other's feelings, the Other's ideas, the Other's volitions, the Other's character. This is because the Other is not only the one whom I see but the one *who sees me*" (310, emphasis Sartre's).

Having presented this very brief and admittedly inadequate overview of Sartre's existential theories regarding the concepts of being, existing, subjectivity and intersubjectivity, I wish to turn to some of the elements of postmodernism which further complicate the quests for self-identity and establishing a firm relationship with others. Given that postmodernism is very much concerned with reflecting the rapid-fire changes prevalent in our culture as well as the assault of information on human-consciousnesses, it is little wonder that many feel that the individual and individuality are hopelessly lost today. I will examine some of the current problems that have joined the old to besiege the human subject and return to existentialism in my conclusion in order to show that the quest to obtain subjectivity/intersubjectivity has more than ever been problematized, but still remains a possibility.
II
Postmodernism and the
Destabilized Subject

I do not make the claim that the subject is still the center of discourse (the deconstructionists long ago helped the postmodernists show us differently), or the most important factor in postmodern works. But is the subject dead in the sense that it bears absolutely no importance to cultural and social examinations that go on in postmodern writing? A couple of decades ago, postmodern criticism was not yet ready to make that claim. Hassan’s *Dismemberment of Orpheus* showed that the subject had certainly been decentered, but was still in many ways at the center of discussion: that is, postmodern literature dealt not so much with culture and society as a whole, but with the process of the individual becoming alienated and destabilized.

A short time later, in the first issue of *Boundary2*, William Spanos discussed postmodernism both in terms of the decentered subject as well as the genre’s proclivity to undermine our traditional (Modern) expectations of narrative. Of ontology and the postmodern, Spanos notes that

In the wake of my repeated interrogations of the canonical tradition and the retrieval of some moments of the past it has colonized...I come to understand the postmodern occasion not merely as a
chronological but also as an ontological phenomenon. Postmodern literature thus becomes a kind of writing that is "grounded" in an ungrounded understanding of being, a kind of "destructive" writing, as it were, which remains marginal up to the middle of this century, but which increasingly thereafter becomes the central preoccupation of dramatists, poets, and novelists. . . (8)

At this point, it is clear that some critics -- at least Spanos -- were not ready to completely surrender the subject to the chaos of postmodernism. It is not that Spanos disapproved of the bizarre narrative experimentation found in postmodern writing. Indeed, he welcomed it and saw it as a key to stimulating the audience's thinking:

"The most immediate task. . . in which the contemporary writer must engage himself -- it is, to borrow a phrase ungratefully from Yeats, the most difficult of tasks not possible -- is that of undermining the detectivelike expectations of the positivistic mind, of unhoming Western Man, by evoking rather than purging pity and terror. . ." (48)

Some fifteen years later, in Spanos' book of collected essays, he seems to make a retraction of sorts: "the following essays bear witness to my growing reservations about certain aspects of the existential inquiry that inaugurated my project -- above all, its tendency to privilege the 'authentic' or 'proper' self. . ." (Repetitions 4)
Regardless of initial theoretical formulations and reservations about relinquishing the subject, postmodern theory in the mid-seventies quickly moved on to the notion that the subject was not only marginalized, but altogether obliterated. In Paracriticisms, for example, Hassan pushes his thoughts about disappearing ontology much further than he did in The Dismemberment of Orpheus and tells us that

it is not the Dehumanization of the Arts that concerns us now; it is rather the Denaturalization of the Planets and the End of Man. We are, I believe, inhabitants of another Time and another Space, and we no longer know what response is adequate to our reality. In a sense, we have all learned to become minimalists -- of that time and space we can call our own -- though the globe may have become our village. (53)

Hassan echoes McLuhan and asserts that even though communication, exploration, and transportation draw us closer together, we can no longer see/move beyond individual ideologies, opinions, and philosophies -- nor do they usually matter to the next wo/man. Certainly, I do not think that Hassan is calling for us to relinquish our individuality, but the thrust of his comments reveal his belief that our discourse should no longer attempt to privilege the individuality of each human subject but instead focus on the ways that postmodern ideas and innovations have influenced society as a whole. As Hans Bertens observes in "The Postmodern Weltanschauung...", Hassan's ideas
are governed by a radical epistemological and ontological doubt. ..

Whereas the Modernists sought to defend themselves against their own awareness of cosmic chaos, of the impossible fragility of any "center" they might perceive, the Postmodernists have accepted chaos and live in fact in a certain intimacy of it. ..

This recognition of the final decentering leads to a postmodern world that is characterized by two main tendencies, "indeterminacy" and "immanence." Of these two poles indeterminacy stands primarily for the results of that decentering, of the total disappearance of ontology. (Fokkema and Bertens 28)

Very soon the majority came to side with Hassan and the general consensus was that "the disappearance of ontology" was an accurate perception of "the postmodern condition" (to borrow Lyotard's term) and that the subject was no longer a factor in these works. In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," for example, Fredric Jameson notes that today, from any number of distinct perspectives, the social theorists, the psychoanalysts, even the linguists, not to speak of those of us who work in the area of culture and cultural and formal change, are all exploring the notion that . . . individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past; that the old individual or individual subject is "dead"; and that one might even describe the concept of the unique individual and the theoretical basis of individualism as ideological. (Foster 114)

Still later, in Postmodernism, Jameson continues to assert that subjectivity is no longer a concern of the postmodern: "anxiety and alienation (and the experiences to which they correspond, as in [Munch's] The Scream) are no longer
appropriate in the world of the postmodern. . . . the alienation of the subject is displaced by the latter's fragmentation" (14).

And yet, isn't it possible to find strains of alienation and anxiety within the characters in these fragmented narratives? In some cases, yes. To say that you cannot is to imply that no character in postmodernism ever really stops to think about her/himself and others. If they do, does that make the work a modern rather than a postmodern piece? This kind of categorization is silly. Chaos is a staple of postmodernism. Narratives take sudden twists and turns and the subject is often thrust from one bizarre, often improbable, sometimes surrealistic set of circumstances to another. Still, in the midst of this chaos, some soul/self-searching does occur -- even if self identity is continuously destabilized by historicity and/or the circumstances which the subject experiences. In "Theory Pedagogy Politics: The Crisis of 'The Subject' in the Humanities," Mad'ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton note that

postmodern critical theory does not conceptualize the subject as a stable entity but argues that the parameters of the subject vary according to the discursive practices that are current in any historical moment. In this view, the human does not have a timeless essence, a nature or a consciousness that places him beyond historical and political practices, but rather is considered to be produced by these practices or as an effect of these discourses. . . . The 'disappearance' of man is the disappearance of discourses
that enable his being in its present mode, a point that Foucault emphasizes in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: "The researches of psychoanalysis, linguistics, and ethnology have decentered the subject in relation to the laws of his desire, the forms of his language, the rules of his actions, or the games of his mythical or fabulous discourse."

This notion of the subject in constant displacement is further radicalized in the work of Jacques Lacan. (4-5)

This does not necessarily imply that subjectivity is dead, but that it is in constant turmoil and forced to undergo continuous metamorphosis by the cultural and social conditions the individual finds him/herself in. Linda Hutcheon stresses this idea when she notes that

The philosophical, "archeological," and psychoanalytic de-centering of the concept of the subject has been led by Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, among others. To decenter is not to deny, however. Postmodernism does not, as Terry Eagleton asserts, mistake "the disintegration of certain traditional ideologies of the subject for the subject's final disappearance" (1985, 70). Its historicizing of the subject and of its customary (centering) anchors radically problematizes the entire notion of subjectivity, pointing directly to its dramatized contradictions. ... To situate is also to acknowledge the ideology of the subject and to suggest alternative notions of subjectivity (Huyssen 1986, 213). (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 159)

It is these "alternative notions of subjectivity" which I seek in the bulk of this dissertation, or more accurately,
the different ways that (inter)subjectivity is approached in
the various works to be discussed in the coming chapters.

This notion of existentialism within the postmodern may
seem radical, as if I am privileging the micro over the
macro, or put another way, looking too closely and ignoring
"the big picture." Not so. Nor do I wish to associate
myself with those who wish to rescue the subject from its
marginalized position. It is true, as Zavarzadeh and Donald
Morton note, that

Postmodern critical theory's
contestation of the concept of the
unitary subject has created tremendous
pressures -- originating from both
inside and outside the academy -- for "
changing the humanities curriculum. . .
The desire for change . . . is the
desire to save the subject. (11)

The "desire to save the subject" indicates that some
theorists would like to resituate the subject as the center
of discourse. I do not. Instead, my goal is to show that
we can still find traces of existential thought in
postmodern literature if we look closely into some of the
fragments of the narratives and the characters and trace the
subject through whatever crises it undergoes. These
crises -- often brought on by the unstable and chaotic
culture which the subject finds itself in -- affect the
consciousness of the subject and its relationship with
others. Whether there is some kind of final resolution, or
whether the subject "finds" itself momentarily only to lose
its grasp of cognizance soon afterwards, is ultimately not a
factor. Open-ended texts and fragmented subjects are staples of postmodernism, a reflection of our indeterminacy and the idea that the author should not be regarded as supreme authority (a notion that will be further examined in Section V of this chapter and in my chapter on Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy*). Let me clarify that I am well aware that the principal agenda of postmodernism is not existentialism or the individual subject, but I maintain that it is possible to produce existential readings of some postmodern works without grasping for straws or stretching credibility.

III

Popular Culture and Postmodern Literature

If we are to understand that existentialism, subjectivity, and intersubjectivity still exist in some form or another in postmodern literature, it is important to recognize that the language with which these subjects are being discussed has changed. One of the most important "languages" that postmodern writers have used in their works is the language of popular culture. As early as *Paracriticisms*, Hassan observed that it is already possible to note that whereas Modernism -- excepting Dada and Surrealism -- created its own forms of artistic authority precisely because the center no longer held, Postmodernism has tended toward artistic Anarchy in deeper...
complicity with things falling apart -- 
or has tended toward Pop. (59)

In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Jameson speaks of
"the erosion of the older distinction between high culture
and so-called mass or popular culture:"

many of the newer postmodernisms have
been fascinated precisely by that whole
landscape of advertising and motels, of
the Las Vegas strip, of the late show
and Grade-B Hollywood film, of so-called
paraliterature with its airport
paperback categories of the gothic and
the romance, the popular biography, the
murder mystery and the science fiction
or fantasy novel. They no longer
"quote" such "texts" as a Joyce might
have done, or a Mahler; they
incorporate them to the point where the
line between high art and commercial
forms seems increasingly difficult to
draw. (112)

Still later, Todd Gitlin ties popular culture to literature:
"As Donald Barthelme's fiction knows, we live in a forest of
images mass-produced and endlessly, alluringly empty" (73).
The images themselves may be "empty," but I believe that the
fact that they make their appearance in works of art gives
them value in the sense that they inform our society about
the quality of its taste and its priorities at any given
period of time.1

As one might expect, the fact that popular culture is
infiltrating so-called serious works of art -- among them,
literature -- has greatly distressed many critics. But I
think it is important to consider the fact that authors pick
up on our obsessions and use them as communication elements
in their works. Thus, if our current fiction -- both pop 
and more literary endeavors -- includes the icons and 
symbols and remnants of what some would call pop culture, 
and others, garbage, it is because of our ability to relate 
to pop culture and learn from it. With this in mind, I 
posit the following equation:


\[
\text{popular culture} = \text{communication with the masses}
\]

At the risk of discrediting my teaching abilities, let 
me illustrate further by drawing from personal example. In 
my classes, I use virtually any example that comes to mind 
in order to convey my meaning to my students. If I cull my 
brain and a particular section of Faulkner's *The Sound and 
the Fury* comes to mind as a good way to explain a particular 
issue or problem, then I use it. On the other hand, if I'm 
stumped and the latest issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* pops 
up in my head, and it too underscores my points, than I'm 
just as apt to use it in place of -- or along with -- 
Faulkner. The same goes for the latest Burger King 
television commercial if it does the job. Now, if I did 
this to the sole exclusion of the literary works I am 
teaching, if popular culture were the only method I used to 
articulate meaning to my students, then there might be a 
problem. Of course this is not the case, and I don't feel 
that I am short-changing them with the occasional pop 
reference. In fact, the odds are good (unfortunately,
perhaps) that most students will more readily ascertain meaning when I use the pop culture referent along with, or instead of, the literary one.

Others share my belief that the appearance of popular culture in postmodern literature is not such a bad thing. As Hans Bertens notes of Leslie Fiedler's and Susan Sontag's stance on the radical forms found in postmodernism,

For Fiedler. . .the new sensibility derides the pretensions of especially Modernist art; the postmodern novel will draw upon the Western, upon science fiction, upon pornography, upon other genres considered to be sub-literary, and it will close the gap between elite and mass culture. . . .The attitude that they [Fiedler and Susan Sontag] identify with Postmodernism is perhaps best described as celebratory -- a celebration of immediate, not intellectualized experience. (15).

Given the prominence of pop culture in our society, I believe that it is another useful language that we can use to communicate, a kind of verbal and visual short-hand that we use to articulate our thoughts on a daily basis. Since many people today rely so heavily on it for communication, information, and recreation (entertainment), and since most of us are inundated by it (even those who try to insulate themselves from it), it seems natural to see it infiltrate our more serious texts. To try and keep pop culture out of the literature would be akin to a kind of censorship -- or at the very least akin to ignoring a useful mode of
communication that will readily speed along information to the postmodern reader.

Pop culture, after all, provides us with an alternate and highly useful mode of communication. The authors I intend to explore have all used popular culture in one way or another in order to tell their stories: Auster uses the pop detective story genre as a springboard into a much more serious and thoughtful exploration of the human subject in *The New York Trilogy*, Pynchon's *Vineland* is permeated with pop culture symbols and references, Coover goes back to a popular children's story book and Disney film and expands them to tell *Pinocchio in Venice*, and Duras relies on our attraction to visual drama (television/film/video/theater) to write a multiplicity of stories within the main body of *Blue Eyes, Black Hair*.

More importantly, popular culture actually comes to further the whole existential, subjectivity, intersubjectivity issue. If pop culture is so much a part of what we are, it seems logical that it can also illuminate -- at least to some certain extent -- who we are. Whether the approaches that these authors take is ultimately effective in the telling of their tales remains to be seen in the forthcoming chapters. But they show that they are in tune with our global culture's heavy use of pop culture, and the messages it carries to the people.
IV
The Impact
of the Electronic Image
on the Postmodern Subject

In a recent special issue of *Time* magazine, Kurt Vonnegut laments: "Here I am an educated person and a writer and I watch every [television] channel, all 75 of them, simultaneously" (70). MTV (Music Television) kicked off its broadcasting network in the early nineteen eighties with the video "Video Killed the Radio Star" by the Buggles. And in 1992, rock singer Bruce Springsteen broke a five year music silence to sing about "57 Channels (And Nothing On)" in his album, *Lucky Town*. The same year, Neil Postman gave us some interesting figures to consider in his book, *Technopoly*:

What is our situation today [in 1992]? In the United States, we have 260,000 billboards; 11,520 newspapers; 11,556 periodicals; 27,000 video outlets for renting video tapes; more than 500 million radios; and more than 100 million computers. Ninety-eight percent of American homes have a television set; more than half our homes have more than one. There are 40,000 new book titles published every year (300,000 worldwide), and every day in America 41 million photographs are taken. And if this is not enough, more than 60 billion pieces of junk mail (thanks to computer technology) find their way into our mailboxes every year. (69)

I would like to point out the incredible amount of visual communication that is implicit in some of the above figures,
the large numbers of sources which bring us visual stimuli, and our addiction/obsession with the electronic image. The previous section of this chapter established that our society has come to depend on pop culture to communicate. Now I will briefly explore the medium through which much of this information is relayed to its audience. From the figures we can see that a certain amount of information is still printed in texts, or relayed to its audience in a more old fashioned way: through books, magazines, billboards. We can also see that the radio is still a factor in the information game, since most of us, whether at home or in the car or in the doctor's office or in certain restaurants, will end up listening to some form of radio broadcast or another. However, I would like to focus on what I feel to be the three most influential forms of information communication in the world today: television, video, and the home computer.

Many find our world's increasing obsession with the electronic image an ill-fated omen. In "The Ecstasy of Communication," Baudrillard notes that today the scene and mirror no longer exist; there is a screen and network. In place of the reflexive transcendence of mirror and scene, there is a nonreflecting surface, an immanent surface where operations unfold -- the smooth operational surface of communication. . .With the television image -- the television being the ultimate and perfect object for this new era -- our own body and the whole
surrounding universe become a control screen. (126-27)

It is clear that Baudrillard is concerned with the fact that for many, television has become a substitute mirror, and as Lacan and others after him have noted, the mirror is considered to be one of the principal elements of identity formation. Instead of subjectivity, we have artificial constructs on the screen. Instead of living active, productive lives and engaging one-to-one with others, many simply choose to gaze at the artificial lives being played out in the electronic box: "It is well known," Baudrillard observes, "how the simple presence of the television changes the rest of the habitat into a kind of archaic envelope, a vestige of human relations whose very survival remains perplexing. . . ." For this reason, he believes that "This is the time of miniaturization, telecommand and the microproces­sion of time, bodies, pleasures" (129). Indeed, because "we live in the ecstasy of communication" to such a great extent, Baudrillard voices his concern that

this ecstasy is obscene. . . today there is a whole pornography of information and communication, that is to say, of circuits and networks, a pornography of all functions and objects in their readability, their fluidity, their availability, their regulation, in their forced signification, in their performativity, in their branching, in their polyvalence, in their free expression. . . . (130-31)

Perhaps this "ecstasy of communication" is obscene and pornographic only if we make it so by letting the electronic
image dictate and rule us. Granted, it seems that it is almost impossible to ignore the onslaught of information coming at us from all forms of the media, and I will concede that much of it is commercial- and commodity-oriented, grossly lacking in any useful information; but why not look at this wealth of information positively by taking control of the situation — filtering out what we decide that we don’t want and keeping and using the rest? Let me develop this further.

Jameson admits that the computer and the television "are indeed machines of reproduction rather than of production," but also notes that

For some seventy years the cleverest prophets have warned us regularly that the dominant art form of the twentieth century was not literature at all — nor even painting or theater or the symphony — but rather the one new and historically unique art invented in the contemporary period, namely film; that is to say, the first distinctively mediatic art form. (Postmodernism 68)

He also goes on to assert that "the most likely candidate for cultural hegemony today. . . . is clearly video, in its twin manifestations as commercial television and experimental video, or "video art"" (69). I believe that he is absolutely right, but I would place more emphasis on commercial television than experimental video (which is marginalized and usually entertains only a more avant garde audience). In Teletheory, Gregory Ulmer notes that
Television organizes information narratively, ordering the complex interaction of sound and image through time by means of a combination of oral and pop culture forms, extending the simple forms of anecdote, joke, proverb, riddle, legend, and the like to new functions of classification and evaluation. (ix)

Considering the massive quantities of television programming most people are exposed/expose themselves to today, it is no surprise that for many (most?) people, television is the narrative form of choice. No single technological media device influences us the way the stuff of "the Tube" (to use Pynchon's *Vineland* television term) does. Television programs and commercials -- from hour long weekly dramas, documentaries and group discussions, to exploitation films, music videos, half-hour situation comedies, and commercials -- all profoundly influence a great majority of viewers. This is not only reflected in fashion styles and mannerisms, but in the public's very identity and personality make-up. In fact, many subjects are today largely comprised of personalities and concepts that they have absorbed from television.

Since this is the case, perhaps television and the image actually help many to find and formulate their identity and subjectivity. If the subject finds something within the images that moves it to the extent that introspection and self-examination occurs, and the subject comes away with a deeper understanding of itself, then
certainly the electronic image has had its positive effect and furthered the subject's quest for self-identity. If, on the other hand, the subject has simply identified with the electronic image on a surface level and assimilated not its meaning but its appearance, then little or nothing has been accomplished through its viewing because no deep engagement has taken place. Instead, the subject may attempt to assume the appearance of the image -- its looks, words, styles -- as a superficial surface persona. In these cases, certainly, the electronic image has hurt the subject. These people become posers and simulacras rather than enriched human beings.

This happens more and more frequently in today's postmodern times because of the wealth of images and communication systems at our disposal. When the plethora of images is thrust at the subject in such rapid, hodge-podge fashion that one undercuts the other in a kind of image collage -- or what Gitlin and others have called "pastiche. . .a mixture of levels, forms, styles. . .pleasure in the play of surfaces" ("The Postmodern Predicament" 67) -- the subject may end up confused and little more. Any kind of image-induced epiphany is usually undermined and swept away by the next image before its full impact (and information) is absorbed by the subject. The rapid-fire cavalcade of images may instead keep the subject in a perpetually destabilized state. If so, then self-identity remains
cloudy, obscure, or just sketchily formulated because it is under constant alteration and reformulation.

Before I begin to sound like an alarmist (as I believe some who critique in this area end up sounding), I wish to stress my belief that today many people have learned to cope with -- and indeed expect and demand -- the onslaught of rapid-fire information. I also believe that it is not only possible but imperative that we engage in a constant, judicious, assimilation-filtration of information. Regardless of what the electronic media fires at its audience or how rapidly it is fired, I believe that many people in our society can take all of the information in and weed out much of the useless garbage that ultimately does not help them to formulate or deepen subjectivity. In this sense, then, television and film can still help many find out who and what they are today.

In Teletheory, Ulmer points out that we must accept television as a cognition aid, given the impact and the prevalence of the electronic image on our culture:

[Neil] Postman's refusal to consider the cognitive capacities of video reflects his failure to acknowledge the changed status of the image and story in the field of cognitive science over the past fifteen years or so. While the tradition of science derived from literacy devalued image and story cognitively, the new communications ecology has forced a reassessment of this devaluation. Current work in Artificial Intelligence promotes the "scripts" and "schemas" of a narrative organization of memory.
Similarly, the long tradition of excluding images from the cognitive processes of abstraction, generalization, concept formation, is no longer accepted by cognitive psychology. The development of prototype theory demonstrates that people reason and classify as much by means of images and stories as by logic and argument. Postman’s advice to limit schools to criticism of TV is shortsighted. There is no technological determinism that dictates what will become of video in our culture, even if that technology is now institutionalized in television. Television is indeed a rival didactic institution, promoting an alternative mode of thought. . . (ix)

For all of the negative elements that we hear about television and film, then, the electronic image phenomenon has its positive aspects and its supporters. Not all television programming is bad, negative, detrimental, or a hindrance. Excessive television has been blamed for loss of creativity and imagination and the like (I leave it for others to debate whether this is true or not), but certain programs can tap into our individual consciousness so well that they end up assisting us in recognizing who and what we are, or what we wish to become. Therefore, I do not think it is wrong to assert that the electronic image can help to enrich our subjectivity.

Similarly, television images can provide certain viewers with insight into other people. Thus, I assert that intersubjectivity can also be deepened with the aid of the television and/or other electronic visual media. This tag is important because television is not the sole contributor
to the image explosion. As Jameson points out, film was initially far more important than television, and for many, it still is. One would hope that regardless of which image source the subject is most exposed to, it 1) engages in a judicious selection of the image process, and 2) engages with the selected image discourse on a deep enough level that introspection and interrogation of the self and others is instigated and carried through. If so, then the end result is not a copy, not a poser, not a human simulacra, but an enriched individual.

There is also, of course, the home computer to consider. Can subjectivity/intersubjectivity be deepened via the personal computer? I believe that applying to computer technology the same considerations which I have used to examine the impact of other forms of image-related technology on the human subject reveal this to be so. (This discussion will also serve to preface my examination of Pynchon's *Vineland* in a forthcoming chapter.) Computers are another way to access a tremendous amount of information almost instantaneously.

Like cinema and television, the computer is another electronic imagery source which can either deepen our subjectivity or subsume it, depending on the materials the subject chooses to view, the amount of time invested in the programs, and the level of engagement between subject and said programs. Today, some computers equipped with CD
ROMs have the capacity to store complete sets of encyclopedias, the combined works of Shakespeare, Woolf, Hemingway, Faulkner, and other prolific authors, and still have enough memory left over to treat the reader/viewer to a generous sampling of Van Gogh's paintings. It seems logical that downloading a literary text (be it novel, short story, play, or non-fiction piece) and reading it off the computer screen will be every bit as enriching for the engaged subject as picking up a hard copy of the same work and reading it out of a non-electronic source (eye strain is another matter). The same might be said for screening the paintings of an acknowledged master on the computer screen rather than picking up a coffee table book by the same artist and studying it on paper. Of course, one might argue, convincingly, that Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* is going to lose a great deal when produced electronically on the computer; but isn't the same also true, to some degree, of the copy in the art book, or the print on the wall?

On the other hand, the potential for any kind of productive consciousness-raising is greatly diminished if the subject spends hour after hour gazing at nothing more challenging than the latest guerrilla warfare video game, yet another sci-fi shoot-em-up, or a game in which the subject takes on the role of a warrior in some "dungeons and dragons" type of fantasy world where the object is to do battle with demons and sorcerers and other strange creatures
in order to infiltrate the deepest recesses of a castle and reap the riches at the end of the game -- and in some cases, rescue the lovely, stereotypical "damsel in distress." Or, to push this to further -- but real -- extremes, there is likely to be little or no productive cognitive elevation produced when playing the latest version of computer strip poker which has electronic photographs of the "opponent" -- male or female, take your pick -- dressing or undressing on the screen, depending on whether you manage to beat the computer; or, in still other programs, by spending time watching moving electronic "loops" of pornographic images being transmitted on the computer screen, complete with synthesized dialogue and/or the expected sounds accompanying the sex acts. Once again, I will leave it for others to decide whether this is ultimately greatly detrimental to the individual subject, a harmless diversion, or just a waste of time (though certainly we can see that some of these games have the potential to perpetuate stereotypes and encode many with chauvinist/sexist attitudes). Once again, however, in order not to sound like an alarmist, I will take a stand for some of these games and assert that playing them from time to time is not going to hurt an individual. There is something to be said for play of one kind or another -- in order to de-stress or just have fun -- and ultimately, the level of engagement of the subject who plays some of these shoot-em-ups or undertakes the electronic quest through the
castle, may even be deeper than the subject who plunks
him/herself down on the couch for the same two hours and
watches a bad television program or grade Z movie. Still,
the possibility for deepened subjectivity via the home
computer is virtually non-existent if this is the only kind
of "output" people demand of it.

On the other hand, there is certainly no shortage of
potentially valuable information available through the home
computer if the subject wishes to tap into the world of
computer networks. Networking also leads me to assert,
somewhat cautiously, that intersubjectivity can also be
deepened via the home computer. The actual process of using
the computer to communicate with others is relatively easy.
All it usually takes is having a telephone modem installed
into one's computer, and in some cases, paying a nominal
monthly fee to join one computer network or another.
Computer networks give the subject access to a wide variety
of dialogues on literally hundreds of subjects. Subject
selects the dialogues which are of interest and taps into
those particular files. Some network subscribers type in
entire essays on a given subject; others transmit images
which can be picked up by other subscribers and encoded onto
their own computers for later display or printing; still
others choose to hold an open electronic forum and engage in
conversation via printed type. In this way the subject can
"meet" people, many of whom it may never see in person (some
are literally across the state, country, or world). Or the subject may choose to remain a silent presence and simply read the downloaded essays or ongoing conversations of others (in a kind of electronic voyeurism).

Clearly the possibility to "connect" with somebody else on a serious level via the home computer exists, but, for a number of reasons, I have my reservations about any deep engagement taking place via this form of communication. For one thing, there are always the computer and screen acting as informing agents or buffers between the two subjects. For another, conversations are usually in the form of typewritten messages between subjects, which eliminates two informative elements of conversation: listening to the actual voice of the other person and watching his/her facial expressions. Still, despite my reservations, computer networking has been known to produce close, long-lasting friendships. After all, this is very much like letter writing with the added twist of the nearly instantaneous reply, and some would counter that they are better able to communicate via the written word, without having to face the other person. Finally, there is also the possibility that what begins as a computer exchange may eventually lead to two people meeting in person for a more personal relationship.

But is printed type -- or image transmission -- the closest one will be able to get to another person via
computers? Is the touching to remain spiritual, or is there some way to tap into a form of physical touching, or more accurately, to transmit the sensations of physical touch, through computers? This question may sound a bit far-fetched, but consider the following: In 1984, William Gibson published the science fiction novel *Neuromancer*, a book which pushed the amalgamation of (wo)man and machine to new levels of complexity and which started a new movement or sub-genre in science fiction called cyberpunk. In his novel, Gibson posits a future in which women and men have jacks implanted into their skulls in order to literally plug themselves into video games and information sources; the anti-hero is Case, an information thief known as a cyberspace "cowboy" who can jack into the actual matrix of various computer networks and in this way break through infiltration codes and steal information; another character in the novel, Molly, has glass-like shells implanted over her eyes which protect them and allow her to see better. Information is also relayed to her through read-out displays within the implants. Because she is a bodyguard, she has also had her reflexes heightened and purchased surgical implants which, when she desires, allow her to extract razor-like claws from the ends of her fingers. During one complex theft operation, Case and Molly unite through a computer process called "sim-stim" (simulated stimulation). Using sim-stim, Case can sit in a safe location, jack
himself into a computer, and monitor Molly's infiltration of a building. In a sense, sim-stim allows Case to be Molly, or more accurately, to receive transmissions which come very close to approximating the exact physical sensations (whether pleasurable or painful) which Molly feels. Now consider that the science fiction of Neuromancer is rapidly becoming science fact, thanks to a concept known as virtual reality.

