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**Mapless cities: Urban displacement and failed encounters in
Surrealist and Postmodern narratives**

Daniele, Daniela, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1992

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**MAPLESS CITIES:
URBAN DISPLACEMENT AND FAILED ENCOUNTERS
IN SURREALIST AND POSTMODERN NARRATIVES
by
DANIELA DANIELE**

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty
in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1992

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

MAPLESS CITIES:
URBAN DISPLACEMENT AND FAILED ENCOUNTERS
IN SURREALIST AND POSTMODERN NARRATIVES

by

Daniela Daniele

Adviser: Professor Vincent Crapanzano

My study traces the origins of the Postmodern eclectic grammar of linguistic collision back in the Surrealist monstrous poetics of ruins. Keeping in mind the images of lost direction in the big city as a central figure in the discussion of both the Modern and Postmodern aesthetics of displacement, I start comparing the epiphanic encounters of the Baudelairean flâneur in metropolitan Paris - in constant search for the traces of a lost symbolic order - with the Bretonian enigmatic pursuit of Nadja, the elusive sphinx in the crowd who discourages the poet's self-recognition in a mental territory of puzzling condensations and of ineffable objet trouvé. In both his visual and written work, Marcel Duchamp was probably the first to envision the space of the crowd as a trans-urban, multiple dimension: a cool arena of disjunctive

encounters contributing to transform the Surrealist erotic space of desire in a cooler, open field of performance.

Deeply influenced by Duchamp's hybrid aesthetics, American Postmodern writers such as Donald Barthelme and Thomas Pynchon, and the performance artist Laurie Anderson, represent metropolis as a "geographical incest", as plural, entropic semiosphere which transcends the very notion of urban community to become the tolerant receptacle of an ethnic and discursive multiplicity, an electronic area of linguistic collisions translatable in new fragmented and unfinished narratives. Evoking the assemblages of Abstract Expressionists, the debris of Simon Rodia "junk art", and the hybrid language of Postmodern architecture, this neo-Surrealist narratives discourse transforms the allegorical, epiphanic traces envisioned by the Baudelairean and Bretonian heroes in partial parodies, in enigmatic fragments of discourse whose ultimate source transcends the narrator's knowledge. The conceptual strategy which is constitutive of these texts implicitly asks the puzzled reader to disentangle the entropic plots, immersing him in the midst of a "linguistic wilderness," where all opposites - fact and fiction, man and machine, man and female - enigmatically and humorously coexist.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation was conceived between two worlds, both in Italy and in the United States, allowing me the pleasure of accumulating quite a few debts among scholars, colleagues and friends in both countries.

Proceeding along geographical lines, I am conscious that without the encouragement of my friend Efisio Espa, and of my tutors Alessandra Contenti and Paola Splendore I would have never pursued graduate studies abroad. I also wish to thank prof. Franco Marengo and Prof. Giuseppe Sertoli for providing all the material and intellectual support I needed to start this research as a doctoral student in English studies at the University of Genova. Professor Marisa Bulgheroni in Milan generously offered precious suggestions at various stages, willing to share with me her inspiring ideas. Prof. Ruggero Bianchi in Turin kindly helped me reconstruct a background around the artistic figure of Laurie Anderson. Prof. Stefania Piccinato and Prof. Guido Carboni's criticisms were still ringing in my ears when I went to the United States to complete this work as a doctoral candidate at the Department of Comparative Literature at the City University of New York.

On that side of the ocean, geographically distant but empathic in spirit, my debt to my advisor Prof.

Vincent Crapanzano is not limited to a particular region. The truly interdisciplinary nature of his scholarship, his intense, perceptive responses helped me get more than I thought out of my pensiveness. At some point I have found it convenient to steal some of his own phrases. Respectful of our cultural difference, he turned our encounter into a dialogue, able to exalt, instead of undermine, my European perspective on the American landscape and culture.

I hope to have a future chance of showing Prof. Mary Ann Caws that I have deserved her attention and her inexhaustible energy both as a woman and a Surrealist scholar. The very idea of this dissertation springs from one of her extraordinary intuitions. Prof. Burton Pike was also essential in arousing my interest in urban literature, promptly reacting to my rough drafts and urging me to get to a synthesis when it was time to.

A hidden presence throughout this dissertation is also Prof. Allen Mandelbaum, who directed it at an earlier stage with his irresistible eccentricism. The lectures of Prof. Jane Tompkins and Prof. Jacques Derrida at CUNY strongly contributed to change my way of thinking literature, and, in other academic settings, Prof. Marjorie Perloff's theory of indeterminacy and Prof. William Sharpe's urban scholarship provided dense material of reflection on the very methods and contents of this work.

Long as this list is, I am afraid it is not exhaustive. My friends and tutors at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York - and in particular Prof. Fred Nichols, Line Pouchard, Pat Laurence, Dagmar Leupold, Marina La Palma, Sally O' Driscoll and Vinnie Tirelli - were able to turn my graduate studies into a warm, self-constitutive experience. I am also grateful to Mrs. Gianna Jelovchch and to Prof. Paolo Valesio at Yale University for providing me and my family the ideal setting to bring this project to an end. My husband Tommaso was with me at all stages of this work, contributing with precious suggestions, with enduring patience and with the emotional support I needed. My little boy Daniele came to life to cheer me up with an affection I did little to deserve.

I wish I could still laugh with my friend Vittorio and enjoy his extraordinary companionship in New York. I also wish I were in time to thank my father Ettore, whose example of human and intellectual honesty I am afraid I can fully acknowledge only now. To their indelible memory, this work is dedicated.

New York City, December 13, 1991

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Introduction

Le surréalisme est ce qui sera.

André Breton, "Cause"

The urban apocalyptic landscape has often been used as a metaphor for the shift in perception from modern to postmodern culture. In both essays and fiction, postmodern rhetoric shows the recurrence of such terms as "debris," "ruins," "dismemberment" which clearly belong to the vocabulary of Walter Benjamin in his reflection on the modern metropolis, crossed by technological innovations as well as by the subversive formal experiments of the Surrealists. Other fragments - in the shape of incongruous linguistic debris gathered with the arbitrary logic of Breton's bricolage - are later constitutive of the catastrophic landscapes of postmodern novels. They compose the stylistic pastiches of postmodern architecture, Donald Barthelme's contemporary narrative collages, William S. Burroughs' neo-Surrealist cut-ups, Kathy Acker's juxtaposition of literary quotations. And isn't bricolage, the technique that the avant-garde adopted for reducing their discourse, as well as their vision of the environment, into bits and pieces, after all, the fundamental mode of the postmodern "poetics of ruins"?

Many critics have argued that the hybrid post-modern language - the koiné founded on the interplay of high culture with the new languages circulating in an information society - is nothing other than a revival of the eclecticism experienced for the first time at the beginning of the century in response to the massive invasion of commodities in the urban landscape.¹ Giorgio Agamben, in his introduction to the Italian edition of Benjamin's manuscripts of Das Passagen Werk, speaks, for example, of a recent revival of the cultural tensions and of the artistic forms that marked the second decade of this century:

L'uscita integrale nel 1982 dell'opera incompiuta benjaminiana si è di fatto inserita nella temperie del dibattito post-moderno, cioè nel quadro di una rinnovata crisi delle ideologie e dello storicismo che ha investito la cultura occidentale, esprimendosi, come era stato per le avanguardie storiche, nelle forme di un eclettismo metastorico.²

Similarly, in the introduction to a much quoted collection of essays on postmodern art, Hal Foster argues that:

¹ The sense of continuity in the transition from the modern to the postmodern city is extensively discussed in the introduction by Marisa Bulgheroni to W.H.Auden, Città senza mura, It. trans. Aurora Ciliberti, (Milano: Mondadori, 1981).

² Giorgio Agamben, "Premessa" to Walter Benjamin, Parigi. Capitale del XIX Secolo (Das Passagen Werk, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrhamp Verlag, 1982), It. trans. (Torino: Einaudi, 1986), p.VIII.

Although repressed in late modernism, this 'surrealist revolt' is returned in post-modernist art.³

Though the provocative and subversive spirit of the avant-garde seems rather subdued in the cooler narrative of the postmodern age, this comparative study means to participate in the debate on the actualité of surrealism, confronting the mapless city that Breton envisioned at the beginning of the century to its reprise in postmodern writing. Though widely separated in time, surrealist and postmodern urban narratives prove isotopic in their constant interrogation of the value of signs in the city and in their common urban theme of the man in the crowd (which Baudelaire originally borrowed from Poe) which they transform into the theme of the pursuit of a fugitive lover. In both epochs, the vision of the city (or rather the monstrous, condensed, abnormal reflection they provide of it) testifies to the crisis of a rational and realistic order; of the loss of the map as a recurring

³ Hal Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface", The Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture, Hal Foster, ed., (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), p. X. For a study of the close relations between high modernism and postmodernism, see also: Hans Bertens, "The Postmodern Weltanschauung and its Relation with Modernism: an Introductory Survey", Approaching Post-modernism, Douvve Fokkema and Hans Bartens, eds. (Amsterdam-Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1986); Maria Del Sapio, Alice nella città. (Note su arte e stili metropolitani) (Pescara: Tracce, 1988); and Lino Gabelone, L'oggetto surrealista. Il testo, la città, l'oggetto in Breton (Torino: Einaudi, 1977).

metaphor for the difficulty of representing the city through a linear, narrative plot.

In the transition from the industrial to the informational city, from the mechanical to the electronic technological paradigm, the big city stands in the fictional background as a fragmentary, elusive space, always questioning the problematic relation between the subject and the unstable referents he finds on his way. After Baudelaire, the still self-centered Bretonian flâneur finds his direct descendant in the postmodern drifter, less obsessed with identity but still engaged in the interpretation of the variety of signs that surround him.

If we take urban space as a constant referent for our discussion of the shift from the Modern to the postmodern sensibility, at some point, especially in our discussion of Duchamp's aesthetics of incongruity, the controversial distinction between the two modes starts blurring. They both rely on the effect of displacement produced by the decontextualization of an object and its re-inscription in another context, which constitutes the simplest surrealist operation. Postmodern pastiche partakes of this technique, extending it from the narrative to the hyper-narrative, metatextual level, in a kind of "generalized surrealism," investing the world of material commodities perceived by Modern writers as well as the variety of languages

and codes circulating in the postcolonial, information society.

According to Benjamin, the fragments that Surrealists were dealing with were derivative of the alienation of the subjective, interior life in its constant confrontation with an artificial environment and reified objects. The disintegration of the organic city (polis) experienced by Charles Baudelaire in 19th-century Paris was first inherited by the subversive, fragmentary aesthetics of the dadaists and futurists before the First World War, and later by the surrealists, who broke the urban territory into fragments, into the "ruins" of the spatial and temporal order.⁴ In other words, Surrealists adopted the aesthetics of fragmentation to depict an artificial habitat which was impossible to embrace in its totality⁵, turning the Baudelairean allegorical city of unexpected, poetic correspondances into a space of rêverie, whose oneiric, scattered traces Breton attempted to read as the cryp-

⁴ "Agli occhi dell'allegoria l'esistenza sta sotto il segno della frantumazione e delle macerie, come l'arte. Il principio dell'art pour l'art erige il regno dell'arte al di là dell'esistenza. Ad entrambe è comune la rinuncia all'idea della totalità armonica in cui, secondo la dottrina tanto dell'idealismo tedesco, quanto dell'eclettismo francese, arte e esistenza profana si compenetrano a vicenda." Cf. Walter Benjamin, Parigi, Capitale del XIX secolo, cit., p.426.

⁵ Benjamin explicitly speaks of the "rinuncia ad assumere l'arte come una categoria della totalità dell'esistenza." Ibid., p.416.

tic signs of the deep, hidden domain of the unconscious.

However, the epiphanic objects that Breton collected in the entropic city as the overdetermined traces of his subjective dreamworld, at some points, as in his novel Nadja, start resisting the poetic reading, lose their power of light, sending the flâneur back to the mute world of enigmatic objects. Self-consciously breaking the order of the historical narrative - which would place Duchamp's work in an earlier time, in transition from the Dadaist to the Surrealist mode - I am later showing how Duchamp's word-play and ready-mades already emancipated the object from the subjective order, taking it back to an immanent, plural realm of non-sense and displacement, envisioning a cool, technological art unmediated by the subjective logic of desire opening the way to Postmodern aesthetics. As he had conceived and developed most of his works in the United States, his incongruous, unredemptive practice of exhibiting banal objects from everyday life devoid of fixed and overtly symbolic meanings was very influential for American conceptual and performance artists at the end of the fifties, the time that Lyotard designates as the beginning of the so-called "Postmodern era."

At that time, consumerism and the information society brought about a further break in the sense of

linear space and time and pushed further the critique of progress which Benjamin started in terms of historicism. The atomic catastrophe requested the methods and aims of rational science and the very meaning of progress, emphasizing the Heisenberg principle of indeterminacy and relativity of which the Surrealists were already aware. On the other hand, the rise of the information society and the consequent circulation of new, mysterious codes implied a new catastrophe in discourse, a renewed reflection on the city as a displacing technological environment. Taking the Benjaminian catastrophic logic to its extreme consequences, Hiroshima was a tragic event transcending reason: in Gravity's Rainbow, Pynchon shows, metaphorically, the "ruins of the monuments of the bourgeoisie" as they were actually demolished after the Second World War.⁶ He represents the ruins of the cities destroyed under the bombs in 1945 as unmapped territories, showing the "cadavres exquis", the cross-purposes produced by the abuse of military technology. Once immersed in the trans-historical, syncretic dimension of the postmodern narrative, however, the war-ruins he describes simultaneously refer to "ruins" of a more advanced semiotic stage: that marking the transition from the

⁶ Benjamin had spoken of the "rovine dei monumenti della borghesia [...] prima ancora che siano caduti." Ibid., 19.

industrial to the electronic age. In Pynchon's work, the waste land that his hero crosses in the Berlin zone proves immediately isomorphic to the post-industrial debris and trash appearing in the more recent urban scenarios of San Narciso in The Crying of Lot 49. The indeterminate field of abandoned factories and used cars marks the rise of the electronic age, the global world of communication which decenters the metropolitan Paris depicted by Benjamin in an expanded, indeterminate urban field. These Babel-like, undistinguished areas - in both the spatial and the semiotic sense - bring the epiphanic reading of urban fragments and the Modernist quest for the fugitive beauty to their very end. With the progressive disappearance of the sphynx in the street, the trace is replaced by conjecture. In Pynchon's V., Stencil, a parodic version of the Modern hero turning traces in meanings of some sort like the Benjaminian bricoleur, wanders among the trash and debris of a post-industrial society still trying to read them as the residual pieces of a map, the trace of an originary architecture, the surviving tesserae of the mosaic of a lost order. His search finally draws him away from the street, in a melancholic space of paranoia and conjecture, marking the end of his quest for knowledge. In response to his defeat - following the amoral example of Breton's Nadja, of Duchamp's Rose Sélavy and,

later, of the Nabokovian *Lolita* - postmodern urbanites start embodying the ambiguous features of the stranger in the crowd and become alien to themselves: drifters. These erratic figures like Nadja, endlessly travel the highway along endless suburban areas, always confronted with new, equivocal versions of the same fact, while the narration transforms itself "in uno sforzo di approssimazione ad un enigma". ⁷

In the transition from one epoch to the other, the urban space increasingly seems to resist a subjective and ironic perspective, transforming the Modern dystopic vision of the depersonalizing, industrial city dominated by a menacing crowd and disquieting monsters into an undetermined urban area where the subject has become an extension of the machine, partaking of a complex semiotic field. In this virtual territory, where the individual voice has become indistinguishable and dispersed in a plural world resisting any final interpretation, the prevailing mode is that of humor (what Duchamp defines as "ironisme d'affirmation"), the tolerant attitude of a subject finally committed to technology.

Starting from the Baudelairean paradigmatic theme of the flâneur's pursuit of the sphinx in the crowded

⁷ Mario Perniola, "Raccontare fatti o mostrare eventi?", Modi del raccontare, Giulio Ferroni ed. (Palermo: Sellerio, 1987), 203.

streets of Paris, crossing the psychological meandering of Breton's dreamworld, our argument - deliberately inverting the chronological order - will lead us to Duchamp's paradoxical aesthetic of the incongruous and to his creation of a Protean, ambivalent man of the mob. His transvestite alter-ego "Rose Sélavy," as well as his anthropomorphic "bachelor machines" are generative of an incongruous, corrosive encounter between man and machine, between male and female, proving seminal for the postmodern hybrid subject dispersed in a decentered information landscape.

In other words, in this exploration of the urban space, we intend to illustrate a transition from the Baudelairean and Bretonian Orphic exploration of the city as a mysteriously epiphanic underworld (basically depending on Northrop Frye's model of the ritual descent of initiation) to the indifferent, non-epiphanic dispersal of the subject (dismemberment) in the electronic, dematerialized city, paradoxically suspended between dream and reality, between the oneiric and the material, amorphic world. American postmodern literary production is similarly suspended in a twilight zone between the external entropic environment and a fictional self-awareness; as Alan Wilde has argued, it should actually bear the name of "mid-fiction" in its ability to provide an undetermined allegorical, but constant, allusion to the metropolitan

environment.⁸ The simultaneous perception of both the external and the internal world was, after all, already constitutive of the Surrealist mind, suspended as it was between the outside and the inside perspective, in a mode that persists in more recent times in the paradoxical mode of "humorous irony" and "magic realism." After Duchamp, the postmodern self is physically committed to the electronic, plurilinguistic world, in a participatory position which seems to solve some paralyzing apories which are typical of parodic "metafiction". In its abstract, metalinguistic nature, the latter actually seems to entrap the reader in a totalizing, literary labyrinth, which is often recognized as the essential feature of postmodern writing but, in many aspects, is still strongly evocative of the introverted and elitist Baudelairean search for l'art pour l'art, of T.S. Eliot's refuge in an encyclopedic "city of words", in retreat from a dystopic environment.

As a necessary premise to this work, I point out that, despite their neo-parodic features, the "post-modern writing" to which I am referring is not a merely self-reflexive literature developed under the influence of Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino, but rather

⁸ Cf. Alan Wilde, Horizons of Assent: Modernism, Postmodernism and the Ironic Imagination (Baltimore-London: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1981).

Thomas Pynchon's and Donald Barthelme's and Laurie Anderson's conceptual works, which consciously transfer the allegorical, fragmentary mode of surrealist displacement in the context of a more advanced, electronic society. It seems to me that the so-called "literary labyrinths," which are nowadays recognized as a substantial part of the postmodern literary scene, are not equally urban and innovative in spirit. They represent a retreat in a whole-literary, linguistic domain which ultimately refers back to the late modernist dialogue with literature as a privileged domain that T.S. Eliot started as a means of redemption from the menace of a dystopic, metropolitan environment. Labyrinthine fictions do not confront urban entropy and human exchanges with information technology, but finally tend to create "unreal cities,"⁹ new versions of the Baudelairean temptation to retreat to an aesthetic city of the mind, in an imaginative world of Western myths alien to the metropolitan environment and to the subversive potentials of the heterogeneous, post-colonial language of the crowd.

The novels we are considering, in their extroverted, truly urban nature, cope instead with the

⁹C. Edward Timms-David Kelly, eds., Unreal City. Urban Experience in modern European literature and art (Manchester: Manchester U. P. 1985), and William Chapman Sharpe's Unreal Cities (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1991).

fragmented, plural perception of the city and with the problems of definition in a Babylon produced by a mythical Fall from language. Their vision of the city keeps questioning the problematic relation between the subject and the unstable referents that constitute their environment in the transition to a more elusive, inter-semiotic and de-materialized world.

They are, however, still indebted to one aspect of the ambivalent Baudelairean vision: his oceanic view of the crowd. They take the allegorical dismemberment of the Baudelairean subject to an extreme, at that moment in which the poet momentarily suspends his sense of identity and the Romantic practice of l'art pour l'art in order to join the crowd and "jouir de la foule." Becoming himself a man of the crowd, he suspends the erratic pursuit of the mysterious stranger, the fugitive woman in the street who represents the object of desire and of the allegorical quest for meaning in both Baudelaire and Breton. Within this tradition, Pynchon and Barthelme's narratives, far from being viciously entrapped in the narcissistic reflection of linguistic circularity ("metafiction"), are indebted to the avant-garde poetics of fragmentation and to their vision of the big city as an enigmatic open field of signifiers. In Breton and even more in Duchamp the city proves to be irreducible to a merely idealistic perspective.

The Duchampian language of condensation juxtaposes mind and landscape, the subjective pursuer and his object of desire, presenting the city as a space of the crowd and of non-fusional contiguity. The monstrous, the hybrid figures of the crowd that he envisions no longer partake of the order of the individual: they do not produce terror or a sense of the uncanny still related to the Modern hero's fear of losing his own identity in a totally reified world. Duchamp's monsters speak, instead, the language of human transaction with the machine, a language of humor which, in postmodern fiction, enters the narrative and the narrator's field, contaminating the purity of the fictional space and reducing the narrator to self-effacement, to a "depersonalized collective character," as Pike acutely defines the crowd.¹⁰

In Barthelme's and Anderson's pastiche of styles and languages, the narrator, as a subject committed to technology, loses control of the novel's perspective, intervening from time to time to confess his own surrender to the crowd of signs. He becomes a tourist, both external and internal, within the entropic domain, "humorously ironical," an "affirmative ironist", as Duchamp puts it, partaking of the technological objects he encounters and still unable to identify with them,

¹⁰ Burton Pike, The Image of the City in Modern Literature (Princeton, N.J.:Princeton, 1981), p.100.

like Zoyd, the hero of Pynchon's Vineland, who enters the phantasmagoric window and the artificial world of the information society while remaining an outsider.

The postmodern hero no longer shapes his dream within an elective encounter with the city; language inhabits him and permeates his space, leaving puzzles unsolved in a field of nonsense. This attitude, however, does not engender nihilism because, when he finally gives up a stable individual identity, becoming a sparse voice among other voices, he encounters a city of heterogeneous beliefs and codes, of linguistic aberrance and of ontological instability, in other words, a Babylon resembling a new pluralistic world, which Barthelme humorously defines as a "City of Churches." In this shape, postmodern mapless cities represent a critique of the monological retreat to harmonic and pure (political and literary) utopias and to closed, ethnocentric worlds.

Taking the flânerie in the "fourmillante cité" of Baudelaire and the surrealist wandering in the dream-world to their extreme, Pynchon and Barthelme find in the city an adequate metaphor for the linguistic displacement due to the penetration in the environment of the multifarious codes of information society. To do so, they enter urban entropy, letting the crowd of signals impinge on their discourse and in the intra-textual life of narrators.

While coping with the ambiguities of the modern city, Barthelme and Pynchon create for themselves an heterogeneous, entropic narrative form always suspended between fact and fiction. They incorporate extra-literary material as well as quotations from the literary tradition, producing a novel that is both narrative and metanarrative. Following the iconoclastic gesture of the surrealists, who were the first to announce a non-selective use of the poubelle de l'histoire, postmodern writing makes transhistorical use of quotations and recycles mass-cultural trash. Taking the abnormal shape of a megalopolitan, undetermined urban field, Pynchon and Barthelme make more debris enter the literary text in the form of implosive fragments of mass-media communication and of linguistic fetishes circulating in a consumer society.

Since Baudelaire the metropolitan experience has always been the most powerful metaphor for the enigmatic voyage, the final object of the hermeneutic quest. The failed encounter with "a woman in the crowd" is the central topos of this search until the inquiring subject ends up joining the crowd and experiencing the irreducible dissimilarity of his object of desire. Becoming part of the entropic landscape means losing his ironic stance and questioning his own identity and all fixed categories, so partaking of a realm of indeterminacy which is never exhausted by a limited

viewpoint. In other words, the transit from modern to postmodern aesthetics seems characterized by a shift from the subjective, ironic perspective on space to a more scattered, humorous interaction with a technological, entropic landscape. In this transition, New Babylon, the entropic city produced, according to Henry Adams, by industrial technology, gradually loses its dystopic features: it is, so to speak, redeemed by the Biblical curse to become an hybrid domain of monstrous condensations, subverting, according to Duchamp's aesthetics, all fixed categories and binary oppositions such as male and female, object and subject, man and machine. This movement implies the suspension of the ironic-idealistic perspective and questions the supremacy of the anthropocentric, subjective view over the landscape of objects which still persisted in Baudelaire and in Breton. The emergence in postmodern writing of a humorous, more tolerant commitment to the entropic environment is the final act of dismemberment, which opens the way to an endless recycling and re-assembling of sparse linguistic materials that ultimately refer to no absolute grammar or synthetic map of the territory.

In this study I trace back the moment in which the enigmatic object of desire starts corroding the subjective, psychological space in the Baudelairean and Bretonian flânerie in Paris. Once decentered and dis-

persed into the crowd, the self enters a field of pervasive cross-purposes and puzzles, gradually transforming the city from a menacing, Satanic underground to an open space of performance, in a linguistic, decentered realm of darkness where marginal, preterite cultures find a voice.