With virtual reality, the individual "plugs" her/himself into the computer system (usually by wearing an electronic helmet-monitor or a pair of special goggles) and the computer-generated world of simulation seemingly comes alive before the person. Move your head slightly to the right and you will see one corner of the computer-generated room along with any activity taking place there. Move your head to the left, and you will see the other corner. The technology has already been developed to the extent that a few video games exist, but as with all other computer technology, it is being improved dramatically by the day. A recent magazine article reports that "Nobel physicist Arno Penzias believes that in the 21st century it will be possible to play Ping-Pong (or any other sport) with phantasms that look and talk like the celebrity of your choice." And, as with much computer technology, the engagement is not destined to remained one-sided. Consider the following from the same "Dream Machines" article:
author Howard Rheingold, who writes about the you-are-there technology known as virtual reality, predicts that consenting adults in the not too distant future will be able to enjoy sex over the telephone. First they will slip into undergarments lined with sensors and miniature actuators. Then they will dial their partner and, while whispering endearments, fondle each other over long-distance lines. (Time 39)

Virtual reality puts us a little closer to the seemingly unlikely but very real possibility of increased intersubjectivity via the home computer by adding a touching dimension to the equation. But as in the case of two individuals using print to communicate (via keyboards, typing, and computer screens) with each other over a great distance, there still remains the problem of the computer/machine being in the midst of things, acting as a synthetic buffer between the two subjects. After all, no matter how real the artificial touching may come to seem, it is still not actual physical contact that is being shared; and while most people would agree that physical contact is hardly the most vital part of human interaction, it still plays a significant role for many. Ultimately, just how close two people can get via this kind of exchange remains to be seen.

The downside of all this (wo)man-computer interaction is the possibility (and all-too-often the reality) that the subject will not actively engage with the programs on his machine beyond a superficial, surface level. There is also
the danger that some people, however intelligent, begin to use the computer as a substitute for thinking altogether. In this case, the computer is just another form of escapism akin to watching hours of mindless television programs. Still in other cases, where perhaps the subject does happen to engage with the images, graphics, and text presented on a computer, the level of engagement may be productive on a personal level but the subject does not move beyond a deepened subjectivity into a productive relationship with others. In other words, computers have the capacity to produce self-centered, introverted individuals. In Technopoly, Postman poses the question: "Will the computer raise egocentrism to the status of a virtue?" (17). And in a recent special issue of Time magazine which attempted to project the cultural, sociological, and technological status of the world "Beyond the Year 2000," Postman's predictions about television viewing can readily be applied to computer use: "Because most public events and entertainment will be experienced privately, people will lose a sense of how to behave in public" (70). The concern I am raising deals with those individuals whose virtually exclusive reliance on the home computer for companionship and information will lead them to become people who find it increasingly difficult to interact with other men and women.

It is interesting to note that Hassan wonders about "the computer as substitute consciousness, or as extension
of consciousness?" as far back as 1975 (Paracriticisms),
before the era of the personal home computer, and in
Technopoly, Postman brings up another potential problem --
the possibility that humans will actually lose some of their
humanity because of the computer:

The most comprehensive idea conveyed by
the computer is suggested by the title
of J. David Bolter’s Turing’s Man. .
Although Bolter’s main practical
interest in the computer is in its
function as a new kind of book, he
argues that it is the dominant metaphor
of our age [a position that in some ways
counters Jameson’s view of television];
it defines our age by suggesting a new
relationship to information, to work, to
power, and to nature itself. That
relationship can best be described by
saying that the computer redefines
humans as "information processors" and
nature itself as information to be
processed. The fundamental metaphorical
message of the computer, in short, is
that we are machines -- thinking
machines, to be sure, but machines
nonetheless. (111)

Postman goes on to agree with Bolter and claims that

It is for this reason that the computer
is the quintessential, incomparable,
near-perfect machine for Technopoly. It
subordinates the claims of our nature,
our biology, our emotions, our
spirituality" (111).

Postman goes on to observe, quite accurately, that

the metaphor of the machine as human (or
the human as machine) is sufficiently
powerful to have made serious inroads in
everyday language. People now commonly
speak of "programming" or
"deprogramming" themselves. They speak
of their brains as a piece of "hard
wiring," capable of "retrieving data,"
and it has become common to think about
thinking as a mere matter of processing and decoding. (113)

Of course, if man considers himself a machine, then he begins to attribute human characteristics to the computer as well. For example, when a computer is infiltrated by a destructive program, that program is often referred to as a computer "virus" (Postman 113). The implication here is that the computer is pushing us further and further away from humanity. I believe that this is only partially true. What Postman does not bother to dwell on are the possibilities that, thanks to our increasing familiarity with computers, (wo)man can internally develop as a result of using computer programs and images and data. I will spend a part of my chapter on Pynchon's Vineland trying to further develop these thoughts and show how like other electronic image technology, the computer can be both a positive element and a hindrance.

To sum up, I maintain that electronic imagery has greatly influenced world culture, has the capacity to deepen our awareness of self and other, and will continue to do so, given our ongoing technological development. It's no surprise then, that postmodern authors have picked up on this fact and reflected it in their works. Notice again that every book examined extensively in this dissertation -- The Malady of Death, Blue Eyes, Black Hair, The New York Trilogy, Vineland, and Pinocchio in Venice -- is somehow
tied to the importance that visual communication has come to play on our information assimilation and cognition.

V

Postmodern Drama/Performance:
Mixing Modes of Expression and
Blurring the Boundaries of
Character/Subject/Author(ity)

In July, 1990, I attended a pop culture television and film convention in New York City and witnessed an embarrassing but telling incident. In the middle of a question and answer session with Jonathan Frid, the actor who played vampire Barnabas Collins on the Dark Shadows 60s soap opera, a gentleman in the audience asked a three-part question that made many of the rest of us cringe: "Even with the hot studio lights, how was it staying in a coffin in a cold, damp basement for hours on end? And do you, Barnabas, or anybody else in the cast, believe in vampires or werewolves or other supernatural phenomena? Or do you or anybody else in the cast practice black magic or demon worship?" What's going on here? Rather than ask Frid to reflect on his having portrayed a character that became an icon of 60s pop culture -- perhaps the world's first angst ridden vampire! -- or to give us an anecdote or two of the problems involved in producing a low budget, (unintentionally) campy television series, or to reflect on
his moving from acting in Shakespearian dramas to soap operas, the fan wastes time asking him a series of silly questions. Further, if we look closely at his questions, we find that for this person -- obviously more "die hard" fanatic than cultural critic -- the boundaries between illusion and reality are blurred. For one thing, he addresses Frid as Barnabas rather than by his real name. For another, even if we give this person the benefit of the doubt and concede that he knows Dark Shadows is just a TV show -- he does, after all, speak of "hot studio lights" -- he also speaks of "Barnabas... staying in a coffin in a cold, damp basement for hours on end." Finally, in a desperate effort to merge actor and character, he asks Frid if he believes in the supernatural.

Again I ask -- What's going on here? -- and answer by way of another example. The Dark Shadows incident parallels those which frequently occur at conventions celebrating another, even greater pop culture phenomenon, Star Trek, and it is what William Shatner parodied when he played himself on a skit of Saturday Night Live. In the skit, Shatner is the guest of honor at a Star Trek convention. After being introduced and approaching the podium, he is quickly asked to settle a dispute between two adult fans by revealing the exact combination to Captain James T. Kirk's cabin safe, to which Shatner responds, "I don't know... It's been a long time... Get a life, will you, people? I mean, for crying
out loud, it’s just a TV show. . . So, move out of your parents’ basements and get your own apartments and grow the hell up!” (and while we are speaking of illusion within reality -- or reality within illusion -- one wonders how close those scripted skit lines come to Shatner’s true feelings about being so closely identified with the Captain Kirk character and the whole *Star Trek* phenomenon).

A final time I ask -- What’s going on here? -- and return to the *Dark Shadows* example in order to supply a final answer to the question. The *Dark Shadows* fan wants very much to believe that Jonathan Frid is Barnabas Collins, the vampire character he portrayed over a quarter of a century ago on a TV show, and barring that there are differences between actor and character, the fan imposes his desires on the actor, hoping that at the very least the actor will believe in the supernatural phenomena with which *Dark Shadows* dealt: vampires, werewolves, black masses, and such.

The above examples have largely to do with typecasting, and in this respect, Frid and Shatner aren’t alone. George Reeves could never move beyond his Superman role; Anthony Perkins was forever Norman Bates after playing him in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*; and in the world of pop music, Don MacLean has never really been allowed to be more than the guy who wrote and sang "American Pie." Typecasting usually centers around the audience’s desire to see an actor
or actress play one specific character, or one specific type of character, and many actors find it extremely -- or, as in the case of George Reeves, who committed suicide because he couldn't move beyond his portrayal of Superman, fatally -- frustrating to be typecast.

In some ways, typecasting and the scenarios described above are a playing-out of Lyotard's discussion of the subject's hunger for nostalgia -- for the comforting trappings of the past -- personified to the extreme. The general public often deludes itself into a great deal of wishful thinking when it comes to the images and characters it encounters on television, film, and stage. It is not so much that they literally believe these characters and events exist as they do in the dramatic piece presented to them. Most intelligent people have no real difficulty distinguishing the boundaries between illusion (drama, fiction) and reality (non-fiction, life) when the material is presented in a modernist framework, but these same people are reluctant to relinquish that which appeals to them and gives them comfort or a thrill. The feelings of comfort, excitement, and pleasure that certain fictional characters, films, plays, and books stir in the adult may be compared to the satisfying feelings a child gets from listening to a favorite cartoon character, fairy tale, or story book. Again, Lyotard's description of the subject's hunger for nostalgia comes to mind (the "Things were a whole lot better
in 'the good old days' kind of reasoning) as well as Jameson's discussions of the nostalgia film. The adult who finds it difficult, or refuses, to distinguish his favorite character from the actor/actress who plays it is clinging desperately to the comforting reassurance and stability that s/he finds in the character and the story in which it is situated.

Postmodern authors have picked up on this audience identification and decided to disrupt it with a vengeance in order to stress the complexity of the human subject, its constantly shifting nature, and the indeterminacy prevalent in today's world. In order to do this, the postmodernist often makes unclear the distinctions between author/artist/narrator/character. This greatly distinguishes the postmodernist's writing from the hackneyed and conventional writer who simply churns out unchallenging, cliched, and easy to follow material. It also distinguishes him from the modernist whose writing is more complex and sophisticated than the hack writer's, but who more often than not still keeps the elements of fiction -- exposition, plot, narrative voice, characterization, climax, resolution, and such -- well defined in her/his texts. Instead, some postmodern literature destabilizes its audience's thinking and leaves the readers wondering where fiction begins and non-fiction ends. Quite often there is no clear distinction between a narrator that is telling the story and the author.
who is writing it, between fictional characters created exclusively for the work and celebrities, politicians, and other real people, between imagined events and actual occurrences. The audience cannot really accept any one character with the knowledge that it is just a construct, because it may really be a reflection of the artist him/herself.

In order to clarify my points, let me apply these thoughts to some of the postmodern literature I will examine in this dissertation. For example, at what point in her novels *The Lover*, *The Malady of Death*, and *Blue Eyes, Black Hair* is Marguerite Duras the writer speaking to us about her true-life experiences, and at what point do these texts become works of fiction? Duras' novels are very autobiographical, and yet, who can say (except perhaps Duras herself), exactly what is autobiography and what is fiction. The same questions may be asked of Paul Auster and *The New York Trilogy*, in which Auster, or the story's narrator, speaks to us about the writing process in his text. In *City of Glass*, we even have a character named Paul Auster included in the story and this character is also a writer. Is this character not a character at all but the writer of the novel which we are reading? Clearly, postmodern authors are interested in problematizing the thoughts of those who wish to affix one true answer to questions about art and life, questions which may prove unanswerable or have
different variations of meaning. The postmodernists remind us through their complex, multi-faceted works that reality itself is often complex, multi-faceted, and subject to interpretation.

This staple of postmodernism extends beyond the realm of literature. For example, one talk-show which Todd Gitlin and others have cited as having many postmodern characteristics which make it stand out from the rest is *Late Night with David Letterman*. How close is David Letterman the person to the often cynical and sarcastic, sometimes self-conscious, other times diffident talk-show host he portrays? Or is he portraying a character at all? In Letterman’s case, are person and persona one and the same? And regarding Letterman’s show itself, is *Late Night with David Letterman* really as impromptu and laid-back as the producers would have us believe? *Late Night, . . . proves that the same kind of postmodern ambiguity and self-consciousness prevalent in postmodern texts can be evoked visually.*

The postmodern artist makes her/himself suspect in the eyes of the audience by increasing said ambiguity in her/his texts and making us wonder about the very nature of the text we are reading, as well as the artist’s talents. Is it fiction or non-fiction? A work of literature, or a jumbled mess? And just how much trust and authority should we place in this author(ity)? It is precisely if — hopefully when —
- these questions surface within the reader that the postmodernist succeeds in communicating with her/his audience. The postmodernist stresses the indeterminacy and ever-fluctuating nature of life by creating indeterminacy in his/her work. S/He also stresses that the creator -- the artist/author -- does not have all of the answers, that s/he should not be viewed as some kind of supreme authority or interpreter of the human/cultural/social condition. If I can use another basic equation here, I would posit the following:

\[
\text{postmodern artist } \neq \text{ authority figure.}
\]

To be an authority figure implies that you have complete control and confidence over your work. The postmodernist is anything but a supreme authority, is anything but fully confident of her interpretations of life/culture. Instead she is merely capturing the human condition as she sees it and hers is, after all, just one of many points of view. The postmodernist is self-conscious about his material and wondering with the rest of us whether or not he got it right.

To sum up, the traditional, mainstream, modernist texts, with their authoritative, often omniscient narrative voices, tightly controlled plots, well developed characters, and mostly linear storylines, seem inadequate and unreal to the postmodernist, who feels it is a mistake to place too much authority on the very human author or creator of a
work. In "Theory Pedagogy Politics," Zavarzadeh and Morton note that "The function of the postmodern critique... contrary to that of the interpretive essay, is to demystify 'authority' (that of the author and of those whom he represents in the symbolic order of culture)" (6). The same may be said of the overall goal of most postmodern artists/authors.

One of the ways to further this demystification of authority is to mix forms and genres in a work. In this way, the postmodernist stresses that he himself is uncertain about what approach best suits a particular story, that like life itself, an amalgamation of forms and genres comes closer to capturing the multiplicity of circumstances and characters than any one approach or mainstream narrative. Although I would not completely agree with Michel Benamou's claim in Performance in Postmodern Culture that "Performance, the unifying mode of the postmodern, is now what matters" (Benamou and Caramello 3) (because he sounds as though he is privileging execution and completely disregarding content), I certainly believe that execution is one of the most significant characteristics of postmodernism. As Benamou goes on to note,

From the experiments of the Living Theater to the sophisticated mixed-mediations of video, performance has changed the scene of the arts, of painting (since Duchamp), of theater (since Artaud), of poetry (since Olson). (Benamou and Caramello 3)
To this we can add that performance in literature -- the act of producing a text -- has changed dramatically with postmodernism and the various forms which texts take have themselves become charged with meaning. Examine Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, Cortazar's *Hopscotch*, J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Robert Coover's "The Babysitter," D. M. Thomas' *The White Hotel*, and Duras' *Blue Eyes, Black Hair* and you have a good representative sampling of postmodern works whose forms emphasize the meaning inherent in the contents of the texts. Or, as Richard Palmer notes in "Toward a Postmodern Hermeneutics of Performance,"

Performance is not just an aesthetic act but a moral act, a community act, a celebration of what is being brought to experiential fullness through performance. Performance of a text does not just 'say' something; it does something. (20)

Conclusion

Throughout Chapter One I have talked about the marginalized -- but very much alive -- postmodern subject and the various influences which serve to keep it in constant fluctuation. I will conclude by returning briefly to Sartre in order to show that while some of the principal characteristics of postmodernism problematize the philosophy of existentialism, some of its key points remain unchanged.

As noted in Section I, Sartre and other existentialists believe that Being precedes Essence and that each of us is responsible for shaping and bringing meaning to our lives.
Many postmodernists, on the other hand, believe that control has been wrenched away from the subject and that it no longer has a say in who/what it is. But is this really such a new idea, and has this ever before stopped the human subject from attempting to govern its existence? The whole naturalism movement dealt with the notion that wo/man is often at the mercy of various economic, political, and/or social conditions which threaten to wrestle the governing of self away from the individual. Here I am not trying to develop a theory connecting naturalism and postmodernism, but, on the other hand, I believe that postmodernists, though they use an entirely new approach, echo one of the key ideas prevalent in the naturalism movement when they posit that individual identity is threatened by contemporary culture and technology.

Certainly there are circumstances in today's society which influence, disrupt, and even alter our lives in ways that are often uncontrollable and run counter to our individual preferences. If we concede that there are forces that to some extent dictate who and what we are, then Sartre's postulation that "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (emphasis mine) may be seem to ring false. However, we need not discard it completely. Perhaps for many, adding the following qualification to the statement comes closer to the truth: "Man is [largely] nothing else but what he makes of himself." Rewriting Sartre may seem
presumptuous on my part, but doing so may make a few more willing to accept that his existential philosophy can be used to read the status of the subject in today's world. Further, we really do not have to augment Sartre's postulation with any disclaimer if we consider that the subject is still whatever it makes of itself in whatever circumstance it finds itself. That is, once the subject accepts that some circumstances and situations are out of its control, it is up to the subject to deepen its subjectivity as much as is possible within the unalterable parameters of the given situation.

Moreover, I posit the following merger of postmodernism and (inter)subjectivity. If today's world presents the individual with more circumstances and outside forces which threaten to dictate his/her existence, then it follows that there is also an increase in the opportunities for the individual to improve his/her knowledge of self. If the assault on the senses is ever-increasing and distracting, isn't it also true that wo/man has more of a selection of information from which to choose than ever before? If the world is becoming a "global village" thanks to our ever-increasing, -improving access to information, doesn't it follow that the more information wo/man has at her/his disposal, the better off s/he will be, the greater the possibility that s/he will come to better understand her/his fellow human beings, the greater the potential to increase
her/his compassion and sensitivity, and the greater the possibility of finding and connecting with a significant Other and attaining intersubjectivity? Sartre speaks of the importance of verbal and physical communication (in the form of the human gaze, eye contact, and even more intimate forms of physical expression) in affirming our own identity, deepening our subjectivity, and communicating with others. Granted, today’s global techno-based innovations make it easy to disregard contact with others and threaten to create a world of egocentric human beings; but then again, the same technological innovations increase the potential for each of us to establish new relationships with ourselves and others, and to become a more caring, compassionate race.

This may sound overly optimistic and too idealistic. I do not mean for it to be so, nor do I wish to imply that wo/man no longer has to deal with the angst of being responsible for her/his own actions. After all, it is also true that with an increase in choices at our disposal comes an increase in our potential for choosing wrongly and hurting rather than improving our existence. As Walter Davis notes,

*Possibility strips subject bare of guarantees, plunging it into the world while maintaining the questions "Who am I?" and "What shall I do?" as measures of each particular choice. Such an understanding of possibility transforms subjectivity because it reveals a disquietude that is at the center of our*
being and that haunts experience. I don’t have possibilities, I am the possibilities I project. To be is to act: subjectivity is totally in the world; it exists as the way we live out the attitude we take toward our situations. (Inwardness and Existence 110)

Thus, the greater the possibilities, the higher our anxiety is likely to be because once we choose, we have committed toward that course of action and, good or bad, made that possibility a reality. At the same time, we may find joy in this angst, not as masochists, but as Nietzsche theorized in his concept of amor fati (see The Will To Power 536-37) and as Heidegger hints when he states that "Along with the sober anxiety which brings us face to face with our individualized potentiality-for-Being, there goes an unshakable joy in this possibility" (Davis 107).

One of the ways that change may be set in motion within the subject is through the work of art, regardless of artistic medium. The artist/author succeeds most when her/his work affects us in such a way that makes us powerless to stop the effect that s/he set out to impress upon her/his audience. The ultimate goal of some creators is to move us in ways that transcend verbal articulation or thought on a conscious level, or to make the work of art so powerful that it causes some undeniable change to occur within the subject.

Most of the time, however, the subject takes a part in the metamorphosis. Most of the time, each of us is in
control of what comes into us depending on the amount and level of engagement we devote to each work. Active engagement presents a number of challenges for the subject and a number of possibilities for growth. Each of us must decide what to do with a certain work -- whether to discard it immediately as a waste of our time, whether that impulse to discard it is a sincere evaluation of the work's merit, or whether it is problematic to our consciousness and deserves further interrogation/reflection on our part. If we decide to proceed with further analysis of a work, we must assess how it affects our own existence, and what the long-range implications behind the work and its relation to ourselves (and to our culture as a whole) might be. The task of reflection which every existential must engage in grows even harder and more vital in today's postmodern world. Walter Davis reminds us that

Reflection isn't a private or occasional act, a room divorced from experience that we enter from time to time, but a constant force of self-interrogation that is lived out immediately in the moods and attitudes we take up toward our projects. In this way, reflection is constant with experience. I am always, though usually without knowing it, engaged in a critical relationship to myself. (Inwardness and Existence 110-11)

Davis' contentions illuminate the task of the existential subject in the postmodern world, especially given the increase in artistic "projects" at our disposal. With this increase in projects comes an increase in the potential for
a deeper, more enlightened self-identity. In this way too, the artist/author is stripped of final author(ity) as each subject situates interpretation/meaning onto her/himself.

Finally, we can look at this dialectical merger of existentialism and postmodernism not as something far-fetched, but rather as something quite logical, and we can see it as both dilemma and celebration because while the challenge for each of us is undeniably great, so too is the pay-off. The kind of existentialism I am positing illuminates both the positive and negative aspects of -- and methods of engaging with -- the plethora of material at our disposal in the postmodern world. Granted, today's subject lives in a world that largely impinges upon its existence and threatens to assault it with such a variety of ideas and information that the task of discovering and maintaining self-identity is greatly problematized. At the same time, if consciousness were threatened to the extent that all self-identity were literally on the brink of being obliterated, or to the extent that the individual were on the verge of completely being subsumed by the culture en masse (as some critics of postmodernism would have us believe), the streets would rapidly fill with millions of maniacs screaming in a gross parody of Munch's painting. There are two possibilities why this is not the case: either we gloss over our own identities in favor of superficial masks, adapting the latest trends on a surface
level and simply choosing to live safe and empty lives (see Section IV of this chapter); or some of us do what I spoke of earlier and actively engage with the circumstances in which we find ourselves and the information at our disposal, living life rather than allowing it to live us, dealing with the angst, embracing the possibilities at our disposal, making choices, changing and shifting the self as we go along so that we are in constant growth and fluctuation as the postmodernists posit, but -- and this is an important but -- in control of that growth and development, at least to a certain extent. This is not a return to humanism, nor a return to overly positive romanticism, nor a retread of naturalism, nor a complete privileging of the subject, nor an attempt to rescue it from total dissipation, nor a denial of the very real fact that every time we turn around some new cultural, political, and/or social trend threatens to impose itself on our lives, nor a hunger for a safe and assuring nostalgic past. What it is instead -- what this entire chapter has been -- is an articulation of my assertion that even among our ever-changing and shifting postmodern culture, some human subjects can maintain a certain degree of will/power over their own existence and shape that existence according to their own design. To reiterate, I am fully aware that this is not always the case, but it is refreshing to know that it is, at least on occasion, a possibility.
Having made these claims, I would like to turn to several novels in the coming chapters and show 1) how the ideas on the postmodern subject, global techno-culture, and existentialism that I have developed in this introductory chapter are manifested in some postmodern literature, 2) and how existentialism may be applied to these works in order to provide us with a better understanding of the postmodern subject's quest to deepen its (inter)subjectivity, or to reveal the subject's attempts to avoid an objective and thorough self-examination.
1. I think it is important to stress that pop culture has infiltrated other respected forms of artistic discourse besides literature. Look what Andy Warhol and Roy Lichenstein did with commercialized artwork in the sixties and seventies, to name but two the most obvious and striking examples.

2. Even those who don’t believe that they use pop culture to communicate should consider this very basic but useful lesson in semiotics: We are at opposite ends of a very crowded room and you are very thirsty. I have just purchased a Coca-Cola from the machine and hold it up to you and raise my eyebrows. You hate Coke but you quickly point to the Pepsi machine next to the Coke machine. Haven’t we both just used two signifiers/visual icons of pop culture -- the Coke and Pepsi logos -- to communicate?

3. There are some people, after all, who do not wish to watch films at home in their butchered (non-letter-boxed, edited-for-commercial-time) states, though with the broadcasting of films in their original widescreen, unedited formats (especially on cable TV) on the rise, and with the pending approval and mass-marketing of wide-screen television sets, television may be on the verge of garnering an even greater audience.

4. Even though this section of my chapter focuses on the impact of the electronic image on the human subject, I will also spend a short time discussing computer-generated texts under the assumption that a text transmitted on a computer screen is a kind of image in itself. In other words, I do not wish to privilege a computer-generated picture or painting over a computer-generated text because both have the capacity to have great impact on the subject.

5. These electronic exchanges get even less personal when the conversation between subjects is staggered. This is possible thanks to elements like e-mail (electronic mail) in which the subject leaves an electronic mailbox open to receive incoming memos, letters, and information. Subject will then "boot up" its mail file periodically, sift through it, discard the electronic junk mail, and then fire off responses to various correspondents.

6. If/When home computers are augmented to transmit live images of the subjects in conversation, this discussion will have to be opened up to further considerations. In a sense, some telephones are now reaching this state of augmentation, but they are still operating on a crude level (due to time lags hampering image transmissions).
7. In no way do I consider *Dark Shadows* to be a work of postmodernism, or high drama. (Indeed, I hesitate to call it drama of any kind. The word camp comes to mind as being closer to the final product of the 60s version of the show.) I merely use this *Dark Shadows*-related example because it exemplifies the points I wish to make about my topic.

8. I use this musical example to show that actors/actresses aren't the only artists who are pigeonholed and typecast. However, since the main thrust of my theory centers around the impact of visuals on our culture, I will focus almost exclusively on visual typecasting for the remainder of this section.

9. Jameson speaks of what he calls the nostalgia film as the masses' way of trying to recapture a past which they believe to be less complicated and more satisfying than their own lives and period:

   Nostalgia films restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation. (Postmodernism 19)

Jameson goes on to mention Lucas' *American Graffiti* (1973), Coppola's *Rumble Fish* and Polanski's *Chinatown* as prime examples of this phenomenon. Faced with these ultimate objects -- our social, historical, and existential present, and the past as "referent" -- the incompatibility of a postmodernist 'nostalgia' art language with genuine historicity becomes dramatically apparent. The contradiction propels this mode, however, into complex and interesting new formal inventiveness; it being understood that the nostalgia film was never a matter of some old-fashioned "representation" of historical content, but instead approached the 'past' through stylistic connotation, conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image, and '1930-ness' by the attributes of fashion. (Postmodernism 19)

Referring to *Body Heat*, Jameson observes that "Everything in the film... conspires to blur its official contemporaneity and make it possible for the viewer to receive the narrative as though it were set in some eternal thirties, beyond real historical time" (Postmodernism 21).
Two more recent examples which fit nicely into Jameson's theory are the Tim Burton productions of Batman and Batman Returns. Here, thanks to Burton and his artistic designer, the end result is a kind of retro-futuristic look for Gotham City, where the art deco of the thirties meets the film noir look of detective films in the forties and fifties, and the end result is combined with a touch of the projected look of the future. Thus, the visual image of Gotham City is more than just "hell on earth"-ish. It also satisfies the viewers' desire to escape into what they perceive to be the comforts of the past without abandoning the pleasures of present-day technology or the satisfying projections of "things to come."

10. For more on this subject, see Part III, Chapter I, Section IV ("The Look") of Sartre's Being and Nothingness.
CHAPTER II
Traces of Postmodernism,
Subjectivity, and Intersubjectivity in Duras'
The Lover, The Malady of Death, and Blue Eyes, Black Hair

Introduction
This chapter will examine three of Marguerite Duras' recent works -- The Lover, The Malady of Death, and Blue Eyes, Black Hair -- and attempt to show that in recent years, Duras' works have grown more postmodern and her concerns, more existential. I will begin with a study of Duras' writing in The Lover and show that in this novel, the author dispenses with story embellishment and detailed narrative backdrops in order to focus intensely on the human relationships in her story. I will then turn to The Malady of Death and Blue Eyes, Black Hair and examine some of the postmodern elements in these texts, including Duras' increasingly sparse, almost poetic storytelling technique, as well as the authorial voice which intrudes at the end of The Malady of Death and pervades throughout Blue Eyes, Black Hair, a voice which complicates our reading and challenges us to envision her story a number of different ways.
This will lead me to a discussion of the existential concerns in *The Malady of Death* and *Blue Eyes, Black Hair*. In order to better understand the struggles between the principal characters in each of these books, I will turn to Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, in particular, "Being-for-Others" (the third part of his book). Finally, I will conclude by focusing briefly on two other concerns of Duras': the universal nature of certain experiences which the subject encounters in the process of seeking -- or avoiding -- commitment with the Other; and certain aspects of human relationships which no amount of verbal or written articulation can adequately define.

I
Traces of the Postmodern in *The Lover*

If we read some of Duras' earlier works -- *The Ravishing of Lol Stein* and *The Vice Consul*, for example -- we find that these novels adhere (for the most part) to the standard conventions of storytelling found in most modern novels. They explore their concepts in accepted and traditional ways. There is no surface play with the text itself, nor is there any kind of radical departure from mainstream storytelling. If the reader is disturbed or stunned by Duras' early novels, it is not likely to be because of the actual look of the texts but by something within the narrative.
This starts to change somewhat when Duras writes *The Lover*. To begin with, we now have a narrator who reflects on events which occurred to her many years before, when she was a fifteen and sixteen year old girl. The flashback narrative is certainly nothing new or ground-breaking, but Duras complicates it further by switching persons in her narrative. At times she uses first-person to tell her story, at others, third. The narrator takes time leaps and we accompany her, despite the fact that sometimes -- perhaps because certain events are too painful for her, or because she is viewing events from a time far removed from their occurrence -- she detaches herself from them and chooses to narrate from a third-person vantage point. This narration complicates the story for the reader because Duras does not bother to make it absolutely clear that she is still speaking of herself and her lover when she switches from first to third person.

Another aspect that distinguishes *The Lover* from some of Duras' earlier works -- and one of the ways it begins to echo the postmodern -- is the hesitancy and ambiguity inherent in the book's narrative voice. At times, the narrator is very sure of the feelings which she experienced when her love affair occurred. At other times, however, there is a hesitancy, a self consciousness to the writing, that gives us the impression that the narrator is working things out for herself in the process of conveying her
experiences. And indeed, this may be exactly what is happening. Cohen notes that one of the things which incites memory and textuality in *The Lover* is writing itself. By dint of an inherently metonymical power, the word on the page catalyzes simultaneously memory and the literary process. (62)

And Bree observes that

Writing involves her [Duras] in that struggle against the 'malady of death,' defined by her as the incapacity to love, which she thinks has overtaken our species, our civilization. She sees it at work in the preoccupation with abstract terms that shut out, constrain, prescribe, proscribe, and compartmentalize, concepts of arrogance and domination. (12)

Thus, the act of writing is for Duras a memory-inducing, memory-preserving and life-affirming act. In *The Lover*, writing becomes a way of remembering -- and recreating -- the past. Things seemed to have happened a certain way because our narrator comes to remember them as such.¹ This remembering via writing carries with it a certain degree of ambiguity, as the narrator herself admits. At the same time, however, the person who uses writing to resurrect memories learns to accept a certain degree of ambiguity and uncertainty as a part of the memory-tracing, sense-making process:

Nowadays it often seems writing is nothing at all. Sometimes I realize that if writing isn’t, all things, all contraries confounded, a quest for vanity and void, it’s nothing. That if it’s not, each time, all things confounded into one through some inexpressible essence, then writing is nothing but advertisement. (*The Lover* 8)
Thus we must take the ambiguity and the uncertainty and the negation that so often accompanies the recreated memory that writing yields. Here Duras echoes one of the primary "rules" of postmodern thought. Uncertainty within a narrative is one of the staples of postmodernism because -- as many postmodernists claim -- it is difficult and in many cases impossible to reach any definite answers or assurances in today's world. Writing, then -- and the conjectural kind of memory or "history" which it yields -- may be the best that we can do.²

On the whole, the changes which Duras begins to implement into her writing in The Lover are significant, but by no means overwhelming. Despite the fact that she begins to stray away from some of the modernist conventions of storytelling, The Lover does not ask that we radically rethink our concept of what a novel is, as do some of Duras' most recent works.

II

Postmodern Elements in The Malady of Death and Blue Eyes, Black Hair

With The Malady of Death and Blue Eyes, Black Hair, Duras' writing becomes more problematic. To begin with, she disrupts the narrative framework of the novel in order to include a series of authorial comments into her main story. She will intrude upon her narratives (at the end of The
Malady of Death and throughout Blue Eyes, Black Hair) in order to speak directly to her readers. Further, Duras' writing takes on an all new brevity in The Malady of Death as she challenges her readers to dispense with preconceived modernist notions of the novel. The Malady of Death is hardly more than a short story, yet it has been published as an independent work and called a novel in the dust jacket. I suspect that this is less a sales gimmick on the part of the publisher (though we should not completely rule out the possibility that a marketing factor is involved) and more a challenge on the part of the author for her readers to accept this work as a self-contained piece bearing as much (and in some cases, more) depth and complexity as many novels four or five times its length.

As with so many of Duras' works, The Malady of Death echoes many of the events and actions which take place in her earlier fiction. Repetition, or working with variations on a theme, is nothing new when it comes to Duras' fiction. Indeed, it is one other aspect of the whole writing-as-producer-of-memories-and-uncertainty issue. As Hofmann notes,

...repetition seems to emphasize the changing unstable aspects of memory and language and move the reader to question his or her own memory and examine the dynamics of forgetting. (35)

And Bree finds that "scenarios, situations, [and] persons are never arrested" or "gelled" in Duras' writing. Rather,
the elements which comprise her fiction "emigrate and fuse with each other via processes of screening, substitution, coding, condensation. These constant metamorphoses mark Duras' world" (10). Repetition, like uncertainty, is also a staple of postmodernism. Authors often borrow from other stories and mediums and refine and rework their own works in an attempt to come to some closer distillation of meaning and truth -- and to show that there is no one meaning or truth upon which one might arrive, but a plethora of possibilities which we must consider.

Willis observes that

Thematically, all of Duras' work is concerned with desire and representation, desire in representation, and with the impossibility of adequate translation, or perfect coincidence, between desire, the body itself, and language. (12)

In some ways, then, the story which is told in The Malady of Death might be said to be a distilled version of the tale told in The Lover and in some of Duras' earlier fiction, but what remains in The Malady of Death is a variation of the various love stories found in her earlier works. Duras' objective is to focus on subjectivity and intersubjectivity. She attempts to articulate -- via the haunting scenes presented in her novel -- the various possibilities that arise in the course of coming to know and share one's life with someone else. At the same time, she tries to show that the experience will differ -- sometimes slightly, sometimes radically -- from person to person and reader to reader.4
There is very little action in or plot to *The Malady of Death*. The book is instead a complex exploration of one man's attempt to ignore his own subjectivity and one woman's attempt to draw him away from "the malady of death" and into the world of the living. This distillation of story is a move on Duras' part from the specific to the general narrative. The author strips the story of a more complex plot in order to focus on universal concepts about physical and spiritual attraction/affection. She certainly wants us to keep in mind that there will be variations from one relationship to another, but Duras uses her characters to focus intensely on certain shared ways of reasoning, motivating one another, and repressing.

Since Duras is very concerned with characters' interiors -- with their psyches and motivations -- she chooses not to flesh out her characters' exteriors. Unlike the characters in *The Lover*, we know little or nothing about the races and backgrounds of the characters in *The Malady of Death*. In fact, the two main characters remain nameless throughout the text. We do, however, observe their actions and how they handle their affair with one another.

As we read and observe Duras' storytelling technique -- again, a technique which stresses the postmodern belief that there are no fixed assurances, no guarantees, no absolutes -- we begin to realize that part of Duras' purpose is to explore certain universal concepts which many people come to
experience. At the same time, she also wishes to emphasize that there are no universal outcomes. To help us draw the distinction between her characters and ourselves (her readers), Duras uses a number of tactics, including working with various pronouns.

As in *The Lover*, Duras' writing style and her narrator both draw us to and distance us from her characters. Perlmutter notes that

> In undermining temporal and narrative logic, *La Maladie* [*The Malady of Death*] exemplifies the postmodern focus on text production, which not only critiques the provisionality of "truth"-texts and the myths they propose and propound, but also reinforces the potential for cross-over modes. (76)

In *The Lover* Duras lapses from first person to third person. In *The Malady of Death* she takes the narrator/reader relationship a step further by using an ambiguous second person. For example, Duras begins her book by noting that

> You wouldn't have known her, you'd have seen her everywhere at once, in a hotel, in a street, in a train, in a bar, in a book, in a film, in yourself, your inmost self. . . (1)

There is a plethora of implications behind this opening statement. To begin with, the author draws us immediately into her story by directly addressing us. It is soon obvious that she wants us to envision ourselves situated -- and active participants -- within the story.

And yet, in order to show us that we are all separate -- and potentially unreadable -- private entities, Duras employs several other techniques. To begin with, her
narrator adopts the uncertainty and ambiguity prevalent in so many postmodern narratives. There are some things which the narrator sees very clearly, and others which she chooses to leave vague: "You may have paid her" the narrator tells us, "May have said..." (emphasis mine). At another point in the text, she tells us that the main character makes love to the woman though "I couldn't say why. I see you do it without knowing why" (39). These kinds of passages separate the author from the narrator and bring the narrator a step closer to ourselves (the readers of Duras' novel). Duras uses her narrator to emphasize that we are all separate entities capable of concealing truths (sometimes even from ourselves).

Of course, there are those who attempt to break through our boundaries and are occasionally successful, but those who are able to penetrate a stubborn, reticent conscience are often few. To make this distinction, Duras keeps her narrator from being omniscient. In the world of The Malady of Death, it soon grows clear that if anyone understands the male character very clearly, it is not the narrator but the female character in the book. Thus, it is to her brief comments, tranquil quality, and somewhat diffident attitude that we must pay special attention.

One senses, in the end, that Duras' primary motive for stripping The Malady of Death of many traditional narrative conventions is to get to the core of human motivations and
drives as her characters become either engaged in cultivating -- or avoiding and disrupting -- physical and spiritual relationships. Duras' follow-up, Blue Eyes, Black Hair, is a more developed narrative than its predecessor. The story remains focused on the affair between the two main characters (again they remain nameless) and the work bears even more postmodern traits than The Malady of Death.

At the end of The Malady of Death, Duras makes the following statement: "The Malady of Death could be staged in the theatre" (56). She then proceeds to give us a few pages of stage directions as she would like to see the play staged. One of the striking things about these directions is the fact that the author places them in her text without a title or asterisk or marker of any kind to indicate that the novel has come to an end, and that it is now she -- the author -- and not her narrator who is speaking to her reading audience. Yet we read these pages and quickly understand that the narrative which comprises The Malady of Death has ended and that the author is now speaking to us. At the same time, what Duras passes on to us -- a clear, vivid description of the peculiar way she would like to see the novel staged -- problematizes our original conception of the events in the novel, or at the very least makes us create another vision of the action which we have "witnessed" in the course of reading the book.
In *Blue Eyes, Black Hair*, Duras' narrative interruptions are more extensive and scattered throughout the text. In fact, the interruptions become a second narrative -- or what I will call a "sub-narrative" -- within the main one. The interruptions are italicized in order to distinguish them from the main story, and in the course of this sub-narrative, Duras again informs us that her book could be staged, and proceeds to describe the stage and the manner in which the actors would interpret the material. Duras' narrative intrusions serve to complicate our reading even more than her note at the end of *The Malady of Death* because this time they are located throughout the book. They also force us to envision the story at least two different ways: as it might be occurring to the man and the woman in the narrative, and as the actor and actress might be presenting it theatrically.

Even though Duras uses italics to distinguish her sub-narrative from her main narrative, she blurs the boundaries of text and play by merging her characters and her actors. That is, the characters in her drama occasionally invade her sub-narrative, and the actors which she describes in her sub-narrative (also "characters" in a sense) make the occasional appearance in her main narrative. By doing so, Duras reminds the reader that although she is asking her/him to construct two stories, the narrative and the stage presentation are essentially variations of the same story.
Some examples of characters and actors crossing the line and intruding upon each others’ territory would include the following: At the very beginning of the main narrative, Duras calls her character "the actor" and has him announce, as a stage narrator might, that it is "A SUMMER EVENING" (Blue Eyes, Black Hair 1, Duras’ capital letters). The female character in the main story calls herself an actress. Later, Duras will again refer to the male character in her story as "the actor" (12). Further, in one of the sub-narrative interruptions, Duras (or her narrator) tells us that when the play is staged, the actress will read her lines from a book. Yet at one point, when we are in the midst of the main narrative, Duras notes that the woman "finishes the sentence [which she had begun a moment before] in the book" (25). Again, we have the character in the main story (who calls herself an actress) become the actress involved in the hypothetical staging of the play which Duras describes for us.

We have already seen that Duras complicates our concept of the novel with The Malady of Death and Blue Eyes, Black Hair. In the latter, she also problematizes our notions of a play:

The reading of the book, says the actor, must always be listened to in the same way. Whenever, in between the silences, the text is read out, the actors should hang on every word, frozen, scarcely breathing, as if, in gradual stages, there was always more and more meaning
None of the things that happen between the man and woman will be shown; none of them will be acted. The reading of the book will act as theater for the story.

No part of the text should be delivered with any special emotion. No gestures either. Just the emotion aroused by the unveiling of the words.

(25)

These statements force the reader to reconsider his/her vision of what Duras means by a "play." And since this interruption is far from being the first, we also have to go back and re-envision the play we were constructing for ourselves. Prior to this sub-narrative interruption, most of us may likely have thought that the play was visually -- and in great detail -- replicating the actions of the main narrative. But since "None of the things that happen between the man and the woman will be shown," Duras' play is little more than a kind of static visual representation of the characters.

Even more curious is the fact that the only drama or action to speak of comes from the male actor's dialogue because the female is not allowed to speak. At times, the man conveys the woman's thoughts by noting "If she spoke . . . ." But at no time do we hear the actress speak. Yet this is appropriate because it underscores the fact that the male character in the story is objectifying the female character. Laura Mulvey and others have spoken about the male "gaze" or perspective from which much of the narrative drama in films
is conveyed to the viewer. "The paradox of phallocentrism," Mulvey notes is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world. An idea of woman stands as lynch pin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies. ("Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" 803)

In some ways, Duras uses her play to echo these ideas. The bizarre drama which she orchestrates for us challenges that whole notion of the silent woman who is very much a physical presence and nothing more. By taking this objectification to extremes, Duras shows how demeaning such acts are.

Finally, the actors on the stage mirror the readers. Like the actors, we "listen" and absorb the story in the main narrative. Like the actors, we "hang on every word" and try to find the "meaning to be extracted from the simplicity of the words" which Duras passes on to us (25).

By incorporating elements of writing, drama, and the theater, Duras further blurs the distinction between herself as the creator of the text which we read, between the main narrative, between the theatrical scenario which she formulates, and between her readers and her characters/actors. For example, the woman in the story initially describes herself as an actress, then as a writer, yet we eventually learn that she is a student and teacher of science at a nearby university. She notes that "one day
she’ll write a book about the room, she thinks it’s a kind of accidental place, in theory uninhabitable, infernal, a closed-in stage" (26, emphasis mine). The man also notes that "it’s in this room, with this theatrical light, that the beginning of his love is to be sought" (27, emphasis mine). Duras’ stage-like description of the man’s room extends beyond its lighting. He has shut off the rest of the house, so we see one room (the way a theater audience may see one room in a play), and Duras’ descriptions of the room leave us with the impression that it is very stage-like:

She’s in the shadow, away from the light. The ceiling light, sheathed in black, lights up only the spot where their bodies are. The shaded light casts different shadows. (33)

Keep in mind that this is part of the novel’s main narrative, not the sub-narrative which speculates that the story could be staged. Another time, the woman remarks that when they part, she and the man will "just have a permanent memory of the emptiness of the room, the theater of yellow light, the white sheets, the walls" (57, emphasis mine). And on still another occasion, the woman reflects that

it was probably always him she wanted to love, a sham lover, a man who can’t love.

He says, "So even before you met me it was me."

"Yes, as with a part in a play -- before I knew you existed." (65, emphasis mine)

Finally, Duras makes her hypothetical play self-reflexive by having the actor comment that
If she spoke. . . she would say: If our affair were acted in the theater, an actor would come to the brink of the river, of the light, very close to you and to me beside you. But he would look only at you. And speak only for you. (84)

In this case, you have the author of the novel -- or her narrator -- telling us about a hypothetical staging of a play, and having those characters in the play contemplating the staging of their affair. This complex scenario gets more self-reflexive when Duras turns the attention of her actors back upon a written work: "He would speak as you would have spoken if you had spoken," the actor continues, slowly and quietly, as if he were reading some sort of literary text. But one from which he was constantly distracted by the effort of having to ignore the woman's presence on the stage. (84)

Now Duras has come full circle. Not only does the narrative in which she tells the story of the man, the woman, and the foreigner have echoes of the theater, but her sub-narrative which interrupts her main narrative and postulates that the play could be performed -- indeed, that lets us "see" some of the performance -- calls attention to its staginess as well as its literariness. Duras succeeds in reminding the reader that s/he is reading a written work, just as these asides taken as a whole would remind an audience that they are viewing something artificial, something contrived -- and yet something quite powerful.

As in *The Malady of Death*, there are a number of reasons why Duras uses multiple methods to tell *Blue Eyes*. 
Black Hair. The first is one which I have already covered: Duras does not want us to forget that her novel is merely one description of an encounter between two people. The book and its characters may resemble us and our own experiences in many ways, but in the end each relationship is uniquely complex. Thus, Blue Eyes, Black Hair is at times deliberately ambiguous. It is difficult to say exactly what does and what does not happen, and that is Duras' intention. As Willis notes, Duras'

work pits the genre against its own rules, exploring the contradictions of each representational formation, while it uses different generic configurations -- translations -- of the scene to call into question any stable frame. (12)

Another reason for Duras' use of a multiplicity of narrative approaches is to ensure that we "get" her meaning. She realizes that the more "angles" from which she allows us to view her story, the better our chances will be of coming away understanding her concerns. Finally, despite Duras' claim at the end of The Malady of Death that "no acting can ever equal the effect of a text not memorised" (57), she shows that a certain degree or type of performance can serve to augment certain written ideas.

Still, for all the innovative techniques which Duras uses to write The Malady of Death and Blue Eyes, Black Hair, for all their respective differences in narrative and textual development, the books hinge on something even more important than the various difficulties inherent in telling
and retelling and remembering a story. Each book is ultimately a thoughtful study of the difficulties involved in establishing and maintaining relationships, of loneliness, of spiritual anguish, and of loss.

III

Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity
in The Malady of Death

Perhaps the main thing which Duras wishes to stress in The Malady of Death is the necessity to commit oneself completely -- both physically and spiritually -- in the course of establishing a relationship with the Other. The book’s male character hires a female to come to him night after night so that he may "study" her. What the man really wants is nothing more than physical pleasure, but he soon discovers that his pleasure is lacking in intensity and each attempt to satiate himself leaves him bitter and frustrated:

Night after night you enter the dark of her sex, almost unwittingly take that blind way. Sometimes you stay there; sleep there, inside her, all night long, so as to be ready if ever, through some involuntary movement on her part or yours, you should feel like taking her again, filling her again, taking pleasure in her again. But only with a pleasure, as always, blinded by tears. (The Malady of Death 13-14)

Throughout her stay, the woman will impose her thoughts and opinions upon the man (via a few select words and phrases) in an attempt to get him to understand that
physical pleasure is insufficient when someone attempts to substitute it for spiritual companionship, as the man does.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre asks, "When... will the beloved become in turn the lover?" (488) and notes that "The answer is easy: when the beloved projects being loved" (488). This is precisely the man's problem. He cannot reciprocate the emotions which the woman projects, and until he does, as Sartre warns,

> By himself the Other-as-object never has enough strength to produce love. If love has for its ideal the appropriation of the Other qua Other (i.e., as a subjectivity which is looking at an object) this ideal can be projected only in terms of my encounter with the Other-as-subject, not with the Other-as-object. If the Other tries to seduce me by means of his object-state, then seduction can bestow upon the Other only the character of a precious object "to be possessed." Seduction will perhaps determine me to risk much to conquer the Other-as-object, but this desire to appropriate an object in the midst of the world should not be confused with love. (488, emphasis Sartre's)

The woman in Duras' story exudes confidence, compassion, and self-satisfaction. She has a deep understanding of herself and can read inadequacies and needs in others. She recognizes that the man is in need of something more substantial than a prostitute, but she allows the man to objectify her in order to show him how unfulfilling an exclusively physical relationship can be. The woman metes out her knowledge in increments, so as not
to frighten away her partner. Early in the relationship, she tells the man that "The malady's getting more and more of a hold on you. It's reached your eyes, your voice," but when the man asks her "What malady?" she tells him that she "can't say, yet" (13). A bit later, she tells him that "as soon as you spoke to me I saw you were suffering from the malady of death" (18). The man had initially wanted the woman to remain silent, but her cryptic comments pique his curiosity and he allows her to articulate further. He asks her why she believes "the malady of death" to be fatal and she tells him: "Because whoever has it doesn't know he's a carrier, of death. And also because he's like to die without any life to die to, and without even knowing that's what he's doing" (19). The woman lets the man know that he is afflicted with "the malady of death" because he has never bothered to get to know himself, let alone other people, and because he leads a sheltered life akin to non-existence.

One testament of the woman's self-confidence and self-knowledge is her honesty. She finds it hard to comprehend that the man has never been in love and admits that love can compel one to "wish to be about to kill a lover, to keep him for yourself, yourself alone, to take him, steal him in defiance of every law, every moral authority" (42). The woman's candid revelation highlights the disparity between herself and her companion. The woman is able to admit to this kind of selfishness. Her motive to kill would stem
from an attempt to arrest life at its apex because it would get no better.

The woman recognizes the need in many of us to engage in intersubjectivity. As Sartre tells us, "the Other has not only revealed to me what I was; he has established me in a new type of being which can support new qualifications" (Being and Nothingness 302). Intersubjectivity allows one to grow and better understand ourselves: "I need the Other to realize all the structures of my being" (Being and Nothingness 303). The woman understands that physical pleasure can only take the man so far and that until he shares his thoughts, desires, fears, and motivations with her--or with someone else--his life will remain stunted and physical pleasure and domination will continue to be an unsatisfactory substitute for a spiritual relationship with another human being:

Leaning over her, motionless, you look at her. You know you can dispose of her in whatever way you wish, even the most dangerous. But you don't. Instead you stroke her body as gently as if it ran the risk of happiness. Your hand is over the sex, between the open lips, it's there it strokes. You look at the opening and what surrounds it, the whole body. You don't see anything. You want to see all of a woman, as much as possible. You don't see that for you it's impossible. (35-36)

The man, for his part, is terrified by the thought of opening himself up to the possibility of love. He is even
disturbed by the woman's returning the intense looks which he bestows on her body because, as Sartre observes,

If we start with the first revelation of the Other as a look, we must recognize that we experience our inapprehensible being-for-others in the form of a possession. I am possessed by the Other; the Other's look fashions my body in its nakedness, causes it to be born, sculptures it, produces it as it is, sees it as I shall never see it. The Other holds a secret -- the secret of what I am. (475, emphasis Sartre's)

But not "who" he is. The man would rather use the woman as an object for his own pleasure rather than get to know her, or allow her to get to know him. When the woman's physical presence isn't enough to satisfy his longing for companionship, he believes that exploring the woman's body will satiate his hunger and leave him fulfilled. But he fails to see what the woman so perfectly understands: that we must cultivate a fully rounded relationship with the Other in order to be fully satisfied with ourselves; that physical pleasure with the Other is heightened when it is augmenting a spiritual relationship between two subjects. What frightens the man is the emotional risk involved in such a commitment. When we open ourselves up to someone, we must be willing to accept their scrutiny and potential dislike and rejection and/or betrayal.

Of course, the main reason that the man cannot communicate with -- and commit himself to -- the woman or anyone else, is because he has repressed his own internal
desires and motivations. The narrator reveals that for this man, "love has always struck you as out of place, you’ve never understood, you’ve always avoided loving, always wanted to be free not to. You say you’re lost. But that you don’t know what you’re lost to. Or in" (47).

Both the narrator and the female character understand that the man is lost because he wishes to remain so. The narrator tells us that "You go on talking, all alone in the world, just as you wish" (47), and the woman comes to know him even better than he knows himself. She sees that the man’s pitiful attempt to "study" her is fruitless because he has not adequately studied himself. The man lives in a vacuum. He has closed himself off to his own subjectivity and is therefore incapable of truly understanding anyone else. The woman sees him as living in death and tells him that "I don’t want to know anything the way you do, with that death-derived certainty, that hopeless monotony, the same every day of your life, every night, and that deadly routine of lovelessness" (48).

The man often weeps. His sobs are manifestations of self-pity. They are also a safety-valve, a substitute for engaging in introspection and sharing his repressed desires and identity with himself and the woman. Crying is a way for the man to avoid facing his own inadequacies.

Just as the woman admits to harboring the desire to kill, the man also experiences such homicidal feelings. But
Unlike the woman, who would kill a lover in an attempt to arrest love at its apex, the man wishes to kill the woman because she attempts to draw him out of his internal exile. Rather than satisfying his desire for company, the woman becomes a threat to the man. Very quickly, he grows to fear the self-confidence inherent in her gaze: "You realize she's looking at you. You cry out" (20).

Because the man refuses to learn from the woman's comments and examples, and because he refuses to open up to himself, he loses the opportunity of achieving intersubjectivity with her. Doing so may have potentially provided him with the most intense relationship of his life and a richer understanding of self. But he loses his chance. One day he awakes to find the woman gone and is left with the same sense of longing which compelled him to seek her out in the first place. Worse, the man cannot even hope to find the woman despite the fact that she bared her physical self to him for several days because

in the light of day you can't recognize anyone. You wouldn't recognize her. All you know of her is her sleeping body beneath her shut or half-shut eyes. The penetration of one body by another -- that you can't recognize, ever. You couldn't ever. (54)

The narrator's comments emphasize the superficial nature of the relationship on the man's part.

Some critics try to find something positive about the ending of *The Malady of Death*. Makward, for example, notes that
Because Duras is a staunch realist, the re-creation seems to fail . . . and the man loses the woman. But we may hope he has learned some of the woman: there is progress in verbal communication along this short narrative, even though they do not break the contract. (38)

This may be true. But if we go by the text and the author’s words, it is clear that her male character remains lost at the close of the story. As the narrator notes of the man’s encounter with the woman, "you have managed to live that love in the only way possible for you. Losing it before it happened" (55). Any hope, then, must lie with the reader who comes away with an understanding of Duras’ belief that the person who risks nothing gets nothing in return; that life itself is a risk and without risking ourselves we live empty (dead) lives.

IV
Substitution and Avoidance
in
Blue Eyes, Black Hair

In many ways, Blue Eyes, Black Hair is an expanded version of The Malady of Death. Once again, we meet a man who asks a woman to stay with him and satisfy his sexual desires. Once again, we have a perceptive woman who attempts to draw out the man’s internal feelings. Still, there are a number of significant differences which distinguish one book from the other.
To begin with, the characters are more fleshed out for us in *Blue Eyes, Black Hair*. Their backgrounds are by no means fully detailed, but there is more to go on than there was in *The Malady of Death*. Also, the most significant change between the two stories is the addition of the mysterious foreigner with "blue eyes and black hair." Both the man and the woman fall in love with the foreigner and he -- or rather, his absence -- becomes the link which draws them together. The foreigner is the absent third party throughout their love affair. He is the source of the man’s obsession and one of the most profound loves which the woman ever experienced. Finally, unlike *The Malady of Death*, in *Blue Eyes, Black Hair* we have not one but two individuals who refuse to fully open up to the possibility of love. The woman is as compassionate and perceptive as her counterpart in *The Malady of Death*, but is herself afflicted with "the malady of death" to a certain extent.

Substitution is a key to understanding much of Duras’ fiction." Freud notes that "the essence of repression lies simply in the function of rejecting and keeping something [anxiety producing, painful] out of consciousness" (105). Duras shows that sometimes people can repress certain aspects of a situation or problem by putting something else in its place. Substitution acts as a way to keep a problematic experience or situation from the forefront of their consciousness. Certainly the man and the woman in
Blue Eyes, Black Hair do not repress their memories of the foreigner. However, they do ignore the fact that they must resolve their fixation with the foreigner before they will be able to move on to other relationships. Thus, both are guilty of trying to use a substitute to avoid dealing with their feelings for the foreigner. The woman seeks a substitute because she is frightened by the enormous power of the foreigner’s love and the risk involved in opening oneself up -- and committing oneself -- to a single person, the man in order to avoid facing the possibility of finding love and then being hurt by the other person.