From Baudelaire's "passante" to Breton's libertine Nadja and finally to Pynchon's unnamable V., I devise a transition from the symbolic-psychological paradigm to the hermeneutic, allegorical mode, leading to the end of the quest for meaning and to the final disappearance of the woman in the crowd, in a city that progressively evolves from a space of passion and of monogamic desire to a space of indifferent promiscuity and multiplicity of objects of knowledge and desire. This indeterminate, libertine space of non-fusional contiguity soon becomes an indifferent cognitive space of tolerance.

The analysis of the written texts of Marcel Duchamp and Laurie Anderson is useful here non only to emphasize the synesthetic character of both surrealist and postmodern writing but also to stress the sharing of the literary themes of displacement in both surrealist and postmodern art, and their common search for a Protean subjectivity, for new enigmatic, open-ended, urban art forms blurring the distinction between dream and reality, between the self and the world he inhabits.

The "poème-objet" defined by Breton as "une composition qui tend à combiner les ressources de la plastique et de la poésie et à spéculer sur leur pouvoir d'exaltation réciproque", ¹¹ returns in post-modern writing, in the synesthetic form of a narrative which, especially in Barthelme, evokes other forms of enigmatic art objects and pastiche, such as the anxious objects of junk sculpture and performance art, not to mention the eccentric building of Postmodern architecture, all stressing the pervasive incestuous language of the contemporary urban field.

The aim of the postmodern, ambivalent art object is not, as it was for the avant-garde, to provoke the audience by means of an iconoclastic gesture, but rather to emphasize the symbolic ambiguity of the hybrid object deriving from an incongruous collision, from a failed encounter. In other words, abandoning the dream of the map and of the subjective, anthropocentric control on the overextended and linguistically saturated city, postmodern fiction creates a Babylonian receptacle of entropic signs which is impossible for the reader to metabolize in its totality, as it would be for a tourist taking an instantaneous World tour in a Baedeker world.

¹¹ Cit. in Claude Abastado, Introduction au surréalisme, (Paris: Bordas, 1986), p. 118.

At the narrative level, the absence of a linear plot and the recycling of sparse linguistic fragments belonging to distinct styles and traditions which are constitutive of postmodern fiction finally lead to the suspension of judgment, to black humor as a way of questioning power assumptions within a plural, multiracial environment.

Chapter 1

Reading fragments in the entropic city: Baudelaire and Breton's pursuit of the sphinx in the crowd

Passages are houses or corridors
which have no external side - like
dream.

Walter Benjamin, Das Passagen
Werke

In this chapter I identify in Baudelaire's experience of the crowd the first signs of displacement of the Modern hero and its threat to reduce the ironic, privileged perspective of the poet before a world of enigmatic, fragmentary objects. The flâneur's failed encounter with his enigmatic object of desire - the unknown passante in the crowd - dramatizes the urbanite's inability to retain semantic control of the urban environment, till the city becomes, like in Poe's "The Man in the Crowd", the space for a quête for the object of desire, which is at the same time an enquête, a quest for meaning.

In both Baudelaire and Breton, the city is an allegorical space of desire and seduction, where the elective encounter marked by the fugitive moment of recognition (choc as coup de foudre) is followed by an ephemeral, magical correspondence.

In Baudelairean Paris, the poet portrays himself immersed in the city crowd, experiencing the ambivalent feeling of ennui and estrangement but also the sensory pleasure of flânerie, of going through unlimited, ineffable encounters. This fluctuating, allegorical territory of fugitive encounters with beauty returns in the Breton's surrealist city, where the poet reads the city fragments as traces of a concealed order, allowing him to transcend common sense and the mute objects in the city.

Paris becomes a dreamworld which, at magical moments, coincides with the deeper order of the unconscious. The immanent chaos of the city, the Satanic world of the Fall is so exorcized by turning ambiguous fragments into revealing signs. The city therefore becomes a hieroglyphic text to interpret, a text whose elusive meaning is represented, in Baudelaire as well as in Breton, by the figure of an unknown, fascinating woman in the Parisian street. The fugitive rencontre of the Baudelairean poet with the unknown passenger in the crowd provides the pre-text of Breton's encounter with the visionary Nadja, the woman who, like an unstable signifier, keeps changing shape, escaping the poet's desire to understand/possess her.

The failed encounter with the sphinx in the crowd, as Pynchon's V. ultimately shows, serves as a metaphor for the erratic search for meaning in the

metropolitan street, constantly resisting plotting and interpretation. Breton's Nadja is itself an erratic text, an unfinished quest whose ungraspable object finally frustrates the narrator's attempt to give her a name, confronting him with the enigmatic, entropic power of unrelated, urban objects.

1. Baudelaire and the Orphic descent into the magic underworld

According to Benjamin's paradigmatic discussion of metropolitan Paris, the Modern vision of the city is directly associated with the sense of individual displacement in the face of the circulation of mercified objects. The circulation of commodities and the demolition of large areas of the historical center represent the catastrophe of an urban space previously perceived as natural and organic. The menacing presence of the "crowd" and of the flux of merchandise in the 19th-century metropolis starts a process of individual alienation witnessed by Baudelaire in 19th-century Paris, the way Walter Benjamin analyzes it in Das Passagen Werk¹ and in "Charles Baudelaire."²

¹ This work is the posthumous, fragmentary book Benjamin had worked on from 1927 until his death.

² Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism, trans. Harry Zohn (London: New Left Books, 1973), p. 43.

Benjamin relates the Baudelairean urban flux to the circulation of commodities in the city, which turns the city from an historical and monumental center - a "static" model, as Pike would define it³ - to a large, fluid market. One of the main consequences of the transformation of the city in a commercial, mechanized environment is the loss of a direct correspondence between sign and meaning, between the exchange value and the use value of objects.

Such a loss of semantic control of the environment revitalizes in modernity the Biblical myth of Babylon, the myth of the Fall from the Edenic, organic world into a satanic chaos where man wanders like a confused exile, nostalgic for a presumably "natural" language which, after Baudelaire, as Paul de Man writes, "our urban and alienated world can conceive only as a nostalgic and unreachable past."⁴ The experience of the loss of identity in the city and the aspiration to restore a nostalgic order, lies in the background of most of the modern quests for meaning, from Baudelaire to T. S. Eliot, in their frustrated effort to elevate

³ Burton Pike, The Image of the City in Modern Literature, XIII.

⁴ Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in Blindness and Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism (1971), Wlad Godzich, ed., "Theory and History of Literature," vol. 7 (Minneapolis: Minnesota U.P., 1983), p. 178.

the increasingly entropic world of reproducible, "reified" objects into mythical signs.

"Entropy" is a term that nicely expresses the anti-urban, anti-technological mode that characterizes the modern critique of industrial civilization; this notion borrowed from thermodynamics was first metaphorically used in literature by Henry Adams to envision death as the ultimate, catastrophic effect of industrial dynamism, culminating in the transformation of the human into an inanimate machine.⁵ In the constant confrontation with the technological environment and with the object of mass production, what is at stake is man's ability to control and to name the material world of objects. The idealistic attempt to locate the space of imagination far from the pervasive banality of the urban environment is representative of the Modern quest for identity. The continuous attempt of the poet to attach allegorical meanings to the immanent, ambiguous world partakes of the nostalgic desire of the anthropocentric self to restore the broken links between mind and nature. But if, as Der-

⁵ Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams. A Study of the Twentieth Century Multiplicity, (1906) (New York: Random House, 1946). For a discussion of Frazer's vision of entropy in The Golden Bough and in Modern science see also Carlo Pagetti, "Letteratura e nuova scienza: da Darwin a Freud" in Modernismo/Modernismi. Dall'avanguardia storica agli anni trenta e oltre, Giovanni Cianci, ed. (Milano: Principato, 1991), pp. 49-62.

rida argues, what circulates at fast, mechanical rhythms cannot be possessed, ⁶ the rhythm of industrial production surpasses the poet's internal rhythms of elaboration. As Baudelaire writes in "Le Cygne":

la forme d'une ville /Change plus vite,
hélas!, que le coeur d'un mortel.

The Baudelairean experience of the "perte de l'auréole" is dependent, according to Benjamin, on the transformation of art into commodity, in a process of reification that the poet exorcizes by attributing allegorical meaning to the objects he encounters. Benjamin adopts the apocalyptic term "ruins" to refer to the new artificial habitat, to the phantasmagoric dimension of the magasin, breaking with the rational order and with the historical memory of the city. The urban fragments resulting from such a break with memory and order provide the enigmatic material of the allegorical art that Surrealists will continue to pursue after Baudelaire:

L'oggetto dell'intenzione allegorica viene
estrapolato dal contesto della vita: viene
smembrato e conservato nello stesso tempo.
L'allegoria si tiene stretta alle macerie. ⁷

⁶ Cf. "Le Capital et la Capitale," a course on Baudelaire and the economy of the modern city given by Jacques Derrida, at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, 28 Sept-2 Oct. 1991.

⁷ Benjamin, Pariqi: Capitale del XIX secolo, p. 124.

Immersed in a crowd of undetermined objects, Paris becomes an archaeological domain of banal objects, a place of ruins, ⁸ a "bric-à-brac confus".⁹

Confronted with the reproducing machine, the poet feels dispossessed of his power to attach a mythical value to random objects, and disdainfully withdraws to a separate world in the attempt to recreate an alternative milieu within the disintegrated organic community. Nostalgic for an ideal past that he identifies with the utopia of an organic "city" (polis), the poet becomes a solitaire hero and retreats to the world of allegories (l'art pour l'art), in a parallel dreamworld respectful of his uniqueness and creativity. Therefore, Paris becomes an allegorical "cité pleine de rêves". ¹⁰

The poet's revolt against the mechanized environment situates him in an ironic perspective, implying a binary opposition between the (chaotic) exterior and the (creative) interior, between the banal and the

⁸ In "Ennui," Baudelaire writes: "Il ferait volontiers de la terre un débris,/Et dans un bâillement avalerait le monde./C'est l'Ennui!", Cf. Charles Baudelaire, Les Fleurs du Mal. Oeuvres Complètes, C: Pichois, ed., 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1975), I:6.

⁹ "Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie/N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,/Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégoire,/Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs." Baudelaire, "Le Cygne," Ibid., I:86.

¹⁰ Baudelaire, "Les Sept Vieillards," Tableaux Parisiens. Ibid., I:87.

presumably uncontaminated imaginary dimension. Confronted with the proliferation of artificial objects in the city, the poet questions their identity and his own, so that urban writing becomes both a quest for the poet's self-identity and a search for a deeper value of the urban objects, overdetermined by the poet-flâneur.

As Benjamin points out, the detective story was a genre developed in industrial England with the urban crowd in mind, actually seeking the identification of the criminal within a mass of individuals by means of a rational analysis of indexes.¹¹ Baudelaire, however, does not, like Poe, resort to reason and logic, but to imagination in order to restore the mythical value of the object. He starts another form of investigation in the crowded city: a search for secret correspondances, for latent meanings which finally relocate the poet and his object in a sublime world whose formal perfection exorcizes the anti-aesthetic, "terrible paysage" of the city.¹² In other words, the allegorical power of the poet is able to redeem the object from its banal, literal (reified) use, relating it to an alchemical, magical order.

¹¹ Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, 40.

¹² "Le sommeil est plein de miracles!/Par un caprice singulière/j'avais banni de ce spectacles/ Le végétal irrégulier,/ Et, peintre fier de mon génie,/Je savourais dans mon tableau/L'enivrante monotonie/Du métal, du marbre et de l'eau." C. Baudelaire, "Rêve parisien," Oeuvres Complètes, p.101.

Confronted with chance in metropolitan life, the poet reads latent contents, hidden meanings into the manifest, fragmented reality, extracting the traces of a lost symbolic world from it. His descent into the satanic world of chaos, into the uncontrollable semantic domain of the city ("Un Voyage à Cythère"), corresponds to a deciphering quest, extracting an idiosyncratic system of correspondances from the world.

Baudelaire's idealistic attempt to envision the magical order of the merveilleux in the metropolis is an attempt to give control over the city back to the subject, an example later followed by Breton, who envisioned a concealed, deep grammar of the unconscious in the ruins of industrial civilization. In other words, flânerie corresponds to the reading of a hidden depth beneath the visible surface of the city. Walking the city streets corresponds to writing:

Je vais m'exercer seul à ma fantasmescrime,
Flairant dans tous les coins les hasards de
la rime,
Trébuchant sur les mots comme sur les pavés,
Heurtant parfois des vers depuis longtemps
rêvés.¹³

At the same time, this initiatory descent into the satanic underworld, which is prelude to the sublime act of transcending contingency, also leads to the risk of dismemberment in the waste of the entropic maëlstrom.

¹³ Baudelaire, "Le Soleil," Tableaux Parisiens, Ibid., I:83.

Besides the "cité de rêves," the poet (la belle âme) in Paris simultaneously experiences a "fourmillante cité" ("Les Sept Veillards"), swarming with nightmares and dreams - but also with life. In the Baudelairean ambivalent vision of the crowd, "le chaos des vivantes cités"¹⁴ also conveys a sense of infinitude, provides an oceanic feeling of unlimited joy which suspends the perception of the self as a critical, separate being:

Il n'est pas donné à chacun de prendre un bain de multitude: jouir de la foule est un art; et celui-là seul peut faire, au dépris du genre humain, une ribote de vitalité, à qui une fée a insufflé dans son berceau le goût du travestissement et du masque, la haine du domicile et la passion du voyage [...] Celui-là qui épouse facilement la foule connaît des jouissances fiévreuses, dont seront éternellement privés l'égoïste, fermé comme un coffre, et le paresseux, interné comme un mollusque. Il adopte comme siennes toutes les professions, toutes les joies et toutes les misères que la circonstance lui présente ¹⁵.

In the Epilogue to Le Spleen de Paris Baudelaire writes about the "ivresse," the mixture of terror and pleasure experienced by Poe's man in the crowd, who is always on the terrifying verge of disintegration into the crowd; but also of transcending the limitations of his own

¹⁴ "Les Petites Vieilles," Ibid., I:87.

¹⁵ Baudelaire, "Les foules" Le Spleen de Paris. (Petits Poèmes en prose), Ibid., I:291.

individuality.¹⁶ This ecstatic, ambivalent experience of the crowd, is, however, accompanied by a guilty feeling, animated as it is by the same act of presumption which caused man's exile from Eden and his entrance into Babel: the "goût de l'infini / Qui partout, dans le mal lui-même, se proclame," the Faustian sin of rivalry with God, which confirms his doom.¹⁷ For this reason guilt and satanic images in Baudelaire are always mixed with the euphoric suspension of individual identity before the entropic cityscape:

Le coeur content, je suis monté sur la
montagne
D'où l'on peut contempler la ville, en son
ampleur [...]
Je voulais m'enivrer de l'énorme catin

¹⁶ Edgar Allan Poe provided Baudelaire with the model for "l'homme des foules" whose pursuit is increasingly marked by a curiosity that becomes a fatal fascination. Cf. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man in the Crowd" in Great Short Works of Edgar Allan Poe, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

¹⁷ Baudelaire, "Projet pour l'édition de Les Fleurs du mal de 1861," Oeuvres Complètes, I:191. Paul de Man synthesizes the ambivalence of the Baudelairean descent into the crowded underworld: "[...] in Baudelaire's description the division of the subject in a multiple consciousness takes place in immediate connection with a fall [...] he is quite powerless to convert even the smallest particle of nature into something human [...]. The ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this authenticity [...] the disjunction is by no means a reassuring and serene process [...] the entire texture of the self is unraveled and comes apart." Paul de Man, "The Rhetorics of Temporality" in Blindness and Insight, pp. 213-14.

Dont le charme infernal me rajeunit sans
cesse. ¹⁸

Caught in the arbitrary flux of events carried by the crowd, the poet-flâneur is seduced by other wondrous figures, by the sudden meeting with the unknown Other, with "une passante" embodying the depersonalized urban type he both abhors and worships. Here, again, his attitude is ambivalent. Surrendering to the crowd simultaneously means surrendering to infinite desire but also to a sense of loss deriving from endless, ephemeral encounters:

Le poète jouit de cet incomparable privilège, qu'il peut à sa guise être lui-même et autrui. Comme ces âmes errantes qui cherchent un corps, il entre, quand il veut, dans le personnages de chacun. Pour lui seul tout est vacant [...] Le promeneur solitaire et pensif tire une singulière ivresse de cette universelle communion. ¹⁹

Attracting the poet from the anonymity of the crowd, the unknown "passante" assumes the satanic role of the temptress in Babylon, who dispossesses the poet both of his own uniqueness and of his ironical distance. As Benjamin writes:

Far from experiencing the crowd as an opposed, antagonistic element, the very crowd

¹⁸ Baudelaire, Epilogue to Le Spleen de Paris, Oeuvres Complètes, I:291.

¹⁹ Baudelaire, "Les foules," Petits poèmes en prose, Ibid., I:291.

brings the city dweller the figure that fascinates.²⁰

The magic moment of the encounter is marked by the sparkling light of a star, an ephemeral moment of seduction soon followed by the return to the darkness of the satanic underworld. In these verses, the metaphors of light, of the glance and of the final exile from eternity, all partake of the Orpheus myth and of his interrupted descent:

Une éclair ... puis la nuit! Fugitive beauté
Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître,
Ne te verrai-je que dans l'éternité?
Ailleurs, bien loin d'ici! Trop tard! jamais
peut-être!
Car j'ignore où t'en fuis, tu ne sais où je
vais,
O toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!

²¹

She seems to lead the flâneur, like a star, towards the light, out of the infernal chaos, but finally disappears into the crowd without revealing her face, condemning him to a dispersal of himself (an Orpheic dismemberment), to a nomadic fluctuation from one face to another, in an unending flux of Babylonian harlotry.

Love and knowledge coincide in the quest for the fugitive beauty. As we later find in Breton, coup de foudre and choc experience coincide in the parallel

²⁰ Benjamin, "Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire", Illuminationen. Hannah Arendt ed., Engl. Trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Ward, 1968), p. 169.

²¹ Baudelaire, "A une passante," Tableaux Parisiens, p. 92.

quest for the object of desire and for the faculty of naming (possessing) and re-incorporating the objects of the world. Sharpe significantly defines the unknown passante first as "the mobile image of unfulfilled desire" and later as "an unknown parole within the lanque of the city," ²² thus offering the poet the illusory signal of an unexpected correspondance, but finally betraying his expectations of fusion and assimilation.

The crowd is therefore portrayed as an orgy of temptation, a landscape of unfulfilled desire, "une mer monstrueuse et sans bords," where the spirit of the poet is "Blessé par le mystère et par l'absurdité" ("Les Sept Veillards"), displaced among "ruines" ("Les Petits Vieilles") and endlessly seduced by the desire to partake of the multiple, libertine nature of the crowd. Subject and object fuse and confuse in such a vertiginous experience:

Moi, c'est tous; tous c'est moi.
Tourbillon. ²³

This dimension of urban dispersal is, according to Baudelaire, constitutive of the Modern artist: "Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne" dwells "dans le fugitive,"

²² Cf. William C. Sharpe, "Poet as Passant: Baudelaire's "Holy Prostitution," Unreal Cities, pp.40, 61.

²³ Baudelaire, "Fusée," Journeaux Intimes, Oeuvres complètes, I: 651.

is "un moi insatiable du non-moi, qui à chaque instant, le rend et l'exprime en images plus vivantes que la vie elle-même, toujours instable et fugitive." ²⁴ The allegorical nature of the experience of the city redeems the poet from the banality of urban objects. Confronted with the crowd, the poet experiences an expansion of his imaginary field, but also a sense of loss following the fugitive appearance of an object that resists his desire to attribute absolute (sublime) value to its ambiguous (profane) nature.

2. Paris as dreamworld in Breton's "flânerie"

There is a city in my mind...

David Byrne, "Road to Nowhere"

In Breton's Nadja, another woman in the crowd reappears as object of desire and potential source of a deeper knowledge. Again, instead of embodying the epiphanic vision in a city of mute objects, she continues to change shape, reflecting an entropic environment of indeterminacy that brings the hero's quest to failure.

²⁴ Ibid., II:692.

Breaking the syntax of the poetic discourse and reducing the text into fragments and an heterogeneous collage of urban materials, in the first decades of the century dadaist and futurist avant-gardes confront the unreadability of the city, freeing themselves from all the ennui feelings and nostalgic desires of the Romantic hero in the face of urban disorder. Subverting the linear, rational structure of the sentence, they apocalyptically demolish past values and subjective memory. In a rhetoric of fragmentation animated by the propulsive impetus of the revolutionary act, Marinetti's mots en liberté incorporate materials and sounds from the street, investing both literature and city life, both the subject and the object, with an energetic sense of mechanical chaos. In deliberate pursuit of fragmentation, Tzara proudly declares that "Dada meant nothing," advocates a return to primaeval incoherence,²⁵ making the cityscape a fragmented territory, rather than a Platonic reflection of their minds.

The iconoclastic, avant-garde gesture of disjunction, the irrational act of breaking with common sense and logic coincides with the assumption of the aesthetic value of chance and of incoherence, thus

²⁵ Tristan Tzara, Sept manifestes dada (Paris: Pauvert, 1963), pp. 33, 17.

escaping both the logic of reason and subjectivity.²⁶

As a result, the ruin in the street assumes no clear semantic value, but is rather negatively exhibited, uninterpreted, as the outcome of mere chance. In 1919, in an homage to Apollinaire, Breton and Soupault practiced for the first time "automatic writing," a deliberately unfinished, enigmatic form borrowed by Dada, which they defined as "surréaliste," borrowing a definition that Apollinaire adopted to introduce the ballet Parade and to subtitle Mamelles de Tirésias (1917).

At this early stage, Breton's version of mots en liberté followed the futurist and dadaist gesture of the subversion of common sense, creating a "language without reservation" not primarily aimed at communication, but able to produce free associations:

Chacun poursuit simplement son soliloque, sans chercher à en tirer un plaisir dialectique particulier et à en imposer les moins du monde à son voisin. Les propos termes n'ont pas, comme d'ordinaire, pour but le développement d'une thèse, aussi négligeable qu'on voudra; ils sont aussi désaffectés que possible.²⁷

²⁶ "...la surprise, l'inattendu, est un des principaux ressorts de la poésie d'aujourd'hui. Et qui oserait dire que, pour ceux qui sont dignes de la joie, ce qui est nouveau ne soit pas beau?" Guillaume Apollinaire, Conférence sur l'esprit nouveau, pronounced in Nov. 26, 1917.

²⁷ Breton, "Premier manifeste du surréalisme", Manifestes du surréalisme (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 49.

After the war, however, what dadaists and futurists dismembered in the avant-guerre in their blind spirit of adventure and destruction ²⁸, Surrealists, confronted with the ruins of the First World War, tried to interpret and translate, in their more constructive impulse to changer la vie. Breton advocated the creation of both a poetic and interior alternative order to the world, ²⁹ elaborating a new philosophy of knowledge and perception based on the combination of historical materialism with Freudian psychoanalysis. In his humanist project, the discourse of fragments, of words chosen by chance, was not merely posited as disjunctive, but functional to the expansion of the subjective space into a deeper domain - the unconscious - where the banal surface, the city fragment was interpreted as a symptom of a concealed, deeper logic. In this sense, he takes after Baudelaire's reading of the fragments in the city as a reading of the second degree, a "deciphering" (i.e., writing).

In the transition from the dadaist to the Surrealist mode, the chance encounter between two or more unre-

²⁸ The apology of modernity and of the mechanical rhythms was expressed by futurists not only in their syntactical experiments, but also in their personal commitment in the First World War.

²⁹ The exterior gesture of revolt of the dadaists was finally rejected by Breton, who wrote in Anthologie de l'humour noir that one could not "dégager du suicide une morale de la vie." Breton, Anthologie de l'humour noir (Paris: Pauvert, 1966), p. 11.

unrelated words in automatic writing assumes a form of casual but symbiotic encounter. "Les mots qui font l'amour" created a "réalité suprême", ³⁰ where the subject and the object, the male and the female; indeed, all antitheses are unified:

C'est du rapprochement en quelque sorte fortuit des deux termes qu'à jailli une lumière particulière, lumière de l'image, à laquelle nous nous montrons infiniment sensibles. ³¹

In the Surrealist bricolage, a violent decontextualization of the object is produced in order to surmount elements of dissimilarity. Even automatic writing meant to produce in the perceptive subject a new sense of the semiotic potential of words, coinciding with a renewed vision, a "conscience poétique des objets". ³² If, on the one hand, chance partakes of poetic creation, depersonalizing it, ³³ then the sudden confrontation of two distant entities, the clash of images, produces on the other hand, an entirely new, epiphanic product, which temporarily reconciles man with nature through a disharmonic, violent gesture. The

³⁰ Breton, Manifestes du surréalisme, p. 49.

³¹ Ibid., p. 49.

³² Ibid., p. 46.