Duras highlights some of the avoidance games which people play, and the trouble which can result in the wake of such tactics. The woman sends the foreigner away, very likely because she is frightened by the strength of the love which has grown between them: "Perhaps it was the thought of happiness. The fear of it... Or the thought of desire, too strong, terrible" (70). However, as Freud observes,

Negation is a way of taking account of what is repressed; indeed, it is actually a removal of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed. ("Negation" 214)

The woman tries to deny that her love affair with the foreigner is one of the most powerful experiences of her life. She tries to bury the affair and links up with the man, presumably to help him with his own troubles.
There is no question that the woman is compassionate. She willingly puts up with the man's domineering behavior. The woman is also strong and perceptive, but unlike the female character in *The Malady of Death*, this character tries to conceal her own desires and inadequacies from herself. She has an ulterior motive for linking herself with the man: to forget the foreigner and the love they could have continued to share. The woman achieves what Freud calls "a kind of intellectual acceptance of what is repressed" — i.e., her lost love with the foreigner — "though in all essentials the repression persists" ("Negation" 214). The woman agrees to become the man's substitute because she herself needs a substitute, someone with whom she can busy herself in order to subsume her own problems. This move on the woman's part mirrors sharply the avoidance games many people play on a daily basis as they seek out substitute activities and/or problems to avoid facing the true source(s) of their anxiety.

Unfortunately, substitute activities can themselves become major problems. This too happens in *Blue Eyes, Black Hair*. The woman links up with the man in order to avoid dwelling on the fact that she rejected the foreigner's love, then finds herself in love with her substitute:

... in the very first hours of their meeting she knew she had started to love him, just as one knows one has started to die. ...
She says, "Later, when the night was over, it was too late for me to refuse. It was always too late for me to stop loving you." (61)

However, the woman has traded the possibility of a strong love affair for a potentially fruitless one. Because the man has never before loved a woman, the woman realizes that the chance of having the man return her love is minimal. Thus, substitution backfires for the woman and she comes to equate her new love for the man as a kind of death. She also begins to reconsider her belief that people should risk themselves completely in their quest for love:

She says people ought to learn to live like them, with the body abandoned in a wilderness, and in the mind the memory of a single kiss, a single word, a single look to stand for a whole love. (66)

The woman is essentially describing the kind of fantasy-like, idealistic love which the man prefers — a safe infatuation with another person — which is ultimately unsatisfactory and empty.

Because the woman does not risk loving the foreigner, she falls in love with someone else and finds herself in the midst of a greater challenge: getting a man who has never harbored feelings for any woman to return her love and appreciate her as someone other than a substitute for the source of his own obsession. Moreover, Duras shows that avoidance/substitution can create a snowball effect and lead to more of the same. The woman's substitution of the man for the foreigner leads her to more substitution because
she must go and find another man to physically satisfy her, since her initial substitute has never been sexually attracted to women.\textsuperscript{11}

Substitution is also one of the keys to understanding the man in \textit{Blue Eyes, Black Hair}. As in \textit{The Malady of Death}, the man in this novel hires the woman to spend her nights with him. This time, however, the man has chosen this particular woman because she reminds him of the man with whose image he fell in love.\textsuperscript{12} We learn that the man has "never had anything but brief, short-lived affairs," that the "affairs" are actually infatuations and that "The affair with the young foreigner with blue eyes, black hair is proving the longest" because the woman "preserves it" (75). The man never tries to make anything of these visual infatuations. Instead, when he desires physical companionship, he pays one of the boys whom he spots on the beach to spend the night with him.

Initially, then, the woman is just another in a series of substitutes which the man relies on. He has chosen a female substitute this time because he is attracted by the woman's voice, blue eyes and black hair -- because she reminds him of the foreigner. So engrossed was he with the foreigner, however, that he fails to recognize the woman as the person who accompanied the foreigner around town. This is not important to the man. What does matter is that he has found a worthy look-alike for the foreigner, albeit a
female, and a willing substitute who will obey his commands and lie naked and inert on a sheet, her eyes covered by a black scarf, so that he may gaze upon her body and pretend that it is the foreigner with whom he is sharing his nights.

As in The Malady of Death, however, the man chooses the wrong woman to objectify. As time passes, she begins to draw him out of his sheltered internal life and gets him to see her as more than a substitute for the foreigner. As the man learns more about the woman — that she studies and teaches at the nearby university, for example — she slowly becomes a living, thinking human being to him, more than an object, more than a substitute for the image of the foreigner, and much more a person. One day, the two exchange a look and the man notes that

she's looking at him as though he were charming, or dead. . . .

They don't refer to it. She's less aware than he is that something has occurred. For some time they keep at a distance from one another, trying to remember what happened when they looked at one another. . . (49)

Against his will, the man finds himself moving from objectification to subjectivity to intersubjectivity as he learns more and more about himself and the woman he has hired.

This poses an entirely new problem for the man, because the objects of his obsessions have always been other males. Now, as he finds himself experiencing feelings for the woman, he faces a new and frightening experience. Though he
tries to ignore his feelings, he concedes that there are certain aspects of this woman which attract him, particularly her bold, adventuresome quality: "He likes the idea of the craziness that made her come and live in the room and take the money" (49). Indeed, the man goes so far as to admit that "if he were to love her it would be mainly because of. . .her being well-off and crazy" (49).

But moving beyond -- and acting on -- this admission proves a difficult (perhaps impossible) task for the man. And just as the woman slid deeper into the substitution/avoidance game, so does the man. Rather than accepting his feelings for the woman and trying to have a physical relationship with her, the man uses another substitute -- the woman’s daytime lover -- as a substitute for proceeding with a complete physical and spiritual commitment. Thus, he ends up loving the woman voyeuristically, through the lover she takes during the day, and because of his lifelong attraction to men, the man finds himself attracted to the woman’s lover. Once again, the man uses substitution and takes the safe and empty way out in order to avoid commitment to either a man or a woman.

The man and the woman both have problems with obsession. The man’s infatuation with the foreigner may be described as a one-sided, obsessive fixation. The woman’s affair with the foreigner was very real, but because she broke it off, she too remains obsessed with the foreigner.
She recognizes that because of its longing and power, the man’s love for the foreigner is much more than one of his typical infatuations and she believes that their mutual love for the foreigner is what makes their own relationship so problematic. Because of the powerful love which they share for the foreigner, they can move neither closer to, nor completely away from, each other. Because their respective affair/infatuation with the foreigner was arrested before it could be fully realized, they cannot move beyond it.

This obsession with the foreigner locks the two in a stagnant relationship and forces them to isolate themselves almost completely from the world around them. The woman even quits her job at the college and reflects that

> there’s nothing in the [man’s] house to read, not even that, he’s thrown everything out, books, magazines, newspapers, there’s no television or radio left, a person doesn’t know what’s going on in the world or even close by, just doesn’t know any more. The life they live -- better off dead. (103)

The woman’s comments make the man realize that they have indeed been living in a kind of vacuum, completely isolated from the world and life in general, because their obsession with the foreigner is a "love which has taken everything" (103). The woman’s comments finally force the man to confront his feelings for the woman and he kisses her.

His actions are both a denial that he is better off dead, and an attempt to affirm that he can move beyond the fantasy life which he cultivates. The kiss is the man’s
attempt to relate to someone on a more intimate level and is filled with such "Desire, defeated, crazy" that it "makes them tremble" (103). The move from subjectivity to intersubjectivity culminates with the kiss. Afterward,

He desires her, the woman in the cafe by the sea. . . . The kiss of their lips has spread through all his body. It's held inside him completely, like an untold secret, a happiness that must be given up out of fear, fear that it might have a future. It's the thought of the kiss that leads him to the thought of death. (105)

The man's feelings for the woman echo the woman's feelings for the foreigner. The sense of permanence and commitment is expressed in his thoughts. Duras realizes that opening oneself to another is not the hardest part of a relationship, that a more troublesome element is the risk involved in sustaining that relationship, leaving the connection open between one another in order to continue to cultivate the affair. One of the most worrisome factors involved in establishing solid relationships is the amount of trust and faith one must agree to place in the other person. The venture is anxiety producing because of the possibility that one person will disappoint and/or betray the other. Commitment can be terrifying and often accompanies the joy which is experienced at the onset of a relationship.

The other great fears, of course, stem from the possibility of losing one's identity within a relationship,
and denying oneself other (potentially stronger) relationships by committing oneself to a single person. This touches on one of Sartre's fundamental existential notions: that we are often paralyzed into inactivity because of our fear of having to choose. The minute a choice is made, we have made a commitment to one particular action, event, or person, and simultaneously abandoned the possibilities that existed until the moment that we chose between one course of action -- or person -- and another. It is for all these reasons that the man feels "a happiness" over his finally getting closer to the woman, but "a happiness that must be given up out of fear, fear that it might have a future" (105). The man feels that committing himself to the woman would mean closing himself off to other possibilities -- other relationships, other affairs, the fleeting kind which he is accustomed to having -- and doing so would stifle a part of his identity. For this reason, "the thought of the kiss. . .leads him to the thought of his death" (105).

The ending which Duras provides for us, therefore, is hardly of the "happily ever after" sort. Rather, there is indication that the man is slipping away from the potential affair with the woman. Even though the narrator tells us that "They are happy as they've never been before," the happiness is the sort that is "so profound it frightens them" (115). We are unsure if the man and the woman will be
able to sustain their love affair. The man clearly has his doubts and remains confused about his own feelings. He notes that "he never knows when he has loved, when he is loving, when he is dying" (115). Freud's words come to mind when he asserts that "the final form of the work of repression in the obsessional neurosis is a sterile and never ending struggle" ("Repression" 115). The woman realizes that their relationship is tenuous at best and it is for this reason that she "hides her face against the floor, and weeps" near the end of the book (115).

The final sub-narrative intrusion also hints at a less than happy ending. The actor calls the scene "the last night" (115). Whether he refers to the last scene of the play or the last night the two characters will share together is questionable. But that is obviously part of Duras' aim -- to leave us wondering, not in order to be intentionally cryptic about her story, but to emphasize that whether our own relationships will manage to skirt ambiguity and uncertainty and move to some deep level of lucidity and (inter)subjectivity will depend on how far the parties involved are willing to go in order to cultivate and nurture them.

Conclusion

The Malady of Death and Blue Eyes, Black Hair are attempts on Duras' part to strip all but the most
fundamental elements from her stories in order to focus
attention on the subjects' explorations of
(inter)subjectivity. In the course of these texts, Duras
not only stresses the unique qualities of each individual,
but focuses attention on those concepts which recurrently
manifest themselves in the human subject as s/he attempts to
establish -- or avoid -- a relationship with the Other.
Duras has stated that

*each narrative has what I call its
complementarity, that is this openness
through which it becomes general. . . an
openness I'd call the openness of the
destruction of singularity.* (Makward 32
-- Makward's translation)

Thus, Duras draws attention to those qualities which make
each relationship unique, as well as the elements which make
each similar.

It is also interesting to note that Duras believes that
some of these "universal" facets of human relationships
resist adequate verbal articulation, as though their very
nature is such that they cannot be reduced to words. The
female character in *Blue Eyes, Black Hair* recognizes that as
complex and unusual as her relationship with the man is, it
still bears certain undefinable traces which link it with
the experiences of others:

* . . . it's what happened in this room
just as it might have happened anywhere,
a universal event that they can't know,
that they will never know, an event
that's concealed by its resemblance to
other things. Other things it resembles
so closely that no one has ever been*
able to identify it for certain as something common to all men.
"All men?" he asks.
All. "You’re right," she adds. (96)

Duras also uses her sub-narrative to touch on this postulation:

One evening, at the edge of the stage, of the river, says the actor, she [the actress] would say, "There could be a change of shift with the actors, as with the staff of a casino, the crew of a submarine, the workers in a factory..."

They would go over to her, to her body lying in the sheets, as it is now, with the face hidden under the black silk. And she, having lost him, unable to recognize him among the new actors, would be distraught. She would say, "You’re very close to a general idea of what a man is, and that’s why you’re unforgettable, that’s why you make me cry." (99)

The fact that the actors could be switched is more than just another variation on the presentation of the play. With it, and with the actress’ fascinating comments, Duras underscores the notion that for all of our unique qualities, we are still similar to the majority of our fellow men and women, perhaps in ways which we cannot accurately pinpoint or discuss, but similar nonetheless.
1. Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* comes to mind at this point — specifically, the characters’ struggles to accurately remember certain events in their past. The banana plantation massacre scene is a good example, as well as the author’s comments on the actual event which inspired him to write the banana plantation scene into his novel:

Nobody has studied the events around the real banana strike — and now when they talk about it in the newspapers, even once in the congress, they speak of the 3000 who died! And I wonder if, with time, it will become true that 3000 were killed. That is why, in *The Autumn of the Patriarch*, there is a moment when the patriarch says, "It doesn’t matter it is not true now; it will be with time." (Dreifus 76)

This is not to say that the events which the narrator of *The Lover* remembers are completely fictitious, or that she is overblowing the actual affair which took place between herself and her lover. But I think Garcia Marquez’s novel and comments go a long way to showing the immense power behind a written work, how it can both influence and shape memories, and actually come to impose itself upon reality.

2. Conjectural narration is by no means an original element of postmodernism. Traces of conjectural reconstruction of the past can be found at least as far back as Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, in which Shreve and Quentin piece together Colonel Sutpen’s story via conjectural narration, and the narrative moves from present to past tense. This kind of storytelling is a tool on which some postmodernists have come to rely in order to convey the vast uncertainty that they see permeating our current existence. I will delve deeper into the issue of writing as producer of memories and uncertainty in Section II of this chapter.

3. I should point out that *The Malady of Death* has also been published in a collection of some of Duras’ short novels.

4. Duras describes the performed versions of her narrative and in so doing, asks us to view her story in at least two (sometimes more than two) different ways. Willis points out that Duras’ project has a performance aspect as well. Since, taken altogether, it constitutes a continual translation and reconstruction of the same configurations, formations, scenes. It is a continual reframing that forces us, as readers/spectators, to confront the very contradictions the work thematizes: between body and language, image and voice, reading
and acting, writing and producing images. (12)

The core elements may remain the same, but Duras' story variations and her use of drama emphasize the many possibilities which exist within a relationship, and from one relationship to another.

5. Here I am not trying to ignore how much The Malady of Death focuses on the physical relations between the two characters and how, in its own way, it is an extremely erotic book. Some might even contend that it is primarily a work of eroticism, but I think that such a claim would undervalue Duras' efforts and diminish the story's fascinating and problematic characters.

6. Duras challenges (imposes upon?) her women readers even further because it is eventually revealed that the "you" is male. Consequently female readers are asked to engage with a male second person character: "you."

7. The fact that Duras would rather have Blue Eyes, Black Hair read to an audience rather than performed, underscores her assertion in The Malady of Death, that "I always think nothing can replace the reading of a text, that no acting can ever equal the effect of a text not memorised" (57).

8. There is one other possibility that bears mentioning: Perhaps the "you" in the story indicates not a semi-omniscient narrator, but the woman herself, reflecting back on the story and "reading" the man's actions throughout her relationship with him, projecting her feelings regarding his actions and lack of actions, interpreting the events that comprise The Malady of Death for us.

9. Consider for example The Ravishing of Lol Stein, The Vice Consul, and Dear Emily, in which characters substitute themselves in the place of others in order to hypothetically experience some act or affair.

10. Other evidence substantiates the fact that the woman was deeply in love with the foreigner when she sends him away. For example, she utters his pet name in her sleep on numerous occasions, and when the man accuses her of being the one who cried out in the hotel as opposed to the foreigner, she does not deny it. The man eventually asks her what her love for the foreigner was like, and she responds, "Like any love with a beginning and an end, unforgettable and yet you've forgotten it. I forget" (66). Here again, the woman reveals her great feelings for the foreigner as well as her attempts to repress them.
11. I should mention that sleep is another coping mechanism that the woman relies on. Time and again, we see her succumb to deep sleep. We also learn that she wakes up extremely disoriented and confused. Sleep acts as a drug for the woman, and is another way for her to avoid her problems with the man. This character’s tendency to sleep differs somewhat from the female character’s bouts of sleep in _The Malady of Death_. In the earlier book, the woman sleeps in order to avoid having to constantly face the man, whom she feels carries "the malady of death" within him. In the later work, the woman sleeps in order to avoid facing the dilemma of loving someone whom she believes will never wish to return her affection.

12. The man does not choose the woman because she had an affair with the foreigner. In fact, there are indications that the man does not remember seeing the woman with the man.
CHAPTER III

Auster's The New York Trilogy:
Postmodern Existential Mystery Fiction

Introduction

In his analysis of detective fiction, Raymond Chandler asserts that

the detective story, even in its most conventional form, is difficult to write well. Good specimens of the art are much rarer than good serious novels. Second-rate items outlast most of the high-velocity fiction, and a great many that should never have been born simply refuse to die at all. They are as durable as the statues in public parks and just about as dull. (The Simple Art of Murder 2)

One wonders where Chandler, a master of the modern detective story, would have ranked Paul Auster's City of Glass, Ghosts, and The Locked Room, the series of mysteries which comprise The New York Trilogy. Chandler also notes that "the good detective story and the bad detective story are about exactly the same things, and they are about them in very much the same way" (The Simple Art of Murder 2). This is hardly true of Auster's novels, which ultimately focus on the investigators rather than on the mystery itself.
And yet, are Chandler and Auster all that different? Well, yes and no. In this chapter, I will attempt to show that Chandler and Auster both implement some of the elements of modern detective fiction, but that partly because Auster turns the main focus of his narratives away from the surface mystery and onto the mysteries of writing, language and the (inter)subjectivity of the main characters, and partly because he writes his mysteries in a very unconventional fashion, the trio of novels which comprise The New York Trilogy should be regarded as postmodern existential detective fiction.

I

Differences Between the Modern Mystery and the Postmodern Mystery

I will begin by focusing on the principal differences between the modern and postmodern mystery: the importance of the main character in the story and the extent to which this character is developed and deconstructed for the reader; the authoritative narrator vs. the intrusive, self-conscious one; and the issue of closure and resolution.

First of all, I don’t think it is wrong to make the claim that in the modern detective story, the "surface mystery" is everything (or just about everything), whereas in the postmodern mystery, the "surface mystery" is of far less importance. Instead, Auster uses it to approach some
of the "deeper mysteries" which he wishes to explore in his text. By "surface mystery" I am referring to the puzzle or dilemma which the detective or character doing the investigating is asked to solve. In the modern mystery, such as *The Long Goodbye*, the surface mystery that would occupy Marlowe's time includes the deaths, or apparent deaths, of Sylvia and Terry Lennox, and the possible connection between Sylvia Lennox's death and Roger Wade's apparent suicide. Other puzzles develop to complicate the main mystery, and Chandler ends up linking all of them together. In Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, the surface mysteries would comprise Quinn's being asked to keep an eye on Stillman, Blue's being asked to keep round the clock surveillance on Black, and the mysterious disappearance of Fanshawe. However, Auster uses these strong surface mysteries to lure us into the more complex mysteries he wishes to explore in the books. These I call the novels' "deeper mysteries." They are the true puzzles in the postmodern mystery. In each of the novels which comprise *The New York Trilogy*, the surface mystery is abandoned in order to focus on the main character, who is investigating the surface mystery. Indeed, the true mysteries in Auster's trio of books are the main characters themselves.

This leads to another striking variation between the postmodern detective story and the modern detective story: character development. We learn a great deal more about the
principal characters in Auster's postmodern mysteries than we do about Chandler's Marlowe -- which is not to say that Marlowe is a flimsy construct around which the story evolves. It is interesting to note Chandler's own drastic change of attitude toward his principal character between the time he wrote "The Simple Art of Murder" (1944) in which he states that his detective "must be the best man in his world and a good enough man for any world" but that "I do not care much about his private life" (18), and the time he wrote The Long Goodbye (1953), in which he privileges characters and "moral dilemmas" over anything else in his story. Jerry Speir is correct when he notes that The Long Goodbye is Chandler's "boldest attempt to exceed the confines of the detective mystery" (65). Speir goes on to observe that in a letter from Chandler to his agent,

Chandler bemoans the genre's preference for "constant action" over character development and allows that he has become too "complicated" and "unsure" to satisfy that demand. His interests lay instead in "moral dilemmas, rather than in who cracked who on the head". . . .

(66)

Chandler creates several such dilemmas for Marlowe and other characters to wrestle with as the story progresses. We come to learn quite a bit about Philip Marlowe, as his character evolves from one novel to the next. Philip Durham has pointed out that Marlowe is basically a romantic at heart, while Gay Brewer has shown that Marlowe's tough exterior conceals a deeprooted longing for the comforts of stability
and domesticity. In *The Long Goodbye*, Marlowe himself tells us a great deal when Howard Spencer asks Marlowe to talk about himself:

I'm a licensed private investigator and have been for quite a while. I'm a lone wolf, unmarried, getting middle-aged [Marlowe is forty-two years old], and not rich. I've been in jail more than once and I don't do divorce business. I like liquor and women and chess and a few other things. The cops don't like me too well, but I know a couple I get along with. I'm a native son, born in Santa Rosa, both parents dead, no brothers or sisters, and when I get knocked off in a dark alley sometime, if it happens as it could to anyone in my business, and to plenty of people in any business or no business at all these days, nobody will feel that the bottom has dropped out of his or her life. (92)

We also learn a number of incidental facts that nevertheless build up and help us better "see" this character as we read *The Long Goodbye*. Marlowe drives an Olds, smokes cigarettes and a pipe, and rents a house in Laurel Canyon. He likes his liquor -- and his coffee. Speir notes that "*The Long Goodbye* is clearly Chandler's last great effort to push the mystery novel out of its stereotyped niche." He is also correct to note that Chandler's agenda is far greater than that apparent in the average whodunit:

Unlike any of its predecessors, it takes on the whole modern society as its subject. It concentrates its examination of the effects of that society on three specific individuals: Terry Lennox. . .Roger Wade. . .Marlowe. . .The book turns both outward toward the world and inward toward the self.
It recognizes human weakness. It ends on a puzzled note of quiet reflection. And it does so with the conviction that the world’s problems are finally the problems of individual human beings. (77)

Chandler is to be credited for bringing a tremendous amount of realism and depth to a genre often populated with hackneyed plots and tired stereotypes. Speir believes that "The plight of the individual in the modern world is the essence of Marlowe’s dilemma at the end of The Long Goodbye," and concludes that the essence of the story is that "we are uncertain of what we want and, by extension, of who we are" (77-78). Still, for all of the ground breaking that Chandler does with characterization and expanding the genre of detective fiction to privilege characterization over action, the surface mystery -- that complex puzzle that involves Terry and Sylvia Lennox, and Roger and Eileen Wade -- is still the prime focal point of his novel.

Auster’s novels deal far more deeply with the angst and confusion of the primary character. At least Marlowe remains a puzzled and insecure presence at the end of The Long Goodbye. Quinn dissipates completely by the end of The Locked Room, and the same holds true for Blue in Ghosts. The nameless narrator of The Locked Room fares a little better, yet he elects to abandon his investigation when it means facing his own inadequacies. William Marling notes that Chandler succeeds in bringing new levels of complexity to his main character "while preserving the traditional
functions of the genre and role of the detective as a knight" (132). Auster's characters, on the other hand, can hardly be regarded as archetypal heroes by virtue of the fact that they are so real and so prone to failure. So human.

Along with differences in character development between the modern and postmodern sleuths, there are also striking differences in character motivation. Critics have often pointed out that Philip Marlowe (and other primary characters in detective fiction) are updated versions of the chivalric, heroic knight who do their best to uphold a trace of justice in a chaotic, unjust world. Philip Durham notes, for example, that by the time Chandler completed writing his first few short stories, "The knightly attitude, indigenous in the hard-boiled hero, had become a characteristic of Chandler's protagonist" (82-83). William Marling echoes this sentiment when he interprets the passage from The Big Sleep which mentions the painting of the knight and the nude damsel in distress hanging in the Sternwood home: "This passage sets up the figure of the detective/knight, his problem with naked and/or amorous daughters to whom he must be sociable, and the solution: a pragmatist stepping into the idealized tableau to achieve results" (83). Further, Chandler himself notes that

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down these mean streets a man must go
who is not himself mean, who is neither
tarnished nor afraid. The detective in
this kind of story [the modern mystery]
must be such a man. He’s the hero; he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor — by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. (The Simple Art of Murder 18)

Finally, in The Long Goodbye, Marlowe himself sums up a day in the life of a P.I. Not exactly a typical day but not totally untypical either. What makes a man stay with it nobody knows. You don’t get rich, you don’t often have much fun. Sometimes you get beaten up or shot at or tossed into the jailhouse. Once in a long while you get dead. Every other month you decide to give it up and find some sensible occupation while you can still walk without shaking your head. Then the door buzzer rings and you open the inner door to the waiting room and there stands a new face with a new problem, a new load of grief, and a small piece of money. (158)

At first it may seem that at least two of Auster’s three investigators in The New York Trilogy — Quinn (in City of Glass) and Blue (in Ghosts) are also motivated by justice and self-sacrifice. Quinn and Blue are self-sacrificing when it comes to working on their respective cases. Indeed, they push self-sacrifice to ridiculous levels, but the reason they do so is ultimately not out of concern for others or some innate chivalric sense of duty. Rather, Quinn and Blue regard their jobs as escape mechanisms. By dedicating himself to the Stillman case, Quinn avoids thinking about his own existence. Similarly, Blue is very diligent regarding his own work, but he too
seeks to escape the responsibilities of his own life. (A more thorough analysis of Quinn, Blue, and the nameless narrator follows in the next section of this chapter.)

Still another difference between the modern and postmodern mystery is the very way it is told to us. While there are a number of authorial intrusions in Auster's mysteries, none exists in Chandler's stories. In The Long Goodbye, we have Philip Marlowe giving us a first person account of the case, and while the reader knows that it is Raymond Chandler giving voice to Marlowe and the rest of the characters in the novel, at no time in the text does Chandler "kick" the reader out of the narrative with a reminder that there is an author behind the voice of Marlowe and that the text which we are reading is a work of fiction.²

Auster, on the other hand, incorporates a number of subtle and striking authorial intrusions into his text which leave the reader wondering about the nature of this so-called work of fiction. These intrusions work to create a series of mini-mysteries for the reader. In City of Glass, for example, Quinn becomes involved in the Stillman case because of a wrong number. The caller was trying to reach Paul Auster of the Auster Detective Agency. Later, a character named Paul Auster -- who happens to be a writer -- appears in the story. Even the most lackadaisical reader begins to wonder whether this character is intended to
represent a fictional construct, or Auster himself. It also forces us to question the very nature of the text which we are reading: how much of it is fact and how much fiction?

Auster's intrusiveness grows greater as the novels progress. At the end of *Ghosts*, for example, Auster notes that

> When Blue stands up from his chair, puts on his hat, and walks through the door, that will be the end of it.

> Where he goes after that is not important. For we must remember that all this took place more than thirty years ago, back in the days of our earliest childhood. Anything is possible, therefore. I myself prefer to think that he went far away, boarding a train that morning and going out West to start a new life. It is even possible that America was not the end of it. In my secret dreams, I like to think of Blue booking passage on some ship and sailing to China. Let it be China, then, and we'll leave it at that. For now is the moment that Blue stands up from his chair, puts on his hat, and walks through the door. And from this moment on, we know nothing. (232)

These concluding statements force the reader to see the peripherals of the narrative, where the author is weaving the story for us, and remind us that we are reading a text. By being so candid with his audience, Auster echoes the postmodern sentiment that the author should not be regarded as supreme authority and that s/he most certainly does not have all the answers. This is further underscored by the confession which Auster makes near the end of the third novel of *The New York Trilogy*:
These three stories are finally the same story, but each one represents a different stage in my awareness of what it is about. I don't claim to have solved any problems. I am merely suggesting that a moment came when it no longer frightened me to look at what had happened. . . I have been struggling to say goodbye to something for a long time now, and this struggle is all that really matters. The story is not in the words; it's in the struggle. (346) Auster's confession is in many ways more baffling than useful because while certain themes are paralleled in each story -- loneliness, the reluctance to probe the self and to commit to others -- the stories certainly do more than retread the same ground from different approaches. At the same time, by making such candid admissions in his text, Auster makes us suspect that he himself may be the nameless narrator of The Locked Room. Further, his confessions reveal that he has his creative limitations: that he isn't an omniscient, all perfect and authoritative storyteller, but rather a very human writer who has struggled with personal dilemmas which parallel the struggles of his characters and who still doesn't have all the answers. Of course, John Barth reminds us that "these authorial selves and surrogates as characters in their own fictions . . . often as not, they're just as fictitious as their fellow characters" ("The Self in Fiction"/The Friday Book 210). Still, even if this is the case in Auster and our candid narrator is not Auster but a construct, Auster has further
problematized the mystery genre by making himself -- or a construct of himself -- visible within the narrative.

Finally, there is the issue of closure to consider -- the greater sense of it in the modern mystery and the lack of it in the postmodern mystery. One of the staples of the modern mystery writer is to bring a strong sense of closure to his/her story -- to "tie up loose ends" and play out the denouement in such a way that it gives the reader the sense that this part of the story has come to its conclusion. Most readers of mysteries try to solve the puzzle along with the sleuth in the narrative and eagerly await the final solution to the story. Thus, "the big pay-off" of the modern mystery lies in the way the author brings closure to the narrative and explains the mystery. Chandler gives us a wonderful pay-off at the end of *The Long Goodbye*, when we discover that Terry Lennox, the man whom we presumed dead from the early part of the book, is still very much alive.

On the other hand, while the modern mystery writer finds it vital to tidy up the ending of his/her story, Auster seems reluctant to bring full or tidy resolution to his narratives. Instead, he gives us what I call "open-ended endings." The surface mystery and the deeper mystery (the existential struggles of the main characters) are left full of holes or unresolved. By leaving Quinn in an inert, traumatized state when we last see him in *City of Glass*, by leaving Blue’s fate uncertain, and by leaving the narrator
of *The Locked Room* in turmoil, Auster moves away from the satisfying closure of the modern mystery toward an ending which is more problematic, yet also more realistic than the endings of most modern mysteries.

II

An Existential Reading of

*The New York Trilogy*

It soon grows clear, as one reads the trio of mysteries which comprise *The New York Trilogy*, that Auster is willing both to flesh out and deconstruct his main characters more extensively than the writer of the modern mystery. The modern mystery writer's foremost purpose is not to explore a man's alienation and subjectivity (though this may be done to some extent in the process of developing his principal character). The postmodernist, on the other hand, may have no fixed agenda or didactic purpose either, but, at least in the case of Auster's *The New York Trilogy*, there is a more intense focus on his main characters. Thus, while the detective in the modern mystery may experience doubts and insecurity, s/he always manages to solve the puzzle. This is not the case in the postmodern mystery, where the main character often neither manages to solve the surface mystery, nor the deeper mysteries of her/his own subjectivity.
Quinn

(City of Glass)

The narrator of City of Glass tells the reader that "It was a wrong number that started it [Quinn’s involvement in the Stillman case]," then proceeds to explain that "As for Quinn...Who he was, where he came from, and what he did are of no great importance" (3), implying that, as in the modern mystery, our investigator’s past and present life are not as important as the mystery which will soon unfold. However, this is deceptive, because very soon we begin to learn a great deal about Quinn: how he was once a more ambitious and prolific writer who produced more than the single detective novel he now publishes once a year, how since the death of his wife and son Quinn has retreated from life and has lost all of his friends, how "more than anything else...what he liked to do was walk" (4) in New York, "an inexhaustible space, a labyrinth of endless steps" because "no matter how far he walked, no matter how well he came to know its neighborhoods and streets, it always left him with the feeling of being lost. Lost, not only in the city, but within himself as well" (4). Quinn relishes this state because "His excursions through the city had taught him to understand the connectedness of inner and outer. Using aimless motion as a technique of reversal, on his best days he could bring the outside in and thus usurp the sovereignty of inwardness" (74). Quinn is a man who wishes
to obliterate memory and thinking, and rather than do it with drink, drugs, or other forms of escape, he does it by engaging in activities which shut off his thinking by concentrating on immediate actions and events (walking in the city, watching hours of baseball on television).

It is no surprise, then, that when a persistent caller rings Quinn and asks for Paul Auster, of the Paul Auster detective agency, Quinn decides to impersonate Auster and take on the case of guarding Peter Stillman from his deranged father. Though he doesn’t consciously realize it, writing detective books allows Quinn to check out of his subjectivity and be Max Work, his main character. Now this telephone mix-up provides him with another form of escape. He can "become" Paul Auster. Quinn plays Auster so well that he feels reluctant to abandon the character as the case progresses. He is also frustrated when he finds himself unable to read Stillman as easily as his own Max Work is able to read others in the mysteries Quinn writes:

Quinn was deeply disillusioned. He had always imagined that the key to good detective work was a close observation of details. The more accurate the scrutiny, the more successful the results. The implication was that human behavior could be understood, that beneath the infinite facade of gestures, tics, and silences, there was finally a coherence, an order, a source of motivation. (80)

Quinn learns a great deal about Stillman the religious zealot, but when Stillman abandons his elaborate attempt to
walk out the letters TOWER OF BABEL in the streets of the
city before he finishes the phrase and instead checks out of
his hotel, Quinn refuses to believe that Stillman has
abandoned his crazy scheme, that he will not try to kill
Peter Stillman, and that he is, after all, just a very
disturbed old man. If Quinn accepted this fact, it would
mean giving up the guise of Paul Auster and returning to
being himself, Daniel Quinn. So he elects to ignore it.

Quinn cannot reach Virginia Stillman to tell her he has
lost the trail of her husband’s father, and despite the fact
that the Stillmans’ telephone line is busy for over a day,
he never makes an attempt to go to their apartment to see if
they are alright. Instead he reasons that

Ideally, an operative should maintain
close contact with his client. That had
always been one of Max Work’s
principles. But was it really
necessary? As long as Quinn did his
job, how could it matter? If there were
any misunderstandings, surely they could
be cleared up once the case was settled.

Quinn stepped across to the other
side [of the Stillmans’ street], found a
spot for himself in a narrow alleyway,
and settled in for the night. (134)

Quinn overlooks some serious points. How does he know, for
instance, that his client isn’t already dead? How can he be
sure that Stillman didn’t break into the apartment and
murder Peter and Virginia Stillman in the day or so that
Quinn lost his trail? Why doesn’t Quinn deduce that the
reason the telephone line is busy for so long may be because
it has been knocked off the hook during a struggle, and that
Peter and Virginia Stillman may already be dead? The reason is obvious: Quinn has grown so enamored of the case and the false identity that came with it that he is reluctant to see it end.

The beginning of the next chapter brings a radical twist in the novel: our narrator tells us that "A long time passed. Exactly how long it is impossible to say. Weeks certainly, but perhaps even months" (135), with Quinn still holed up and keeping constant vigil in the alleyway! At this point it is quite clear that our narrator is far more disturbed than we imagined. This isn’t self-sacrifice. This is a desire to escape from the responsibilities of existence taken to extremes. Quinn still clings to the pretense that he is doing a job for the Stillmans, but his true motives grow quite clear to the reader. For example, the narrator’s comments that Quinn "spent many hours looking up at the sky. From his position at the back of the alley, wedged in between the bin and the wall, there were few other things to see" indicate that Quinn is not keeping as close an eye on the entrance as he believes himself to be (140).

Earlier in the novel, Quinn listens to a street clarinetist whose music "went on and on, always finally the same, and yet the longer I listened the harder I found it to leave. . . .To be inside that music, to be drawn into the circle of its repetitions: perhaps that is a place where one could finally disappear" (130). Quinn gets his wish at
the end of the book, as he begins to dissipate, but he realizes (for the first time, it seems) that writing could have functioned as well as the clarinet music: that writing could have given him the power to disappear/dissipate if he had done more of it. In earlier years, Quinn wrote more ambitious works, including a book of poetry which Paul Auster admired, but that kind of "serious" writing either became too painful for him after the death of his wife and son, or he became apathetic. At the very end, Quinn sees that writing can function both as an outlet for self-discovery and as an escape mechanism, not just as a way to bring in money, which is primarily how he used it after the death of his wife and son. But it is too late now. He understands that when he finishes writing in the red notebook, he will cease to be. He seems to have a change of heart, but only because naked and alone in the empty Stillman apartment, Quinn finds that he has stepped into the state of nonbeing that he always sought. In this state, where meals are seemingly miraculously delivered to him daily, and he is free of all responsibilities, Quinn can go on living and now regretted having wasted so many pages at the beginning of the red notebook, and in fact felt sorry that he had bothered to write about the Stillman case at all. For the case was far behind him now, and he no longer bothered to think about it. It had been a bridge to another place in his life, and now that he had crossed it, its meaning had been lost. (156)
The problem now for Quinn is that he is running out of pages in the notebook. If writing is what is sustaining his new existence, he worries, justifiably, about what will happen when he runs out of ink and paper:

He wondered if he had it in him to write without a pen, if he could learn to speak instead, filling the darkness with his voice, speaking the words into thin air, into the walls into the city, even if the light never came back again.

The last sentence of the red notebook reads: "What will happen when there are no more pages in the red notebook?" (156-57)

What happens isn't exactly clear, but Quinn disappears from the narrative. For all intents and purposes, he ceases to exist.6

So how, one might wonder, is this a story about existentialism and one man's struggles to avoid coming to know himself and deepen his subjectivity? I make the claim that existentialism/subjectivity remains very much an absent presence throughout the novel and is actually the main focus of the text even though the main character goes out of his way to avoid engaging in introspection. Quinn spends his life trying to obliterate consciousness in order to avoid the burdens and responsibilities which go along with living. City of Glass then, whether Auster intends for it to do so or not, reflects the efforts of many to occupy themselves with the lives of others in order to avoid assessing their own lives. It also reminds us that it is much easier to don
masques and pretend to be someone else rather than to struggle and discover who we really are.

Blue

(Ghosts)

For several days, Blue does not bother to look out the window. He has enclosed himself so thoroughly in his own thoughts that Black no longer seems to be there. The drama is Blue’s alone, and if Black is in some sense the cause of it, it’s as though he has already played his part, spoken his lines, and made his exit from the stage. For Blue at this point can no longer accept Black’s existence, and therefore he denies it. Having penetrated the sanctum of Black’s solitude, he cannot respond to the darkness of that moment except by replacing it with a solitude of his own. To enter Black, then, was the equivalent of entering himself, and once inside himself, he can no longer conceive of being anywhere else.

(Ghosts 225-26)

Such is the revelation that comes to Blue at the end of the peculiar case which White hired him for — a routine surveillance job of Black. The job ends up being anything but routine, though; or, more precisely, it is atypical because it is so incredibly mundane and demands so little of Blue, who sits in an apartment across from Black’s and for the better part of a year, watches him write or read. It is a job that Blue, who "likes to be up and about, moving from one place to another, doing things" (166), comes to loathe because it allows him far too much time to think:
I’m not the Sherlock Holmes type, he would say to Brown, whenever the boss gave him a particular sedentary task. Give me something I can sink my teeth into. (166)

The case demands that Blue do something he has never done before: attempt to think and reason exactly like his "enemy" in order to come to a close approximation of his thoughts. These mental exercises eventually begin to cause a change within Blue and make him invest more time thinking than he ever has before. Because Black has set up the perfect situation for it to happen, Blue finally begins to engage in an internal examination:

For the first time in his life, he finds that he has been thrown back on himself, with nothing to grab hold of, nothing to distinguish one moment from the next. He has never given much thought to the world inside him, and though he always knew it was there, it has remained an unknown quantity, unexplored and therefore dark, even to himself. (171)

Blue begins a slow and painful existential investigation as he scrutinizes his internal self, yearns for close spiritual contact with others, and comes to the frightening recognition that ultimately, we must own up to our own actions and responsibilities. Of course, Blue does not recognize that he is probing into existential matters, nor would he likely discuss the process of engagement and series of recognitions that come to him in philosophic language. Still, Blue is not ignorant of the fact that something is happening to him: "I’m changing, he says to himself."
Little by little, I’m no longer the same. . . . I’m on my own, he thinks, there’s no one to turn to anymore" (173-74, 187).

Blue initially feels "Inspired" by the recognition that he no longer has to work in the shadow of his mentor, Brown. He feels liberated by the thought that "There is no master above him anymore. I’m my own man, he says to himself. I’m my own man, accountable to no one but myself" (188). This newfound joy however, is short-lived, because being solely on one’s own also means that there is no one to turn to for advice and guidance, and no one to share the blame when things are botched.

Blue, who has always felt more comfortable with physical activity rather than mental activity, finally decides that "the key to the case is action" and proceeds to disguise himself and instigate a series of encounters with Black (199). These brief discussions, however, do no more than further trouble Blue and make him engage in deeper reflection.

Almost against his will, a new compassion and sensitivity begin to awaken within Blue. He is initially quite chauvinistic and self-centered. For example, he always thinks of his fiancee as "the future Mrs. Blue," and shortly after taking on the Black case, "He thinks about calling her up on the phone for a chat," but "hesitates" and eventually "decides against it" because "He doesn’t want to
seem weak," and "If she knew how much he needed her, he would begin to lose his advantage and that wouldn’t be good. The man must always be the stronger one" (165). Further, it is initially only her physical presence and the pleasure he derives from her body that he misses. However, as the case progresses and Blue grows more honest with himself and more sensitive about the feelings of others, "thoughts of the future Mrs. Blue occasionally disturb his growing peace of mind. Blue misses her more than ever, but he also senses somehow that things will never be the same again" (173). Blue eventually recognizes that the best thing to do is to let the future Mrs. Blue go, because to him she was no more than an object from which he gained physical gratification. When he eventually loses her to another man, Blue accepts responsibility for the loss:

Blue feels tears forming in his eyes, but more than grief he feels anger at himself for being such a fool. He has lost whatever chance he might have had for happiness. . . (196)

Blue begins to feel a closeness with historical figures who have been alienated by their own struggles (Henry Ward Beecher and Jackie Robinson, for example). He recognizes that the journey to improve oneself is not always successful, as is the case with Jeff Bailey, the character Robert Mitchum portrays in Out of the Past, a film which Blue greatly admires. He also begins to feel "a rush of pity for that forlorn figure across the street" -- the very
man who caused Blue's spiritual inspection, metamorphosis, and turmoil (226). For to feel compassion for this mysterious stranger, Blue begins to realize, is to feel compassion for himself.

In the end, however, because Black has used Blue as a year-long witness to the writing of his memoirs (which are actually one long suicide note), and because Black threatens to kill Blue along with himself, Blue's anger gets the best of him and he gives Black a beating so vicious that "If he's alive now, Blue thinks, it won't be for long" (231). But there is also another unspoken reason why Blue vents his anger on Black: it is Black, after all, who has put Blue through all of the grief of engaging in introspection and reflection and coming to a better understanding of himself. It is Black who for the better part of a year has acted as a mirror image of Blue and shown him what a wasted and worthless existence Blue has lived. Self-recognition can be painful, especially when you find that on the whole, your life has been pretty meaningless and your attitude, pretty selfish. If Blue feels compassion for Black, he also feels hatred which he cannot govern and which causes Blue to attack Black. Afterward, Blue takes Black's manuscript with him and reads it and finds that he "knew it all by heart" (232). Black's wasted life mirrors Blue's and if there is any kind of hope, it is that Blue does not shoot himself with Black's pistol in the end, but has the courage to walk
away with his new awareness and perhaps go on living and improving himself from then on.

The ending of the novel is left open, and even though Auster tells us that "Where he goes after that is not important," even the author seems to struggle with the impulse to throw in a romanticized cliched ending to cap off his anything but cliched story:

Anything is possible. . .I myself prefer to think that he went far away, boarding a train that morning and going out West to start a new life. It is even possible that America was not the end of it. In my secret dreams, I like to think of Blue booking passage on some ship and sailing to China. Let it be China, then, and we’ll leave it at that. (232)

In some ways, this seems far too optimistic on the part of Auster, especially when we consider Blue’s murder (or near murder) of Black. The fact that Blue harbors this much hatred for Black -- or anyone -- is a problem in itself. In his discussion of the nature of hatred, Sartre notes that Subject’s hatred of the Other is actually "the hatred of all Others in one Other:"

In hate there is given an understanding of the fact that my dimension of being-alienated is a real enslavement which comes to me through others. It is the suppression of this enslavement which is projected. That is why hate is a black feeling. . . (Being and Nothingness 533, emphasis Sartre’s)

This is not to say that Blue has no right to be resentful of the fact that Black wishes to kill him, and that his
feelings should not be in turmoil. After all, Black has been the chief source of Blue’s existential angst and psychological anxiety. Black has succeeded in opening up Blue to himself, and what Blue finds is painful for him to accept. However, the fact that Blue acts upon his hatred for Black in such a violent manner and leaves Black for dead suggests an inability to govern his own temperament and actions and problematizes the progress Blue seems to have made toward a better understanding and compassion of self and others. As Sartre notes in *Being and Nothingness*,

hate too is in turn a failure. Its initial project is to suppress other consciousnesses. But even if it succeeded in this -- i.e., if it could at this moment abolish the Other -- it could not bring it about that the Other had not been. Better yet, if the abolition of the Other is to be lived as the triumph of hate, it implies the explicit recognition that the Other has existed. Immediately my being-for-others by slipping into the past becomes an irremediable dimension of myself. It is what I have to be as having-been-it. Therefore I cannot free myself from it.

(534)

To reiterate, Blue is not likely to think of these matters in the philosophical terminology that Sartre or others may employ to define his metamorphosis and turmoil. However, he gets the same messages from other sources to which he can more easily relate, and as time passes, he is likely to understand the full significance of his actions toward Black. For example, Blue understands that in *Out of the Past*, Jeff Bailey "has been marked by the past and once
that happens, nothing can be done about it" (Ghosts 193).
Blue comes to understand that past actions and events are an indelible part of existence:

Something happens, Blue thinks, and then it goes on happening forever. It can never be changed, can never be otherwise. Blue begins to be haunted by this thought, for he sees it as a kind of warning, a message delivered up from within himself, and try as he does to push it away, the darkness of this thought does not leave him. (193)

Unfortunately, this new awareness is not enough to keep Blue from killing or nearly killing Black. Whether Black dies or not -- and if Blue is any judge, it seems that he will -- Black will very likely be one of the many "Ghosts" coming "out of the past" to haunt Blue from now on. We cannot, therefore, see the ending of Ghosts as overly positive, in spite of the fact that Blue has attained a new awareness of self and others. As Sartre reminds us,

the triumph of hate is in its very upsurge transformed into failure. Hate does not allow us to get out of the circle. It simply represents the final attempt, the attempt of despair. After the failure of this attempt, nothing remains for the for-itself except to re-enter the circle and allow itself to be indefinitely tossed from one to the other of the two fundamental attitudes. (Being and Nothingness 534)

The Nameless Narrator

(The Locked Room)

The nameless narrator of The Locked Room goes out of his way to convince himself -- and his readers -- that we
are all under the whims of chance and that there is no way to anticipate what lies in store for us throughout our lives. He dredges up stories of La Chere, Lorenzo, and his own boyhood friend Fanshawe to prove that life can be one bizarre twist after another, and that it is fruitless to attempt to find logical patterns in the courses our lives take because "In the end, each life is no more than the sum of contingent facts, a chronicle of chance intersections, of flukes, of random events that divulge nothing but their own lack of purpose" (The Locked Room 256). Throughout the novel, the narrator stresses that "Lives make no sense... A man lives and then he dies, and what happens in between makes no sense... in the end, each life is irreducible to anything other than itself. Which is as much as to say: lives make no sense" (295, 298). If the narrator is partially right in his circular argument, he is also partially wrong, for it is always easier to dismiss lives as a series of random occurrences than to deconstruct them, scrutinize them objectively, and attempt to search for clues which may reveal the motives behind actions and events which lead to the formation of distinct personalities. If the latter course is taken, it also calls for the subject to admit to her/his own failings and shortcomings. The narrator tells himself that "lives make no sense" because to do otherwise would call for him to make a number of painful self-admissions: that his life has come to be largely
influenced and orchestrated by his childhood friend, Fanshawe, and that Fanshawe excels at the narrator’s own occupation -- writing.

_The Locked Room_ is the story of Fanshawe told by the narrator, but it is also the story of the narrator’s failure to come to terms with living in Fanshawe’s shadow. What is truly remarkable about the novel is how deluded the narrator remains, how he struggles to avoid his own deeprooted feelings, and how he threatens to destroy his relationship with his wife, Sophie. On the whole, the narrative reveals a repression on the narrator’s part, an unwillingness to be honest with himself and admit to the full impact of Fanshawe on his life.

One of the reasons why the narrator goes to such great lengths to prove that lives are impossible to interpret is that he has assumed the task of writing his missing friend’s biography. The narrator knows that Fanshawe is alive because Fanshawe has sent him a short letter. The narrator has also married Fanshawe’s former wife, Sophie, and adopted Fanshawe’s son, Ben. Under the pretext that he wishes to spare his wife the grief of learning that Fanshawe is alive (a fact which reveals that he didn’t die as a result of foul play but instead chose to abandon Sophie mere months before she gave birth), the narrator decides to kill Fanshawe off by writing a fictional biography of his friend.

There was never any question of telling the truth. Fanshawe had to be
dead, or else the book would make no sense. Not only would I have to leave the letter out, but I would have to pretend that it had never been written. I make no bones about what I was planning to do. It was clear to me from the beginning, and I plunged into it with deceit in my heart. (291)

At this point the narrator's actions -- or lack of actions -- begin to grow puzzling. Granted, it seems logical to assume that since the narrator wishes not to reveal that Fanshawe is still alive, the ending of the biography will have to be fictionalized. Further, we can also allow him the concession that every written historical account is, to one extent or another, a work of fiction in the sense that it is ultimately up to the author to interpret the events s/he chronicles. But why does the narrator have so much trouble writing the rest of the biography? Is it because he really doesn't have it in him to write anything other than short critical essays? Hardly. The reason for the narrator's struggles is that in order to do it properly, he must also look at himself. To delve into Fanshawe's past means to simultaneously dwell on his own past. What the narrator finds is the painful reminder that in every way (or almost every way), Fanshawe was the superior person: the young, intelligent, independent boy with his own morals and standards, the young man who continued to refine his writing skills, and the person who even in "death" is the superior writer. In fact, we begin to suspect, after hearing the narrator praise Fanshawe's early writing skills, that
Fanshawe is the main reason the narrator became a writer. Thus, writing an account of Fanshawe's life would expose the narrator to all of his own inadequacies over and over again in the course of chronicling the life of his boyhood friend.

Yet the narrator is caught in a double bind because he believes that writing the biography would also benefit him in a number of ways. For one thing, he would prove to himself that he is capable of producing more ambitious material than the critical essays he usually writes:

One morning, as I sat at my desk struggling over the final sentence of an article, groping for a phrase that was not there, it gradually dawned on me that I had been given a second chance. I could give this up and start again. I no longer had to write articles. I could move on to other things, begin to do the work I had always wanted to do. This was my chance to save myself, and I decided I'd be a fool not to take it.

(288)

Second, killing off Fanshawe in print would better insure his wife from suffering unnecessary grief: by committing to print the lie that Fanshawe is dead, Fanshawe would be less prone to show up and disprove it. Third, this act would also benefit the narrator and make Fanshawe less a threat to his own new-found happiness. After all, if Fanshawe were to have a change of heart and turn up alive, that move could bring much turmoil to the narrator, who has married Fanshawe's former wife and adopted Fanshawe's son. What is to stop Fanshawe from changing his mind and coming back?
Writing the biography and "killing" him in print may do the trick.

The problem is that whether the narrator’s biography of Fanshawe is to be a work of fiction or not, Fanshawe’s story must ultimately be a success story -- the one about the missing/dead young man whose posthumous works -- novels, poems, and plays -- are runaway best sellers and critical successes. This is the kind of success which the narrator longed for but long ago gave up on. Writing about Fanshawe’s success puts him face to face with his own creative shortcomings and reminds him that even now he is living under the specter of Fanshawe, living off the money Fanshawe’s works bring in to Sophie and himself, living with Fanshawe’s former wife and son. Thus, the narrator has trouble getting started with the book and he eventually discovers that his feelings for Fanshawe have turned into hate and that a fictionalized death will no longer suffice. These discoveries he makes while bedding Fanshawe’s mother and transferring his hostile feelings toward Fanshawe into the sexual act with the woman who gave him birth:

I had entered my own darkness, and it was there that I learned the one thing that is more terrible than anything else: that sexual desire can also be the desire to kill... I found myself revelling in my cruelty. But even then I knew that I was only halfway home, that she was no more than a shadow, and that I was using her to attack Fanshawe himself... I wanted to kill Fanshawe. I wanted Fanshawe to be dead, and I was
These admissions on the narrator's part are probably the most truthful admissions in his narrative. The narrator later tries to tell us that "In the end, I don't think that I really intended to kill him" and that "The murderous vision that had come to me with Mrs. Fanshawe did not last, at least not on any conscious level" (317), but his confessions seem a weak attempt to cover up his true feelings on the matter and here we see that even in the aftermath of this whole experience, as the narrator writes about it in the text which we are reading, he is still not being honest with himself. After all, regardless of how much he attempts to deny that he harbored murderous feelings toward Fanshawe, his actions speak louder than his words. For the fact remains that he abandons his life in New York to track Fanshawe first in America, then in Paris, and when he fails to find Fanshawe, he settles for a scapegoat -- an unlucky patron who enters a Paris bar:

I had never seen this man before. . . . He's no one, I said to myself. . . . and then, out of the blue, by some muddled reasoning, I finished the thought by adding: and if he's no one, then he must be Fanshawe. . . .
Stillman was not Fanshawe -- I knew that. He was an arbitrary choice, totally innocent and blank. But that was the thing that thrilled me -- the randomness of it, the vertigo of pure chance. It made no sense, and because of that, it made all the sense in the world. (348, 351)
But the narrator fails to kill the scapegoat and is instead nearly killed himself when Stillman gives him a severe beating. The narrator’s reactions in the aftermath of the beating indicate that even physical pain and death are welcome substitutes for the torment he feels over the whole Fanshawe affair:

I couldn’t feel myself anymore. The sensation of life had dribbled out of me, and in its place there was a miraculous euphoria, a sweet poison rushing through my blood, the undeniable odor of nothingness. (352)

Indeed, the narrator seems to be disappointed that he will survive the beating:

For the next three days I didn’t move from my hotel room. The shock was not so much that I was in pain, but that it would not be strong enough to kill me... At a certain moment, lying there on the bed and looking at the slats of the closed shutters, I understood that I had lived through it. It felt strange to be alive, almost incomprehensible. (352)

Being alive means having to return to his dilemma. While in Paris, the narrator begins to act like Quinn in City of Glass and Blue in Ghosts, and reveals a desire to cut off all previous ties and responsibilities: "I didn’t want to look up any of the people I had seen before, and I didn’t have the courage to go back to New York. I became inert, a thing that did not move, and little by little I lost track of myself" (245). The narrator also resembles Fanshawe in this respect, but in this way too the narrator is inferior
to his boyhood friend. Fanshawe stays lost, but the narrator feels that he must return to his home and family and abandon the fruitless search for Fanshawe.

The narrator returns to New York, reestablishes a relationship with his wife, knowing that "the story wasn't over. My last month in Paris had taught me that, and little by little I learned to accept it. It was only a matter of time before the next thing happened" (355). So he waits for Fanshawe to make the next move and when Fanshawe asks him to come to Boston he goes, hoping that a confrontation with Fanshawe will finally resolve his dilemma. Instead, the conversation he has with Fanshawe is more frustrating than illuminating, as is the red spiral notebook which Fanshawe writes to his friend as "an explanation" of his actions:

If I say nothing about what I found there, it is because I understood very little. All the words were familiar to me, and yet they seemed to have been put together strangely, as though their final purpose was to cancel each other out. (370)

So in *The Locked Room*, Auster presents yet another case where the main character wrestles with some of the challenges associated with existential thought, but where the journey into the self is left incomplete -- where the narrator decides to return to his old life and settle for a fragile sort of comfort (fragile because the cause of the dilemma is still unresolved). That the narrator doesn’t gain much from Fanshawe’s notebooks is no surprise because
he has not done the proper mind-work on his end. The narrator returns to his old life and settles for comfort rather than continue to probe inward into matters which could potentially destroy the pleasure he has found with Sophie, Ben, and his new son, Paul. Earlier in the book, the narrator decides to write a semi-fictional biography of Fanshawe, yet the text which this character supposedly writes and which we read -- the manuscript of The Locked Room -- seems to be a fairly truthful account of Fanshawe's life and a deceptive semi-fictional autobiography. Because the narrator cannot make certain admissions about himself, he ends up lying to us and we have to probe his text to get close to the truth, which is that the narrator ends up taking the easy way out and settling for a tenuous, unquestioned happiness without really understanding why that happiness was threatened in the first place.

Conclusion

Auster's approach to the detective story is problematic to those readers who are accustomed to their mysteries operating under the conventions of modern detective fiction. Of course, one of the things Auster wants to accomplish is to move away from established patterns and challenge his audience. Such is the mark of the mysteries which comprise The New York Trilogy and such is the mark of the
postmodernist, as Spanos reminds us in "The Detective and the Boundary"/Repetitions:

The most immediate task... in which the contemporary writer must engage himself -- it is, to borrow a phrase ungratefully from Yeats, the most difficult of tasks not impossible -- is that of undermining the detective-like expectations of the positivistic mind. . .

(48)

Lyotard lends support to this argument in "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?":

The postmodern would be that which. . . denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. A postmodern artist is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have to be done. (340-41, emphasis Lyotard's)

Auster's The New York Trilogy reminds us that many readers are themselves the biggest mysteries they will ever run across. In fact, we may each be the greatest case we'll never "crack" (i.e., understand), because we may not have the capacity, courage, or desire to do so. Auster's books also remind us that we make up our own plots and dramas as
we live and think and do -- or don’t live, don’t think, don’t do. To sum up, Auster’s mysteries remind us to look inside ourselves once in awhile. Perhaps we will find that our "lives make no sense" after all, but at least we will reach this recognition by giving the matter some thought.
1. Durham contends that Chandler was actually writing romantic fiction, but by simulating reality through a hard-boiled attitude he could stay within an American literary tradition. The action and violence more or less covered up the fact that everything came out all right in the end. (Down These Mean Streets A Man Must Go 97)

Further, Brewer asserts that there is traceable character progression throughout the Marlowe novels and that one of the most striking elements associated with this growth is Marlowe's increasing desire to settle down and indulge in some of the domestic comforts which others have but which he -- the knight engaging in a seemingly endless battle for others -- never allows himself to have (A Detective in Distress: Philip Marlowe's Domestic Dream).