³³ "Ecrivez vite sans sujet préconçu, assez vite pour ne pas être tenté de vous relire. La première phrase viendra toute seule, tant il est vrai qu'à chaque seconde il est une phrase étrangère à notre pensée consciente qui ne demande qu'à s'extérioriser," Breton, Ibid., p. 41.

encounter of two unrelated objects in a disharmonic context redeems them from their surface meaning, replacing them in an alchemic order preparatory to the miracle of transfiguration. From a mute surface ruled by the reality principle, the world becomes an uninterrupted totality concealing a deeper truth, a realm of the unconscious as the source of all images and creativity.

In this frame, common objects assume marvelous, latent meanings, "invisible mais présent", and the city becomes a "théâtre mental" of enigmatic encounters. As we read in the "Second Manifeste du surréalisme," Breton encourages another Orphic descent into the domain of interiority towards "la récupération totale de notre force psychique par un moyen qui n'est autre que la descente vertigineuse en nous, l'illumination systématique des lieux cachés et l'obscurcissement progressif des autres lieux, la promenade perpétuelle en pleine zone interdite." ³⁴

In this reflexive search for a submerged, forbidden domain, man, "ce rêveur définitif", ³⁵ is asked to suspend his rational faculties in order to read the traces of an imaginary world of dreams in the immanent world of common objects conceived as banal and limited:

³⁴ Breton, "Second manifeste du surréalisme", Ibid., p. 86.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 11.

L'homme, ce rêveur définitif, de jour en jour
plus mécontent de son sort, fait avec peine
le tour des objets dont il a été amené à
faire usage. ³⁶

In the act of transcending accidentality, the individual, as in Baudelaire's vision, regains his power of creation and his centrality in the cosmos as a poet:

La médiocrité de notre univers ne dépend-elle
pas essentiellement de notre pouvoir
d'énonciation? ³⁷

In these terms, Breton translates the immediately perceptible (the visible) into the analogical language of the mind, in order to "jeter un fil conducteur entre les mondes dissociés," to relate the empirical to the subjective world, echoing the Baudelairean search for correspondances in the urban disorder. Transcending the literal meaning of things was the aspiration of the Baudelairean anthropocentric idealism:

Les contacts primordiaux sont coupés: ces
contacts je dis que seul le ressort analogique parvient fugitivement à les rétablir.
D'où l'importance qui prennent, à longs
intervalles, ces bref éclats du miroir perdu.
³⁸

In his Platonic program Breton at some point recognizes the continuity of his investigation with the Romantic principle of correspondances:

³⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

³⁷ Breton, Point du jour (Paris: Gallimard, 1934), p. 22.

³⁸ Breton, La clé des champs (Paris: Ed. du Sagittaire, 1953), p. 113.

Quant'à l'idée d'une clef "hiéroglyphique" du monde, elle pré-existe plus ou moins consciemment à toute haute poésie, que seule peut mouvoir le principe des analogies et correspondances. Des poètes comme Hugo, Nerval, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, des penseurs comme Fourier, partagent cette idée avec les occultistes, et aussi vraisemblablement avec la plupart des inventeurs scientifiques. ³⁹

However, while Baudelaire saw the city as a "forêt des symboles" ("Correspondances"), Breton, under the influence of the disrupted forms of the avant-garde, stresses instead the opaque nature of the urban objects, envisioning a "forêt d'indices", ⁴⁰ a landscape of enigmatic traces in the city. The Surrealist flâneur plays the role of the Baudelairean chiffonnier, who collects rags and old, unrelated objects in the street:

Voici un homme chargé de ramasser le débris d'une journée de la capitale. Tout ce que la grande cité a rejeté, tout ce qu'elle a perdu, tout ce qu'elle a dédaigné, tout ce qu'elle a brisé, il le catalogue, il le collectionne [...] il ramasse, comme un avare un trésor, les ordures qui, ramâchées par la divinité de l'Industrie, deviendront des objets d'utilité ou de jouissance. ⁴¹

The trouvaille, the object in the street mysteriously charged with meaning, is an ephemeral trace, likely to

³⁹ Letter of Breton to Claudine Chonez, Gazette de lettres, July, 31, 1948, republ. Entretiens (Paris: N.R.F., 1952), 267.

⁴⁰ Breton, L'amour fou (Paris, Gallimard, 1937), p. 21.

⁴¹ Baudelaire, Du vin et du haschisch, in Oeuvres Complètes, pp. 249-50.

be soon substituted by another trace, and called to assume a multitude of unstable meanings, of coincidences, of sudden matches; as a virtually infinite receptacle of correspondances. However, because of the intimate connection between the trace and urban disorder, Breton, unlike Baudelaire, never dislocates such indexical objects to an aesthetic, transcendent world, but rather reads it as signs of desire scattered in the extra-textual world. Breton's encounter with urban materials provided by chance therefore belongs to a form of extrovert, immanent rêverie, and is not antinomic to the banal object or to the urban experience. In this sense, as Mary Ann Caws has pointed out, surrealists liked to consider themselves as only a "prehensile" tail of the Romantic movement ⁴², envisioning an uninterrupted chain of perverse, unmediated correspondances in the world. The surrealist dreamworld produces correspondances that are not dependent on the aesthetic intervention of the poet, but are rather on a casual collision between the object and the subject in which the poet does not prevail as the artifex, as a creator or transfigurer of the

⁴² Mary Ann Caws, André Breton (New York: Twayne, 1971) p. 27. Cf. Breton, "Second manifeste du surréalisme", p. 102.

object, but merely as a witness, ⁴³ active in the faculty of relating the object encountered in the street to his personal dramas.

The subjective power of intuition remains the demiurgic instrument that makes dream and reality coincide in a sublime, surreal domain ⁴⁴ where the accidental and arbitrary world "s'offre à l'esprit comme un cryptogramme". ⁴⁵

Alchemy, hermetism, magic and the logic of the unconscious provide the subject with the mysterious grammar able to turn the entropic, inert object into spiritual epiphany. The tiniest coincidences, the uncanny, the subtlest décalage in the texture of the world, suddenly provoke surprise in the viewer, a potential epiphany and a moment of revelation which redeems the object from urban chaos. The poet stands on a street corner waiting to perceive revealing signs, which might or might not occur:

⁴³ Borrowing Pierre Reverdy's ideas, Breton writes that "l'activité surréaliste" consists of bringing together distant entities, while the role of reason should be limited to the observation of the "phénomène lumineux." Breton, Poésie et autre (Paris: 1960), p. 51.

⁴⁴ "Je crois à la résolution future de ces deux états, en apparence si contradictoires, que sont le rêve et la réalité, en une sorte de réalité absolue, de surréalité, si l'on peut ainsi dire." Breton, "Manifeste du surréalisme," Manifestes du surréalisme, p. 24.

⁴⁵ Breton, "Du Surréalisme en ses oeuvres vives." Ibid., p. 171.

Il m'arrive de faire les cent pas pendant des heures entre deux numéros de maisons ou quatre arbres d'un square. Les promeneurs sourient de mon impatience, mais je n'attends personne. ⁴⁶

By expecting the luminous and miraculous manifestation of an unconscious desire in the concrete world, ⁴⁷

Breton, like Baudelaire, goes through both the cognitive and aesthetic experience of the merveilleux. ⁴⁸

In a flash of perception, a private dream is related to an exterior object. In the hasard objectif, the casual encounter of the mind with the unstable signs of external revelation intersect to reveal the unconscious:

C'est seulement par la mise en évidence du rapport étroit qui lie ces deux termes; le réel, l'imaginatif, que j'espère porter un coup nouveau à la distinction qui me paraît de plus en plus mal fondée, du subjectif et de l'objectif. ⁴⁹

The poet lies in wait for the "monster", for the sparse objects overcharged with meaning springing from a casual encounter, but, as he says in L'amour fou, not

⁴⁶ Text immediately following the end of A. Breton, Champs magnétiques (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 175.

⁴⁷ Dalí paradoxically spoke of "irrationalité concrète" to refer to the recreation of the world by means of imagination. Cf. Salvador Dalí, La conquête de l'irrationnel (Ed. surréalistes, 1935), p. 12.

⁴⁸ "Le merveilleux est toujours beau." Breton, "manifeste du surréalisme", Manifestes du surréalisme, p. 24.

⁴⁹ Breton, L'amour fou, p. 76.

in order to shoot him down, for the "waiting is itself magnificent".⁵⁰ Differing from the Baudelairean fugitive encounter with his mysterious object of desire, Breton's rencontre is deferred in time, allowing the woman to change shape, the object of the quest to assume multiple meanings, waiting for a "message subliminal," opening up "zones dangereuses et interdites de la pensée [...] ce qui se trame à l'insu de l'homme dans les profondeurs de son esprit."⁵¹

In the encounter between the internal and the external, Breton assumes the Hegelian, synthetic notion of the humour objectif, as the mode of the rencontre, a synthesis of the self-reflexive spirit and of the contemplation of the external world, which corresponds to a simultaneous movement of the spirit toward himself and toward the world.⁵² Adding the

⁵⁰ Ibid., p, 39.

⁵¹ Breton, "Second manifeste du surréalisme," Manifestes du surréalisme, p.118.

⁵² "L'art romantique, dit-il, avait pour principe fondamental la concentration de l'âme en elle-même, qui, ne trouvant pas que le monde intime, restait indifférente en face de lui. Cette opposition s'est développée dans la période de l'art romantique, au point que nous avons vu l'intérêt se fixer tantôt sur les caprices de la personnalité. Mais, maintenant, si cet intérêt va jusqu'à faire que l'esprit s'absorbe dans la contemplation extérieure, et qu'en même temps l'humour, tout en conservant son caractère subjectif et réfléchi, se laisse captiver par l'objet et sa forme réelle, nous obtenons dans cette pénétration intime un humour en quelque sorte objectif." Breton, Anthologie del l'humour noir, pp. 16-17.

On the avant-gard perception of the city as both an internal and external domain, see also: Giovanni Cianci, "L'anima e la città. Il monologo interiore tra

avant-garde element of chance in the Hegelian synthesis, Breton concludes that, in the encounter with the hasard objectif, the subject experiences a revelation that is ephemeral and that escapes final definition:

Nous avons annoncé d'autre part que le sphinx noir de l'humour objectif ne pouvait manquer de rencontrer, sur la route qui poudroie, la route de l'avenir, le sphinx blanc du hasard objectif, et que toute la création humaine ultérieure serait le fruit de leur étreinte.
53

The moment of recognition is overdetermined in the Freudian sense: the signs read as manifestation of the unconscious in the streets, are elevated to the order of fetish; they are, as Gabellone says, "oggetti investiti da una forza di figurazione elettiva che prende origine nel rigore del desiderio e si dispiega in investimenti simbolici esteriorizzando la scenografia del 'théâtre mental'". 54 The flânerie, the principle figure of the hasard objectif, of the accidental encounter with urban objects and events mediates the transition from the mundane domain to the oneiric universe, in a programmatic reduction of the ironical distance between the poet and the world.

interiorità ed esteriorità," in Il piccolo Hans, 64, (Winter 1989-1990), 52-75.

53 Breton, Anthologie de l'humour noir, pp.16-17.

54 Gabellone, L'oggetto surrealista, p. 56.

A (disquieting) change in the viewer is produced, as an index of the "absolu nouveau," of the sudden emergence of a deeper meaning.⁵⁵ Rupture and fragmentation, what Breton defines as a "convulsive beauty"⁵⁶ finally lead to the order of the "hasard objectif," of the revealing occurrence provided by chance which redeems the enigmatic object from its babelic opacity, but never once and for all. In "La crise de l'objet," Breton discusses the uninterrupted sequence of latent, non-literal meanings in the objects of the world and their potential transformation constantly in dialogue with the innovations occurring in the visual arts, and the creation of complicated symbolic machines. Still, grotesquely distorted objects with a shock-value belong to Das Unheimliche, the Freudian uncanny which suspends the object in a disturbing, unresolvable ambivalence, situating it between the familiar and the mysterious.⁵⁷ Within the category of the marvellous, Breton lists

⁵⁵ As in automatic writing, the encounter between distant things proves revealing: "La loro unione può generare un corpo totale, androgino e senza reti, non più dissociabile in due componenti diverse," Ibid., p. 38.

⁵⁶ "La beauté sera convulsive ou ne sera pas." Breton, Nadja (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), p. 187. Hereafter all quotations from this novel are embedded in the text.

⁵⁷ "Unheimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence." Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, James Strachey, ed., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-73), XVII, 226, 219.

Romantic ruins, the modern mannequin or whatever proves disquieting to the human sensibility ⁵⁸. "Paysages dangereux", ⁵⁹ monsters and Surrealist condensations are derivative of the reified encounter between the human and the machine - they are product of "entropy" in Adams' distopic sense of the word - which, according to Benjamin, made their first appearance in the 19th-century city with the marvelous attractions of the circus and with the anthropomorphic caricatures of Grandville ⁶⁰.

Dali's phantoms, De Chirico's mannequins, Hoffmann's automaton in Der Sandmann, are all objects defying representation and any notion of common sense, disquietingly suspended between the animate and the inanimate, and therefore threatening the integrity of the subject. They are fresh symbols, "monsters lying in wait": Bretonian "poisson soluble", "reptiles cambrioleurs", ⁶¹ "the elephants with heads of women and the flying lions" which both he and Soupault trembled in fear of meeting; in other words, they are the

⁵⁸ Breton, "Premier Manifeste du Surréalisme," Manifestes du surréalisme (1924), Oeuvres Complètes (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1989), p.29.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 52.

⁶⁰ Benjamin, Pariqi, p. 235.

⁶¹ Breton, "Premier Manifeste du Surréalisme," Manifestes du surréalisme, pp. 52-53.

uncanny outcome of a deeper order of meaning that transcends human order.

The city becomes a space of dreams and obsessions (which Pynchon will later take to an extreme of paranoia), situating the subject in a Surrealist domain where the unconscious meets and endlessly rewrites an always changing city. For its uncanny features the object encountered by chance, the trouvaille, comes to the attention of the perceptive individual as a fetish, an object of fascination, the exorcistic "merveilleux précipité du désir" which functions like dream: it is invested with emotions and estranged, liberating the subject from his former "scrupules affectifs paralysants", ⁶² and enlightening a fragment of the invisible map of the unconscious, of the "théâtre mental" latent in the world.

Breton's predilection for old, ambivalent objects - the objective correlative of fragments in automatic writing - such as old curiosities, broken machines, marginal fragments devoid of exchange-value and open to the poet's analogical net of associations, partakes of his search for revealing signs in the city "qui ont le pouvoir d'agrandir l'univers et de le faire revenir partiellement sur son opacité". ⁶³ In this archaeologi-

⁶² Breton, L'amour fou, p. 43.

⁶³ Ibid., p.19.

cal flânerie, however, their potential for revelation depends on chance and does not always achieve epiphanic clarity. The uncanny, the disturbing feeling is a cryptic symptom selected among a mass of non-privileged signifiers for its ability to produce a psychic/emotional change, what De Chirico defines as surpris. As the unconscious belongs to the domain of the unfinished, the Surrealist text remains tendentially entropic and disharmonic, producing an analogical récit de rêve, not a story with a plot but a sequence of allusive but never symbolic fragments, opening the way for a regression to a deeper dream-world, to a transcendental reality incorporating chance and irreducible to rational logic. "Je n'aime que les choses inaccomplies," Breton writes in Le pas perdu⁶⁴. In the fluid order of chance where the unconscious manifests itself, however, the dualistic gap between object and subject is not always filled and the subjective mind, as the privileged reader of the banal surface, is likely to be overwhelmed by disorder and to confront his inability to re-name the world according to the language of the unconscious. After the choc of recognition of the overdetermined object, the individ-

⁶⁴ Breton, Le pas perdu (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), p. 22. Mary Ann Caws argues that Breton's unfinished form responds to the individual desire to embrace totality, to incorporate whatever chance brings to light "Poetry is the love of the unfinished, of things unaccomplished." Caws, André Breton, p. 32.

ual can either refer back to his rational faculty to reconvert that signal into a sign or, alternatively, be confronted by merely indifferent fragments constantly defying the logic of desire.

Nadja is the urban account of the latter case: it is a failed encounter in the city street, a failed quest for correspondance which leads the poet back to the city as the opaque scenario of subjective displacement and of condensed, enigmatic objects.

Chapter 2

At the frontier of nonsense: Breton's Nadja and the failed encounter

The Bretonian big city introduces itself as a potential place of libidinal investment, a geography of desire, suggesting to the subject endless chains of analogical associations and memories. In Nadja (1928), the autobiographical narrator prepares to explore the city as a metamorphic "théâtre mental" in the pursuit of another woman of the crowd, metonymic of the surrealist object overdetermined by subjective associations.

The movement of desire and that of knowledge are deliberately confused in Breton. The rencontre, like Baudelaire's encounter with the unknown passenger, is an "état de grâce avec le hasard" ¹ resulting in the conciliation in un seul être of the external and the internal: it is the merveilleux that appears in the shape of the quotidian. Similarly, sublime love is the synthesis of opposites, the fulfilling "reconstitution de l'Androgyne primordial". ² The rencontre of the poet with the sublime woman thematizes the quest for the

¹ Breton, Entretiens.1913-1952, (Paris: NRF, 1952) p. 136.

² Breton, "De Surréalisme en ses oeuvres vives", Revue Médium 4, jan. 1955, republ. in Manifestes du surréalisme, p. 184.

object as image of his desire to unify, in a higher synthesis, the two worlds, the two opposing forces:

c'est le foyer vivant de la totalité du monde. En lui il n'est plus possible de percevoir les diverses formes de l'être comme des réalités essentiellement hétérogènes. ³

The miracle that occurs in the rencontre, however, never interrupts the chain of desire in the crowd: Orpheus is dismembered, and the unknown woman, like Baudelaire's "passante," disappears to be replaced by another ephemeral presence. Nadja, therefore, takes on a variety of different shapes. Libertinage and polygamy are manifestations of the adulterous sexual dimension expressing the Surrealist analogical enterprise, as opposed to a static, exclusive commitment (of the symbol). Breton speaks of "le dernier visage aimé" in L'amour fou. ⁴ When Nadja herself - the mysterious woman in the crowd - embodies the libertine principle of the Surrealist mind in her vertiginous pursuit of the unknown, however, Breton paradoxically celebrates her and simultaneously condemns her presumption to evade the frontiers of human identity and of intelligibility.

Breton's ambivalent attitude toward Nadja reminds us of the Baudelairean simultaneous excitement and ter-

³ M. Carrouges, André Breton et les données fondamentales du surréalisme (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 23.

⁴ Breton, L'amour fou, p. 8.

ror before the multiplicity of the crowd, in a quest for desire ideally unlimited, but frustrating when it transcends the sphere of the individual.

In the beginning of the text, the language of eroticism marks the Bretonian exploration of the city as an epiphanic dreamworld: the autobiographical narrator deliberately avoids descriptions of the city, replacing them with "referential" pictures in order to let Surrealist images prevail, free to flow in the narrative.⁵ The woman's body begins to reveal itself in the "volupteuse nonchalance" of the waves of the Seine at Pont Neuf and in the obscure seduction of Place Dauphine. Parisian sites like the Place Maubert start causing the narrator an "insupportable malaise" (23); in other words, he feels prepared to receive "sensations électives [...] dont la part d'incommunicabilité même est une source de plaisirs inégalables" (21). He seems intuitively to know the way to the magic underworld where he may experience the light of correspondances:

Mais, pour moi, descendre vraiment dans les bas-fonds de l'esprit, là où il n'est plus

⁵ "Ce n'est pas moi qui méditerai sur ce qui'il advient de la forme de la ville, même de la vrai ville destruite et abstraite de celle que j'habite [...] Sans aucun regret, à cette heure je la vois devenir autre et même fuir. Elle glisse, elle brûle, elle sombre dans le frisson d'herbes folles de ses barricades, dans le rêve des rideaux de ses chambres où un homme et une femme continueront indifféremment à s'aimer. Je laisse à l'état d'ébauche ce paysage mental, dont les limites me découragent". Breton, Nadja, pp. 145-6.

question que la nuit tombe et se relève
(c'est donc la peur?) c'est revenir rue
Fontaine, au "Théâtre des Deux Masques." (35)

Nadja starts by being perceived as an "étoile" (68),
seductive like Baudelaire's passante and the elusive
Louise Lamé in leopard-skin coat in Desnos' novel
L'Amour ou la liberté! (1927) who is equally perceived
as a "mirage" in the desert by the night-traveller
walking along blind alleys in the mapless city:

Perdu dans un désert sans palmiers,
l'explorateur casqué de blanc tourne lente-
ment autour d'une ville mystérieuse ignorée
des géographes [...] poursuivant le cours des
ses pensées fugitives. ⁶

Nadja progressively assumes instead a variety of roles,
which finally puzzle the autobiographical narrator: she
identifies with the obscure role of Hélène⁷; is later
given by a lover the name of Lena (73). In the course
of the novel she keeps changing appearance, first
poorly dressed, then elegant, ⁸ later shabby again

⁶. Robert Desnos, L'amour ou la liberté! (1927)
(Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 96.

⁷ "Une courte scène dialoguée, qui se paraît être
tout ce qu'elle a lu du Manifeste, scène à laquelle,
d'ailleurs, je n'ai jamais su attribuer de sens précis
et dont les personnages me sont aussi étrangers, leur
agitation aussi ininterprétable que possible, comme
s'ils avaient été apportés et remportés par un flot de
sable, lui donne l'impression d'y avoir participé vrai-
ment et même d'y avoir joué le rôle, pour le moins
obscur, d'Hélène." Breton, Nadja, p. 78.

⁸ "Nadja, arrivée la première, en avance, n'est
plus la même. Assez élégante, en noir et rouge [...] La
conversation est pourtant devenue plus difficile."
Ibid., p. 70.

(74). In other words, she remains the unnamable sphinx in the street:

[...] ce véritable sphynx sous les traits d'une charmante jeune femme allant d'un trottoir à l'autre interroger les passants, ce sphynx qui nous avait épargnés l'un après l'autre et, à sa recherche, de courir le long de toutes les lignes qui, même très capricieusement peuvent relier ces points - le manque de résultats de cette poursuite que le temps écoulé eût dû rendre sans espoir, c'est à cela qu'est allée tout de suite Nadja. (79)

Frustrated spectator of Nadja's coquetterie before withdrawing and leaving her to the irrational flow of her wondrous existence, the autobiographical narrator confronts himself with

les péripéties les plus lamentables de sa vie, de se livrer de-ci de-là à quelques coquetteries déplacées, de me réduire à attendre, les sourcils très foncés, qu'elle voulût bien passer à d'autres exercices, car il n'était bien sur pas question qu'elle devint naturelle. Que de fois, n'y tenant plus, désespérant de la ramener à une conception réelle de sa valeur, je me suis presque enfui... (125-6).

Her strange libertine body (Corps étrange, cadavre exquis?) simultaneously fascinates and irritates the narrator. Like Medusa, she turns him from an image-maker into an "homme de pierre" (118), forever attempting to take her back to the principle of reality and consistency and forever unable to understand her. In other words, she rejects the binary male search for the complementary opposite and, in the failed encounter, deprives him of the (diamond) sparks of the demiurgic vision. Her subsequent encounters with Breton are

failed encounters increasing the gap between the two worlds, underlining the drama of their mésentente,⁹ culminating with her madness and the narrator's loss of a deciphering, psychological code.

Nadja's fragmented visions do not partake of the Freudian symbolic topography; they are not translatable into the superior langage de la révélation that Breton directly borrows from psychoanalysis.¹⁰ They belong to a principle of arbitrary chance (madness) which escapes subjective recognition, as prescribed in the "Second manifeste du surréalisme,"¹¹ drifting free of any synthetic logic.

While Aragon abandons himself to the casualities of the street, recognizing in them an oneiric frame,¹² according to Breton the elective encounters in Parisian

⁹ Cf. Maurice Blanchot, L'entretien infini (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 612.

¹⁰ In his preface to the edition of Nadja of 1962, Breton points out that "le ton adopté pour ce récit se calque sur celui de l'observation médicale entre toutes neuro-psychiatrique, qui tend à garder trace de tout ce qu'examen et interrogatoire peuvent livrer, sans s'embarrasser en le rapportant du moindre apprêt quant au style." Breton, Nadja, p. 5.

¹¹ Breton, "Seconde Manifeste du Surréalisme," Manifestes du Surréalisme, p. 110, n.l.

¹² "A toute erreur des sens correspondent d'étranges fleurs de la raison. Admirables jardins des croyances absurdes, des pressentiments, des obsessions et des délires." Louis Aragon, Le Paysan de Paris 1926 (Paris: Livre de poche), p. 15.

streets may lead to epiphanic experiences as well as to anxiety and doubt:

La rue, que je croyais capable de livrer à ma vie ses surprenants détours, la rue avec ses inquiétudes et ses regards, était mon véritable élément: j'y prenais comme nulle part ailleurs le vent de l'éventuel.¹³

The subjective ability to decipher the vocabulary of the unconscious in the urban field, transforming ambiguous signals into signs, is suspended in Nadja, where at some points the language of desire is replaced by the heterogeneous, enigmatic language of lost objects in the city. Instead of mirroring a deeper reality, the entropic city becomes the protagonist, providing traces finally belonging to the order of dispersion and of the ephemeral.

This suspension of the deciphering, psychoanalytic code underlying Breton's discourse anticipates post-modern urban drifting among the heterogeneous codes of an information society, in an urban errance conceived on the same basis as the Surrealist notion of "désenchaînement perpétuel" (78).

The image of the train that never stops, with neither origin nor destination, is the metaphor Breton adopts for Nadja, the embodied principle of dispersion and chance, the vehicle of multiple meanings:

Elle est comme un train qui bondit sans cesse dans la gare de Lyon et dont je sais qu'il ne

¹³ Breton, Le pas perdu, p. 11.

va jamais partir, qu'il n'est pas parti.
(154)

She is later recognized and idealized as the paradoxical principle of Surrealist beauty, the perfect state of indecision keeping opposite ideas "en ballottage" (explosante/fixe), in a nonsensical, incongruous order:

La beauté ni dynamique ni statique, la beauté
je la vois comme je t'ai vue [...] La beauté
sera CONVULSIVE ou ne sera pas. (153-4)

In her scattered personality, however, Nadja rather seems to personify the playful principle of automatic writing, of the game of "exquisite corpses," ¹⁴ because her "dépaysement" from the ordinary linguistic landscape, ¹⁵ from the topography of conventions, does not provide epiphanies but partakes of the disinterested game so defined by Eluard:

Cadavres exquis [...] Plus aucun souci, plus
aucun souvenir de la misère, de l'ennui, de
l'habitude. Nous jouions avec les images, et
il n'y a pas de perdants. ¹⁶

Dislocated and errant before the Protean woman, Breton observes with puzzlement symptoms that are difficult to

¹⁴ Cf. Breton, Le surréalisme et la peinture (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 340, 279.

¹⁵ "La surréalité sera [...] fonction de notre volonté de dépaysement complet de tout (et il est bien entendu qu'on peut aller jusqu'à dépayser une main en l'isolant d'un bras, que cette main y gagne en tant que main)". Breton, "Avis au lecteur pour "la Femme 100 têtes de Max Ernst," Point du jour (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 63.

¹⁶ Paul Eluard, "Donner à voir," Oeuvres complètes, Lucien Scheler ed. (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), pp. 990-991.

decipher and that make the quest of the deciphering subject more challenging to him:

Pour moi la plus forte image est celle qui présente le degré d'arbitraire le plus élevé, je ne la cache pas: celle qu'on met le plus longtemps à traduire en langage pratique.¹⁷

Nadja relates "les épisodes les plus marquants de vie [...] livrées aux hasards, au plus petit comme au plus grand." A sequence of unusual, inexplicable events shapes her strangeness, leaves her "en proie au démon de l'analogie" (126-7). She is the Satanic temptress, a misleading seducer.

When the encounter of their separate worlds do not produce recognition and, once brought together, they prove to be irreducible to a single isotope, the Surrealist quest is defeated. When Nadja's fragmented world of associations and dreams betrays Breton's expectation of the heuristic signs of the Surreal world and does not manifest itself in the shape of meaningful traces in concrete reality, Breton's hermeneutic project comes to a dead end, taking him back to the opaque, unreadable surface of the city.

After all, as Adamowics points out, in the Surrealist vision the distance between the analogical and the meaningless is always minimal:

[...] in the surrealist metaphor the intersection is minimal, indeed often absent, thus

¹⁷ Breton, "Manifeste du surréalisme", Manifestes surréalistes, p. 50.

situating it at the very limit of rhetorical functioning.¹⁸

In other words, when the encounter with chance does not produce the miracle of illumination, the "open-ended analogy" produces a breach in the arbitrary, a situation that is in some way disturbing to Breton:

[...] the segments of the monster are in a relationship of contiguity, or metonymic relationship with the other parts of the monstrous body [...] however scarcely interlocking [...] Their disparate character is irreproducible and remains allotopic. Semantic contiguity is replaced in the Surrealist figure by a spatial collocation of random elements [...] on page or canvas. The absence of semantic justification pushes the figure to the limits of the rhetorical process.¹⁹

The failed encounter with the amorphic surrealist monster moves the emphasis from human consciousness back to the opaque, "mute," heterotopic surface of the world. Like Giacometti's little enigmatic statue accounted for in the narrative, where the parts involved in the encounter (the object and the subject) are incompletely interwoven, the literal potential of the object resists figurative order and is therefore resituated in the crowd of unrelated objects where it originally belonged, that is, at the frontier of nonsense and dépaysement. In other words, while in the

¹⁸ Elza Adamowics, "Monsters in Surrealism: Hunting the Human-Headed Bombyx," Modernism and the Unconscious (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 290.

¹⁹ Ibid.

uncanny, the trace simultaneously calls for and refuses an analogy, in bricolage, in the disorder of the marché aux puces:

[...] suspended segments stick uneasily together; those viscous, embryonic, indeterminate shapes are scarcely distinguishable from the formlessness of the matter. ²⁰

In other words, the object deprived of its epiphanic justification is suspended in its symbolic function to the advantage of its phatic function. Breton finally deserts Nadja, ²¹ situating her "dans un tel demain le droit de constater me paraît être tout ce qui est permis" (77); that is, the domain of visible immediacy, of mute reality, of the banal object, here marking the end of the quest for meaning.

Nadja, the mysterious woman, is metonymic of the unstable identity of the trouvaille, of the enigmatic objet trouvé, of the objects out of fashion, of the out-of-work and the accidental, exhibited in a monstrous assemblage of unrevealing automatic texts in

²⁰ Ibid., p. 292.

²¹ "Que ferais-je sans toi de cet amour du génie qui je me suis toujours connu, au nom du quel je n'ai pu moins faire que tenter reconnaissances ça et là? [...] tu t'es substituées aux formes qui m'étaient les plus familières [...] et il est parfait que tu me l'aies cachée.

Tout ce que je sais est que cette substitution de personnes s'arrête à toi, parce que rien ne t'est substituable, et que pour moi c'était de toute éternité devant toi que devait prendre fin cette succession d'enigmes." Breton, Nadja, pp. 150-1.

the marché aux puces of Saint-Ouen. Here Giacometti is mysteriously attracted by an iron mask without knowing the reason; and Breton discovers in an half cylinder a geroglyph, an undeciphered, indeterminate inscription in the city. Immersed in the entropic field of bric-à-brac, the object is trash, rather than a trace referring to a deeper domain. In its loss of any fixed exchange or aesthetic values, in its autonomous, ephemeral presence, deprived of any original context and not subjected to the rules of the economic market, the object partakes of the city as an heterogeneous, archeological space. Like the cubist paintings of Picasso and Braque that incorporated fragments of objects on canvas in the attempt to reduce the ironical distance between the iconic sign and the external referent, the assemblage of objects here is not identifiable with the merveilleux, in the sense that it prevents subjective identification in its open display of ambiguity.

The paratactical language of the ready-made, of the heterogeneous, contiguous materials (the incongruous language that puzzles Breton in Nadja) is not likely to be incorporated into the analogical syntax of dream, in the psychoanalytic discourse of the subject or in the hidden logic of the uncanny, electing them for entrance into an oneiric and phantasmic world.

The condensed object, deprived of its exchange value, produces an estrangement which makes the

Bretonian quest constantly fluctuate between indeterminacy and the expectation of epiphany. In some way, Breton situates himself between the enigmatic "presence" of the objet trouvé (the ambivalent signifier that resists interpretation) and the recognition of the trouvaille, the Unheimlich, the uncanny, transcending the literal meaning of the object and the banal context where it is found, transforming it into re-trouvaille, into an oneiric object.

This contradictory perception of city fragments (automatic vs. oneiric), which Breton still holds together as "surrealist objects", are indicative of the two poles of the surrealist movement which would produce distinct aesthetic visions and artforms thereafter: one which is object-oriented and leading to a playful nonsense, the other based on the subject's analogical power to reveal hidden, unconscious meanings. As Rosalind Krauss writes:

Automatism and dream may seem coherent as parallel functions of unconscious activity, but give rise to image types that seem irreconcilably diverse.²²

Accidental events, accidental encounters and coincidences actually interrupt the flâneur's exploration of the city shifting the emphasis from the oneiric object overdetermined by the subject as a partial

²² Rosalind Krauss, "L'Amour fou", L'Amour fou, R. Krauss and J. Livingston eds. (New York: Abbeville, 1985, p. 18.

inscription of the unconscious in the ordinary world, to the enigmatic, unmediated object which - like the objet trouvé that Duchamp invented between the wars (1934-1936) - generates endless questions. In the "Second manifeste surréaliste," Breton alludes to novels as unfinished quests, as forms that rather seem to escape the "objective chance" as a moment of synthesis:

On se plaît à imaginer des romans que ne peuvent finir, comme il est des problèmes qui restent sans solution. A quand celui dont les personnages, abondamment définis par quelques particularités minimales, agiront d'une manière toute prévisible en vue d'un résultat imprévu.²³

In other words, as Nadja demonstrates, Breton's "mental theatre" conceived as a place of "rendez-vous avec le hasard", is hardly reconcilable with Nadja's informe city, where chance can only lead to doubt and to puzzling signs. The latter is a "monde [...] des rapprochements soudains, des pétrifiantes coïncidences [...] faits qui [...] présentent chaque fois toutes les apparences d'un signal, sans qu'on puisse dire au juste de quel signal" (19-20).

At some point, the amorphic/metamorphic Nadja identifies herself with Mélusine (123), according to Bachelard, the legendary irrational principle of trans-

²³Breton, "Second Manifeste du surréalisme," Manifestes du surréalisme, p. 112, n. 1.

formation ²⁴ the redeemer of the waste land dominated by the sterile masculine rational principle. She never, however, lives up to this promise, and vanishes as the unknown stranger (étrange), the Baudelairean passante, in the "mondane," senseless world of undeciphered signals which is madness.

She is not the Bretonian "femme fée," the "femme sublime" de L'amour fou, she does not embody the miracle of love, the synthetic encounter of opposites:

Seul l'amour au sens où je l'entends - mais alors le mystérieux, l'improbable, l'unique, le confondant et l'indubitable amour - tel infini qu'il ne peut être qu'à toute épreuve, eût pu permettre ici l'accomplissement du miracle. (127)

She entices the flâneur to an infinite errance with no correspondances, to the verge of insanity where he would not follow. She is often vague and "distracte" in the presence of the Seine (100), recognizes her flow of thoughts in the flow of a fountain (84), as if she were partaking of a similar ungraspable fluidity:

J'ai pris, du premier au dernier jour, Nadja pour une génie libre, quelque chose comme un de ces esprits de l'eau que certaines pratiques de magie permettent momentanément de s'attacher mais qu'il ne saurait être question de se soumettre. (110)

²⁴ Gaston Bachelard, La poétique de la rêverie (Paris: P.U.F., 1957), p. 175. Cf. Mary Ann Caws, Breton and Bachelard, p.36 and also Giuseppe Sertoli, Le immagini e la realta'. Saggio su Gaston Bachelard (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1972).

Within those waves she envisions hallucinating hands (84); she begins to demonstrate clairvoyant powers, situating herself "au delà de la chance" (89), in a madness that speaks the same language of the arbitrariness of the world. The "faits-glissades" become "faits-précipices"; they open up the abyss of Satanic chaos, overwhelming the subject and obscuring his final aim: the deciphering of the object of desire as a quest for knowledge as well as for self-knowledge:

Subjectivité et objectivité se livrent, au cours d'une vie humaine, une série d'assauts, des quels les plus souvent assez vite la première sort très mal-en-point. (5)

Nadja - like Louise Lame in Desnos's novel, who also passes "du rêve au rêve," providing his lover with "une révélation qui se contredit sans cesse et qui l'égare de sa propre image méconnaissable,"²⁵ - finally overwhelms the autobiographical narrator with an arbitrary, erotic flow of images, renewing their questions about identity:

Qui étions-nous devant la réalité, cette réalité que je sais maintenant couchée aux pieds de Nadja, comme un chien fourbe? Sous quelle latitude pouvions-nous bien être, livrés ainsi à la fureur des symboles, en proie au démon de l'analogie, objets de démarches ultimes, d'attentions singulières, spéciales? (109-10)

Self-displacement and the metropolitan experience of the woman in the crowd coincide: "Livre de tous liens

²⁵. Desnos, La liberté ou l'amour!, pp. 31, 101.

terrestres" (88), Nadja is the ungrounded, erratic soul unable to realize a communion with her opposite or to envision the light of the hasard objectif, "la rencontre d'une causalité externe et d'une finalité interne". ²⁶

She surrenders to the blind play of chance, to an aimless errance, finally situating the narrator "aux pieds du Sphinx" (111), implying for Breton an "idée de perte irréparable" (8). Pure intuition produces the impossibility of translating into human words, into terms of a new "crystalline" reality. The quest remains unaccomplished and open (unfinished), like the form of Breton's prose. The object of the quest, l'âme errante, the inhabitant of the streets, "la créature toujours inspirée et inspirante qui n'aimait qu'être dans la rue, pour elle seul champ d'expérience valable" (112) finally embodies the "chimère," the enigmatic trace (118), the object resisting identification. Silences and soliloquies mark Nadja's behavior before her interment:

J'ai de plus en plus de peine à suivre son soliloque, que de longs silences commencent à me rendre intraduisable. (106)

Non-epiphanic flânerie leads to a sunset that extinguishes the light of recognition and closes the book on an opaque indeterminacy:

²⁶ Breton, L'amour fou, p. 23.

Il se peut que la vie demande à être déchiffrée comme un cryptogramme. Des escaliers secrets, des cadres dont les tableaux glissent rapidement et disparaissent [...] Qui est la vrai Nadja, de celle qui m'assure avoir erré toute une nuit, en compagnie d'un archéologue, dans la forêt de Fontainebleau, à la recherche de je ne sais pas quels vestiges de pierre. (112)

As narrative, Nadja is an analogical/archeological combination of memories, anecdotes, poetic images, and pictures, seeking to trace secret paths and ever returning to the same places, to its initial questions: "qui suis-je? ... qui je hante?...qui vive?" Nadja ends up playing with words in the taxi; dissolving the deep quest of the narrator in a nonsensical divertissement, like Desnos' and Duchamp's word-play. At some points in his work, Breton shows that the apparent arbitrariness of the world can lead to mere contradiction between terms, to further obscurity, to word-play, paradox, nonsense and humor but he never systematizes this thought, maintaining, nevertheless, an open dialogue with black humorists like Duchamp providing the oxymoronic vocabulary for his aesthetics of indeterminacy:

La beauté convulsive sera érotique-voilée, explosante-fixe, magique-circonstantielle ou ne sera pas ²⁷.

This playing at the verge of chance is certainly promoted by his practice of automatic writing as a means

²⁷ Breton, Ibid., p.16.

of undermining the critical and rational stance. Breton, however, cannot hide a certain discomfort when confronted with the unresolved enigma of a landscape unmediated by the poet's demiurgic subjectivity. In a discussion of Surrealist paintings, Breton affirms that beauty and knowledge necessarily imply a transition to the subjective domain:

l'oeuvre plastique [...] se référera donc à
un modèle purement intérieur ou ne sera pas
28.

Nadja's adventure, instead, seems to show the autonomous nature of the ruin in the city, and to be a figure of chaos who cannot be reduced to the phantasmic incarnations of the narrator's thoughts. She proves to be a failed encounter, an experience of incongruous contiguity and mutual estrangement. In a disjointed, conclusive image of their flânerie, Breton and Nadja, male and female, the subject of the quest and his object of desire, finally walk together and still apart: "Nous déambulons par les rues, l'un près de l'autre, mais très séparément" (103). In such a configuration, in which the opposites do not fuse but are suspended in an enigmatic juxtaposition, they evoke the Duchampian indefinite object, rejecting depth as a self-centered category and endlessly defying interpretation.

²⁸ Breton, Le Surréalisme et la peinture, p. 21.

Interestingly enough, in Nadja, Breton evokes Duchamp as "l'homme vivant le plus rare, le plus infixable, le plus décevant", referring to his "mystérieux 'jeux de mots' (Rose Sélavy)" and to his "étonnantes équations poétiques" (28) multiplying and renaming the objects in a "jeu disintéressé". In the following chapter, I discuss Duchamp's presentation of himself as Rose Sélavy, the transvestite figure-limite rejecting Breton's heuristic synthesis of the opposites and replacing it with the incongruous contiguity of incommensurable features in the crowd.

Chapter 3

Marcel Duchamp/Rose Sélavy: the artist as transvestite
and the corrosive
encounter of opposites in space

What riddles, what dark words
thou always speakest!

Sophocles, Oedipus the King

1. Entering the multi-dimensional space: "La
Mariée"

Nadja was the multiple object of desire conveying such a variety of meanings to prove finally threatening to the narrator's self-centered quest for identity.¹ Her linguistic errance, brought to the very limits of comprehension, is no prelude to an encounter with hieroglyphics translatable into the language of dream² but displays unrelated signals that produce no communication. Preventing the poetic transfiguration of reality into signs of poetic/psychic value, she takes the poet back to a Dada anti-aesthetic, non-epiphanic

¹ Ivos Margoni speaks of Nadja as a "oggetto ri-semantizzato e moltiplicato" in Breton e il surrealismo (Milano: Mondadori, 1976), p. 33.

² Sigmund Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), Engl. trans. A. A. Brill (London: George Allen & Unwin-New York: Macmillan, 1942), p. 269.

surface-world, pullulating with common, inert objects, and renewing the entropic menace of disintegration that the Postmodernists will finally bring to the point of dramatizing both the mental and the physical dismemberment of the self.

In this chapter devoted to an analysis of Duchamp's disjunctive work, I emphasize the artist's transcendence of the ironical Romantic perspective and his humoristic encounter with the mob, in a hybrid experience which finally renders the subject (himself) indistinguishable from the female object of his quest (the transvestite Rose Sélavy), in the creation of incongruous products of condensation, of assemblage and jeux de mots which ends up transforming the artist himself into a multiple being beyond rigid and binary (gender) categories.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the deviating presence of an excess of meanings in the object partakes of the plethoric constructions of Surrealist art. In his work, Breton invokes bricolage and papiers collés, the combinations experimented with Picasso and Braque, incorporating fragmented objects onto canvas as forms of enigmatic encounters with unrelated objects. In his collage, Max Ernst witnesses the emancipation of the object from the order of subjectivity:

L'objet extérieur avait rompu avec son champ habituel, ses parties constituantes s'étaient

en quelque sorte émancipées de lui-même, de la manière à entretenir, avec d'autres éléments, des rapports entièrement nouveaux, échappant au principe de réalité mais n'en tirant pas moins à conséquence sur le plan réel: bouleversement de la notion de relation³.

Dali's spectacle d'objets, not to mention the synesthetic form of soirée, or total theater, whose origin refers back to the Dadaist Schwitters' Merz-constructions, which, anticipating the non-representative space of performance, created a whole environment with objects collected in the street, were producing non-epiphanic forms, assemblages of heterogeneous nature, transcending any symbolic order.

The unmediated exhibition of sparse objects and the consequent displacement of the subject have a central role in the art and writings of Marcel Duchamp. The multiple personality he assumes while identifying with the transvestite Rrose Sélavy, the creation of the trans-human creatures of the "bachelor machines", are indicative of the surrender of man to the crowd, of the emergence of an urban artist simultaneously producing and embodying multiple meanings.

Liberating the objects from any form of ironic/symbolic reading, Duchamp shows their potential for multiple meanings: it is a faculty of immanence to show its magical nature without the intuitive, over-

³ Breton, Le Surréalisme et la peinture, p.90.

determining intervention of the reader. With Duchamp, the indeterminate, Surrealist form finally becomes, as Sayre says borrowing a Derridean expression, "undecidable" ⁴, incorporating both the subject and his object of desire into an ambiguous, condensed form which the audience is ultimately left to work out. He situates male and female in a contiguous position which does not correspond to the ideal fusion advocated by Breton, inaugurating and finally embodying the ambivalent figure of the hermaphrodite, in which the opposites are juxtaposed without producing synthesis. In "The Bride Stripped Naked by the Bachelors," he suspends male and female, man and machine, in an unfulfilled union, in an incongruous assemblage wherein male suitor and pursued woman, subject and object are indistinguishable and which Postmodern artists will later pursue.

These monsters are not uncanny and disturbing as the precipitates of individual traumas, but rather show an enigmatic condensation that questions man's power to read the signs of the unconscious in the immanent world. Duchamp therefore transforms the allegorical mode of the interpretation of city fragments into the undetermined, non-interpretative form of word-playing

⁴ Henry M. Sayre, The Object of Performance. The American Avant-garde since 1970 (Chicago-London: Chicago U.P., 1989) p. XIII.

and non-sense. The literary correlatives of his enigmatic and absurd object (ready-mades) are word-play and puns, which produce a clash of slightly dissimilar verbal expressions that function as deceptive trompe-l'oeil, endlessly defying identification and recognition by the reader. In his use of inconsistency and of dream-condensation, of which the central figure is word-playing, Duchamp leaves the contradictions of the unconscious unsolved, imposing no final hermeneutic order. This form of black humor shifts the focus from the ironical subject to the audience as creator of the work of art, opening the way for the postmodern aesthetic, for the conceptual, Neo-Surrealist works of Pynchon and Barthelme which transform the fictional space into an open field of performance.

Elevating the banal to the level of art, Duchamp selects ready-mades from the everyday without overdetermining them with fixed, oneiric meanings. In other words, he deprives them of both their functional and their psychological values, presenting them to the viewer as an unsolved condensation, a puzzling, indifferent product of the unconscious. They are not interpretable and do not have the disquieting features of the uncanny, finally producing a derisive, humorous effect of displacement. These enigmatic objects are self-corrosive in the sense that they defy interpreta-

tion. Unlike the Bretonian trouvaille, they do not refer to an ultimate grammar and have no deep roots in the logic of desire. The violent decontextualization that they experience provides them with an autonomous existence as enigmatic, indeterminate objects. In other words, they lose their potential for choc and producing an opacity, a suspension of judgement on the part of the viewer, who is endlessly kept "waiting."

Selected by chance from the scenario of everyday life ⁵ (and often casually juxtaposed with other objects of common usage, slightly "corrected" by the artist, in the so-called ready-made aidée), bicycle wheels, bottle-cases and urinals appear in his exhibitions under unrelated titles. Elevated to the dignity of art "par le simple choix de l'artiste"⁶, "ready-mades" - a definition coined in 1915 shortly after Duchamp's arrival in New York - are not overdetermined by the demiurgic power of the artist, but are objects suspended in both their prosaic and aesthetic function, displaced as they are from any context, both mental and

⁵ "This is - you know - the name I give these works that are, in fact, already made." Marcel Duchamp interviewed by James Johnson Sweeney in "Eleven Europeans in America," The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin (New York) XIII, Nos. 4-5 (1946), 19-21.

⁶ Breton, "M. Duchamp" in: "Dictionnaire abrégé du surréalisme" cit. in "Phare de la Mariée", Minotaure (Paris) II, No. 6 (winter 1935), 45-49; Engl. trans. in View (New York), Marcel Duchamp number, V, No. 1, (March 1945), 7.

physical, both subjective and objective. Questioning the autonomous and harmonic nature of the work of art, they are fragmented, decontextualized materials exhibited as the product of a puzzling condensation, lacking the disquieting nature of the uncanny, the epiphanic trace of the unconscious that Breton hoped to encounter in the streets in order to reveal his individual dream-world of private obsessions. In the Duchampian world, one that does not belong to any totalizing Weltanschauung (Levi-Strauss), there is neither experience of descent, nor of initiation rites: everyday life - the only dimension available for the displaced subject - is the physical surface that, when slightly manipulated by the artist, produces fantastic surprises. The space for humor is a virtual, non-transcendental space, still dependent on physical laws and slightly modified by the intervention of the artist. In other words, Duchamp does not aim to subvert the laws of immanence, but merely modifies them, somewhat placing himself in a middle ground between the real environment and his dreamworld. His privileged space is a twilight zone situated at the very limit of semiosis, where meaning is always contingent. Compared with Breton, Duchamp prefers possibility and dispersion to the ironic recognition of revelation.

Duchamp's "ready-mades" are independent of any subjective projections and refer back to a domain of the

banal, unredeemed by any demiurgic intervention of the artist. Rejecting the oneiric frame, Duchamp poses the problem of the definition of the object as an indifferent, multiple entity which is presented rather than elaborated, and re-presented by the subject.