2. The possible exception here is the fact that Chandler (through Marlowe) draws attention to bad writing -- in particular, to stilted dialogue -- by noting it in the dialogue of other characters. Of course, after making such observations, Chandler's scenes and dialogue seem to rise above the contrived storytelling of others.

3. Further, characters with the same name appear from one novel to the next. These may or may not be the same characters found in the previous books. For example, a detective named Quinn is spoken about in The Locked Room, and the narrator of that novel picks a man named Peter Stillman as a substitute victim when he cannot find and murder the real Fanshawe.

4. This is in sharp contrast to a modernist like Faulkner, some of whose stories do indeed retread one another as he switches from one section of his narrative and one point of view to the next. It is also interesting to juxtapose Auster's confession with Faulkner's explanation about writing The Sound and the Fury:

   It began with the picture of the little girl's muddy drawers, climbing that tree to look in the parlor window with her brothers that didn't have the courage to climb the tree waiting to see what she saw. And I tried to tell it with one brother, and that wasn't enough. That was Section One. I tried with another brother, and that wasn't enough. That was Section Two. I tried the third brother, because Caddy was still to me
too beautiful and too moving to reduce her to telling what was going on, that it would be more passionate to see her through someone else’s eyes, I thought. And that failed and I tried myself -- a fourth section -- to tell what happened, and I still failed. (Gwynn 1)

Both authors provide a confession about the limitations of their ability to adequately articulate a particular story and deal with certain themes. However, Faulkner’s comments come in response to a question asked of him during a visit to a graduate course, while Auster incorporates his statement -- in true postmodern fashion -- into the narrative of his final novel.

5. Certainly this sense of closure is not a characteristic of modern literature in general. On the contrary, many modern stories are left as open-ended as postmodern works. Consider Brighton Rock, Heart of Darkness, Howards End, Ulysses, and Absalom, Absalom!, for example.

6. Granted, a character named Quinn appears in Auster’s third novel in the series, and this Quinn is a private investigator. But is this Quinn the writer-turned-private-eye of the first novel? Did he come to terms with his existence, manage to forget the Stillman case, drop his mystery writing career in favor of solving real mysteries, and become the detective who is hired by Sophie to trail Fanshawe? Auster does not make it clear, and by not doing so stresses one of the most crucial differences between the modern detective story and the postmodern version: the modern writer still feels a "Rage for Order" but the postmodern writer does not.

7. This holds true for both works of fiction and non-fiction and, to a certain degree, works of film and video, even supposedly objective documentaries. For more about this subject, see my chapter on Pynchon’s Vineland.

8. The one exception here is that the narrator may have been a friendlier person and had a warmer personality than Fanshawe. By his very nature, Fanshawe is distant and never allows anyone -- not his family members, not even his best friend the narrator -- to get too close to, or familiar with, him. Years later, Fanshawe’s mother will tell the narrator that Fanshawe "wasn’t half the boy you were. He was cold inside. He was all dead in there, and I don’t think he ever loved anyone -- not once, not ever in his life" (309). Granted, she is in the process of trying to seduce the narrator when she says this, but her admissions seem to be not so much a part of her attempt to bed the narrator as a need to share her troubled feelings about Fanshawe with someone --
especially his unwillingness to share spiritual intimacy with his own mother when he was growing up.
CHAPTER IV

Revealing Gazes, Revealing Images:
The Deepening of Subjectivity through Looks, Photos, and Film in Pynchon’s *Vineland*

Introduction

After a seventeen year break between novels, Thomas Pynchon gave us *Vineland* in 1990, a postmodern look at America in the mid-eighties, with frequent backward glances on the previous two or three decades. The book is told in a diffident, unhurried, narrative voice that mirrors its meandering -- what I call a flashback/flashforward -- narrative structure and fits right in with the rambling of the befuddled characters in the story: the ex-hippies, former activists, law enforcement officers, young teenagers, and so on.¹ Modern technology abounds in this book. There is a heavy use of television and film metaphors to convey emotions and meaning. To read *Vineland* and fully engage with the text, you must be prepared to accept questionable supernatural events as you do when you read certain works of magical realism. Pynchon uses flying saucers, the possible presence of a Godzilla-like creature, and the "living dead"
(the Thanatoids) the way that Garcia Marquez uses fantastic occurrences and characters in many of his works.

But I wish to return to modern technology in *Vineland*. More than any of the other novelists examined in this dissertation, Pynchon relies on electronic technology and popular culture -- the media, television, film, actors, actresses and other celebrities, film characters, the computer, video games -- to communicate with us. In some ways, one comes out of *Vineland* with the suspicion that for Pynchon, the characters and stories of "the Tube" (as he refers to television throughout the novel and as I will on occasion in this chapter) and film are the ultimate metaphors for today's society. Many characters in the novel use Tube lingo -- TV metaphors -- in their conversations and even our narrator uses them to convey ideas to the reader.2

Further, most of the characters in *Vineland* are linked to or influenced by film in some way or another. Zoyd has to commit one bizarre act per year in order to be certified as crazy and receive his government disability pension and his behavior is covered by a plethora of television news teams. Frenesi's mother Sasha was a script reader and her father Hub was a gaffer for the studios. Prairie grows up watching the Tube and suspecting the value of her own family because of the ideal families presented to her on television. Frenesi and DL once tried to expose government corruption by using film, believing that "The camera is a
weapon" every bit as powerful -- perhaps more so -- than a gun.

The very setting for Pynchon's novel is film oriented: Northern California in 1984, shortly after George Lucas filmed portions of *Return of the Jedi* in the area and subsequently gave Vineland an economic, yuppie face-lift by injecting capital into its economy. It is no surprise then, that there are echoes of *Return of the Jedi* throughout the book. For example, federal attorney Brock Vond (Darth Vader) tries to capture the liberal rebels (Weed Atmann and his followers; Frenesi and 24fps; Prairie) throughout the story. Of course, even Brock must answer to Reagan's higher authority (just as in *Jedi*, Vader must bow to the Emperor). Eventually, Brock closes in on Prairie and tries to convince her that it is he, not Zoyd, who is her father (just as Vader reveals to Luke Skywalker that he -- Vader -- is Luke's father). Brock tries to get Prairie to voluntarily surrender herself to him (just as Vader tries to get Skywalker to voluntarily join the dark side of the Force). However, seconds before Brock captures Prairie, his funding is cut off and he is doomed to a supernatural existence by the Thanatoids (just as Vader eventually ends up in some kind of ethereal afterlife with Obiwan Kenobi and Yoda).

My reason for this thematic mini-overview of Pynchon's use of pop culture, television, and film is because I wish to make a correlation between the importance of electronic
images for these characters -- images generated by television, video, film, and computer -- and the manner in which they come to significant recognitions (moments of subjective and intersubjective awareness) in the text.

Since television and film are so important to the characters in Vineland, it is no surprise that what they see is often as important as -- or more so than -- what is said. In some cases, the image provides recognition within the character -- subjectivity is deepened as information is assimilated. Following Sartre’s postulations on the importance of "The Look" in coming to a better understanding of our own existence and the existence of others (Being and Nothingness 340-400), it grows evident that in order to see the Other as something more than an Object, we must look beyond her/his exterior and comprehend that s/he has her/his own interior -- a separate subjectivity and consciousness. Subjectivity may be deepened and two people may come to a deeper intersubjective relationship through an honest verbal exchange, but looks play a very important part in the sharing process. And in today’s society, the "right" image may provide us with another "in" into ourselves, others, and significant moments in history because of the high value that many have come to place on images.

Now, some clarification: by the "right" kind of image I mean candid photographs and undoctored, documentary-style film or video footage. Quite often what we see on film and
videotape these days can seem almost as real as the thing or person itself. I am thinking here not so much of the fictionalized dramas on film and television, but of the objective, static, dispassionate images that are captured on film and videotape by documentary and news footage (or, in more and more cases these days, by the amateur video buff with his/her own mini-cam). In this chapter I will examine both kinds of information exchanges -- those involving looks and words between characters, and those involving one-sided image assimilation -- both of which are prevalent in *Vineland*. I will begin by focusing on Zoyd in order to show that his subjectivity and intersubjectivity are deepened through the words and looks exchanged with his daughter, Prairie. I will then examine Prairie in order to show that her subjectivity is deepened by getting to know her mother, Frenesi, via the documentary film records of 24fps, the film group to which Frenesi belonged. Finally, I will turn to Frenesi in order to show that her masochistic nature is precipitated -- and her subjectivity is arrested -- by images of authority figures and by an inability to penetrate through Brock's consciousness.

I

Zoyd

Like some of the other characters in *Vineland*, when Zoyd's inner awareness is deepened and when he comes to
attaining something close to intersubjectivity (close internal contact with the Other) it is often through a significant unspoken moment: a vision on Zoyd’s part -- or a gaze imparted upon him -- makes for stronger communication than anything that is said. The strength of the image at that time is enough to stir his consciousness and make him aware that he is in the process of witnessing a special moment -- or of being witnessed in a special way.

For Zoyd there are at least three such moments that bear examining. The first comes during and shortly after his wedding ceremony, when "Frenesi was smiling serene" and "Zoyd would be unable to forget her already notorious blue eyes, glowing under a big light straw hat" (39). Zoyd is deeply in love with Frenesi, but if this is as far as the scene went, we couldn’t be sure that Zoyd was looking at Frenesi as anything other than a beautiful body. But the scene continues: Zoyd "smiled, squinting back, like a schoolmarm who still couldn’t believe her luck" (39) and proceeds to ask his wife: "Frenesi, do you think that love can save anybody? You do, don’t you?" (39). Zoyd’s savior complex -- he will eventually admit to government law officer Hector Zuniga that "what hurts... is how innocent I thought she was... I wanted to wise her up, at the same time protect her from ever knowin’ how shitty things could get" (42) -- makes him believe that his love will nurture and protect Frenesi. But it is his response to the look
which Frenesi gives him that clearly reveals the intensity of his feelings for her as a human being: "She gazed up at him from just under the brim of the hat" and Zoyd tells himself, "At least try to remember this, try to keep it someplace secure, just her face now in this light, OK, her eyes quiet like this, her mouth poised to open . . . ." (39). This may still seem as though Zoyd is looking at Frenesi as object, or marginalizing her interiority, but the fact that Zoyd cannot shake his obsession with Frenesi after over a decade -- despite the fact that she left him for another man and that he would later recognize that "It could’ve been anybody [that Frenesi linked up with], Scott, the two junkie saxophone players [in Zoyd’s band], all’s you was lookin’ for was some quick cover" (282) -- suggests that his obsession with Frenesi is far more than physical.

The second important, revealing gaze comes for Zoyd at Prairie’s birth. Zoyd, "gazing mindblown at the newborn Prairie" attends the birth stoned on acid "on the chance of glimpsing something cosmic that might tell him he wouldn’t die" (285). What he gets instead is a look from "the baby with both eyes open now looking right at him with a vast, an unmistakable recognition" (285). If we return to Sartre, we know that looking at the Other as Object will confirm our own existence for us, but that in order to see the Other as Subject, we must look beyond their physical bodies -- beyond their eyes -- and recognize that which is within the person
-- their independent consciousness. Only then can we hope to attain some kind of intersubjective sharing. In this case, it seems difficult to accept that a baby can provide anyone with anything other than a surface look, but even though "Later people told him it wasn't personal, and newborns don't see much," Zoyd feels that Prairie has seen within him and he in turn sees within her and some profound sharing has occurred between the two. Prairie's look tells Zoyd that "she knew him, from someplace else" [emphasis Pynchon's], and it is "This look from brand-new Prairie -- oh you, huh?" that "would be there for Zoyd more than once in years to come, to help him through those times when the Klingons are closing, and the helm won't answer, and the warp engine's out of control" (285). I certainly don't mean to imply that what Zoyd gains from the look is some kind of proof in a higher order of existence, as much as the fact that his new-born daughter gives him someone to whom he is closer than anyone in his life and that the potential for sharing is there. Zoyd is in for some painful times, foremost among them having to deal with the fact that Frenesi married him primarily in order to escape Brock Vond and forget her involvement in Weed Atmann's murder. It is the close relationship he has with Prairie, therefore, that helps him endure hard times.

Which brings us to the third key scene in which a look for Zoyd combines with perceptive verbal analysis, a scene
which (because of Pynchon’s flashback-flashforward narrative structure) in the text comes much earlier than the scene I have just discussed. This time the gaze and perceptive articulation come from Prairie and they succeed in triggering within Zoyd a solid moment of self-recognition which brings him closer to his daughter:

"But all you ever date is this, sorry but rilly B material, in terms of family skills, girls you pick up when they’re out on eating binges at the Arctic Circle Drive-In, girls from these weird after-hours clubs whose whole wardrobe is like totally black, girls who inject cough syrup with biker boyfriends named Aahhrrrgghh -- in fact lots of them girls I see in school every day? Know what I think?" She’d rolled out of her lower bunk to stand and LOOK HIM IN THE FACE, LEVEL [emphasis mine]. "Is that, deal or no deal, you must have always loved my mom, so much that if it couldn’t be her, it wouldn’t be anybody." (54)

Prairie has read her father correctly, and even though Zoyd thinks to himself that "No, that hadn’t been part of the deal," he recognizes that his daughter has discovered a very real truth which he elects to keep concealed. Thus, because he is feeling exposed and vulnerable and guilty for concealing this truth, "The clarity of her gaze made him feel fraudulent and lost" (54). And when "all he could manage was ‘Wow. You think I really am crazy, don’t ya?’" Prairie attempts to reassure Zoyd by revealing her own feelings: "No, no . . . Dad, that’s exactly the way I feel too, that . . . she’s the only one for me" (54).
The moment and the dual revelations are significant because Zoyd and Prairie have communicated in a way that is rare for characters in this text, where the characters remain largely lost onto themselves. Some degree of intersubjectivity has been gained between father and daughter, and it is reinforced by Prairie's penetrating gaze, even as she is in the process of "shaking back her hair, looking up again, stubborn sure, out of Frenesi's blue eyes" (54).^5

I am aware that *Vineland* is not a text whose primary focus is to provide us with intense existential studies. Like many other postmodern works, this novel seems to marginalize its characters in favor of depicting -- through an unstable text, semi-serious narration, supernatural occurrences, and other unorthodox traits -- an era and location as the author sees it (in this case, a look at the sixties and their subsequent impact on the eighties). Zoyd himself is the kind of character that comes on strong in the first few sections of the novel and then (for the most part) disappears until the last third of the book. Nor is Zoyd completely engaged with his own subjectivity or the subjectivity of others at the end of the book. On the whole, except for the fact that he knows that he loves his former wife and that he can communicate with his daughter at a time when many parents cannot, Zoyd remains a confused character. For example, he knows that he still loves
Frenesi, but he really doesn’t know why. When Prairie meets with her mother and then comes around and tells Flash and Zoyd "I can see why you guys married her," Zoyd and Flash immediately ask, "Why?" (375). But then again, Zoyd does have his fortuitous moments of insight -- at least three of them.

II
Prairie
Prairie’s relationship with Zoyd reveals that she is intelligent and witty. Yet despite her perceptive nature, Prairie has a hard time dealing with her absent mother because sappy, unrealistic television programs have taught her that a normal family unit consists of three crucial elements: Mother, Father, and Offspring. Anything other than the death of a family member that might change this equation is unacceptable, which is why Prairie cannot accept Frenesi’s absence. Along with her absent parent comes an absence of self. Prairie feels the need to see and talk with Frenesi in order to accept her motherless situation and feel less "incomplete" (53). Appropriately enough, if images have served to distort Prairie’s perceptions of family, then images will help to correct and deepen her perceptions, as we shall soon see.

If Prairie knew the right terminology, one suspects that she would refer to her own family as "dysfunctional."
Atypical, perhaps, but dysfunctional? Granted, the relationship that Zoyd and Prairie share is hardly commonplace. In many ways, Prairie seems to be Zoyd’s parent, not the other way around, and I would argue that Prairie may be the most mature and sensitive character — adult or otherwise — that we encounter in *Vineland*. Many family groups would likely have strong reservations about Zoyd’s capabilities as a parent, but on the whole, there are two things which Zoyd and Prairie share which distinguish them from most of the other characters in the novel: a sense of genuine spiritual affection for each other and an ability to communicate with each other. On these levels, certainly, they are able to function fairly well.®

Yet Prairie’s desire to get to know Frenesi is certainly justifiable. Many children who grow up in single-parent homes miss the nurturing and role-model aspects of the absent parent, but part of Prairie’s desire for wanting her mother around is due to the media’s influence on her thinking. Thanks to the Tube, she has come to believe in the "Leave It To Beaver"/"Brady Bunch" family unit that has been drilled into her head through years and years of unrealistic situation comedies. Because Prairie’s home life hasn’t mirrored that kind of Tube lifestyle, she sets out to find her mother and in one scene, riding in the back of DL and Takeshi’s car, "Prairie huddled down in back, hanging on, wishing they could wake into something more benevolent
and be three different people, only some family in a family car, with no problems that couldn’t be solved in half an hour of wisecracks and commercials" (191).

Prairie finally gets to know her mother, but it is as much through a close examination of the images which she screens -- on computer files and on old stock footage taken of and by Frenesi for 24fps -- as through her talks with DL about Frenesi and her eventual conversation with Frenesi at the end of the book. Jacques Lacan long ago pointed out the importance of the mirror in the first stages of identity formulation. Lacan notes that

from the age of six months [an infant]. . . . Unable as yet to walk, or even to stand up, and held tightly as he is by some support, human or artificial. . . . nevertheless overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstruction of his support and, fixing his attitude in a slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold it in his gaze, brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image. . . . We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image. (Ecrits: À Selection 1-2, emphasis Lacan’s)

In her discussion of "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey concurs with Lacan and stresses that "it is an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the 'I,' of subjectivity" (807).

It is no surprise then that in our booming age of television and cable TV, with a plethora of channels at our
disposal, pay-per-view options, video cassette recording capabilities, video rental stores seemingly around every corner, laser disc players and discs, people are more than ever ready to learn from media images. As Lacan notes, humans are often able to distinguish from reality and make believe in recorded images and through a kind of judicious empathizing, learn from them:

Only the subject -- the human subject, the subject of the desire that is the essence of man -- is not, unlike the animal, entirely caught up in this imaginary capture. He maps himself in it. How? In so far as he isolates the function of the screen and plays with it. Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen is here the locus of mediation. (The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis 107)

Unfortunately, many of the shows on "the Tube" and in the theaters -- whether they claim to be fictional dramas or allegedly true stories -- are quite often more concerned with reinforcing old myths, cliches, and stereotypes and disseminating misinformation than presenting unbiased stories and using innovative cinematic narrative methods. Mulvey and many others have spoken about the way in which films manipulate their audiences --

Playing on the tension between film as controlling the dimension of time (editing, narrative) and film as controlling the dimension of space (changes in distance, editing), cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire. (Mulvey 815)
-- but sometimes static, objective footage that seeks not so much to influence but to simply capture a particular event on celluloid or videotape is often the most powerful, influential, and moving footage one can watch. I'm sure that many of us can name or describe at least one photo or snippet of film that has left its imprint on our minds. For me (if you will allow me to indulge in this personal example), the Zapruder film of John F. Kennedy's assassination has forever been etched into my consciousness. No amount of make-believe horror film footage could ever invoke the kind of undescrivable emotion that those few seconds of film stir within me.

For Prairie, the old photographs in the computer files and the undoctored 24fps footage provide her with a more honest representation of Frenesi and her era. As Prairie begins her electronic search for her mother, she "found that she could . . . summon to the [computer] screen photographs, some personal, some from papers and magazines" and it is through these photos that Prairie begins to get to know her mother for the first time. Prairie studies the images of her mom, most of the time holding a movie camera, at demonstrations, getting arrested, posing with various dimly recognizable Movement figures of the sixties, beaming a significant look at a cop in riot gear beside a chain-link fence someplace while one hand (Prairie would learn her mother’s hands, read each gesture a dozen ways, imagine how they would have moved at other unphotographed times) appeared to brush with its fingertips the underside of the barrel of his assault rifle. (114)
Prairie's reactions to these images of her mother -- "Gross! Her Mom?" (114) -- show how moved she is by them. She goes on to study a vivid photo of Frenesi and DL and

Prairie could feel in the bright California colors, sharpened up pixel by pixel into deathlessness, the lilt of bodies, the unlined relaxation of faces that didn't have to be put on for each other, liberated from their authorized versions for a free everyday breath of air. (115)

This image is so moving that Prairie mentally speaks to it: "Yeah," Prairie thought at them, "go ahead, you guys, go ahead. . . ." (115).

As Prairie continues her search for Frenesi, she assimilates a tremendous amount of information through the documentary film footage taken by 24fps. The images reveal much more than an objective, realistic portrait of her mother -- they make an entire era come alive for her in such a way that fictionalized dramatizations of the period can never do:

Night and movies whirred on, reel after reel went turning, carrying Prairie back to and through an America of the olden days she'd mostly never seen, except in fast clips on the Tube meant to suggest the era, or distantly implied in reruns like "Bewitched" or "The Brady Bunch." (198)

The 24fps stock footage is uncensored, plotless and therefore more unsettling. Of course, Prairie is no stranger to allegedly non-fiction film footage. Anyone who has any contact with The Tube these days is well aware of the many talk shows and investigative programs that are
constantly competing with each other for screen time. But these shows are largely exploitation pieces bent on glorifying whatever bizarre topic they have chosen to "explore" or "examine." Even news programming has become so sensationalized that it cannot be trusted to give us a non-partisan view of events (Consider the sensational "hyperreal" coverage which the media gives to Zoyd’s annual window jumping). Thus, the uncensored and raw (notice how familiar we are with such media adjectives and how -- rightfully -- cliche and suspect they have become, even when used legitimately) 24fps footage which Prairie watches is extremely bothersome to her, but it is also educational and she is perceptive enough to subject herself to all of it:

Here were the usual miniskirts, wire-rim glasses, and love beads, plus hippie boys waving their dicks, somebody’s dog on LSD, rock and roll bands doing take after take, some of which was pretty awful. Strikers battled strikebreakers and police by a fence at the edge of a pure green feathery field of artichokes while storm clouds moved in and out of the frame. Troopers evicted the members of a commune in Texas, beating the boys with slapjacks, grabbing handcuffed girls by the pussy, smacking little kids around. . . all of which Prairie, deliberately, made herself watch. (199)

Through the incidents and locations depicted in the footage and through the subtle personality of the filmmaker that is captured on the film itself ("At some point Prairie understood that the person behind the camera most of the time really was her mother") Prairie comes to a deeper understanding of Frenesi, believing that
if she kept her mind empty she could absorb, conditionally become, Frenesi, share her eyes, feel, when the frame shook with fatigue or fear or nausea, Frenesi's whole body there, as much as her mind choosing the frame, her will to go out there, load the roll, get the shot. (199)

Prairie moves beyond seeing her mother's image and seeing into her mother, even in those shots in which Frenesi is an absent presence -- a camerawoman out of the shot. Even though she has little to work with -- old images of her mother or images shot by her mother -- Prairie moves beyond Sartre's Looking at surfaces and into the spiritual and psychological framework that constitutes Frenesi. Her mother comes alive and becomes a significant Other-as-subject to her via the 24fps shots. Therefore, her desire to communicate with the image of Frenesi is understandable:

Prairie floated, ghostly light of head, as if Frenesi were dead but in a special way, a minimum-security arrangement, where limited visits, mediated by projector and screen were possible. As if somehow, next reel or the one after, the girl would find a way, some way, to speak to her . . . . (199)

It is precisely because film is so well able to deepen her insight into Frenesi that Prairie has such a hard time dealing with her mother's actions as more troubling images are revealed to her. The most shocking and difficult footage, of course, is the death of Weed Atmann, which Frenesi helped to set up in order to appease her lover, Brock Vond. Frenesi is in charge of shooting the camera, not the pistol, but nevertheless it is through this set-up
that Prairie comes to recognize her mother’s role in Weed’s murder:

Frenesi aimed the light, Weed was on his face with his blood on the cement . . . . Up on the screen Rex was crying, "It should have been you, Frenesi, fuckin’ whore, where are you?" . . . Prairie imagined her standing with nothing but the light between her and Rex and his hatred while he hung, tightening in pain all over, holding the gun but no longer in possession of it. (247)

The image combines with Ditzah and DL’s words to allow Prairie to learn more about her mother than she may have cared to discover. Her quest for Frenesi has revealed anything but a Carol Brady or a June Cleaver. Instead she finds a woman who is the willing pawn of a power-abusing government agent and who willingly goes along with his death schemes. The image being shot by her mother at the time of Weed’s death -- an image in which Frenesi may inadvertently catch a ghostly image of herself -- is too much for Prairie and for the first time, she is forced to turn away from the film footage:

that’s how the shot ended, in a close-up of one of Rex’s gleaming eyeballs, with the light she [Frenesi] was holding reflected on it round and bright, and in the back-scatter -- if Prairie only looked closely enough she would have to see her -- Frenesi herself, dark on dark, face in wide-angle distortion, with an expression that might, Prairie admitted, prove unbearable. (247)

It is no surprise that when Prairie and Frenesi finally meet, it is an awkward and somewhat anti-climactic scene.

Pynchon shows us very little of the meeting. The dialogue
which we get between the two is superficial, and he simply
tells us that Prairie and Frenesi and Sasha "would sit and
hang out for hours, spinning and catching strands of memory,
perilously reconnecting" (368). Verbal communication may be
every bit as important as the images Prairie has discovered,
but it seems unlikely. Prairie can finally talk with her
mother -- "a woman about forty, who had been a girl in a
movie, and behind its cameras and lights, heavier than
Prairie expected, sun damage in her face here and there,
hair much shorter and to the cognizant eye drastically in
need of styling mousse" (367) -- as she has longed to do for
years and as she yearned to do in the midst of studying
Frenesi's photographs and celluloid images. But Prairie is
ahead of the game. The one-sided image communication with
Frenesi has prepared her for this moment, made her mother
real to her even before the meeting takes place, and shown
her aspects of Frenesi that are hard to accept but
nevertheless accurate. Further, Prairie's own subjectivity
is deepened by the experience: she comes away from her
study of Frenesi's images with a more accurate and realistic
understanding of herself and her family. Thus, the main
focus of the Prairie story -- to come to a better
understanding of her mother and feel less "incomplete" --
has largely been dealt with by the time the two actually
meet face to face and converse with each other.
III
Frenesi

Sartre outlines the way that some people feel they can give up the self, an "enterprise" that he calls "the masochistic attitude:"

Since the Other is the foundation of my being-for-others, if I relied on the Other to make me exist, I should no longer be anything more than a being-in-itself founded in its being by a freedom. Here it is my own subjectivity which is considered as an obstacle to the primordial act by which the Other would found me in my being. It is my own subjectivity which above all must be denied by my own freedom. I attempt therefore to engage myself wholly in my being-as-object. I refuse to be anything more than an object. I rest upon the Other, and as I experience this being-as-object in shame, I will and I love my shame as the profound sign of my objectivity. (Being and Nothingness 491-492, emphasis Sartre's)

I mention Sartre's comments at the onset of the Frenesi section because it is my contention that masochism keeps Frenesi tied to Brock Vond through the years. On the surface, Frenesi may seem like an independent woman, but actually, she has a weakness for authority figures -- men and women who allow her to relinquish control of her own subjectivity and the responsibilities which accompany awareness of self.9

Frenesi's obsession with Brock very likely stems from the fact that she grew up in a house where her father Hub was often an absent figure. As Louise J. Kaplan observes in Female Perversions,
For some children... the ones who got just enough mirroring love to survive and to become human but seldom as much as they were yearning for and seldom at the right time or in the right place, the loss of a love that once existed is senseless. They cannot comprehend why once, or once in a while, or every so often, they had experienced some moments of mirroring admiration and tender care but now the parents no longer applaud the things they had once in a while loved the child for. As she tries to figure out why she has been dropped like this, why she has been cast away, why this terrible thing has happened to her, a little girl cannot imagine that it is due to some weakness or failure or cruelty or ugliness in her mother or father. It must be because she has been bad, because she is worthless, because she has committed some terrible crime. (221)

Frenesi grows up with such guilt. In one of her dreams, she remembers her father "rolling, clanking away from her," off on another lighting job, and when "She called after him... he wouldn't turn, only went on... answering but denying her his face, 'Take care, Young Gaffer. Take care of your dead, or they'll take care of you'" (370). Frenesi is "Hurt, furious" over Hub's departures. Her "dead" include her father, who abandons her with each job, so "she yelled back, 'Yeah, or maybe they're just too busy being dead'" (370). Thus, Frenesi will later feel the need to seek out figures of authority to replace the missing authority figure in her early life. Kaplan notes that

Extreme submissiveness is an expression of a prevailing and enduring social mythology about the respective powers of females and males. The
special kind of perfection these women strive for is a perfection that can be achieved only through having intercourse with a superstar, a man with a huge brain, a huge amount of money, a huge reputation, a huge penis.