The same indeterminate nature applies to his practice of word-play that Raymond Roussel inspired in him and that Robert Desnos also significantly pursued under the title: "Rose Sélavy,"⁷, in overt homage to Duchamp. Following the Surrealist technique of displacement, Duchamp removes the word from its ordinary context, thereby multiplying its semantic value:

If you introduce a familiar word into an alien atmosphere, you have something comparable to distortion in painting, something surprising and new. (since one discovers) unexpected meanings attached to the interrelationships of disparate words [...] Sometimes, four or five levels of meaning come through.⁸

What Breton thought of displacing in order to assimilate it into the hidden grammar of the unconscious Duchamp juxtaposes in order to multiply: in word-play the proliferation of slightly modified lexical terms widens instead of closes the gap between word

⁷. Robert Desnos, "Rose Sélavy," (1922-23), Corps et biens (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), pp. 33-46.

⁸ Marcel Duchamp interviewed by Katherine Kuh in "Marcel Duchamp," Talks with Seventeen Artists (New York-Evanston: Harper & Row, 1962), p.89.

and meaning. It disjuncts what common sense and subjective intuition unifies.

In order to emphasize the dissimilar instead of the isomorphic, Duchamp produces a juxtaposition of opposites, incongruous forms (monsters), thus producing a potential for meanings that escapes final synthesis. Breton defines such an operation in terms of humour noir:

Pour prendre part au tournoi noir de l'humour, il faut en effet avoir échappé à de nombreux éliminatoires. L'humour noir est borné par trop de choses, telles que la bêtise, l'ironie sceptique, la plaisanterie sans gravité [...] (l'énumération serait longue).
9

The effect of the juxtaposition of things arbitrarily selected from the world without subjective mediation is a puzzling incongruity. "Ready-mades" are corrosive of any fixed principle of reality and of individual identity: devoid of any literal and figurative value, they become displaced objects. The space of the "ready-mades" is one in which the distinction between the artist and the layman, between high and low cultures begins to blur. Their artistic attribution is not immanent in them as art objects, but in the spectator's definition of them as such, and in their location in the context of galleries and museums.

⁹ Breton, "Preface" to Anthologie de l'Humour Noir, p. 21.

Duchamp produces a further displacement of everyday objects by attributing to them incongruous titles, so that they finally belong neither to the ordinary world nor to the overdetermining artist, but to a middle-ground of indeterminacy suspended between the artist and the world. Widening the allegorical disjunction between the image and its "name" (the title he attributes to it), he means to discourage identification, creating a radical effect of displacement on both the object and the reading subject, clearing his work of all metaphysical and psychological latencies.

Deprived of both their utilitarian and analogical/psychological value, "ready-mades" display an indifference, which is not an absence of meaning, but rather a potential for multiple meanings. According to Duchamp, the "ready-made" is un possible, an enigmatic object corrosive of its common aesthetic and functional attributions:

la figuration d'un possible (pas comme contraire d'impossible ni comme relatif à probable ni comme subordonné à vraisemblable). Le possible est seulement un "mordant" physique (genre vitriol) brûlant toute esthétique ou callistique.¹⁰

At the same time, it produces displacement in Freudian terms of the suspension of the psychic accent:

The indifferent experience substitutes itself for the psychologically important one [...] a

¹⁰ Duchamp, "Possible" (1913), Duchamp du signe, p.104.

displacement occurs -let us say, of the
psychic accent.¹¹

Resisting the psychological, anthropocentric order,
the ready-made expresses an indifferent mode, a lack of
subjective perspective, in other words, it represents a
form of "dehumanization of the work of art."¹²

Duchamp is able to resist the continuity of common
sense "by the use of mechanical techniques,"¹³ by
adhering to the cold, distant logic of the machine,
adopting its anonymity and lack of taste and feeling:

the choice of these ready-mades [...] was
based on a reaction of visual indifference
with a total absence of good or bad taste
[...] in fact, a complete anesthesia¹⁴.

The language of the machine presents no markers of sub-
jective intervention and neutralizes the overdetermin-
ing force of poetic egocentrism, turning attention
back to the urban territory, in its multiple,
indifferent shapes. The hypertrophic space of memory
and psyche that constituted the space of the individual
in the Modern city, with Duchamp is reduced to the
advantage of the machine world.

¹¹ Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, p. 178.

¹² Duchamp interviewed by J.J. Sweeney, The
Museum of Modern Art Bulletin, pp. 4-5.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Duchamp, "A propos of Readymades," Unpublished
talk delivered at the Museum of Modern Art in New York,
in 1961 whose first draft was published in Art and Art-
ists (London) I, No. 4 (July, 1966), 47.

Entering the non-psychological logic of the machine (the entropic inert versus the synthetic animate) Duchamp creates the "bachelor machines": a monstrous hybrid assemblage resisting definition, something that stands in between the human and the inhuman; in other words, a machine which posits itself as "an anthropomorphic event" open to the reader's interpretations. This configuration anticipates the Postmodern electronic bodies, urbanites who testify with their mixed nature to man's deeper commitment to the technological environment in a more advanced, non-anthropocentric urban sphere.

Anticipating McLuhan's conception of technology as an extension of man, Duchamp defines a multi-dimensional space where man and machine finally interact, in which the soul is mechanized and the machine humanized - to the point that it starts living the regular life of a human being. In his major work, "The Large Glass", machines are anthropomorphic and intelligent ¹⁵: as "machines célibataires" they take over human roles and have an emotional life of their own. They experience desire: have sexual intercourse and get married, transcending the model of mute,

¹⁵ Cf. L. Steefel, "The position of La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même (1915-1923) in the stylistic and iconographic development of the art of Marcel Duchamp," (Ann Arbor: University Microfilm, 1960).

robotic creatures, the disquieting vision of automatons depicted by E.T.A. Hoffman as well as those painted by De Chirico, representing the threatening double, the machine invading and destroying the human psychological space. The machine that in Breton still emanates the pathos of the uncanny, produced by the Medusan fear of being turned into a mineral object, Duchamp transmutes into the cooler sensibility of a machine assuming human attributes. Unmediated by the egocentric intervention of the artist, the anthropomorphic machine produces a convergence of opposite natures, creates an eccentric field of difference where, as Lyotard points out, "not only does uniformity disappear, but so does identity."

¹⁶ The bachelor machines simultaneously possess a trans/human and trans/sexual organism: "La Mariée"¹⁷ is an incongruous combination of male and female features, a mechanical representation of eroticism, "exprimée par la juxtaposition des éléments mécaniques et de formes

¹⁶ Jean François Lyotard, Duchamp's TRANS/formers, (Les transformateurs Duchamp, 1977), Engl. trans. Ian Mc Leod, (Venice: Ca.: The Lapis Press, 1990), p. 79.

¹⁷ Duchamp, "La Mariée mise à nu par ses Célibataires, même," better known as the "Grand Verre," started in 1915, soon after Duchamp's arrival in New York around June 15. For a thorough study of the Duchampian bachelor machines see Michel Carrouges, Les Machines célibataires (Paris: Arcanes, 1954), pp. 27-60, and Jean Suquet, Miroir de la Mariée (Paris: Flammarion, 1974).

viscérales." ¹⁸ Duchamp's monsters are permeated by the indeterminate, oxymoronic logic of the explosante-fixe that also defined Nadja.

By incorporating the human and the artificial, Duchamp's hybrid creatures mediate the transition toward the anti-humanist "science poétique," the interaction between the spirit and the mechanized environment that Baudelaire advocated long before. ¹⁹ Moreover, his "ready-mades" confirmed a dehumanized vision, an interest in the machine that Dada and futurism had exhibited much earlier. ²⁰ Duchamp's interest in the machine is not, however, as literal and directed to the celebration of mechanical dynamism as a new source of energy and revelation as it was for the futurists. It rather aims at humor and derision:

People living in a machine age are naturally influenced either consciously or unconsciously by the age they live in; I think I was conscious enough and I introduced derision into that sacrosanct era. Humor and

¹⁸ Duchamp, "A propos de moi-même," Duchamp du signe, p. 224.

¹⁹ Baudelaire, Oeuvres complètes, p. 1381.

²⁰ On this point it is worthwhile to refer to Marjorie Perloff's work on futurists as the initiators of what she first defined as "the poetics of indeterminacy". Cfr. M. Perloff, The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U.P., 1981) and The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant-Guerre, and the Language of Rapture (Chicago-London: Chicago U.P., 1986).

laughter - not necessarily derogatory derision - are my pet tools ²¹.

As opposed to the negative irony of the Dada movement which depended only on laughter "purely negative and accusatory," Duchamp's "ironism of affirmation is not transgressive, but reactive". ²² The "ironisme d'affirmation" that Duchamp attributes to his anthropomorphic machines, is opposed to the "ironisme négateur dépendant du rire seulement"²³: it is a form, as Breton concludes, of black humor. ²⁴

Laughter is not a simply negative gesture that denies the very existence of the world, but shows alternative ways of dealing with a meaning whose value is subjected to the laws of contingency; it is an humorous way of living in the world in order to show its limitations and relativity. In the Duchampian notion of the "ironisme d'affirmation," the irony comes from invention, from the transformation of the con-

²¹ Marcel Duchamp interviewed by Kuh in "Marcel Duchamp," The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists, p. 90

²² Lyotard, Duchamp's TRANS/formers, p. 124.

²³ Duchamp, "Notes générales pour un tableau hilarant," Duchamp du signe. Ecrits, Michel Sanouillet, ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), p. 46.

²⁴ Breton wrote that the Duchampian "ironisme d'affirmation [...] est à l'humour ce que la fleur de farine est au blé." Breton, Anthologie de l'humour noir, p. 468.

tingent although it is an invention suggested by the immanent world.

Guided by what he knew of non-Euclidean geometry and mathematics about n-dimensional spaces, and by the theory of non-measurable sizes that he learned from Poincaré and Dedekind, Duchamp conceives his artwork as multi-dimensional spaces, surmounting the intuitive reception imposed on us by the perceptible, absolute, Kantian space.

Duchamp's black humor is an apathetic hinge-logic, a hinge-style suspended between two states, between causality and the irony of the artist.²⁵ His relation to the machine (technophilia) reduces the distance between subject and object without producing identification between them. In other words, Duchamp's systematic (mechanical) work transforms ironic distance into black humor, substituting the elitist withdrawal of the Romantic poet from the technological environment with a "corridor," an "n-dimensional space" where the subject and object are both dislocated and suspended:

[...] nous tentions d'ouvrir, Picabia et moi, en toute ignorance ou indifférence de ce qui, en art, s'était fait avant nous, un corridor d'humour qui ne devait pas manquer de déboucher sur l'onirisme, par conséquent sur le surréalisme [...] Un exemple, si vous voulez: avec le stoppage-étalon, je

²⁵ Ibid., 122.

souhaitais donner une autre idée de l'unité de longueur. ²⁶

Humor is Duchamp's favorite weapon for undermining absolutes and for exploring the paradoxical sides of life and of the self, locating the artist himself neither inside nor outside the world, in an ineffable middle-ground of displacement where the individual, establishing a relation with the technological world, modifies it instead of indulging in feelings of "ennui" and in the desire to shape a separate, "organic" world.

In humor, as Freud says, the coherence of the real is dislocated; its representation is destroyed and distorted. The rational bonds to reality are distended, such that the spirit feels so disinterested that it can operate a systematic renewal of established values and of its own self.

Accordingly, Duchamp conceives of visual and written structures as based on the principle of difference and dissimulation. Suspended in a virtual, indeterminate state, the object acquires a plurality of meanings: the young artist of tomorrow, he says, "like Alice in Wonderland will pass through the looking-glass of the retina, to reach deeper mines of express-

²⁶ Duchamp interviewed by Jean Schuster, Duchamp du signe, p. 248.

ion [...] to uncover new shock values which are and always will be the basis of a revolution in art."²⁷

Crossing the surface of reality means transcending the profane values of immanent laws and allowing the mind - in the sense of wit, of cool intellect, and not of the Dadaist irrationality or individual intuition advocated by Breton - to create new relations between words and things.

In other words, Duchamp's interest in learning from the machine a "peinture de précision, et beauté d'indifférence"²⁸ leads to a basically conceptual and cognitive art, with no relation whatsoever to the emotional and psychological (individual) sphere which anticipates the Postmodern aesthetics.

Humor involves the suspension of emotions and passion, Breton argues in his Preface to the Anthologie de l'humour noir:

[...] il est par excellence l'ennemi mortel de la sentimentalité. ²⁹

Starting from the practice of deconstructing forms à la manière cubiste, Duchamp goes beyond visual frag-

²⁷ Duchamp, "Where do we go from Here?", unpublished talk delivered at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art on March 20, 1961 in John Canaday, "Whither Art...", New York Times (March 26, 1961), 15.

²⁸ Duchamp, "Notes générales pour un tableau hilarant," Duchamp du signe, p.46.

²⁹ Breton, Preface to Anthologie de l'humour noir, p.21.

mentation, putting "painting once again at the service of the mind," aiming at producing a problematic, intellectual response in the reader/observer, placing himself, as an individual, in an undetermined position, in the gap between signal and meaning:

And my painting was, of course, at once regarded as "intellectual, literary" painting. It was true, I was endeavouring to establish myself as far as possible from 'pleasing' and 'attractive' physical paintings. That extreme seems as literary [...] This is the direction in which art should turn: to an intellectual expression, rather than to an animal expression.³⁰

In this sense, Duchamp rejects a purely aesthetic art in which the artist is the mere maker of an artefact with aesthetic qualities, and advocates instead an intellectual art able to produce an effect of estrangement and displacement in the viewer, raising questions about the nature of art and its relation to life.³¹

In this perspective, the dissimilar, the illegible is magnetically attractive to Marcel Duchamp, who discovers in the urban, entropic object a conceptual dimension, a territory of unstable signs which, under his influence, performance artists in the United

³⁰ Marcel Duchamp interviewed by James Johnson Sweeney, untitled review in "Eleven Europeans in America," The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin, pp. 20-21.

³¹ He admired his brother Jacques Villon because he never indulged in "repeating and imitating himself like other painters, who stop being creators and turn into performers." Duchamp interviewed by Francis Steegmuller, "Duchamp: Fifty Years Later", Show, New York, III, No. 2 (Feb. 1963), 28-29.

States, and by Postmodern writers such as Pynchon and Barthelme, will expand upon.

In front of the indeterminate object taken from the street (i.e. the "ready-made"), Duchamp, or what Lyotard better defines "an eye without memory," ³² suspends his faculty of recognition (and identification) of similar things. ³³ The pathos of the encounter as potential identification (choc), which in Baudelaire and in Breton ultimately defines the moment of recognition and the manifestation of the uncanny, disappears and is replaced by a cooler mode of condensation (as opposed to synthesis) of opposites. Confronted with the mechanical form and its "beauty of indifference," ³⁴ Duchamp speaks the language of indecision. ³⁵

The combination of contrasting elements (which always continue to possess their separate characteristics in spite of their encounter), expresses an ambivalence that is both revealing and concealing,

³² Lyotard, Duchamp's TRANS/formers, p. 75.

³³ Duchamp, Duchamp du signe, p. 47.

³⁴ C. L. Steefel, "The position of La Mariée", p.176.

³⁵ "En général, quand on se dit 'je sais', on ne sait pas, on croit." Duchamp interviewed by J.J. Sweeney, in Duchamp, Duchamp du signe, p. 285.

bearing what Freud calls the "double-sidedness of wit".

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Duchamp's "dédain de la thèse" emanates from this humoristic vision of a world always defying the assimilatory inclination of the eye and the mind. To discover its potential for multiple meanings, therefore, involves a suspension of the ironical position and the refusal both of fixed values and of the entrance into the open field of the street. The encounter with the mechanized city in an indifferent flânerie:

It is not that you love what is inhuman in a machine for its own sake, you love the way its logic, coldly carried out, and distant, lets you discover in this nonsense that you're in danger of loving for itself, this woman, this sun in the water, this street, all of them senseless, with still more strength, humor and monstrosity. ³⁷

The street, the space of the possible built on the Heisenberg principle of indeterminacy, ³⁸ is a surface on which man and machine are interdependent participants.

³⁶ Freud, Wit and its Relations to the Unconscious (1905). Engl. trans. A.A. Brill (London: Kegan Paul-Trubner, n.d.), p.

³⁷ Duchamp cit. in Lyotard, Duchamp's TRANS/formers, p. 13.

³⁸ Werner Heisenberg, Physics and Philosophy (New York: Harper & Row, 1958).

Substituting expressive individual values ³⁹ with technical, neutral value, Duchamp existentially practices the "negative capability" of standing doubt. He partakes of the inconsistency of the world and lives with no stable sense of personal identity, starting "a little game between 'I' and 'me'", ⁴⁰ in a disjunctive dialectics that questions the very notion of individual identity. In the realm of the possible, Duchamp transforms the object, never repeating the same effects, and, in doing so, he transforms himself into a monster, into a multi-dimensional being. According to Lyotard, Duchamp is a transformers, a multiple transformer or producer of virtual spaces, a battery of the metamorphic machine, who continually has to metamorphose and transcend his individual dimension in order to become plural, several transformers. ⁴¹

He abandons intellectual irony to enter the urban field of nonsense, embracing an incongruous, absolute humoristic attitude (the de Manian "irony of irony"),

³⁹ "[...] je me force à me contredire pour éviter de suivre mon goût." Marcel Duchamp, cit. in Michel Sanouillet, Introduction to Marcel Duchamp, Duchamp du signe. Ecrits, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Marcel Duchamp interviewed by C. Kuh in "Marcel Duchamp," The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists, p. 83.

⁴¹ Lyotard, "Duchamp as transformer", remarks presented at the panel discussion on Duchamp at the colloquium "On the performance," Milwaukee, Wis., 17 nov. 1976, organized by Michel Benamou, and reprinted in Duchamp's TRANS/formers, pp. 31, 36.

in which he, metanarratively, perceives himself as another source of doubt:

Mon ironie est celle de l'indifférence: méta-ironie. ⁴²

In his divided perception, he posits himself both as subject ("I") and object ("me"). Humour noir is precisely this conduct, a sort of "dandysme absolue" deprived of the Bretonian, modern preoccupation with synthesis and consistency in the face of the city's linguistic promiscuity:

Seriousness is a very dangerous thing. To avoid it, one may call for the intervention of humor. The only serious thing that I might consider is eroticism [...] and I have tried to use it as a platform [...] in the *Bride*, for instance. ⁴³

Regulated by the contingency of the law, the "ironism of affirmation" produces contingent contacts among separate units, in a ludic coupling of incongruous signs which never achieves a stable meaning, never fulfills desire:

It is always when there is contact between two bodies in movement, the two circles, the hunters and the beasts, the suitors and their lovely objects, and when from one side a claim arises to unite them, to unify them in one body animated by the same movement, hence when the aim of coupling or composing forces appears, it's then that retortion comes along

⁴² Marcel Duchamp cit. in Michel Sanouillet, Introduction to Duchamp du signe, p. 17.

⁴³ Duchamp interviewed by Alain Jouffroy, Une révolution du regard (Paris: Gallimard, 1964) pp. 111-24.

to foil this claim, erecting the dissimilating partitions between the partners. ⁴⁴

Eroticism, according to Duchamp, does not imply fusion and identification (the synthetic encounter advocated by Breton) but here serves as the main figure for humor, reflecting a vocation for semiotic libertinism, the endless encounter of irreducible objects. As in Nadja, the coquetterie of the errant soul refers to the forest of signs as a space of contingent and always unfulfilled relations, rather than as the elective domain where the suitor encounters and recognizes his fixed object of desire. It is in the amoebic shape of the crowd that the self becomes aware of the unexpected treasures of images and ideas surrounding him.

Identifying with the number three - the number of the crowd - as opposed to one (the number of the individual) or two (the number of the couple), Duchamp expects to lose his monolithic, rational identity faculties in the mob, to become unrecognizable, ⁴⁵ and to see beyond predetermined significations. According to Freud, the mob is ruled by the pleasure principle,

⁴⁴ Lyotard, Duchamp's TRANS/formers, pp. 44-5.

⁴⁵ Arturo Schwarz, The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp (New York: Abrams, 1970), p. 167.

⁴⁶ and is the site where all prohibited intercourse can be enacted between the dissimilar (neither familiar not completely alien), as opposed to the act of transfiguration that results instead from the fulfilled synthesis of opposites. Following the same incestuous paradigm, every Duchampian encounter simultaneously implies separation and contiguity (Breton and Nadja walking together but still apart in Paris) - just as the encounter in space of the Bachelor and the Bride demonstrates.

Duchamp speaks of his masterpiece, "La Mariée," as an incommensurable object, founded on the principle of incongruence and of incommensurability which, at that time, were subverting the geometric Euclidean laws. The "Bachelor-machines" (La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même), or "The Large Glass," was begun in the autumn of 1915 in New York and was abandoned unfinished in 1923, to be later donated by Katherine Dreise to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The work portrays an half-willed bride (a new human being, half robot and half four-dimensional being), as an erotic engine confronted with an anxious bachelor from whom

⁴⁶ "A group has no critical faculty, and the improbable does not exist in it. It thinks in images, which call one another up by association [...] and whose agreement with reality is never checked by any reasonable function". Freud, A General Selection of the Works of Sigmund Freud, John Rickman, ed. (London: Hogarth & the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1938), p. 198.

she is separated by means of a "mirrorish" partition, which functions as a separating diaphragm between the opposites involved (male/female, gas/water), though uniting them in a mutual reflection.

While a perfect coupling and reconciliation would create a totalizing space of passion and assimilation of opposites ⁴⁷, "La Mariée" is a space of dissimulation where the two opposing figures are maintained in a state of suspension, reflecting each other through a dividing partition which keeps them "celibate":

The two virtual spaces they reflect each other (they are married), but are strongly incongruent (they are celibate)[...]. The transparent pane has acted as a celibacy machine: holding apart those who look at each other in it. ⁴⁸

Significantly, Duchamp resorts to the notion of the "mirrorish" (reflecting but holding the reflected opposites apart) as opposed to the "specular" which implies replication, assimilation and possession of the other as a complementary half. Limiting itself to reflecting a paradoxical, non-fusional encounter, the "Mariée" turns out to be a "retard en verre comme on dirait un poème en prose ou un crachoir en argent," a hybrid

⁴⁷ " In the male desire to make the woman have pleasure, there still is something much worse than vanity: there is assimilation." Lyotard, Duchamp's TRANS/formers, p. 112.

⁴⁸ Lyotard, Ibid., pp. 60, 62.

"réunion indécise" of possible meanings, ⁴⁹ as the "exposition extra-rapide (apparence allégorique) de plusieurs collisions" ⁵⁰ where viewers lose their ability to recognize isomorphic forms.

In "La Mariée," Duchamp abolishes the distinction between art and life, ⁵¹ and between the two sexes. He reduces the distance between suitor and object of desire (the woman in the crowd), but, as in Nadja's story, places a partition between them. The Baudelairean and Bretonian pursuit of the female as opposite and complementary turns, in Duchamp, into the incorporation of the female side in an incongruous combination.

The work is an oxymoronic picture of paradox, portraying desire as disjunction, a desiring married female out of contact and still related to the desire-engine of the bachelor, and, finally, representing the apotheosis of her virginity through a malicious désir

⁴⁹ Duchamp, "Retard en verre", Duchamp du signe, p.41.

⁵⁰ Ibid, p.43.

⁵¹ "Art may be bad, good or indifferent but, whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the same way as a bad emotion is still an emotion." Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," Convention of the American Foundation of Art in Houston, April 1957, cit. in Schwarz, The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp, p.196.

blanc, through a contradictory "puissance timide."⁵² The juxtaposition of sexual opposites never reaches the fusional state of the "androgyne primordial" advocated by Breton, never corresponds to the coniunctio oppositorum, restoring the original unity of the primordial Being, the Immortal Hermetic Androgyne,⁵³ and exhausting all the pairs of contraries in non-duality.

Despite what Arturo Schwarz has to say on this point, the non-fusional contiguity of the bride and the bachelor belongs to a principle of bisexuality that does not correspond to the archetypal quality of synthetic creation. The prevailing model seems instead to be the myth of interdicted incest, which dominated Duchamp's life and mythology in actuality⁵⁴.

As opposed to the myth of the reunification of the sexes promoted by Eros, which Plato discussed in the

⁵² "La Mariée à sa base est un moteur. Mais avant d'être un moteur qui transmet sa puissance timide - elle est cette puissance timide même". Duchamp, "Mariée," Duchamp du signe, p. 62.

⁵³ Gilbert Durand, Les Structures anthropologiques de l'Imaginaire (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963).

⁵⁴ Duchamp's incestuous play of opposites actually finds a confirmation in his love for his sister Suzanne, a biographical fact that he refers to when he writes: "Incest ou passion de famille." Duchamp, "Rose Sélavy", Duchamp du signe, p. 160.

Symposium, ⁵⁵ the figure of the "hermaphrodite," of the bisexual, is perversely ambivalent but not unified. It is rather a perverse aberration of nature, the representation of a puzzling contiguity of man and machine, of male and female, rejecting synthesis and producing a suspension of judgment.