Nor does it matter if reality confirms these attributions of hugeness and infallibility. If the man does not actually possess these qualities, the social order has fetishistic images enough for any man to become the perfect phallus for any woman. Any man in uniform might do -- general, fireman, policeman, judge. (225-226)

Frenesi finds her ideal authority figure in District Attorney Brock Vond as she covers a community college demonstration and her camera, "in the middle of a slow pan around the rotunda, happened to pick up in her viewfinder this compact figure in a beige double-knit. . . . Another camera eye on the same crew might've dismissed him as one more pompous little functionary," but not Frenesi, whose unconscious desire to find the right image of authority makes her continue to focus on Brock: "Zooming in a little on his face, she began to track him" (200). As the scene progresses, we see the importance of both words and images in *Vineland*, for it is as much their wordplay (full of sexual innuendo), as his appearance and social position, that initially attracts her to him:

"Ya got me," said Brock Vond. . ."Maybe I’ll get a shot of you someday."

"Nothing the FBI won’t already have . . . go check it out."

"Oh, all they care about is identifying faces. I’d want something a little more . . . entertaining, guess you’d say."

". . . thanks anyway but I’ll pass."
"Oh -- you'd have no choice. You'd have to come." He was smiling.
She moved her pretty jaw a little forward. "I wouldn't come."
"Then a man in a uniform, with a big pistol, would have to make you come." (201)

So great is Frenesi's attraction to Vond, that she is willing to betray her fight against government authority and succumb to his whims. She is even willing to set up a murder for him because "The manifest erotic pleasure and the psychological pain of bondage lead the observer astray" (Kaplan 218). Like other masochists, Frenesi is living out a scenario which reveals "a desperate need. The actresses and actors are using penises and vaginas as instruments for playing out the repetitive cycles of castration and restitution, abandonment and reunion, death and resurrection" (Kaplan 218).

As Sartre and others note, however, "masochism is and must be itself a failure" because "the more he [the masochist] tries to taste his objectivity, the more he will be submerged by the consciousness of his subjectivity -- hence his anguish" (492-493). Thus, what is initially a satisfying physical relationship for Frenesi eventually sours and she finds herself attempting to break the masochistic cycle with Brock. Frenesi longs to move from being dominated to being recognized as a subject. In the midst of one of their trysts, a gargantuan thunderstorm approaches and Frenesi "felt electrically excited -- more than his cock just then, she needed his embrace. Fat
chance. . . A peal of thunder from outside fell close enough to send a shuddering fine ache all across her skin. She wanted so to hold him" (212-213). Her desires go unnoticed, however, or are ridiculed by Brock, so Frenesi must satisfy her yearning with fantasies:

She lay on one elbow, unable to stop gazing at Brock, pretending to herself that it made some difference to him whether or not she and Weed were fucking . . . just as she had to pretend that Brock was not "really" what he looked like to everybody else -- namely, the worst kind of self-obsessed collegiate dickhead. . . . (216-217)

One of the most disheartening aspects of Frenesi's dilemma is that she doesn't have the strength to pull away from Brock's control even after she learns that beyond her physical charms, he cares nothing about her. Frenesi the masochist is willing to surrender her own subjectivity and endure incredible insults from Brock such as when he admits that Frenesi is simply "the medium Weed and I use to communicate, that's all, this set of holes, pleasantly framed, this little femme scampering back and forth with scented messages tucked in her little secret places" (214). She also endures one of the worst forms of torture: when the Other (in this case, Brock) laughs at one's verbal confessions:

At some point he [Brock] must have gone drifting off to sleep, and she hadn't noticed. She watched over him, hers for a while, allowing herself to shudder with, even surrender to, her need for his bodily presence, his beauty, the fear at the base of her spine, the prurient ache in her hands. .
at last, so swept and helpless, she leaned in to whisper to him her heart's overflow, and saw in the half-light that what she'd thought were closed eyelids had been open all the time. He'd been watching her. She let out a short jolted scream. Brock started laughing. (217)

This scene more than any other shows just how callous Brock Vond is and how obsessed Frenesi is with him. Even after she has married Zoyd and given birth to Prairie, Frenesi chooses to ignore the "perfect cover" that the role of motherhood would provide her in order to resume her relationship with Brock. Frenesi gives up Zoyd and Prairie because she does not wish to fight Brock and because ultimately her husband and child are too passive to provide her with the charge she receives from being submissive to a power figure like Brock. As Kaplan explains,

Suffering is a seduction of some critical, rejecting Other. And this is a theme in every perversion, male or female, for the worthless one must always retain the hope that one day love will come back [or, in Frenesi's case, that love will finally be won over in the disinterested Other]. (232)

Brock never stops treating Frenesi like an object, and by 1984, the suspicion that Frenesi had over a decade earlier -- that "she had lost just too much control" (216) -- has seemingly been confirmed for her. After years of being little more than Brock's whore and pawn, she believes that

It's too late, we're [Frenesi and Flash] locked into this. . . . Once they find out you're willing to betray somebody you've been to bed with, once you get that specialist's
code attached to you, don’t have to be glamour beefs like high treason anymore, they can use you the same way for anything, on any scale, all the way down to simple mopery, anytime they want to get some local judge tends to think with his dick, it’s your phone that rings around dinnertime. (70-71)

Thus, Frenesi lets herself be pimped out. When she is not on a job for Brock, she works her menial mall job or whiles away the time engaging in masturbation, using televised images of authority figures as her main stimulus:

Let the feminists rave, Frenesi knew there were living women, down in the world, who happened, like herself, to be crazy about uniforms on men, entertained fantasies while on the freeway about the Highway Patrol, and even, as she was planning to do now, enjoyed masturbating to Ponch and Jon reruns on the Tube... (83)

Frenesi’s marriage to Flash is also based on lust and convenience, not love. They are better able to communicate on a physical/sexual level than on a spiritual one. Although they are able to share "a good mutual look" that is physically arousing, they must be mindful of its leading to a "possible overflow into words that, if experience was any guide, would get them in trouble" (70). Frenesi finds it hard to see Flash-as-subject because to her, "Flash was an absorber of light, somebody she had to look for to see and work to know, to whom she tithed too much energy" (70). Her initial attraction to Flash may have been an attempt to find yet another dominating male because "once, not long ago, he’d been as outlaw as they come" (73), but by 1984, he is more than anything else, "a pain in the ass" who has lost
much of the power that makes the Other so appealing to Frenesi. Still, because Frenesi has lost all confidence in her own capabilities, leaving Flash is out of the question: "--but alone, she thought, she would perish, too exposed, not resourceful enough" (70).

Frenesi is clearly caught in a masochistic labyrinth from which she cannot escape. She deeply regrets missing out on watching her daughter grow and mature. She often "entertained images of a nubile teen Prairie, looking something like herself" (68), but knows that "if I saw her on the street someplace... I wouldn't even know her..." (68). Brock's power over Frenesi never diminishes. When Frenesi abandons Zoyd and Prairie, she repeats the cycle which likely caused much of her own neurosis and gives up the potential for stability and happiness. The image and occasional presence of Brock's "erect penis" becomes "the joystick with which, hurtling into the future, she would keep trying to steer among the hazards and obstacles, the swooping monsters and alien projectiles of each game she would come, year by year, to stand before..." (293).

Conclusion

Zoyd's encounters with Frenesi and Prairie, and Frenesi's encounters with Brock, show the importance that looks and words play in the process of self-recognition and
moving beyond surfaces and onto the comprehension of the Other-as-subject. Yet it is the assimilation of knowledge and the deepening of subjectivity via the media and technological images in Prairie’s case that strikes me as one of the most fascinating — and postmodern — aspects of Vineland.

Idealistic Tube images initially serve to distort Prairie’s concepts of the family, but in the end, less subjective images force her to view herself and her parents from a more realistic perspective — to accept her unconventional relationship with Zoyd, to understand Frenesi’s actions, and to see that an atypical family does not necessarily mean that it is dysfunctional. However, other characters in Vineland are not so lucky and remain lost in the distortions that some images can produce. To reiterate, Frenesi is deeply affected by domineering images of authority throughout her life and as a result, spends years being little more than Brock Vond’s slave. Further, Prairie’s boyfriend Isaiah Two Four is also heavily — and negatively — influenced by the Tube and technology. Isaiah comes up with the idea of setting up "first one, eventually a chain, of violence centers, each on the scale, perhaps, of a small theme park" (19). Even Zoyd mistrusts him, not because he judges Isaiah by "his haircut alone," as Prairie accuses him, and not because he has "turned into exactly the same kind of father that used to hassle you, back when you
were a teen hippie freak" (17), but because "never did any of us in my generation," Zoyd corrects his daughter "show up late at night at somebody's door in no hockey mask, carryin' around all these lethal blades, even somethin' looked like a pruning hook?" (17). Isaiah's costume, which echoes the homicidal maniac Jason's in the Friday the 13th films, together with his violence theme park ideas are his way of rebelling against his pacifist parents, but they are clearly influenced by the violent images precipitated by today's TV and cinema.

Of course, complicating this notion even further, the video arcade and the home computer have evolved in a way that is comparable to the escalating sex and violence we see in films and on television. Today, video games have moved from having the player -- or vidiot -- defending the earth from nuclear attack, eating power pills, munching on blue ghosts, and hunting animals while on safari, to shooting well articulated images of soldiers or engaging in gang warfare and overpowering opponents in one-to-one combat. Isaiah's video attractions reflect the move from violence directed at alien (non-human) entities and animals to violence directed at humans:

"Third World Thrills," a jungle obstacle course where you got to swing on ropes, fall into the water, blast away at surprise pop-up targets shaped like indigenous guerilla elements . . ."Scum of the City," which would allow the visitor to wipe from the world images of assorted urban undesirables, including Pimps, Perverts, Dope Dealers, and
Muggers, all carefully multiracial so as to offend everybody. . . "Hit List," in which you could customize a lineup of videotapes of the personalities in public life you hated most, shown one apiece on the screens of old used TV sets bought up at junkyard prices and sent past you by conveyer belt, like ducks at the carnival, so your pleasure at blowing away these jabbering, posturing likenesses would be enhanced by all the imploding picture tubes. . . . (19)

The realism in video games gets even "better" at home, where the home computer has become an instrument which, given the right memory and software, allows one to thrive on gratuitous sex and violence. The images on many home computers have reached the quality of a sharp photograph, and, since home computer games are played in the privacy of your home arcade, engagement with the image grows easier -- and potentially more problematic. The home computer often allows one the financial luxury of unlimited plays, unlimited power, and unlimited lives. The violence is escalated and the sexual elements (because of the private nature of home video) more exaggerated and extremely explicit.

All of this goes a long way to underscore the potentially distorting effects that electronic images can have on one's consciousness. A final example from Vineland: federal law officer Hector Zuniga's mind is so distorted by the Tube that he is on the run from NEVER -- National Endowment for Video Education and Rehabilitation. According to Dr. Dennis Deeply, the function of the organization is to
"study and treat Tubal abuse and other video-related disorders." Hector, the doctor informs Zoyd, is "One of the most intractable cases any of us has seen. He's already in the literature. Known in our field as the Brady Buncher, after his deep although not exclusive attachment to the series" (33). Hector, who goes around humming the theme from "The Flintstones" and calls Zoyd "li'l Buddy" (the Skipper's affectionate term for Gilligan on Gilligan's Island), is so deluded by TV images that he, like Prairie, may believe that a reconciliation between Zoyd and Frenesi is possible. Hector also plans to leave his "cuttin' and shootin'" (53) job of government law enforcement officer in favor of a "cutting and shooting" job as filmmaker/producer. His "dream" is "to locate a legendary observer-participant from those [the sixties] times, Frenesi Gates . . . and bring her up out of her mysterious years of underground existence, to make a Film about all those long-ago political wars, the drugs, the sex, the rock an' roll which the ultimate message will be that the real threat to America, then and now, is from th' illegal abuse of narcotics?" (51). Hector is ready to contribute to our on-going media/image circus.

I would like to bring (dis)closure to this chapter by comparing the television, the movie screen, and the home computer to modern day, technological Pandora's boxes. In Technopoly, Neil Postman reminds us that "it is a mistake to
suppose that any technological innovation has a one-sided effect. Every technology is both a burden and a blessing; not either-or, but this-and-that" (4-5). Certainly this is true of television and related image-producing media. But out of every Pandora's box comes the hope for something better -- something positive. Maybe ninety-nine percent of today's electronic imagery is garbage; but there is also that one percent of quality material that often goes a long way to counterbalance the junk. Certainly Prairie's image-induced internal development throughout *Vineland* attests to this contention.\(^{13}\)
1. I call Vineland's structure a flashback/flashforward one because that is the manner in which it is written -- not in linear fashion, but bouncing back and forth, from the past to the present, sometimes several time-trips per section, sometimes making huge chronological leaps within the same paragraph.

   The question arises after making this observation: Is this book written in a lazy, sloppy fashion? Or is there a reason for the text to be composed as such? I think so. The almost lackadaisical, flashback-flashforward structure of Vineland mirrors the laid-back attitude that some people had during the sixties, one of the principal eras which Pynchon focuses on.

2. Characters frequently use TV terminology to express themselves. For example: "'It's like Mr. Sulu laying in coordinates, only different,' Zoyd explained" (40). Even our narrator does the same to communicate with us: "It was a romance over the years at least as persistent as Sylvester and Tweety's," he tells us of Zoyd's run-ins with government law officer Hector Zuniga. At one point, he describes a predatory, stalking incident as "Jason-like," knowing that many of us will understand that he refers to the Jason character in the Friday the 13th films. And the narrator will tell us that "It was just before prime time," when a particular incident took place, knowing that most of us are familiar with such TV lingo and that we will make the connection between his reference and the period around seven o'clock in the evening.

3. For more of Sartre's theories regarding the importance of "The Look" — moving beyond physical surfaces and gazing into the Other — see Being and Nothingness and Chapter One of this dissertation.

4. I am well aware that such objective news footage is sometimes anything but, thanks to sensationalized doctoring of the film or video. Often such footage is used to distort and sensationalize a particular event rather than to report on it objectively. I will highlight the differences between the exploitation kind of news coverage with the more objective and static kind by examining the media's coverage of Zoyd Wheeler's annual jump through a window (see endnote 7) and the 24fps footage which Prairie studies.

5. Sadly, Zoyd feels that the moving spiritual sharing cannot be followed up with and further solidified with a physical expression of affection:

   The moment may have called for him to embrace her, but her remarks, by now familiar, about the role of jailbait in his emotional life warned him that this time he'd better refrain,
even now when he most needed some kind of hug himself -- only nod instead and try to look competent, call her Trooper, maybe sock her on the shoulder for morale . . . but have to lie there nevertheless, a foot and a half overhead, and let her find and follow her own way to sleep. (54)

6. Daryl Louise (or DL as she is referred to throughout the novel) and Takeshi may be the other exceptions.

7. Admittedly, even this kind of documentary film footage -- like all photographs and images -- is to a certain extent a subjective representation if in no other way than by virtue of what the camerawo/man has elected to focus on and what s/he has chosen to leave out -- or what has been left out inadvertently or due to the constraints of time. There are also space limitations to consider, as well as the limited capabilities of the recording equipment and/or the camerawo/man her/himself.

8. Zoyd's annual crazy stunt has become such a media-oriented event that even he himself -- the focus of the attention -- cannot alter it. When he decides to change his act and relocate it by using a chainsaw to destroy the Log Jam instead of jumping out the window of the Cucumber Lounge, the media will not have it. Television crews from the surrounding area converge on the Cucumber Lounge and await his jump through the Cucumber's window. Resigned, Zoyd complies, admitting that "I knew someday this act would get bigger than me" (8). He drives to the Cucumber Lounge, goes through the process of "obligingly charging at each of the news cameras while making insane faces" (12), and takes his tumble through the picture window, which has been considerably replaced with fake glass this year by the Cucumber's owner. Of course, as Umberto Eco has discussed in Travels in Hyperreality, every event must be made to seem more real and sensational than it actually is, and the media will compensate for the Phoney window when it screens the footage of the event: "On the Tube, Zoyd came blasting out the window, along with the dubbed-in sounds now of real glass breaking" (15). And the sound effects aren't enough. The entire event is sensationalized and augmented in various ways. "Police cruisers and fire equipment contributed cheery chrome elements," and on at least one station, the event is enhanced by slowing it down so that it reveals every nuance of the jump: "Over on one of the San Francisco channels, the videotape was being repeated in slow motion, the million crystal trajectories smooth as fountain-drops, Zoyd in midair with time to rotate into a number of positions he didn't remember being in, many of which, freeze-framed, could have won photo awards someplace" (15). And of course, the very notion that this is an annual event is exploited by using
previously recorded images -- "Next came highlights of his previous attempts, at each step into the past the color and other production values getting worse. . ." -- and by expounding on the bizarre nature of Zoyd's activity: " . . . and after that a panel including a physics professor, a psychiatrist, and a track-and-field coach live and remote from the Olympics down in L.A. discussing the evolution over the years of Zoyd's technique, pointing out the difference between the defenestrative personality, which prefers jumping out of windows, and the transfenestrative, which tends to jump through, each reflecting an entirely different psychic subtext. . ." (15).

9. I mention women as well because Frenesi is also attracted to DL, who rescues her in the midst of a violent demonstration. The two become close friends and lovers, until Frenesi grows fascinated with Weed Atmann and Brock Vond.

10. We also learn that Hub and Frenesi's mother Sasha separated several times, though it is not clear whether or not this was when Frenesi was still living at home. If so, however, then this obviously would further fuel Frenesi's feelings of abandonment.

11. The number of masturbation incidents in this novel is extremely high: Zoyd masturbates to mental images of Frenesi; Frenesi masturbates to the "CHiPs" TV show; DL masturbates to avoid thinking about the "Vibrating Palm" death touch she placed on Takeshi; a young girl in a prison cell masturbates to images of Frenesi; Brock masturbates to images of Frenesi; a man masturbates with the use of his Porsche. This could well be a reflection of the empty, superficial, self-love that is so prevalent among many in our society. Some people long for stable, spiritual relationships with an Other, but fail to find him/her. Others have grown self-centered and given up, or settle for any partner out of convenience (Frenesi and Flash).

One gets the feeling that Pynchon seems to think that true spiritual affection is very rare these days, and that we are sliding into a narcissistic, self-loving race of individual entities who seek out others solely for our own selfish self-gratification -- when we bother to seek out anyone at all. Thankfully, he does provide us with a few exceptions to this rule -- most notably, Takeshi and DL, who are serendipitously thrown together, but who end up having a close physical and spiritual relationship.

12. Has Frenesi passed on her submissive/ masochistic streak to Prairie? Possibly. Witness Prairie's longing for Brock Vond at the end of the book: "You can come back," Prairie calls out into the darkness after Brock's helicopter has
pulled away from the area. "It's OK, rilly. Come on, come in. I don't care. Take me anyplace you want" (384).

13. For more about the impact of the image on the postmodern subject, see Chapter I, Section IV of this dissertation.
CHAPTER V

Coover's Pinocchio in Venice:
Existential Study and Postmodern Satire

Introduction

Since I am already going out on the proverbial limb by positing a dialectical merger between the existential and the postmodern, let me take further risk by making the claim that Robert Coover's Pinocchio in Venice is simultaneously a work of postmodernism and a cultural/social satire. Coover's novel, an adult sequel to Collodi's children's book Adventures of Pinocchio and Disney's animated film version of the story, is driven by some of the impulses which characterize the postmodern movement. It also echoes some of the existential theories that Sartre formulates in Existentialism and Being and Nothingness. However, Coover's novel is also part satirical comedy. In this chapter I will examine the postmodern characteristics in Pinocchio in Venice, then focus on the ways the novel satirizes Venice and destroys the romantic mystique surrounding the city and its people. Finally, I will turn to Pinocchio -- or as Coover introduces him to us, the distinguished professor emeritus, Professor Pinenut -- and the
existential/ontological crisis that he faces during the last few days of his physical life. The philosophical concepts Pinocchio spends a lifetime formulating are useless, he comes to realize, unless he "practices what he preaches" and acts upon them. Ultimately, Pinocchio in Venice echoes Sartre's belief that a blend of theory and action, as well as intersubjectivity with a significant Other, are the keys to a fulfilling existence.

I

Postmodern Characteristics in Pinocchio in Venice

One of the staples of postmodernism is copying or borrowing from old established forms and genres and amalgamating them in such a way that creates a new work of art. The result is often a bizarre "pastiche" as Gitlin observes (67), that attempts to communicate with today's audience in a language that contains a plethora of those images and metaphors with which they are most familiar. Coover does so by using the Pinocchio figure and story as a starting point for his Pinocchio in Venice. Of course, this is nothing new for Coover, who has in the past used familiar storybook characters (Hansel, Gretel, and Snow White for example) in his fiction. As Anderson notes, one of Coover's longstanding objectives is "to shock readers out of their conventional approaches to literature" (17) by delving into
"the reinterpretation of stories that have been accepted uncritically for ages" in order "to free his readers from some of the cultural cliches they have unconsciously assimilated" (17). McCaffery concurs: "Coover often creates his fictions out of precisely the sort of familiar myths, fictions, cliche patterns, and stereotypes whose content he hopes to undermine" (27).

Given that postmodernism never hesitates to amalgamate sources and mediums, Coover combines Collodi’s Pinocchio story with Disney’s animated version of the tale. This move makes sense because fewer people read extensively these days and for many, Disney’s version of Pinocchio is likely the only version of the story with which they are familiar (how many people actually know who wrote the original Pinocchio story, and where and when it was written?). Thus, in Coover’s sequel, Pinocchio has worked as a story adviser in Hollywood and believes that the Disney film "captured something of Gepetto’s stupidity maybe, but not his malice" (218). Coover also updates the puppet troupe found in Collodi’s novel. Pinocchio finds himself playing electronic keyboard, "the newest member of the Gran Teatro dei Burattini Veggetal Punk Rock Band," and discovers that what he and the rest of the puppets play "sounded suspiciously to him like ‘When You Wish Upon a Star’" (141). Later, he will actually find himself "wishing upon a star" and decide that the only thing he really desires is "to be held again"
Coover combines Collodi and Disney because he realizes that like many great stories and literary figures, Pinocchio has evolved beyond his origins, no longer Collodi's exclusively, but very much alive given global retellings and cultural variations. In this respect, then, Coover's novel is a worthy contribution to the Pinocchio icon/myth.

Another postmodern element in the novel is its mixture of humor and seriousness, and the supernatural with the realistic. Coover retains a fantasy-like quality to his narrative even during its most serious moments. For example, for Coover's story to work, the reader must accept Pinocchio's friends and enemies from Collodi's original tale -- the talking dogs, cats, and foxes, and the Blue-Haired Fairy. But this is definitely an adult novel written for the postmodern generation who is used to humor within seriousness -- and rapid-fire shifts between seriousness and humor -- in its daily life (aren't the TV and VCR remotes always close at hand, helping us to shift moods in a matter of seconds?). Nor is all of the silliness in Pinocchio in Venice "kid-stuff." In fact, much of Coover's humor is biting because part of his story ridicules certain locations in Venice and certain aspects of its culture. (I will go into more detail about the book's sexual and satirical humor in Section II).
Despite its postmodern qualities, Coover's novel still retains a number of elements which are commonly found in modern texts, among them an intimate narrator who "sticks close" to his main character, and a relatively close adherence to mainstream form and structure. Pinocchio in Venice does not abandon the structured framework of the modern novel, as other postmodern works often do. Instead, because Coover wishes to echo the original Pinocchio story, his decision to stick to a linear structure makes sense. There is, of course, the occasional flashback, but flashbacks are commonplace in linear texts. And as Gordon notes,

at the same time that [Coover] maintains a strong narrative line he counterpoints it (his musical term is 'descants') with numerous mythic, legendary, or symbolic levels (in painterly terms 'washes'), which serve to explode any final meaning or resting point. (6)

There are definite traces of modernism in Pinocchio in Venice, but there are also enough postmodern impulses to undermine its being categorized as a straightforward work of modern literature.

II

Coover's Mixture of Sexual Humor, Religious and Social Satire, and Seriousness
Shortly after Pinocchio is robbed of his money, manuscript and possessions, he is rescued by his old canine friend, Alidoro. Alidoro takes Pinocchio back to his old love Melampetta's house, and the two proceed to give the beat up Pinocchio a meticulous and thorough tongue-bath. Even as they do, Pinocchio pours out his disillusionment with himself, with the country he has returned to, and with its people. The dogs' actions are amusing, but Pinocchio's words are not. This is the kind of mixture of humor and seriousness that prevails throughout *Pinocchio in Venice*. Coover's sexual humor and sharp-edged satire threaten to undermine the serious side of his story, but never do. Instead, these elements contribute to the transformation of children's story into adults' story. In fact, this move is a necessity because wouldn't we be laughing anyway -- and immediately dismissing Coover's text -- if he or anyone else attempted to pass off an adult sequel to the Pinocchio story in completely serious, deadpan fashion?

The basic story of Pinocchio -- the story of the little wooden puppet whose nose grows when he lies -- lends itself to some obvious sexual jokes. In Coover's novel, the most striking of such jokes comes when the Blue-Haired Fairy places Pinocchio in a double bind and makes him lie to her in order to use his nose to sexually satisfy herself (119). This is a perfect example of Coover's bizarre amalgamation of humor and seriousness. While we laugh at this scene,
another part of us is horrified by it. The Blue-Haired Fairy is a trusted and much admired entity. In fact, if Gepetto is Pinocchio’s father for carving and creating him in puppet form, the Blue-Haired fairy is his mother because she turns him into a human being. Pinocchio deifies her and tries to live a virtuous life in order to please her. In Pinocchio in Venice, the aged Professor Pinenut titles his work in progress — a text which he considers to be his masterpiece — Mamma. In a sense, then, the Blue-Haired Fairy’s actions are a kind of incest, or abuse of power.

Coover also takes full advantage of word play in his story. The fact that he chooses to translate Pinocchio’s name for his story and call him Professor Pinenut is humorous, as are the many puns (sexual and otherwise) that can be derived from Pinocchio himself. There are many instances in which Coover’s characters bombard us with puns. At the Martedi Grasso Carnevale, for example, where Pinocchio is once again "the Star of the Dance," Eugenio announces that

our own Marco the Pole [has] come home
to us like so much drifting flotsam
stumping back to his deepest roots. . .
A mere sprout of native undergrowth when
he left here, a green little sap pegged
for the pen, he penned his way, as he
grew alder, to become the world’s most
distinguished woodenknob, spunkily
taking on all the knotty problems of the
wormy world. . . So here he is, this
most poplar fella and perennial
favorite. . . (287)
This particular diatribe continues for the better part of two pages, but the engaged reader will appreciate the humor without losing sight of Coover's overall objectives.

On the other hand, not all of the humor is so lighthearted. In fact, some of it is biting and satirical. Perella touches on some of the more subtle internal workings of the original Pinocchio in his essay:

... of especial interest is Giuseppe Prezzolini's remark, in 1923, that "Pinocchio is the testing ground for foreigners; whoever understands the beauty of Pinocchio understands Italy." ... outside Italy Collodi's tale is still taken almost exclusively as a story for children, who, though unlikely to miss the didactic message the author meant for them, are hardly capable of fully appreciating the tale's underlying linguistic sophistication and narrative strategy, its various levels of irony and sociocultural innuendo, or its satirical thrusts against adult society. (2)

In Pinocchio in Venice, Coover heightens the "levels of irony and sociocultural innuendo" and "satirical thrusts against adult society." As we read, it is obvious that Coover wishes to strip Venice of its romantic mystique, to portray it realistically and expose some of its faults. Thus, in the first chapter, Pinocchio returns to "what many hold to be the most magical city in the world" and "a universally acknowledged work of art" (13-14), a city which "Petrarch... called 'noblest of cities, sole refuge of humanity, peace, justice, and liberty, defended not so much by its waters as by the prudence and wisdom of its citizens"
(40), but after suffering a great deal of misfortune, comes to see his native Venice more harshly and objectively:

So he has returned, he has discovered, not only to the scene of his triumph, but to the scene of his ignominy as well. . . This infamous city of despotism and duplicity, of avarice and hypocrisy and subterfuge, this "stinking bordello," this wasps' nest of "insatiable cupidity" and "thirst for domination," as Venice's outraged neighbors once declared, this police state with the air of a robber's den, always out after its "quarter and a half-quarter" and "conspiring the ruin of everyone," this fake city built on fake pilings with its fake fronts and fake trompes l'oeil, this capital of licentiousness and murder and omnivorous greed. . . (102)

The Venice in Coover's novel is more cold, damp, dark, and murky than beautiful. Amidst the canals and impressive architecture and stunning art, we also gaze upon the seamy, seedy side of the city and its people. There are many thieves in the novel (the Fox and the Cat and Eugenio, for example) who act as Pinocchio's friends only to rob him. As always, Coover's narrator remains close to Pinocchio, and it is through the puppet-turned-man-returning-to-puppet's observations that we get some of our most biting comments of the city:

Across the ruffled lead-colored waters of St. Mark's Basin, poised between crenelated Gothic fantasy and High Renaissance exuberance, Andrea Palladio's masterful church of San Giorgio Maggiore, with its sagging cheeks, carbuncular dome, and stiff cone-capped campanile at its rear (his grumbling companion has likened it to a
belled cat with its tail in the air), sits gravely at anchor like an ordered thought within a confused sensuous dream, this damp dream called Venice, "the original wet dream," as his dear friend Eugenio likes to call it. The church’s pale facade, caught obliquely in the winter sun’s angular light and framed now between the two absurd columns of the Piazzetta like a carnival mask hung in a window, peers out past the growling, bobbing water traffic upon this shabby but bejeweled old tart of a city, the mystery of reason confronting the mystery of desire, and what it seems to be saying is: history, is at best a disappointment ("It is a fairy tale full of wind, master, you are right, an empty masquerade, a handful of dead flies . . ."), but it is also, in spite of itself, beautiful . . . (175)

With this description, Coover captures both the distasteful and the appealing qualities which make up Venice as a whole.