This antithetical combination keeps recurring in Duchamp's work, in the photograph that Man Ray took of Duchamp as a transvestite entitled Rose Sélavy (Paris, 1920-21), ⁵⁶ in his portrait as "Rose Sélavy" on the perfume "Belle Heleine, Eau de Violette" (1921, New York), as well as in the sexual dérive of his bearded Mona Lisa (L.H.O.O.Q.) and in the ambivalent structure of The Door: 11, rue Larrey (1927), the door that paradoxically neither closes nor opens. As "Rose Sélavy" Duchamp portrays himself as half male, half female, an amphibious hermaphrodite like the Bretonian mermaid Nadja, who finally ends her life in an asylum without the consolation of mating.

The juxtaposition of the antinomic traits (male/female) does not involve recognition and comprehension, an organic assumption of the female aspect into the male body which embodies perfection. Like

⁵⁵ Plato, I dialoghi dell'amore: Carmide, Liside, Convito, Fedro, It. trans. Enrico Turolla (Milano: Rizzoli, 1953).

⁵⁶ Now at the Galerie Arturo Schwarz in Milan.

words in automatic texts, the object has no name and attribution; no exchange value, no clear notion of sexuality. The ambivalent, transexual subject of ambivalent nature reflects a condensation that Duchamp also produces at the microstructural level of the sentence and the word, inaugurating a monstrous grammar of collision and condensation, which would be later pursued by American conceptual and performance artists as well as by Postmodern writers like Barthelme.

2. Duchamp's sexual/verbal laboratory: Rose Sélavy.

Inspired as he was to compose "La Mariée" under the influence of Raymond Roussel's puns, Duchamp became also known as a writer with the publication of his notebook about "La Mariée" in 1934. In 1939 he significantly titled a collection of puns and word-play under the name of his transvestite alter-ego, Rose Sélavy. As before mentioned, Robert Desnos also published another collection of jeux de mots under the same title coherently invoking the name of Duchamp in the form of a riddle:

L'auteur regrette ici de ne pouvoir citer le
nom de l'initiateur à Rose Sélavy sans le

désobliger. Les esprits curieux pourront le déchiffrer au n. 13.⁵⁷

Duchamp's "Rose Sélavy" is an anthology of aphorisms, short and condensed in their ambiguity, verbal trompe-l'oeil deriving from the shift of a single letter within the word, or from the minimal exchange of a syllable between two words, conceived to produce doubt about the fixed meaning of words. Again, he creates a verbal structure consisting of slightly modified terms brought together, of lexical units which, like the male and the female sides in the figure of the transvestite, are contiguous and yet separate.

When Duchamp entitles one section of his collection of puns Rose Sélavy, he establishes her both as his pseudonym and as his literary alter-ego: in doing so, he meant to transcend sexual distinctions, referring to an amphibiological form "beyond the importance given to the difference of the sexes, and hence to their reconciliation."⁵⁸ Rose Sélavy and Morceaux moisis are texts founded on the same principle of dissimilarity ("indifference") that inspired "La Mariée". At the lexical and syntagmatic level, it creates a play of slightly varied elements, according to a poetics of

⁵⁷. Cf. Desnos, "Rose Sélavy," Corps et biens, p. 31. In the jeu de mots n. 13, Desnos refers to Duchamp as "the marchand du sel," quoting the title of the artist's writings. Cf. Marcel Duchamp, Marchand du sel (Paris: Le Terrain Vague, 1958).

⁵⁸ Lyotard, Duchamp's TRANS/formers, p. 115.

displacement which will also pervade the whole narrative structure in the Postmodern narratives.

In his introduction to Rose Sélavy, "jeux de mots," as he defines it in an interview, ⁵⁹ Duchamp significantly discusses his identity as Rose Sélavy as one of a Protean, unnamable individual:

J'ai voulu [...] changer d'identité et la première idée qui m'est venue c'est de prendre un nom juif. J'étais catholique et c'était déjà un changement que de passer d'une religion à une autre! Je n'ai pas trouvé de nom juif qui me plaise ou qui me tente, et tout d'un coup j'ai eu une idée: pourquoi ne pas changer du sexe! Alors de là est venu le nom de Rose Sélavy. ⁶⁰

His Protean shape combines an ambiguous sexuality under a female denomination as well as a series of Babelic cultural connotations, Rose being a patronymic often adopted by Jewish people in the United States as a shortened form for Rosenberg, Rosenbaum, etc. Furthermore, the doubled initial letter reproduces a curious peculiarity of some English names like "Lloyd". ⁶¹ The author assumes the multiple dimension of the trans

⁵⁹ Duchamp interviewed by Pierre Cabanne, Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp (Paris: Belfond, 1967), p. 118.

⁶⁰ Duchamp, "Rose Sélavy", in Duchamp du signe, p. 151.

⁶¹ Interestingly enough, the very word "ready-made" was deliberately chosen from a foreign vocabulary, and italicized, thus intensifying the opacity of the object and discouraging an immediate association with a French equivalent. Cf. Duchamp, "Readymades," Duchamp du signe, p. 49.

vestite solo-performer Fregoli, equally embodying different incarnations as Desnos depicts him in his novel:

Frégoli, c'est-à-dire l'ennui, s'agite sur la scène et joue une sempiternelle comédie dont les protagonistes se poursuivent sans cesse, obligé qu'il est de se costumer dans les coulisses à chaque incarnation nouvelle. ⁶²

In his transvestitism as Rose Sélavy, Duchamp is simultaneously taking over the opposite gender features of both a female and a male. He also adopts his puzzling pseudonym to refer to himself as a condensed texts, as a no man's land, an impersonal being simultaneously perceived as both a man and a machine, like the "Bachelor machine" he created, in an estranged game between the "I" and the "me," becoming both a subject and the object of discourse, in other words, a nonsensical textuality. In the collection of verbal exercises that Duchamp named "Rose Sélavy", the jeu de mots is deprived of all playful creativity and of erotic and manipulative joy that Desnos seemed to stress in his onymous word-play. Duchamp's arid aphorisms, founded as they are on minimal mechanisms of inversions of word and syllables, had a more systematic rigour and cool aesthetic sterility than Desnos'. As Breton wrote when he discovered Duchamp's aphorism in 1922, the mysterious osmosis Duchamp-Desnos was questionable:

⁶². Desnos, L'amour ou la liberté!, p. 91.

Les mots ont fini de jouer. Les mots font
l'amour. ⁶³

Like a dispassioned, lucid performer of "coïts verbaux contre nature,"⁶⁴ the word-player Duchamp turns, as Lyotard says, in an objectified "machine-like phrase-maker." Widening the gap between sign and sense, Duchamp creates verbal equivalents of the "ready-mades": texts that, amorphous like the crowd, are open to a variety of interpretations initially meant to complement his Glass work:

Le verre en fin de compte n'est pas fait pour être regardé (avec des yeux "esthétiques"); il devait être accompagné d'un texte de "littérature" aussi amorphe que possible qui ne prit jamais forme; et les deux éléments verre pour les yeux, texte pour l'oreille et l'entendement devaient se compléter et surtout s'empêcher l'un l'autre de prendre une forme esthétique-plastique ou littéraire.
⁶⁵

Duchamp was basically reluctant to write, fearing the rhetorical power and continuity of discourse: its tendency to create relations between things. As a pioneering conceptual artist, however, he found it natural to give written expression to his aesthetics, as was to happen later in the United States among environmental and performance artists like Laurie Anderson and

⁶³. André Breton, "Les Mots sans rides", Littérature, new series, 1 (Dec., 1, 1922), p. 14.

⁶⁴. Cf. Michel Sanouillet, Preface to "Rose Sélavy," Duchamp du signe, p. 146.

⁶⁵ Letter of Marcel Duchamp to Jean Sequet, 25 Dec. 1949, in Miroir de la Mariée, p. 247.

Robert Smithson, who were enormously influenced by Duchamp's conceptual aesthetics discourse as well as by his visual expression.

In order to resist the continuity of language, he conceived in 1914 the idea of placing his scattered notes and texts in a "boîte," a receptacle where papers of different sizes and colors were collected with no order whatsoever, to be selected by the reader according to mere chance. Chronologically decontextualized, the Boîte contains texts often written in an incorrect and unfinished form, finally left to the reader to interpret and re-create. ⁶⁶

The style of the Boîte is that of assemblage, of the conflicting directions simultaneously taken by bricolage, a form made as it is of separate units. Such a subversion of language, this corrosive presence of humor is another form of condensation that pulls together fragmented parts. Caws comments that "Nonsense carefully avoids any unity between parts, any analogical associations that might form in the mind," as the outcome of a "prosaic mind" that "can only play with

⁶⁶ "The spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act." Duchamp, "The Creative Act," Art News, (New York), LVI, No.4 (Summer 1957), 28-29, reprinted in "M.D. Criticavit", Duchamp du signe, p. 189.

parts." ⁶⁷ Similarly, word-play finally refers to no ultimate grammar or law, ⁶⁸ if not the one provided by the interpreting, puzzled viewer. ⁶⁹

The French editor of the collection of Duchamp's writings therefore invites the reader to absorb the proposed materials in minimal doses, a little at a time, in order not to be overwhelmed by the intoxicating effect of his entropic writing:

Nous conseillons au lecteur de prendre de ce philtre intellectuel avec modération. Une phrase au jour, matin et soir, nous paraît constituer la dose convenable. Sinon, l'ivresse ou le dégoût se manifesteront dès la première heure.
ATTENTION POISON. ⁷⁰

In his word-play Duchamp demonstrates the arbitrariness of the semantic value commonly attached to words, and presents the fixed attribution of meaning as an act of repression. He transfers in puns the same condensation of meanings that he produces in his art. Disjuncted and isolated from their ordinary context,

⁶⁷ Caws, Surrealism and the literary imagination, p. 55.

⁶⁸. In his word-play, Robert Desnos points out, in form of pun that "Au pays de Rose Sélavy on aime les fous et les loups sans foi ni loi". Cf. Desnos, "Rose Sélavy", Corps et biens, p. 34.

⁶⁹ "The viewers are those who make the painting." Duchamp interviewed by Jean Schuster, "Marcel Duchamp, vite," in Le surréalisme, même (Paris) No.2 (Spring, 1957), p. 143.

⁷⁰ Michel Sanouillet, "Introduction to Marcel Duchamp", Duchamp du signe, p. 40.

commonplaces take on fantastic values, featuring an uncertain order of things:

Words are not merely a means of communication. Words are absolutely a pestas far as getting anywhere. You cannot express anything through words, because language is an imperfect form of communication.⁷¹

Although he adopted a form only vaguely evoking Duchamp's geometric and arid verbal exercises, Desnos well interpreted the intention of the artist to prevent his readers from deciphering his opaque, "dumb" words, as he significantly underlines in his puns inspired to the ambiguous personality of "Rose Sélavy":

Ne tourmentez plus Rose Sélavy, car mon génie est énigme. Caron ne le déchiffre plus.

Oubliez les paraboles absurdes pour écouter de Rose Sélavy les sourdes paroles.⁷²

As he points out in the novel L'amour ou la liberté!, all revelations depend on the watcher's idiosyncratic perspective.⁷³ In the crowded city streets - a labyrinth of desire - horizons and perspectives become mobile and ever changing:

⁷¹. Duchamp interviewed by C. Kuh, "Marcel Duchamp," in The Artist's Voice, p. 88.

⁷². Robert Desnos, "Rose Sélavy," Corps et biens, pp. 34, 38.

⁷³. Corsaire Sanglot travels towards "une révélation qui se contredit sans cesse et qui l'égare de sa propre image méconnaissable, en raison de la position des yeux ou du manque d'un point de comparaison et de la légitime défiance dans laquelle un esprit élevé tient les miroirs dont rien ne prouve la vertu révélée." Cf. Desnos, La liberté ou l'amour!, p. 101.

Chaque énigme a vingt solutions. Les mots disent indifféremment le pour et le contre. Là n'est pas encore la possibilité d'entrevoir l'absolu. ⁷⁴

According to this principle of indeterminacy, Duchamp meant to annul possible grounds of identification and recognition through the trans-linguistic operations he performs:

Prendre un dictionnaire Larousse et copier tous les mots dits "abstraits", c'est-à-dire qui n'aient pas de référence concrète. Composer un signe schématique désignant chacun de ces mots (ce signe peut être composé avec les stoppages étalon). Ces signes doivent être considérés comme les lettres du nouvel alphabet. ⁷⁵

Make a list of French proper nouns, or English ones (or in another language) or mixed together - with first-names (in alphabetic order or not), etc. ⁷⁶

Duchamp's word-play merely functions at the level of the word and of the sentence, in the micro-structure of the text, and manipulates them as if they were colors, materials to assemble in different combinations. Homographic and homophonic units - palindromes ("anemic cinema"), puns, morphologic deviations, semantic ambiguities - are burlesque verbal assemblages pointing to the physical autonomy of the ambiguous

⁷⁴. Ibid., p. 54.

⁷⁵ Duchamp, "Langage," Duchamp du signe, p.48.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 111.

sign. Such divertissements in the shape of "bisticci" between terms express different meanings through a minimal morphological modification and defy the expectation of their common usage, posing as dissimilar objects "of oscillating density," whose fluctuation of value expresses what Duchamp defines as "the liberty of indifference":

My niece is cold because my knees are cold ⁷⁷
or:

Etrangler l'étranger.⁷⁸
or:

Eglise, exile. ⁷⁹

The illogical equation of : A guest plus a Host= a ghost, ⁸⁰ gives a sense of the "dis-logical" monsters produced by words' coupling, neither logical nor completely arbitrary. Discovering Duchamp's aphorisms in 1922, Breton said that "Les mots ont fini de jouer. Les mots font l'amour," but copulation is not necessarily conceived of as reproduction, and these verbal encounters are perfectly sterile:

Cops pullulate, Copley copulates. ⁸¹

⁷⁷ Duchamp, "Rose Sélavy," in Duchamp du signe, p. 155.

⁷⁸. Ibid., p. 157.

⁷⁹. Ibid., p. 160.

⁸⁰. Ibid., p. 162.

⁸¹. Ibid., p. 163.

The incommensurable clash of words that link and separate at the same time are expressive of a virtual field of differences, non-sense. As in the paradoxical condensation of "La Mariée," the mot-valise, or this phrase-valise, conveys the idea that all tastes exist in nature. Duchamp writes:

TOUTALEGOUT SONT DANSLANATURE

And if a myriad of different perspectives and meanings converge in the Surrealist condensed writing, an ultimate sense gets lost like the paradigmatic fugitive lover in the crowd. In the following pun, Duchamp's reference to mots exquis is evocative of the Eluardian game of "cadavres exquis," similarly relying on verbal chance to produce a proliferation of meanings:

Rose Sélavy et moi esquivons les eschymoses
des Esquimaux aux mots exquis.⁸²

Duchamp wants to create a new alphabet, not a grammar, because, as Margoni points out, puns and anagrams are linguistic materials rather than meaningful words, pre-existing and evading the psyche⁸³ and belonging to a ludic rather than functional linguistic activity.

His word-play also discourages analogical associations and, implicitly, Breton's magical projections and intuitive transformation of the given world. Elizabeth Sewall, in The Field of Nonsense, properly distin-

⁸² Ibid., p. 153.

⁸³ Ivos Margoni, Breton e il surrealismo, p. 57.

guishes nonsense-rhymes such as those of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll from magic, because the former simply change "the sequence of reference, not the things themselves" ⁸⁴ whereas, a Mary Ann Caws points out, magic belongs to the subjective domain, proving to be akin to the fluid, analogical process of dream, in that "it allows the notion of substitutions and coexistences, of one thing disappearing or turning into another." ⁸⁵

Nonsense and word-play are "variations apportées à un stéréotype linguistique" obtained by distending the rules of common sense, by "détendre un peu les réalités physiques et chimiques." Duchampian word-play does not seek a sublime transfiguration. His nonsense replaces the analogical, oneiric writing of Breton: word-play reduces the distance between opposites, leaving them semantically suspended in contiguity:

Réduire, réduire, réduire était mon obsession. ⁸⁶

Freud so defines the product of linguistic condensation:

The ideas which transfer their intensities to one another are very loosely connected and are joined together by such forms of association as are disdained by our serious think-

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Sewall, The Field of Nonsense (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), p. 40.

⁸⁵ Caws, Surrealism and the literary imagination, p.55.

⁸⁶ Duchamp, "M.D. Criticavit," Duchamp du signe, p.171.

ing, and left to be exploited solely by wit. In particular, assonances and punning associations are treated as equal in value to any other associations.⁸⁷

The condensation originates from a repressed train of thought and takes the form of illogical puns in order to avoid interference from the censor. In this shape, "contradictory thoughts do not try to eliminate one another but continue side by side, and often combine to form condensation-products, as though no contradiction existed."⁸⁸ The condensation-product is not a figure of perfection, but a playful space of possibility, a blurring of distinctions produced by censorship: it is a product of tolerance and dissimulation.

Incongruence, however, is a product of the suspension of interpretation, a product of silence: Sanouillet writes that Duchamp had a vision of "réalités des choses dont l'implacable immensité le contrainait à se taire."⁸⁹ This silence, however, is an empty place of possibilities, producing and enclosing multiple responses. The creation of this n-dimensional space, where the individual assumes the identity of the crowd, has reference to an undogmatic Weltanschauung, to a cool, suspended universe, resistant to the very idea of

⁸⁷ Freud, The Interpretation of Dreams, pp. 548-49.

⁸⁸ Freud, Ibid., p. 549.

⁸⁹. Introduction of Michel Sanouillet to Duchamp, Duchamp du signe, p. 14.

synthesis, as well as to the binary logic of the pair, finally proposing to abolish all fixed categories, whether they be physical (male/female), aesthetic (art/non-art), or moral (incest and bisexuality).

3. The value of inconsistency

If, as Sanouillet argues, the incommensurability of reality, the Babelic language of the mob produces silence, it is not the silence of acceptance. Duchamp, therefore, invites "A se taire, mais non pas à accepter."⁹⁰ As Deleuze says, nonsense is not the inverse of sense but, like the symbolic machines created by Surrealist painters between the wars, goes "dans les deux sens à la fois."⁹¹ "Inconsistency," Lyotard points out, "is not insignificance,"⁹² but a problematic linguistic practice producing an awareness of the way in which meaning is generated. Paradoxical irresolution does not coincide with cynicism: it is not

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 14.

⁹¹ Gilles Deleuze, Logique du sens (Paris: Ed. Minuit, 1969), p. 36. For a complete discussion of surrealist assemblage incorporating materials chosen by chance, see R. Passeron, Histoire de la peinture surréaliste (Paris: Livre de poche, Gallimard, 1968), pp. 270-2.

⁹² Jean-François Lyotard, Duchamp's TRANS/formers, p. 12.

mere play, but rather an invitation to look beside or beyond common sense; to see, for instance, a clock from the side, and to discover that it no longer tells the time ("The clock in profile"). In other words, Duchampian "ironisme d'affirmation" is a turning away and toward the world, a movement to and fro, away and toward the self. A disjunction between the self and its discourse on itself; a move away from identity, culminating in the creation of new, indeterminate identities.

Schwarz argues that inconsistency for Duchamp is the source of tolerance, an awareness of contradictions:

[...] the refusal to make a choice once and for all between two mutually exclusive values (inconsistency) was a way of life for Duchamp. Inconsistency is an attempt constantly to deceive life. In fact, life continually places us between alternative situations, between two doors both of which are marked Entry, and neither Exit [...] But Duchamp has invented the door which is neither open nor closed.⁹³

In his realization that opposition can be not reconciled in any harmonizing synthesis, Duchamp wrote to Breton:

For me there is something else in addition to yes, no, and indifferent - that is, for

⁹³ Schwarz, p. 194. See also Leszek Kolakowski, "Eloge de l'inconsistence", Engl. trans. Anna Posner, Arguments (Paris), XXVII-XXVIII (1962), 1-6.

instance, the absence of investigations of that type.⁹⁴

This attitude of tolerance underlies the Postmodern narratives that we are about to analyze, defining urban areas where ideological pluralism and hybrid language suggest a tolerant coexistence of dissimilar cultures and ideological perspectives. Conceiving tolerance as non-commitment, the Duchampian humor prevents "a fanaticism as dangerous as the fanaticism of passion"⁹⁵; it keeps distance from the world and still partakes of it. He invites us to think in terms of difference, not of oppositions:

My position is the lack of a position, but, of course, you can't talk about it, the minute you talk about it you spoil the whole game.⁹⁶

The realm of the possible is situated "not as the contrary of the impossible nor as the relative to probable nor as subordinated to plausible [...] it is only a physical corrosive"⁹⁷. Inconsistency means non-power, the will not to impose one perspective on the world. The individual position in space is relative and the

⁹⁴ "Une lettre de Marcel Duchamp," addressed to André Breton, Medium (Paris), No. 4 (Jan.) 1955), 33.

⁹⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté (1947) (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 72.

⁹⁶ Duchamp interviewed by George and Richard Hamilton, "The Creative Act," April 1957, Convention of the American Federation of Arts in Houston.

⁹⁷ M. Duchamp, Duchamp du signe, cit., p.104.

eye continuously vacillates between two incongruent positions and dimensionalities:

An eye will have only a tactile perception of a perspective. It will not have an overall view like the eye. By analogy, the eye has a walking-perception for perspective. ⁹⁸

Flânerie is the condition of this wandering perception, a space of witty daydreaming, neither of intuition and epiphanic illumination nor of rational reasoning. ⁹⁹ Duchampian playful physics and oscillating perspective moves the subject away from egocentricism and scatters him in the crowd of the possible, in a "world in yellow" characterized by the color of ambivalence, simultaneously bright like the sun of recognition and associated with sulphur and the Devil (with Babylon and its consequent Fall from language). ¹⁰⁰ Its domain is the realm of paradox, a kind of hellish Heaven, an immanent field where the magical keeps reappearing with no power of light and where the contingent assumes fantastic shapes with no need to transcend the world, in a form of magic realism.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 125.

⁹⁹ Freud himself distinguished between daydreaming and intentionally oriented reflections. Freud, "Preface to the English edition of The Psychology of Day-Dreams (London: Allen and Unwin, 1927), in Gesamelte Werke, XIII, 440.

¹⁰⁰ Schwarz, The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp, p. 79.

The paradox and humor characterizing the Duchampian multi-levelled space of action become the pervasive dimension in the Postmodern city: Barthelme's and Pynchon's urban world is a domain of the unpredictable and of non-selection, where perceived reality transcends the scope of the perceiving individual, becoming an absolute immanent enigm whose central topoi are the cosmopolitan city, the highway, and the "electronic bodies" developed from the "Bachelor machines."

The non-sentimental language of objects opens the way to the "ice age" of postmodernity, when man and machine become indistinguishable and the absence of a prevailing logic renders the city a promiscuous space beyond truth-values and power, a virtual space of metamorphic variations and non-fusional encounters. The space of art, according to Duchamp, is a mechanical, entropic area of indeterminacy; it is a mobile play of dissimilar languages, bringing the quest for elective signs to an end.

In the Postmodern version of the Duchampian n-dimensional dimension, the Modernist city as a space of passionate correspondances, dominated by the subject's epiphanic intuition and dream, turns into a cooler surface of contingent encounters and hybrid figures freely coupling in a libertine word-play of mots en liberté. The incongruous contiguity of dissimilar signs that Duchamp conceived in the full, humoristic recognition

of life's paradoxes and variety, is radically different from the idea of "metafictional" and self-reflexive space based, instead, on the paradigm of repetition (parody) and on the use of semantically exhausted fragments, as opposed to dissimilar units that Duchamp, and American Abstract Expressionists after him, assemble in new combinations. Postmodern American writers like Pynchon and Barthelme expanded the opacity and the allegorical nature of Duchamp's discourse from the level of the lexical units and phrases to the narrative structure. By reducing the role of the omniscient narrator and emphasizing the reader's perspective, they transform the narrative enterprise into a cognitive experience and in a quest for meaning of the reader.

After Heisenberg and his theory of indeterminacy, Duchamp himself was very aware that the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator's point of observation is just as important:

Ce sont les REGARDEURS qui font les tableaux [...] Je m'intéresse beaucoup à ce qui peut s'écrire à propos de "La mariée mis à nu par ses célibataires, même."¹⁰¹

The reader/viewer is called to close the gap between the contiguous opposites, contributing to produce a text that actually relies upon the "missing link" between the object and the viewer:

¹⁰¹ Duchamp interviewed by Jean Schuster, "Marcel Duchamp, vite," Le Surréalisme, même, 2, (Spring 1957), 143-45, republ. in Duchamp du signe, p. 247.

It is not what you see that is art, art is that gap. ¹⁰²

The art and narratives springing from Duchampian aesthetics are never the bearers of a straightforward message: they are "puzzles", enigmatic objects changing shape in their transition from the artist to the viewer/reader. They belong to a performative mode which transcends the ideological control of the artist, as Nadja's puzzling errance escaped Breton's control:

[...] in the chain of the reactions accompanying the creative act, a link is missing. This gap, representing the inability of the artist to express fully his intention [...] The spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act. ¹⁰³

¹⁰² Duchamp interviewed by Sweeney, cit. in A. Schwarz, The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp, p. 197.

¹⁰³ Duchamp, "The Creative Act," Art News, (New York), LVI, No. 4 (Summer 1957), pp. 28-29.

Chapter 4

The space of dismemberment: zones, empty places and the end of the quest in American Postmodern fiction

Lâchez tout

Lâchez Dada

Lâchez votre femme, lâchez votre maîtresse

Partez sur les routes.

André Breton, Le pas perdu

The whole random universe of the industrial
age is breaking down into cryptic fragments.

William S. Burroughs,
preface to Love and Na-
palm: Export U.S.A.(Attr-
ocity Exhibition) by
J. G. Ballard.

1. The Postmodern City between fact and fiction

In this part we move away from Paris as the
modern, crowded capital of the 19th century to American
urban landscapes, more evocative of "postmodern"
aesthetics and sensibility. The writers Thomas Pynchon
and Donald Barthelme and the performance-artist Laurie

Anderson reflect a boundless, desertic city, evoking a displacement arising from the ultimate effects of the circulation of commodities envisioned by Benjamin. The "catastrophe" produced by the breakage of spatial-temporal linearity and by the collapse of rational order in the commodified city of the 19th century, which are reflected in the avant-garde vision of fragmentation, lead to what Jameson judges as a collapse of all preceding narrative paradigms, and the loss of a condvisible language which makes the Benjaminian description of the rise of the modern "singularly relevant and singularly antiquated" in light of this new unimaginable stage of technological alienation. ¹

At the end of the fifties, the general improvement in social conditions and the diffusion of media constituted the incentive for the rise of the cultural market, able to transform knowledge itself into a commodity. Fredric Jameson writes that the expansion of culture within the social domain has reached such a point in recent times that one may say that "almost everything has become cultural."² The parallel irrup-

¹ Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1985) (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 1991), p. 45.

² Ibid., p. 48. For a further discussion of the cultural industry in Postmodern culture, see also Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in Hal Foster, ed., The Anti-Aesthetic, cit. and Dick Hebdige's Hiding in the Light: On Images and Things (London: Routledge, 1988).

tion of cybernetics and of new information codes marked the decline of the industrial civilization and the beginning of the electronic age, able to transform the city from a market-place into a vaster, decentered communication field. For such a conversion of the industrial society into the information society, Daniel Bell and Jean-François Lyotard respectively introduced the terms "post-industrial" and "postmodern". ³

The transition from an industrial economy to the information market has produced a "sublimation," or "de-materialization" (Hassan), of the metropolitan landscape, turning what was left of the architectonic space and its massive "hardware" into a "global village" of communication, ⁴ an ultra-urban domain created by the media, instantly reaching even the remotest cultures and places. The creation of a boundless world was also historical, coinciding as it did with a new wave of immigration from Asia to the United States ⁵ which

³ Cf. Daniel Bell, The Coming of Post-Industrial Society. A Venture in Social Forecasting (New York: Basic Books, 1973) and Jean-François Lyotard, La condition postmoderne (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1979).

⁴ Cf. Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

⁵ For a study of the most recent flux of ethnic minorities, such as the Asian and the Puerto-Rican, in American cities, see Neil Smith and Peter Williams, eds., Gentrification of the City (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1986).

emphasized the multiracial, Babel-like aspect of the city.

The main effect of the circulation of an excess of information in the city is to extend the process of alienation from the individual surrounded by material commodities, paradigmatically witnessed (according to Benjamin) by the Baudelairean experience in Paris, to the more immaterial level of communication. In the information city, the commodities are "linguistic fetishes," what Donald Barthelme defines as "language trash." In other words, in addition to the circulation of material fetishes, constituting, according to Benjamin, the background of the phantasmagoric flânerie before the Parisian windows, the Postmodern metropolitan field turns into a flux of signs and codes, into a sort of "linguistic crowd," redefined by Thomas Pynchon as "entropy" ("conversion, mutation, confusion," according to its Greek etymology), ⁶ the concept of thermodynamics that he borrowed from Henry Adams to designate a climate of linguistic disorder in

⁶ "Entropy, or the measure of disorganization for a closed system, an adequate metaphor to apply to certain phenomena in his own world." Thomas Pynchon, "Entropy" (Kenyon Review, 1960), republished in Slow Learner. Early Stories (London: Picador, 1985), p.84. On the subject of Postmodern literature and linguistic disorder see also Charles Newman, The Postmodern Aura. The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation, (Evanston: Northwestern U.P., 1985).

which a surplus of codes constantly interferes with communication.⁷

Many theorists of postmodernity have considered such a degree of linguistic saturation to be symbolic of the lack of any epistemologically guaranteed language system or ideology. As a result, the debate on Postmodernity and Vattimo's "weak thought" in particular, has been characterized by a sense of general skepticism that becomes disturbingly pervasive in the so-called "self-reflexive" narratives, metonymic of a whole linguistic world which has finally lost touch with the referent and the actual world. While the French school of post-semiotic theorists such as Baudrillard and Deleuze announced the emergence of a culture of mere surfaces where language is the underlying principle, the literary labyrinths (or "metafiction"), equally produced a move away from the urban environment and from the shift in language and perception that the emergence of a new technological paradigm

⁷ Cf. Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams. A Study of the Twentieth Century Multiplicity, cit.. In thermodynamics, the word originally designates the state of homologation and final immobility as the final effect of the motion of heat-units. Later information theory has mutated the concept of "entropy" from the second law of thermodynamics in order to indicate a state of semiotic degradation in a situation of coexistence of codes in which an increasing difficulty in converting the sign into an univocal meaning is experienced. This is the meaning attributed to the term, maintaining its negative nuances. Cf. Norbert Wiener, The Human Use of Human Beings (1950), (New York: Avon, 1967).

is producing. Such a "negative," neo-idealistic revival of the modernist retreat to the literary domain, which today claims the name of the "literature of exhaustion,"⁸ is in some way a later version of the "death of the novel," of the exhausted possibility of narration, expressed in the repetition of styles and themes from the past and in a renewed self-reflexive dialogue with literary tradition. A la mode de T. S. Eliot, postmodern American writers such as John Barth, Robert Coover and William Gass⁹ ideally continue, in parodic forms, the elitist tradition of intertextual writing, taking a narcissistic, self-reflexive turn when they make the narrator intervene at some point of the narrative with metanarrative considerations on the fictive nature of his enterprise. John Barth's Lost in the Funhouse (1968), the short stories in Robert Coover's "The Magic Poker" (Pricksongs and Descants, 1968), and William Gass' "In the Heart of the Heart of the Country"

⁸ The definition is John Barth's in the article "The Literature of Exhaustion", Atlantic Monthly, August 1967, later republished in The Novel Today. Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction, Malcolm Bradbury, ed. (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977), pp. 70-83.

⁹ For a discussion and a complete bibliography of American postmodern fiction see Larry McCaffery, Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986).

(1976), ¹⁰ would seem to belong to this group. The crisis of the system of decodification and of interpretation is, however, differently handled by writers like Pynchon and Barthelme who continue the allegorical urban tradition started by Baudelaire and the avant-garde and, like the multi-media artist Laurie Anderson, keep on posing interpretation problems in the expanded urban field. Beside the "ruins" of literary tradition, they incorporate into their work the multiplicity of idioms and idiolects of the complex semiotic field of the city today, which Barthes defines as a "multi-dimensional space in which are married and contested several writings, none of which is original: the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture." ¹¹

¹⁰ For a discussion of metafiction see Patricia Waugh, Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction (London: Methuen, 1984), and Linda Hutcheon, Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox (New York: Methuen, 1984), and A Theory of Parody: The Teaching of Twentieth-Century Art Forms (New York: Methuen, 1985).

¹¹ Roland Barthes, The Rustle of Language (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), pp. 52-53. Quotationism is not, however, mere repetition and resynchronization of what was previously produced in the past, like Scarlett by Alexandra Ripley (Warner, 1991), the sequel of Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind, and the literary replicas often misread as postmodern writing. The multidimensional space created by Barthelme's and Pynchon's narratives rather stresses the dissimilarities of the recycled texts, the plurality of messages circulating in the information society, none of which is central. The undetermined zone they create is not a complacent parody but serves to obliterate boundaries, to blend genres, and to question ethocentrism.

However, the quotationism that certainly characterizes the Postmodern writing we deal with, is not to be conceived in terms of mere repetition and resynchronization of what was previously produced in the past. The multidimensional space created by Barthelme and Pynchon in their narratives rather stresses the dissimilarities of the recycled texts, the plurality of messages assembled and circulating in the information society. The saturated, undetermined city they create is not a complacent parody, but serves to obliterate cultural boundaries, to blend genres, and to question ethnocentric assumptions.¹² In other words, it assumes the conceptual dimension of Duchamp's art and discourse.

In the face of the electronic city, the urban writer - or rather that complicated cross-road of languages that he now happens to be - is forced to abandon the obsessive space of his mental and merely fictional constructions and to enter the depersonalized dream-world defined by his difficult mediation of the contradictory signals of the city. Confronted with the open-ended crossroads of cosmopolitan zones, the new flâneurs in their stories drive on endless highways,

¹². In this critical perspective the above mentioned essay, A Theory of Parody by Linda Hutcheon, provides a basis for the discussion of parody as subversion and revision of the texts and languages parodied.

metaphorical of a never-ending quest for meaning; discover hybrid and decentred cities whose architecture, whose sculptures and shopping centers speak the conceptual language of the inconclusive quest for meaning. They are first of all decoders, "bricoleurs" who do not resign themselves to the temptation of a retreat into a thoroughly mental space, but who situate themselves in the midst of a variety of languages and cultures, always suspended - like the Duchampian ambivalent subject - in a transitional space between the internal and the external, the man and the machine.

Zavarzadeh defined postwar American writing as a "bi-referential" narrative mode, simultaneously self-referential and out-referential, paradoxically combining "factual and fictional" and prepared to come to terms, as Francesco Binni argues, with "la funzione elusiva di fatto e finzione che è diventata la matrice dell'esperienza d'oggi".¹³ Far from reaching the conclusion of a further, apocalyptic "loss of meaning," these narratives constantly question the modes in which meaning is produced in a plurilinguistic environment

¹³ Cf. Francesco Binni, "Romanzo di famiglia: il mito dell'eterno ritorno nella fiction del post-modernismo," Caratteri esclusivi. Saggi sull'identità anglo-americana (Pisa: ETS, 1981) p. 111. See also Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, The Mythopoetic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel (Urbana: Illinois U.P., 1976).

that seems to have abandoned absolute certainties and fixed value-systems.

By absorbing random linguistic materials (trash) into their narratives, Pynchon, Barthelme and Anderson adopt a feature of Surrealist art and writing, incorporating advertisements, street "white noise," scraps of mass-culture such as pop songs and commonplaces in their work, mixing, in the shadow of the avant-garde aesthetics, high and low languages, the elitist traits of Modern dialogue with literary tradition and fragments of pop culture. Posing narrative as a synesthetic, Neo-Surrealist form, they incorporate different semiotic materials and the trash of industrial civilization, like Rauschenberg's combines. In this sense, it is here significant to close our discussion of Pynchon's and Barthelme's writing with the isomorphous writing of a performance artist like Laurie Anderson, immersing the reader in a myriad media messages, and testifying to the synesthetic nature of the Postmodern American novel.¹⁴

The pervasive evocation of a multimedial, plurilinguistic entropy in the texts I discuss implies a further de-centralization of the urbanite, which

¹⁴ John Barth himself gives his Lost in the Fun-house the subtitle Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice and advocates a deeper contamination of literature with mixed-media arts in his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion," in The Novel Today, p. 72.

deepens the gap between the ironical (self-centered, ethnocentric) perspective of the Modern hero and the humoristic, composite nature of the Postmodern drifter, who constantly questions and subverts Western ethnocentrism and its ideology of power.

The strategy adopted by these writers to convey the contiguous presence of the different languages and cultures in the expanded urban field is, as in Duchamp, that of Surrealist decontextualization and displacement; the monstrous rhetoric of the oxymoronic encounter with the irreducible Other. In this light, epistemological uncertainty does not lead to a turning away from the city into an inner, self-reflexive domain, but to a non-dogmatic, Duchampian errance in a plurilinguistic field which does not merely pose problems of identity, but moreover of the tolerant coexistence of the incongruous.

Binni argues that American postmodern fiction is generally "accomunata a livello epistemologico dalla posizione non interpretativa nei riguardi della realtà esterna."¹⁵ This is the reason why the postmodern discourse of linguistic contamination does not seem to privilege the polis (the monumental-historical center of the city) or metropolis (the congested center invaded by crowds of signals and passengers) as a rep-

¹⁵ Binni, "Romanzo di famiglia," Caratteri esclusivi, p.111.

representative space, but an open-ended field, a Duchampian n-dimensional space, appearing in the shape of the no-town, the empty inter-urban areas of automobile transit and of multiethnic, Babel-like cosmopolitan areas; in other words, "ultra-urban" places that end up transcending the definition of "city" or of "nation," which is also evocative of the recent emergence of the "megapolis," a city growing beyond its limits.

The Babylonian, non-dystopic spaces of Postmodern fiction are images of lost direction, labyrinthine forms which do not merely represent the self-reflexive nature of these texts which remain, instead, suspended between reality and dream. Their allegorical nature does not prevent them from referring to an urban referentiality; they reflect the urbanistic and architectural shapes that North-American cities are assuming: the suburban shopping malls that have now replaced the metropolitan magasin as the new centers of consumerism in a decentered city which, compared to the Baudelairean Paris at the turn of the century, presents an urban decentralization of the commercial activities from the historical center to out-of-town areas. As Burton Pike argues:

The post-industrial city of the present is diffuse and decentralized, a "nowhere city," as Alison Lurie has tagged Los Angeles. Contemporary urban sociologists like to speak of "megapolises," "commutersheds," and "con-

urbations" and clearly prefer the adjective "urban" to the noun "city."¹⁶

It is symptomatic of the blurring of both the geographical and cultural boundaries of the city today that in the 1988 Triennale in Milan Miami was designated as "the city of the future" for assuming, like the cities we encounter in Postmodern novels, both the character of a de-centered Babylon - the multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan metropolis shaped by an hybrid mixture of ethnic groups ¹⁷ - and that of no-town, of the highway city developing beyond its boundaries, reflecting an expansion beyond the urban perimeters that urban areas are now assuming in the United States:

Miami [...] è la vera città senza confini, come l'ha definita il suo storico più recente, T. D. Allman: 'Miami has no beginning. It has a middle. But it does not have an end, if you are willing to drive far enough to find it'. E' come l'Aleph di Borges: contiene tutti i punti, un labirinto pieno di ramificazioni che non portano in alcun luogo. ¹⁸

¹⁶ Pike, The Image of the City in Modern Literature, p. XII.

¹⁷ "Tale costellazione urbana, sorta verso il 1895, è vissuta e sopravvive sull'immigrazione degli stili e delle razze, tanto che la lingua 'locale' è lo Spanglish, un misto di spagnolo e di inglese, nato dall'incontro tra popolazioni anglo-latine, prevalentemente composte da cubani, haitiani e colombiani, con una ridotta percentuale di ebrei americani e, più recentemente, di vietnamiti." Germano Celant, "MIArt," Oltre la città, la metropoli, Georges Teyssot, ed., catalogue of the XVII Triennale of Milan, (Milan: Electa, 1988), p. 207.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 207.

In this semiotically and geographically decentered territory, the problem of the map - that is, the problem of the synthetic and exhaustive description of metropolis - is a paradox for both the student of mass communication as well as for urban planners and geographers. New maps and recent urban studies envision hyperextended territories, linguistically saturated, which resist the very definition of "city" and any measuring of urban territory.¹⁹ Metropolis, the "mother-city" (from the Greek etymology "mater" and "polis": "founder of colonies") which, starting from the last century, was in the industrial era the center of production and trading and the pole of attraction for the masses saw the rise of satellites areas, of the first suburban neighborhoods built to provide an alternative to the congestion of urban centers between the Fifties and the Seventies, due to the expansion of inter-urban communications. Between the late Fifties and the early Sixties, writers like Sylvia Plath, Susan Sontag and Saul Bellow found in the suburbs the ideal background for their "fictionalized recalls," stories of hypertrophic selves retreating to the suburbs to

¹⁹ Proof of this is provided by the maps exhibited at the Triennale in Milan. Geographer Gunnar Olsson maintains that, even if a perfect representation were possible,, "una descrizione perfetta di un modello spaziale, vi sono modi diversi di interpretarla e non si può dire quale sia il migliore." Gunnar Olsson interviewed by Franco Farinelli in Linea d'ombra, 26, (April 1988) 74.

escape urban alienation in their collective condemnation of metropolitan life.

Their bourgeois dream, interpreted by Lewis Mumford,²⁰ to recreate an organic city within the suburban model did not, however, seem to stop the abnormal expansion of the American city, growing into a "megapolitan area." The on the road writing of the Beat generation and the Coney Island of the Mind by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, simultaneously depicted the emergence of the "car-culture," a growing number of cars and motorcycles on the road, "engines that devour America" launched at high speed on "freeways fifty lanes wide"²¹ as a reflex to the expansion of inter-urban highways, which the underground still found menacing.

This vision of a cynetic city, entering the arts and literature with the Futurist avant-gardes and reflected in the Thirties in the fragmentary urban vision of Dos Passos in his trilogy U.S.A.,²² moves the focus of the urban experience from the monumental and historical center to the dynamic perspective of the

²⁰ Cf. Lewis Mumford, The Urban Prospect, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1956).

²¹ Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "In Goya's greatest scenes" in A Coney Island of the Mind (1958) (Parma: Gaunda, 1968), pp. 16, 18.

²² John Dos Passos, The Big Money (1933), vol III of the trilogy U.S.A. (New York: Signet, 1969).

the car-driver on the move.²³ Instead of in crowded urban centers, like the New York of The Big Money, however, the car transit of Postmodern characters takes place mostly in the anonymous landscape of the super-highways that grow beyond the suburban areas. The present crisis of suburban areas, provoking the progressive abandonment of residential areas,²⁴ has focused the attention of urban planners on another urban phenomenon typical of the expanding "Sun-belt" states: the no-town, the city of transit mainly providing facilities for the driver and a limited architectural conglomeration built around main highway junctions. This new form of "urbanization without cities"²⁵ also depends on the tendential megalopolitan configuration and decentralization of the urban territory beyond the unstable suburban perimeter:

Newer cities in the South and West present this spaced-out appearance so different from

²³ Cf. Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch, John Meyer, The View from the Road (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1964).

²⁴ W. Sharpe and L. Wallock point out that, because many suburban areas have turned into working areas, they are showing the same disadvantages of the centers for which they initially aimed to provide an alternative. William Sharpe, Leonard Wallock, eds., Introduction to Visions of the Modern City. Essays on History, Art, and Literature, (London-Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U. P., 1987), p. 35.

²⁵ Cf. Brian J. L. Berry, "The Counterurbanization Process: Urban America since 1970" in Urbanization and Counterurbanization, B.J. L. Berry, ed. vol. II, Urban Affairs Reviews, (Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage Publications, 1976), p. 24.

the spatial organization of cities that evolved from pedestrian downtowns more than two centuries ago. ²⁶

In other words, the model of the no-towns or "urban fields" in the "Sun-belt" and of the "megalopolis" in the Northeastern regions ²⁷ provides the image of a decentered city, in a centrifugal movement of "Flatland", of scattered communities of commuters far from the metropolis. ²⁸ We see these areas of transit reflected in Postmodern writing, expanding the vision of the Benjaminian crowded metropolis to a more undistinguished, displacing areas.

The fascination of a city like Los Angeles is related to its dimension of "Nowhereville" and "autopia," of the transformation of the city in the "great architectural highway" that Frank Lloyd Wright foresaw²⁹, as an advocate for the "Broadacre City of the Future" and for urban decentering:

Whatever glass and steel monuments may be built downtown, the essence of Los Angeles, its true identifying character, its mobility ... the language of design, architecture and

²⁶ Ibid., p. 20.

²⁷ Jean Gottman, Megalopolis: The urbanized Northeastern Seaboard of the United States (New York: Twentieth Century Fund, 1961), p. 213.

²⁸ Berry, "The Counterurbanization Process" in Urbanization and Counterurbanization, p. 31.

²⁹ Frank Lloyd Wright, "America Tomorrow," American Architect, 141, May 1932, 17.

urbanism in Los Angeles is the language of movement.³⁰

In Postmodern writing, the recurrence of the highway motif insistently undermines the very idea of architecture and structure. As in Baudrillard's travel notebook on American cities, the city on the highway becomes a metaphor for the hermeneutic circle³¹: in Pynchon it provides the background for the mapless quest of drifting figures in their attempt at solving obsessive dilemmas. The rapid development of communications, the creation of a "non-place urban realm,"³² has provided the fictional settings for the renewed sense of territorial dispersion and linguistic entropy. The no-town, in particular, and the motif of the endless quest on the highway dictate the very syntax of Postmodern narrative: dispersive, hybrid, open-ended like an unmapped territory.

In these cosmopolitan cities, the drifter, heir to the Baudelairean flâneur, is constantly on the move. His voyage among the street-signs does not imply dénouement, but leads to the awareness of the

³⁰ Reyner Banham, Los Angeles. The Architecture of Four Ecologies (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 22.

³¹ Cf. Jean Baudrillard, Amérique, (Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1986).

³² Cf. Melvin M. Webber, "The Urban Place and the Nonplace Urban Realm" in Explorations in Urban Structure, Melvin M. Webber, ed. et al. (Philadelphia, 1964), cit., in W. Sharpe, and L. Wallock, Introduction to Visions of the Modern City, p. 29.

relativity of knowledge, because the relation between image and meaning is equivocal and the wandering urbanite will never get to the (gnostic) center of the city.

Like Oedipa Maas, the heroine of The Crying of Lot 49, the more these flâneurs, driving along peripheral streets gather indices from the ruins of the industrial landscape, the more they confront themselves with multiple versions of the same events.

As in postmodern architecture, and in the event in its broader meaning - as a discourse that finds its actualization in the process of interaction with the reader³³, postmodern narratives exhibit a reality that they do not explain. They retain the same symbolic ambiguity that characterizes performance art, that multimedial, conceptual urban art whose message is perceived as opaque by the spectator situated at the center of audiovisual stimulations.

These recent narratives, which are in constant dialogue with the new urban arts and architecture, are indebted to Surrealist aesthetics as open-ended works, new coagulations of ruins that the narrator is no longer omnisciently mediating, inducing the reader to contribute to the production of meaning. For example,

³³ Such is Paul Ricoeur's definition of the "événement" in "Biblical Hermeneutics," Semema, 5, 1975, 51.

in Pynchon - where we find the last signs of the alienation of the modern hero in his search for epiphanic indices - the reader is caught in a dispersive labyrinth of plots and subplots, progressively demolishing the structure of the detective novel which, instead of culminating in a solution to the mystery underlying it, remains a disordered mass of enigmatic indices. Donald Barthelme's short stories borrow the Surrealist collage technique to translate the city to a plurilinguistic field, in a juxtaposition of incongruous styles where, in his humorous, Duchampian "dedain de la thèse," the narrator himself misses the central meaning of his own narrative, submerged in a multiplicity of codes that freely interact beyond his control.

Showing the "anxious objects" of urban art and architecture (Barthelme), the ambivalent messages of the electronic city (Anderson), or enacting in the disorder of metropolitan debris improbable quests for meaning (Pynchon), the postmodern urban text becomes itself an enigmatic landscape, the labyrinthine map of a city that finally posits itself as a dense hermeneutical field, a linguistic puzzle, an unstable mosaic of hypothetical paths which does not arouse melancholy feelings and is ultimately left to the reader/flâneur to solve.

Chapter 5

Linguistic wilderness: the ruins of the map
in Thomas Pynchon's post-industrial zones

She said: What is History?

And he said: History is an Angel

Being blown backwards into the future

He said: History is a pile of debris

And the Angel wants to go back and fix

things

To repair the things that have been broken

But there is a storm blowing from Paradise

And the storms keeps blowing the Angel

Backward into the future.

And this storm, this storm

Is called

Progress.

Laurie Anderson, "The day before"

(dedicated to W. Benjamin)

In both Surrealist and Postmodern fiction the narratives about urban entropy in the city are themselves entropic in nature: they evade the conclusions and the definition of the object they seek, asking the reader to find his own way through the signs disseminated in the text. The stories they tell are stories of displacement and of errance among the

linguistic debris of collage-cities where information circulates and proliferates like commodities. In Pynchon the city reappears in a fragmented shape, displaying the technological degradation of the industrial landscape; disquieting bidonvilles where heaps of trash pile up like the ruins of the European cities during the Second World War. In this waste land, endless quests among ruins and fragments take place, in a parody of the 19th-century detective novel whose protagonists are doomed to remain eternal tourists in a foreign city. Faced with the mass of indices and clues that they find on the road, their errance is an endless effort to translate the ambivalent signs they encounter in this scattered territory. Their quest does not lead to the recognition of an urban center or to the reconstruction of a full view of the city, but to the collection of ambiguous messages pursued in a hieroglyphic landscape which increasingly takes the shape of the mythical Babel: in Benjamin's words, "a linguistic cosmos"¹, synchronically unifying distant times and spaces.