The same acerbic tone that is prevalent in Coover’s depictions of Venice can also be found in his social criticism and art criticism in the text. One of Coover’s principal targets is the narcissistic, those who are overly fond of themselves and their country, who are willing to label any work of art a masterpiece. Eugenio is a good example. At one point he praises the sculpture on L’Omino’s tomb, not so much for its detail, but because he happened to model for one of the cherubs in the sculpture.

Further, art and religious artifacts are also lambasted in the book. Not all of Coover’s comments are negative, to be sure. There are moving, thoughtful observations from Pinocchio himself, such as when he notes that "for all of
the theatrics, the hedonism and decorative frivolity" that Veronese incorporates into his paintings, "there is something restful about" him, "as though the languid gaze might have passed from painted to painter, invading the entire canvas, and the colors, flowing from the languor, are as soft and lush as old tapestry and vaguely warm him" (118). But there are also the frank and off-center critiques which Bluebell, Professor Pinenut's former student (and the Blue-Haired Fairy, in one of her many disguised manifestations), is always ready to offer: "I mean, 'images of eternity,' 'shadows of the divine perfection,' all that's just -- fffplOP! [the sound of her gum popping] -- bullpoop, isn't it, Professor Pinenut? Like you always said!"

Pinocchio is horrified that Bluebell has misunderstood so much when she took his Principles of Art (or, as she refers to it, his "Arse Pimples") class, but she continues:

And I can see now what you meant about churches being nothing more than fancy repertory theaters -- I mean, just look around! -- it's a place where you just expect something wild to happen -- ! . . . All the bejeweled props and snazzy sets, the stage doors and costumes and all the music and magical stuff -- I mean, what actor wouldn't go apeshit for the priest's gig, it's a real headliner, isn't it, it's got everything but dancing girls! (124-25)

Bluebell's comments about the priesthood are certainly not the first wisecracks about religion in the text. In fact, Coover spends a great deal of time satirizing religion, and in particular, the Catholic faith. Early in
the story, several characters constantly work puns around religious figures and events (Melampetta the dog's comments especially come to mind). In answer to those who have at times compared the story of Pinocchio to the story of Christ, Coover provides us with the puppet's bizarre nightmare in which he stars in a Hollywood version of his life, not as the puppet at first, but as an ass who carries his character around. And then, when he does find himself as the puppet turned human in his dream, he is nailed to a cross that is planted in "the very hole, he sees, that he once dug in the Field of Miracles to plant the gold coins as seed for his magical money tree" (83). It seems that one of Coover's objectives for presenting us with

the final stirring episode in the Passion of Pinocchio! . . . the farewell dance of the world's most notorious bad boy, this improbable son of an impotent carpenter and a virgin fairy, baptized by a chamber pot and circumcised by woodpeckers, part flesh, part spirit, and a legend in his own lifetime! (83)

is to make people question old stories which are often regarded as unquestionably true. In his nightmare, the wooden cross actually begins to speak to Pinocchio and tells him that

I've got a routine. . . A dumb show, a curtain dropper. . . an act with nails, halfway between a hanky twister and a creepie. . . People like to wear me on their chests. I'm vaguely sexy. . . I like the blood! I soak it up! I can't get enough of it! . . . I like the writhing and the sweat: it oils me up.
And I like the crowds! (85-86, Coover’s emphasis)

As for the country’s passion for religious artifacts, Coover writes about the discovery of a new masterpiece, the Madonna of the Organs, and the procession which is held in its honor:

Her face...does, except for the hollow eyes and the fringe of ink-black beard peeking out from under her chin, resemble that of Giovanni Bellini’s "Madonna of the Small Trees," but the rest of her is more like an oversized walking anatomy lesson, an elaboration of sorts upon the traditional Madonna of the Bleeding Heart, in that not just her heart (which is bright green) is outside her body, but all her glands and organs are dangling from her generous flesh like Christmas ornaments: her spleen, kidneys, liver, brains, bladder, stomach, larynx, pancreas, and all the rest, her lungs worn like water wings, her mammarys like shoulder pads, her intestines looping from her rear like a long spongy tail or a vacuum sweeper hose. (239-240)

The newly acquired "masterpiece" sounds more like a poorly constructed, anatomical model kit than a beautiful work of art, but with the lavish procession that it is heralded, Coover satirizes those who are too quick to elevate mediocrity to greatness, those who too readily coin the grotesque a great work of art, and those who are ever ready to deify anything remotely religious. This scene is both hilarious and sobering, as are other such incidents in the book, and shows that in the midst of this postmodern text and existential study, Coover also manages to include his
share of satirical jabs. It is with this same mixture of humor and seriousness that Coover presents his analysis of Pinocchio.

III

(Inter)Subjectivity in

Pinocchio in Venice

Collodi's Adventures of Pinocchio deals specifically (though admittedly on a simplistic and juvenile level) with the adventures and misadventures that result from a puppet's struggles to become a true and virtuous boy. Throughout the children's story, Pinocchio finds himself amidst a series of picaresque adventures in the process of trying to live a good and virtuous life and become a proper son to his parents (Gepetto and the Blue Haired Fairy). Collodi's character typifies the child's struggles with maturity and the formulation of self-identity. In some ways, then, Coover has chosen the perfect children's character to further develop if part of his objective is to write about the continuing growth of the self.

Even though Adventures of Pinocchio was able to appeal to both children and adults, it is primarily a children's story. Conversely, Coover's Pinocchio in Venice is primarily a tale for adults, so one of the first things that one notices about Coover's Pinocchio sequel is that he raises the level of sophistication of the original Pinocchio
tale. It becomes apparent very quickly that Coover’s text is no children’s novel. It also grows clear that the puppet-turned-human’s identity crisis is far from over and is far more serious than the identity problems the character wrestled with as a boy (in Collodi’s book and Disney’s film). Despite the fact that Pinocchio has experienced phenomenal success in his human state and is a professor emeritus, a philosopher, art critic, former theologian, and two-time Nobel Prize winner (for his philosophical concepts of "I-ness"), the events which occur while he is visiting Venice force him to question his identity and principles. Pinocchio is turning back to wood, an external metamorphosis which mirrors the internal (emotional, cognitive) changes that he is experiencing.

Initially, Pinocchio is "drawn back" to Venice because he is "seized. . . by the sudden vivid conviction that only by returning here -- to his, as it were, roots -- would he find. . . that synthesizing metaphor that might adequately encapsulate the unified whole his life has been, and so provide him his closing chapter" of his final philosophical text (14). But searching for a "synthesizing metaphor" must be postponed after he is tricked by the Fox and the Cat once again and robbed of all his possessions, including his computer and manuscript. Pinocchio begins a frantic search for retrieval and it is while on this search that he engages
in the final phase of his cognitive maturation and learns
the value of sharing one's existence with another person.

Pinocchio has long believed that he can save humanity
by obeying the Blue-Haired Fairy's command to live a caring,
virtuous life. "All my life," he remarks, "I have searched
for meaning and dignity, striving to be true to . . . to her
vision of me" (64). He has spent years writing
philosophical guides for self-exploration and virtuous
living. But Pinocchio has struggled to help others at the
expense of his own happiness. He has never bothered to
cultivate a close relationship with anyone, never allowed
himself to indulge in anything more than fleeting,
superficial relationships. To do so, he believes, would
distract him from living out his interpretation of the
Blue-Haired Fairy's message:

goodness, she was trying to tell him,
could die in the world. It was not an
absolute, not a given, but something
that got recreated from day to day, from
moment to moment, by living and dying
men. Either they kept it alive or it
disappeared. Maybe even forever. "It
gave me a mission: Her power was really
my power, I had but to exercise it. 'I-
ness,' I called it in a famous essay:
the magical force of good character. My
virtue, I felt, my decency, my civility,
my faithfulness, might save the world!"
(75)

The result of Pinocchio's assuming the task of becoming the
ultimate role model for humanity is that he spends his life
writing valuable theoretical models for "right" (proper and
virtuous) living and wins two Nobel prizes and much
prestige, but is left in great inner pain as a result of his self-sacrifice. "I have been so . . . so lonely" he admits as he sees the end of his life approaching (64). In the process of trying to please the Blue-Haired Fairy and save the world with his writings, Pinocchio deprives himself of one of the most valuable benefits humanity has to offer -- the pleasures and rewards of sharing one's existence with others, especially, one specific Other.

Pinocchio learns much from the Blue-Haired Fairy, but he also misses some of her most valuable lessons. For example, he comes to "his quite stunning perception that the Blue-Haired Fairy was not alive and pretending sometimes to be dead, but was truly dead, only pretending sometimes, when he helped her, to be alive" (75). However, he fails to understand that the reason the Blue-Haired Fairy continues to appear to him throughout his life is not so much to monitor his progress, but because she wants to be a part of his life -- and, unconsciously, he wants her in his life. Pinocchio understands that "It was not she who had given me a place in the world. . . but I who had called her into being!" (75), but fails to see that one of the reasons he keeps conjuring her up is because he himself is in need of close spiritual companionship and friendship. It is not until the last few days of his life that Pinocchio finally recognizes the fact that the Other can be instrumental in the formulation of one's own identity and enriching one's
existence, and that the opposite is also true. However, when the Blue-Haired Fairy returns to him near the end of his life, this time under the guise of his young, vivacious former student, Bluebell, Pinocchio finally realizes that his concept of I-ness and his other philosophical theories are useless unless he takes the time to actually implement them and live them out accordingly. He may also realize, finally, that his concept of I-ness is too close to egocentrism if it does not lend itself to the possibility of engaging with others.

McCaffery notes that "nearly all of Coover's works deal with characters busily constructing systems to play with or to help them deal with their chaotic lives" (25-26). Pinocchio/Professor Pinenut is no exception, but after several encounters with Bluebell around Venice, he finally recognizes that he must put theory into practice and that intersubjectivity may prove to be the key to a satisfying existence. Appropriately enough, Pinocchio's striking revelation occurs on a wild carnival ride called the Apocalypse, a ride which he shares with Bluebell. The "mad ride" is clearly a metaphor for Pinocchio's turbulent return visit to Venice, picaresque, crisis-filled, with no significant Other to help him, until now:

The earth was flying about them everywhere and they were being severely shaken still, but it was as though they were becoming one with the very forces that, so powerfully and so primordially, shook them. This: this is the truth,
he realized, with such a jolt of recognition, he knocked his head on her chin and set off another giddy burst of whooping and squealing: "You made me swallow my gum!" she yelled and then suddenly they were upside down again and hanging on to each other for dear life. (266, emphasis Coover's)

Pinocchio begins to reformulate his philosophy as he realizes that mere thoughts about life are useless if one does not actually experience it:

All these years, he thought as they plummeted, then shot upwards again, instead of riding with it [life], he had been trying to stop it in artificial freeze-frames, made lightheaded by anything that twitched, but now, suddenly, he began to feel most centered, most contented, when most ferociously flung about. "I feel alive," he gasped, as, headlong they looped and dived and spun, "truly alive, for the -- ahi!! -- first time since the day I-I ... grew up!" (266)

On the Apocalypse, Pinocchio learns two important things: that one must not shirk living for fear of the potential "bumps" along the way; and that having someone to share life with can be a great benefit. Once he is hit by this recognition, he clings to Bluebell and discovers not only the possibility of weathering the roller coaster ride, but upgrading his waning existence.

Bluebell is for Pinocchio what no other of his casual flings has been. He feels genuine affection for his former student who, in some ways, has become his teacher. Pinocchio engages in introspection and finds that his desire for Bluebell extends beyond the physical:
it was more than the breasts, more than
the hugging and squeezing and bouncing
against one another, and the glorious
fragrances that wound him round, it was
a true mystical communion with the
Other, the most ecstatic and visionary
moment of his life. (266)

Bluebell's effect on Pinocchio is so profound that it
causes him to re-evaluate many of his longstanding aesthetic
and theoretical beliefs surrounding one of his professions,
art criticism. For example, he "has always rejected the
theatrical, the narrative, indeed all arts with concepts of
time other than eternity" (175-6), but reconsidered this
stance after several encounters with Bluebell. Pinocchio
begins to believe that many modes of artistic expression --
fiction writing, drawing, and painting, for instance -- are
static because even though there may be a great deal of
described or depicted activity in their content, there is
still no true physical action. On the other hand, the
theater moves its audience via on-the-spot, physical
activity, which therefore, Pinocchio concludes, makes it a
worthy and valuable form of artistic expression. The fact
that Pinocchio rejects many previously cherished art forms
and embraces long-rejected ones, highlights the radical
transition he is undergoing.

It is also especially significant that Pinocchio comes
to accept the theater as a valuable form of artistic
expression because in so doing, he learns to accept part of
his true self. After all, he is turning back into a
puppet -- a work of art -- and what are puppets designed to do, but perform on the stage and theatrically imic life:

\[\ldots\] as he himself had been a sort of walking parody of thought given form, assuming that what was in old Geppetto's pickled head was so noble a thing as to be called thought, he had been able to intuit (here, perhaps, the years in Hollywood helped) the hidden ironies in all ideal forms, and so began to perceive that thought's purity lay not so much in its forms as in its pursuit of those forms -- whereupon: his "go with the grain" as a moral imperative, "character counts," his symbolic quest for the Azure Fleece, the concept of I-ness, "from wood to will," and all that. (177-178, emphasis mine)

Once he recognizes the value of pursuing -- or acting upon -- one's ideas, Pinocchio incorporates the help of the puppet troupe to play out one last scene that will be his final exit. The time arrives for Pinocchio to take center stage and become "The Star of the Dance" once again, as he did when he was an ass at the mercy of the circus owner. But this time, Pinocchio is in full control of his destiny when he elects to place himself at the center of a procession that will lead him to a final union with the Blue Haired Fairy.

That exit comes when Pinocchio discovers Bluebell to be just another variation of the Blue-Haired Fairy, who is also the Madonna in the Cathedral and many of the other women he has known throughout his life. In the Blue-Haired Fairy or "his mamma," Pinocchio also
catches a glimpse of the [La Bella] Bambina's wicked smile. Bluebell's milk-fed complexion and fluorescent eyeshadow, and hints, too, of a Hollywood starlet he once knew, maybe more than once, a colleague at university, several students, his interviewer on a television talk show, the doctor who removed the peculiar growth on his nose a year ago and prescribed a long voyage, an admiring museum curator who confessed to a platonic affection, his traveling companion in the limousine at the Nobel awards in Stockholm, even (the stray blue hairs on her chin perhaps, the ridge of her forehead) the blue-haired goat he passed on his way into Attila's gut. These features, or suggestions of features, seem to exist not simultaneously but sequentially (now it is the Bambina's waxen complexion he sees, Bluebell's gum-smacking cherry-lipped grin), in a kind of moving montage, flickering across her face like unstable film projections. (322-23)

Initially, the revelation that all of the women with whom he has had even the most superficial relationships throughout his life, have simply been variations of the Blue-Haired Fairy, leaves him disappointed, angry, and betrayed. Aside from the dogs Alidoro and Melampetta, he has found no one to trust in Venice. But soon a deep longing to re-experience that feeling of "mystical communion" which he felt with Bluebell overtakes him, and he decides to join with the Blue Haired Fairy, in whatever form she chooses to present herself. This capitulation is not a defeat but a victory because Pinocchio discovers before he dies that intersubjectivity can enhance one's own life.
Conclusion

Gordon notes that postmodern writers like Coover "frequently take as their subject the problems of using language to refer to a reality that is largely unknowable, unfixed and incapable of linguistic documentation." He also asserts that for Coover and other writers, "The act of writing becomes an existential act of reacting to and 'reading' the events, people, and 'meaning' of the universe" (2). In *Pinocchio in Venice*, the act of writing, however articulate and perceptive, is ultimately not enough to satisfy its principal character. It is because Pinocchio makes this discovery and begins to reformulate some of his theories that his last mortal hours are enriching. Pinocchio acts upon his new-found realization as much as he can, and takes an active part in life at the very end. For example, when the Blue-Haired Fairy mentions that she will turn the sad remains of Pinocchio’s body into a book, Pinocchio asks her to make it a talking book (329).

Coover’s *Pinocchio in Venice* provides us with an exploration of (inter)subjectivity at the same time that it satirizes Venice in several ways. However, at no time does Coover’s novel fall into the trap of being overly contrived or preachy. The novel is hardly a didactic text on "I-ness," such as the ones that Professor Pinenut/Pinocchio devoted his life to writing. Nor is it a complex, philosophical tract such as Sartre gives us in *Being and
Nothingness. Rather, Pinocchio in Venice is somewhat of a paradox -- both lighthearted and thoughtful, humorous and sobering. Yet it is such paradoxes that today's postmodern audiences seem ready to accept.
1. As Perella mentions, "the refusal of most critics to admit to any sexual allusions in Pinocchio seems too rigidly exclusive" (44) (note the possible male-oriented "sexual allusion" in his comment). He is correct, particularly because of the adult portion of Collodi's audience. Perella goes on to point out that "the abundance of jokes and popular superstitions concerning the symbolic equivalence between nose and penis justifies speculation on the matter in Pinocchio's case." Coover capitalizes on this obvious source of ribald humor when he writes Pinocchio in Venice.

2. In his translation Adventures of Pinocchio, Perella explains that literally, pinocchio means "pine nut", "pine kernel", "pine seed" and that "While it is quite likely that many of the first readers of Collodi's tale were amused at hearing of a family of Pinenuts, clearly no translator would be so rash as to anglicize the puppet's name" (477).

Perhaps not a translator, but leave it to Coover to take advantage of the humor elicited by a literal translation of the famous puppet's name and use it in his sequel.

3. Pinocchio's observations juxtaposed with Bluebell's show the differences between the trained eye noting the surrounding art work and the undisciplined eye attempting the same. Interestingly, by the end of the novel, when Pinocchio is in the process of re-evaluating his philosophical principles, he concedes a few points to Bluebell because he has begun to see the value of the gut impression and the possibility that his student may have extracted something from his lectures that he himself was not aware that he was passing on, and the possibility of learning from, and sharing with, Bluebell.

4. Although Adventures of Pinocchio was written as a didactic story for children and was first printed in a children's magazine, there are traces within the story which indicate that Collodi also had an adult audience in mind:

Even more important as an archetypal image or pattern than the redemptive imprisonment in the sea monster's belly is this image of the human being as a puppet created by a Master Puppeteer. The Old Testament account of the creation of Adam is much in this vein but allows the puppet to have a will and therefore a willfulness of his own. The man-as-puppet archetype also appears in Plato's discussion of how best to educate youths so that they will become perfect citizens. Plato suggests that the puppet, man, is pulled in various directions by the strings of his passions, his
likes and dislikes, whereas he should let himself be guided (pulled) by the golden chord of reason, "called by us the common law of the state" (Laws I:644). Plato's passage was undoubtedly known to Collodi, being one that would have come up in the talk about puppets common among his fellow drama critics in nineteenth-century Europe, particularly in Italy, where puppet theater, especially with the use of marionettes, was vastly popular and never exclusively juvenile in its appeal and repertoire. (50)

... Though Collodi seems neither to sentimentalize nor idealize the child, the nostalgia is surely there, albeit masked; and almost surely his need to exorcise it accounts for much of the ambiguity or secret tension felt by adult readers, most of who are bound to smile indulgently at Pinocchio but not without some concern at his madcap flights and dangerously childish hopes. . . . Collodi's ambivalence is also our own, an ambivalence that derives from the regressive pull of the child in us even as we enforce the role of responsible adults upon ourselves. . . . It is no surprise then, that children's stories are not only written by grown-ups but also are often about growing up. (48)

Collodi was aware that many adults would be exposed to his tale when they read it to/with their children, and for that reason, he included the subtle winks and nudges aimed at that portion of his audience.

5. Of course there is a whole other dimension to this argument that is quite problematic if we change points-of-view and begin to consider the Blue-Haired Fairy's fixation with her surrogate son. In many ways, the Blue-Haired Fairy's relationship with Pinocchio can be viewed as incestuous (see my discussion of her manipulation of Pinocchio in Section I of this chapter) and unhealthy. The Blue-Haired Fairy may easily be regarded as a mother who refuses to relinquish control of her son, and in this respect, it may be postulated that the ending of the novel is an "enslavement in the womb" victory on the Blue-Haired Fairy's part.

6. Pinocchio may already have begun to suspect this to be the case well before he arrived in Venice. In fact, it was the uneasy feeling that "Something was missing" from his final philosophical masterpiece, that the final product "was, like the stark New England landscape outside his office window, too
cold, too intellectual, too abstract. Too empty" that makes him return to Venice. It takes Pinocchio a while, but he finally begins to realize that the missing element is human passion/compassion, without which his discourse is nothing more than lifeless rhetoric: "In his intransigent pursuit of the truth he had somehow neglected... one and the same -- the senses" (40). This quest for tapping into his own senses in order to enrich his philosophical tract is what eventually leads him to recognize the value of pursuing happiness with others.

7. It is true that Pinocchio has not been completely ignorant of the value one can have upon another's existence, and vice versa. As he acknowledges about his relationship with the Blue-Haired Fairy, he came to realize that "it was not she who had given me a place in the world, you see, but I who had called here into being" (75, emphasis Coover's). But the Blue-Haired Fairy remains a spiritual entity and an ideal for Pinocchio, not physically real, and therefore, not someone with whom he can fully interact. More than anything else, the Fairy becomes a model or gauge for right or proper living, a reason to strive for good character and virtue and decency and civility and faithfulness (75). At best, Pinocchio can look upon the Blue-Haired Fairy as an ethereal first sister-, then mother-figure. At worst, he sees her as a haunting figment of his own psyche who has brought him, along with some degree of happiness, a substantial amount of pain: "last night you said... that without you she wouldn't even exist," Melampetta mentions while conversing with Pinocchio, to which he replies (quoting one of his own philosophical works): "It's our own creations that most possess us" (97). In the end, the problem with the Blue-Haired Fairy is that she is not human (granted, Pinocchio himself is turning back to wood, but he is still partially human), and it is not until she finally assumes a human guise, as Bluebell, that Pinocchio can finally fully accept and relate to her.

8. Since Bluebell is yet another version of the Blue-Haired Fairy, and since the Blue-Haired Fairy's relationship with Pinocchio has always been largely didactic, this final reversal is appropriate.

9. Here Coover presents the postmodern notion of meaning and recognition coming through a series of rapid-fire images being hurled at the audience/viewer. This scene in the novel echoes Coover's short story, "The Phantom of the Movie Palace," in which the projectionist of an abandoned theater runs several films simultaneously, one image atop the other, in the hopes of easing his loneliness and coping with his isolation:

Perhaps it's this, he thinks, stringing up a pair of projectors at the same time, that accounts for his own stubborn
romanticism -- not a search for meaning, just a wistful toying with the idea of it. . . Sometimes, when one picture does not seem enough, he projects two, three, even several at a time, creating his own split-screen effects, montages, superimpositions.  (A Night At The Movies 22)
CONCLUSION

The Open-Ended Ending

This conclusion is more a beginning than an ending (at least for me), because having finished tracing the existential impulses running through the postmodern novels I chose to examine in this study and noting the ways that (inter)subjectivity is a shadowed but relevant presence in these texts, I find that my explorations have just begun to graze the surface of this line of thought. It seems that I am constantly discovering another novel or film that would have fit nicely into this dissertation. It is also reassuring to find critical investigations which greatly support my own work (such as Linda Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*) and still others which are forthcoming (such as James M. Glass’ *Shattered Selves: Multiple Personality in a Postmodern World*, in which the author attempts to show the limitations of the concept of fragmented personality in postmodern discourse when it is juxtaposed with actual first-person narratives of women suffering from multiple personality disorders).

On the other hand, the opposite is also true: it also seems that I am constantly discovering a recently published
article or book which contests my findings and argues that (inter)subjectivity and the postmodern do not mix in the ways which I claim. This is frustrating but expected, since I knew from the beginning that in many ways I was "sticking my neck out" by postulating a dialectical merger of the two. I will, however, stand by my postulations.

I believe that we will continue to see a dialectic between modern and postmodern thought -- especially, a continued probing into the ways that (inter)subjectivity is "alive and well" in postmodern discourse -- as time progresses. To reiterate an earlier statement, this is hardly a romanticized return to the past or a desire for the comforts of nostalgia, but rather an acknowledgement that there is some merit in what has come before and that we do not have to discard completely old thoughts and ideas as we forge ahead. The old can inform the new and the new can illuminate both the flaws and merits of the old. I hope that my dissertation shows that some postmodern works echo the past in such a way that isn't redundant but ground-breaking.

I chose to focus on The Malady of Death, Blue Eyes, Black Hair, The New York Trilogy, Vineland, and Pinocchio in Venice because I felt that they would best help me to develop my theory and that they most strongly reflect the fusion of the existential and the postmodern. However, as I stated earlier, other books have come before and after the
ones examined in this dissertation which also contain postmodern existential impulses. These include James Joyce's *Ulysses*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*, William Gaddis’ *The Recognitions*, Julio Cortazar’s *Hopscotch*, and Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Some of these works are more modern than postmodern in nature, but again, all of them anticipate the postmodern in one way or another. I might mention that postmodernism is also foreshadowed in even older works such as Fielding’s *Joseph Andrews*, Stern’s *Tristram Shandy*, and even Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, for reasons that John Barth makes quite clear in "The Self in Fiction, or, 'That Ain’t No Matter. That Is Nothing'" (*The Friday Book* 207-214). More recent works which emerged around the same time as some of the books I do cover in this dissertation include Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, Carlos Fuentes’ *Christopher Unborn*, Ariel Dorfman’s *The Last Song of Manuel Sendero*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and Milan Kundera’s *Immortality*. This is a telling list because it underscores the fact that the impulse to join the modern and the postmodern is widespread and not restricted to one gender, race, country, or culture/society.

Further, there have recently emerged a number of films and television programs with a postmodern narrative structure which also concern themselves, to one degree or another, with (inter)subjectivity. These include David
Cronenberg's *Videodrome* and *Naked Lunch*, as well as David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*. Here too the existential is explored in new ways by the directors and screenwriters, one of which is the incorporation of elements of magical realism into the films' narratives and images in much the same way that some authors include it in their texts (again, see Garcia Marquez, Rushdie, Fuentes, Dorfman, Morrison, and Kundera).

Because of the books which already exist and the ones yet to be written and published that no doubt will follow in a similar vein, I call this an open-ended ending (a term I use to describe some of the endings of the postmodern novels examined in this dissertation) and know that I will continue to think about "Existentialism and (Inter)Subjectivity in the Postmodern Novel" for some time to come, applying some of the thoughts I developed in this study -- or a variation of them -- to other works. I say "a variation of them" because I know that I will continue to distil and refine and reshape my own approaches and beliefs.

In closing, I feel a mixture of satisfaction, anxiety, and depression haunting me in much the same way that I believe Auster, Coover, Duras, and Pynchon want us to believe that some of their constructs are haunted. Some of these characters find solutions to their dilemmas and end up thinking and doing by themselves and with others. My solution is to turn to writing not in the way that Quinn does in Auster’s *City of Glass*, in order to obliterate
consciousness, or in the way that Antoine Roquentin does in Sartre's *Nausea*: "The truth is that I can't put down my pen: I think I'm going to have the Nausea and I feel as though I'm delaying it while writing. So I write whatever comes into my mind" (231). Rather, I turn to writing the way that Roquentin does at the end of *Nausea*, when he hears the woman singing and comes to the recognition that writing can also be a constructive, productive form of action:

> Can you justify your existence then? Just a little? . . . Couldn't I try. . . . Naturally, it wouldn't be a question of tune . . . but couldn't I, in another medium? . . . It would have to be a book: I don't know how to do anything else. (237)

Roquentin comes to believe that writing a worthy text -- "It would have to be beautiful and hard as steel. . . ." (237) -- has the potential to validate his own existence; and, if it has the capacity to "make people ashamed of their existence" and make them desire to better themselves, his text will also benefit others (237). Ultimately, Roquentin finds that attempting to write an influential text can stave off the nausea that threatens to overwhelm him. Perhaps his solution will continue to work for me as well.

> A book. Naturally, at first it would only be a troublesome, tiring work, it wouldn't stop me from existing or feeling that I exist. But a time would come when the book would be written, when it would be behind me, and I think that a little of its clarity might fall over my past. Then, perhaps, because of it, I could remember my life without
repugnance. . . And I might succeed -- in the past, nothing but the past -- in accepting myself. (238)
Works Cited


---. "Negation." Freud 104-115.

---. "Repression." Freud 213-217.


---. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." Foster 111-125.