In the foreground of recentered cities, of highway labyrinths, crossing continents and languages, Thomas Pynchon represents the final defeat of the detective of indices in the pursuit of the unknown, multiple woman

¹ Benjamin, Parigi, p. 674.

of the crowd (V.). His quest takes him far from the road, into a final exile in the obsessive space of conjecture, while his drifting alter-ego Benny Profane takes the allegorical "dismemberment" of the Baudelairean flâneur produced by the disjunction between mind and reality, subject and object, to the extreme. The dispersal (or "scattering") of his alter-ego Profane does not simply dissolve the ironical perception of the cityscape and the consequent fragmentation of individual perception, according to the Baudelairean model, but involves a "dismemberment" of the very body of the flâneur, representative of his loss of interior space as a defensive, separate space, and of the ultimate fusion of the individual with the technological city.

In this entropic habitat, the Baudelairean flâneur becomes a drifter, assuming the nomadic nature of the "woman in the crowd," and is asked to evade his melancholic monologic space, to experience a corporeal dissolution in the semiotic magma that he inhabits. Becoming dismembered, he goes through a linguistic estrangement, culminating in the loss of an interior and creative space, which for the modern hero still provided, in Benjamin's words, "a shield against the

reified world." ² On the contrary, in Pynchon's novel, alongside fragment-collectors and increasingly resigned conjecturers, drifters finally give up their search for the map and go through a physical dispersal in the Babel-like codes of the information city.

"Electronic monsters" (the "machine-extensions" conceived by MacLuhan), appear in these novels with their bodies covered with electric appendices in order to witness a closer relation with technology: they are the vehicles (and not only the recipients) of a process of radical linguistic "hybridization," leading, as in Duchamp, to the creation of anthropomorphic machines, escaping fixed definitions. The incestuous relation with the technological object is therefore also expressed through the cosmopolitan and polyglot identity of the protagonists (what Pynchon defines as "human palimpsests"); while, at the narrative level, it manifests itself in the appearance of "lexical monsters," typical of a Surrealist writing form pursued by Pynchon and Barthelme. Their pastiches do not speak the Baudelairean language of "ennui" or of d'art pour d'art, but the enigmatic idiom of the crowd: a Babel

² "Il significato straordinario di Baudelaire consiste nell'aver per primo e più coerentemente di chiunque altro 'stabilizzato' (ding-fest gemacht) l'uomo estraniato a se stesso, nel doppio senso di averlo individuato e di avergli fornito una "corazza contro il mondo." Benjamin, Parigi, p. 413.

language of contamination which legitimates different forms of knowledge in a non-selective, "entropic" form.

In this city of mixed codes, there is an interplay between the literary level and low culture, applying to the narrative level the iconoclastic Duchampian practice of mixing profane and literary languages. The cumulation of linguistic trash in postmodernity does not have the negative value attributed to the commercialized metropolis by the alienated modern hero: it is the sign of the irruption of unknown idioms from the ethnic communities, opening up dialogue with cultural paradigms ignored by Western ethnocentric culture.³

In Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, it is significant that the metropolis assumes the disfigured and cosmopolitan shape of Berlin divided into four zones; in a Babel waste land crossed - in fiction as well as in history - by four armies and cosmopolitan figures speaking a variety of languages, in an extreme geographic "spatial phantasmagory," simultaneously recalling different places and cultures within a single, expanded and discontinuous field.

³ The risk of misunderstanding and the desire for power within the dialogue with unequal non-Western cultures is accounted for by Vincent Crapanzano's "The Postmodern Crisis: Discourse, Parody, Memory", Cultural Anthropology, Vol. 6, no. 4, (Nov. 1991), 431-45.

1. Pursuing the sphinx between the hothouse and the street: "V." as a parody of the detective story

In their changing shape as war ruins, as cosmopolitan metropolis or as no-towns at the edge of the highway, Pynchon's landscapes define places that cannot be found on the map, as if reflecting the state of simultaneous coexistence of heterogeneous signals typical of contemporary media communication. These puzzling cities provide the setting for the last pursuit of the unknown woman, the V. of the title, in a failed encounter which finally leads the Modern quester to suspend his quest in the tropic street, retreating into a self-reflexive, paranoiac space.

Pynchon significantly distinguishes between the street (where the subject is displaced and physically disintegrated) and the "hothouse," a metaphor for the obsessive construction of mental spaces, the allegorical space where those who fear the intensified urban entropy disconsolately retreat till suffocation.

The refuge in a "hothouse"-space is central to the experience of Stencil, a parodic Modern hero retreating to a domain supposedly alien from the crowd. Before Pynchon, the asphyxiating nature of a wholly interior world had been represented in the American autobiographical fiction produced at the turn of the Sixties, which Tony Tanner defined as "fictionalized

recalls." Narratives like Susan Sontag's Death Kit (1963), Saul Bellow's Herzog (1959) and Sylvia Plath's The Bell Jar (1963), depicted paranoid characters, "self-absorbed figures" who exorcise the pressures and stimulations of the big city by withdrawing to the stifling space of their ruminations before mental breakdown and suicide intervene to put an end to them.⁴

In order to emphasize the doom of the obsessive detective confronted with the impossible task of reorganizing sparse indices and codes into a coherent map,⁵ Pynchon presents two separate character types in V.: the "spies" like Stencil, who move like detectives among the debris, trying to find a causal logic able to convert ambiguous traces into indexical signs, and the drifters in constant transit among the linguistic ruins and unstable signs, with neither final destination nor internal drama. The "spy" who tries to reorganize his search into a plot finally enters an obsessive world of conjecture, a paranoid space of rumination, while the "drifter" never thinks of reordering the multifarious variety of signs into a plot with a beginning and an end.

⁴ Cf. Tony Tanner, City of Words London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), pp. 295-321.

⁵ On this point see Stefano Tani, The doomed detective: the contribution of the detective novel to postmodern American and Italian fiction (Carbondale: Illinois U.P., 1984).

At the origin of all plots there is always the hope of reconstructing a "complot," a causal net of events starting from sparse and meaningless indices. To the map, conceived of as a causal plot, Pynchon opposes the street as a labyrinthine space leading to the demise of the spy and the fin de siècle detective like Sherlock Holmes, and to the end of the quest, as the initiatory journey of knowledge. Initially assuming the structure of the quest and of the spy story, the narrative in V. finally culminates in a dispersion of all the indices collected.

In a postwar landscape of ruins such as we find in V. and Gravity's Rainbow, enigmas multiply instead of being solved, and those who decide to find order in the fragmented indices at their disposal must only avoid the street as a source of white noise and interference, and shut themselves in a "hothouse" of obsessions:

Maijstral's growing theory that V. was an obsession after all, and that such an obsession is an hothouse: constant temperature, windless, too crowded with particolored sports, unnatural blooms. ⁶

In other words, suspended between mental resistance to chaos and an anarchic, aimless drifting, Pynchon takes the dilemma of the modern hero to an extreme: he is engaged, on the one hand, in saving an autonomous space of reflection in the face of entropy (what Benjamin

⁶ Thomas Pynchon, V. (New York: Bantam, 1963), p. 421.

defines as "una corazza contro il mondo reificato"⁷), and on the other hand, forced to come to terms with fragmented experience and with the excess of information surrounding him.

The fear of losing themselves in the street chaos induces many Pynchonian characters to become what Benjamin defines as "rimuginatori" or "debris collectors," who, as opposed to the "allegorists," search for global meanings in the ruins.⁸ Their effort at reorganizing the semiotic space in a map or in architecture is a recurrent metaphor for the creation of a "plot" gathering all indices towards a final moment of dénouement, as in a spy story. In his early seminal short story "Entropy," Pynchon's character Aubade (who lives hidden in a hothouse apartment, perfectly isolated from the external world)⁹ creates for herself a personal world of linear and coherent logic, opposing her own "architecture," her own mental designs, to the flux of signals coming from the street:

⁷ Benjamin, Parigi, p. 403.

⁸ "Per quanto riguarda il collezionista, la sua collezione non è mai completa; e quando gli mancasse anche solo un pezzo, tutto ciò che ha raccolto resterebbe per sempre un frammento, ciò che appunto le cose sono per l'allegorista fin dal primo momento." Benjamin, Parigi, p. 277.

⁹ "[...] this hothouse jungle [...] hermetically sealed, it was a tiny enclave of regularity in the city's chaos, alien to the vagaries of the weather, of national politics, of any civil disorder." Pynchon, "Entropy," in Slow Learner, pp.79-80.

The architectonic purity of her world was constantly threatened by such hints of anarchy: gaps and excrescences and skew lines, and a shifting or tilting of planes to which she had continually to readjust lest the whole structure shiver into a disarray of discrete and meaningless signals.¹⁰

However, in a gesture that stresses the persistent ambivalence of the Pynchonian character, she finally breaks the glass of the hothouse of her conjectures to open herself to the world, so demonstrating that the self cannot preserve its mental order for long, but is doomed to dissolve itself in the pluralism of signals and separate identities that the street represents, because the final meaning of the postmodern hero's quest, whether he be a "spy" or a "drifter", is his confrontation with an entropic universe, and with a variety of different meanings.

Continuing Baudelaire and Breton's search in a more advanced stage of technology, Stencil is another Modern hero tracking down a phantom woman, possessing a single, weak index of her existence: V., the initial letter of her name that gives the novel its title. He is "an architect-by-necessity of intrigues".¹¹ The metaphor of architecture is opposed to that of the street, as a motif that Pynchon borrows from Henry Adams according to whom Gothic cathedrals, and the

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 84.

¹¹ Pynchon, V., p. 209.

thirteenth-century architecture of Chartres and Mont Saint Michel are the totalizing expressions of an absolute, undeniable truth which fell apart before the chaos produced by industrialization. ¹²

Amid the war ruins of La Valletta, Stencil paradoxically tries to build up a Gothic architecture, ¹³ later discovering himself as a mere assembler of trash and debris like Simon Rodia, the urban sculptor dear to Pynchon who built a parody of Gaudi's towers (the "Watts Towers") out of the trash and glass splinters gathered in the street of Watts, the Black ghetto in Los Angeles. In an article on the race riots in Watts, Pynchon describes Rodia's urban art thus:

It's part of the landscape both the real and emotional one: busted glass, busted crockery, nails, tincans, all kind of scrap and waste. Traditionally Watts. An Italian immigrant named Simon Rodia spent 30 years gathering some of it up and converting a little piece of the neighborhood along 107th Street into the famous Watts Towers, perhaps his own dream of how things should have been: a fantasy of fountains, boats, tall open spires, encrusted with a dazzling mosaic of Watts debris. ¹⁴

¹² Henry Adams, Mont Saint Michel and Chartres (1904) (Cambridge: Press Syndicate of the Cambridge University, 1983).

¹³ "Waiting for Paola to reveal how she fitted into this Grand Gothic pile of interferences he was hard at work creating." Pynchon, V., p.209.

¹⁴ Thomas Pynchon, "A Journey onto the Mind of Watts" The New York Times Magazine, (June 12, 1966), 78.

The rational architectures challenging the street chaos in the Postmodern stories of Thomas Pynchon are therefore abstract elaborations that take place in a purely mental spaces. ¹⁵ On the other hand, the street that the rational mind tries to reduce to a detailed cartography remains a catastrophic, cosmopolitan site of errance, resisting more and more the very definition of city. At the beginning of V., what surrounds Stencil is a city - New York in the Fifties - that discourages the spy quest, assuming the form of a multiracial palimpsest, "affected by a kind of geographical incest," ¹⁶ crossed by the hero as if on a tourist trip in a foreign country. ¹⁷

When the action later moves to Malta, Stencil encounters another Babelic labyrinth amid the war ruins of La Valletta, a city of debris inhabited by a hybrid Maltese race, which speaks a complicated language that is hard to decipher, being a strange mixture of an Arab

¹⁵ In The Crying of Lot 49, "Oedipa had looked down at her feet and known, then, because of a painting, that what she stood on had only been woven together a couple thousand miles away in her own tower, was only by accident known as Mexico, and so Pierce had taken her away from nothing, there'd been no escape ... Such a captive maiden, having plenty of time to think, soon realizes that her tower, its height and architecture, are like her ego only incidental." Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49 (1966) (New York: Bantam, 1967), pp. 10-11.

¹⁶ Pynchon, V., p. 16.

¹⁷ "It seemed he was walking into one ... alien country (...) yo-yoing again". Ibid., p.12.

dialect and borrowings from Italian, English and
Sicilian:

Nobody knows what a Maltese is. The Maltese think they're a pure race, and the Europeans think they're semitic, Hamitic, crossbred with North Africans, Turks, and God knows what all. ¹⁸

In a story that proceeds with vertiginous spatial and temporal leaps from the end of the nineteenth century to the fifties, Stencil crosses several cities and nations, passing from New York to a Florence mined by political complots, from the catastrophic Malta to the hieroglyphs of the Egyptian tombs, in pursuit of the phantom V. His intercontinental journey, however, far from defines a map of proofs about her very existence and ends with the creation of a surrogate for the map, which he calls a "personal Baedeker," ¹⁹ like the tourist guidebook, offering a merely schematic and often stereotyped picture of foreign countries:

V. at the age of thirty-three (Stencil's calculation) had found love at last in her peregrinations through (let us be honest) a world if not created then at last described to its fullest by Karl Baedeker of Leipzig. This is a country populated only by a breed called tourists [...] it is two-dimensional, as is the Street, as are the pages and maps of those little handbooks [...] The tourist may wander anywhere in this coordinate system without fear. War never becomes more serious than a scuffle with a pickpocket [...] politics are of course never discussed with

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 328.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 77.

the native population. Tourism thus is supernatural, like the Catholic Church.²⁰

In other words, what Stencil designs is not a city but an abstraction, envisioning a paranoiac map of complots, although the logic shaping the events, as in the Surrealist world, is mere chance. His territory is therefore configured as a utopia (in the etymological sense of U-topia, of a "city which does not exist"), as an individual geography for which no atlas can account.

Following his enigmatic index around the world in pursuit of a mysterious woman he never saw in the flesh (a de-materialized object of desire), Stencil completes a Grand Tour that culminates in no initiation, but in a labyrinth of stereotypes, in a "hothouse" of prejudices which, according to Pynchon, has the same asphyxiating air as the parallel, mental society ("a parody of home"²¹) that a superficial tourist creates when encountering unknown cultures and places.²²

Suspended between the Babelic street and the architectonic purity of his speculations, Stencil turns the few indices at his disposal into a partial map that is more a paranoid creation than the reflection of the cities he visits:

²⁰ Ibid., p. 384.

²¹ Ibid., p. 76.

²² "... for tourists ... eventually create a parallel society of their own in every city ... a kind of infiltration," Ibid., p. 386.

V. is a country of coincidence, ruled by a ministry of myth. Whose emissaries haunt this century's streets. ²³

In conclusion, V. emerges as "a remarkably scattered concept," a confused index, a mysterious initial that finds no name nor physical shape but as many names and shapes as all the plots conceived about her enigmatic existence. The quester finally defines himself as:

He who looks for V., and whatever impersonations that might involve [...] the ultimate Plot Which Has No Name. ²⁴

The quest for V. therefore coincides with the construction of a mapless territory by a spy whose deciphering functions are parodied, unsupported as they are by the effective existence of a complot:

It isn't espionage [...] he works for no whitehall [...] the lunacy of any self-appointed prophet ²⁵.

Stencil's feverish mental activity arbitrarily reorganizes historical and geographical data, in an hermeneutic effort that eliminates every objective illusion of the existence of facts.

When he says that the world does not exist, except in a mind merely producing contingent meanings, ²⁶

²³ Ibid., p. 423.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 210.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 42.

²⁶ "He had decided long ago that no situation had any objective reality: it only existed in the minds of those who happened on it at any specific moment." Ibid., p. 174.

Stencil is rejecting an absolute epistemology, as Wittgenstein does when he relates language to a city with no panoramic view, the same way in which language resists generalizations by creating "meaning in situation."²⁷ By saying so, Stencil finally abandons the Baudelairean neoidealistic space of survival, which in the Postmodern version has become a pathological mental space of paranoia, offering no more further alternative to the pervasive entropy of mass communication.

Interiority, for Pynchon, is not the elective space of creation that it was for Baudelaire, but a scattered map of cerebral conjecture, of projections merely disclosing, like "metafiction," the mental mechanisms of the subject, the ideological structures of his discourse, and not the objects that he examines.²⁸

According to Pynchon, the hypertrophic space of the mind is a fairly decadent resort, another form of "hothouse." As with the Benjaminian ruminator before the ruins of Paris, Stencil does not simply reflect on

²⁷ Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Ricerche filosofiche, (Philosophische Untersuchungen, 1953), It. trans. Renzo Piovesan and Mario Trinchero (Torino: Einaudi, 1967). It is worth noting that in V., Pynchon quotes Wittgenstein in the name of a character, Weissman, engaged in the difficult decodifying of a radio broadcasting in the African desert, finally translating the mysterious signals into the famous aphorism: "The World is All that is the Case."

²⁸ "[...] now (Stencil had) awakened to discover the pursuit of V. was merely a scholarly quest after all, an adventure of the mind, in the tradition of The Golden Bough or The White Goddess." Pynchon, V., p. 50.

a thing, but on his very perception of the thing
itself:

Ciò che fundamentalmente distingue il
rimuginatoro dal pensatore è che il primo non
riflette semplicemente su una cosa, ma piuttosto
sulle sue percezioni di questa cosa. Il
caso del rimuginatoro, è quello di un uomo
che, possedendo già la soluzione del grande
problema, l'ha però dimenticata [...]
Rimuginatoro e allegorista sono fatti della
stessa pasta. ²⁹

He transforms his quest into a speculative inquiry on
the logic and rational processes that are typical of
Western culture, designing an allegorical territory
that is an unreal Baedeker, like the narrator's mental
house in William Gass's "In the Heart of the Heart of
the Country," ³⁰ or like the seminal Borgesian Tlön:

Gli abitanti di questo pianeta concepiscono
l'universo come una serie di processi mentali
[...] l'universo è paragonabile a quelle
crittografie in cui non tutti i segni hanno
un valore [...] Tlön sarà un labirinto, ma un
labirinto ordito dagli uomini, destinato a
essere decifrato dagli uomini. Il contatto
con Tlön, l'assuefazione ad esso, hanno dis-
integrato questo mondo. ³¹

²⁹ Benjamin, Parigi, p. 480.

³⁰. William Gass, "In the Hear of the Heart of
the Country," In the Heart of the Heart of the Country,
(New York-Evanston-London: Harper and Row, 1968), pp.
172-206.

³¹ Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"
in Ficciones (1944), in Opere, vol. II, Domenico Por-
zio, ed., (Milano: Mondadori, 1981), p. 630.

In this recalling of the ruins of the map, Pynchon is indebted to Jorge Luis Borges ³² and, in particular, to a short story in which, quoting (or in a fake quotation of) Suárez Miranda, the Argentinian writer refers to a ruinous maps of knowledge, to the incomplete cartography of a synthetic, rational order that Surrealists had begun to question long before. ³³

The motif of the ruins of the map has been more recently pursued by Umberto Eco, who, in a metadiscursive short story, implies that those who try to recreate a map of the Empire (language) engage them-

³² Barbara Lanati relates Postmodern narrative forms to those of South American writers, where the exploration of the world becomes a metaphor for a voyage in a mental space. She says: "del loro divagare lento attraverso i meandri della mente dei loro personaggi, dove storie surreali s'intrecciano e inseguono, si ripetono e intersecano, dove le parole pesantemente si dispiegano e confondono, come per mettere a nudo non il problema del rapporto tra il personaggio e la sua storia, ma tra il personaggio e il suo 'pensare'." Barbara Lanati, Preface to "La finzione necessaria: Il romanzo postmoderno americano," Calibano, p. 12.

³³ "In quell'impero, l'Arte della Cartografia raggiunse una tale Perfezione che la mappa d'una sola provincia occupava tutta una città, e la mappa dell'Impero, tutta una Provincia. Col tempo, codeste Mappe Smisurate non soddisfecero e i Collegi dei Cartografi eressero una Mappa dell'Impero, che eguagliava in grandezza l'Impero e coincideva puntualmente con esso. Meno Dedite allo Studio della Cartografia, le Generazioni Successive compresero che quella vasta mappa era Inutile e non senza Empietà la abbandonarono alle Inclemenze del Sole e degl'Inverni. Nei deserti dell'Ovest rimangono lacere Rovine della Mappa, abitate da Animali e Mendichi; in tutto il Paese non è altra reliquia delle Discipline Geografiche." Cf. George Luis Borges, L'artefice (1960) in Tutte le opere, p. 1253.

selves in a endless task. In the allegorical story, "The Map of the Empire," he writes about an Emperor who decides to make a realistic map of his territory, fatally falling into the paradox of producing an over-inclusive topography, an impossible representation of total space.³⁴

Though devoting themselves to the creation of a map perfectly coinciding with their Empire in its entire extension, the representation of "real" space made by the Emperor's laborious workers is never satisfactory, because to build a map, a detailed topography, Eco suggests, would always mean selecting one way of reading it, with the consequent impoverishment of the Empire.³⁵ Out of the Wittgensteinian metaphor, knowledge has no catalogue; it is a space of communication that elsewhere Eco defines as "unlimited semiosis,"³⁶ a linguistic process resisting all maps and measures.

³⁴ Umberto Eco, "The Map of the Empire", Engl. trans. S. Eugene Scalia, "Italian Writing Today," The Literary Review, n. 2, vol. 28, (Winter 1985), 233-38.

³⁵ The story ends with the following words: "However strenuous and of difficult practicality this solution may be, it supports the transparent, permeable, spread, and orientable map as being the best and preventing the need for recourse to the impoverished map: Except that it too, like the previous maps, is susceptible to the paradox of the Normal Map." Ibid., p. 238.

³⁶ Eco, Semiologia e filosofia del linguaggio (Torino: Einaudi, 1984).

In order to find a way out of the aporias of the self-reflexive labyrinth, in Gravity's Rainbow Slothrop, another hero confronted with a site of war ruins, chooses a different solution: he finally leaves his hothouse to encounter the crowd, turning from the desiring suitor into the pursued object of the quest.

2. Scattered in the cosmopolitan Zone: deciphering "Gravity's Rainbow"

It is worth noting, as Leverenz did,³⁷ that the original title of this novel was Mindless Pleasure, referring to the logic of chance actually ruling Slothrop's promiscuous sexual life. The Neo-Surrealist topography created by his fugitive libertine encounters, however, does not prevent the Pavlovian psychologist Pointsman from inspecting his private life in order to prove a direct correspondence between Slothrop's sexual activity and the rocket launchings. Roger Mexico also produces two maps of London that compare the urban sites hit by the V2 missiles³⁸ with

³⁷ David Leverenz, "On trying to read Gravity's Rainbow in D. Leverenz-Levine ed., Mindful Pleasure (Boston: Little Brown, 1976), p. 230.

³⁸ "His little bureau is dominated now by a glimmering map [...] an ink ghost of London [...] Rocket strikes are represented in red circles." Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow, p. 63.

those where Slothrop meets with his different lovers.

³⁹ It is from such improbable links that another paranoiac international intrigue starts, breaking into thousands of plots and subplots, and finally culminating in the explosion of the H Bomb, an event devoid of any rational logic, due to a science that no longer serves the development of human progress, appearing as an arbitrary, invisible source of devastation.

The crisis of rational science and causal logic envisioned by the avant-gardes and realized as the atomic catastrophe by Postmodern writers finally leads Roger Mexico, the map-maker, to undo the plot, concluding that the two events are unrelated:

Each hit is independent of all others. Bombs are no dogs. No link. No conditioning [...] There is nothing to link the rocket strikes.⁴⁰

At the end of the novel, the question that animated the whole action - "And where, keepers of the maps, specialists of surveillance would you say the new one will fall?" ⁴¹ - is suspended and enters the n-dimensional domain of the unpredictable.

Gravity's Rainbow takes place in the ruined European cities of the last few months of the Second World

³⁹ "Slothrop's map of London [...] revealing fondness out here for mindless pleasures." Ibid., p. 230.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 140.

War, and in Berlin in particular, a city that, once a third of its houses and 90% of its historical center are destroyed, becomes a nowhere place, transcending the very definition of a city, divided as it is into four culturally promiscuous zones (American, British, French and Russian) corresponding to the four occupying armies. ⁴²

It is exactly this crisis in the definition of the ruinous city, its state of undefinable political and social abeyance, that Pynchon evokes with this semiotically entropic setting, where Slothrop passes "through a Londonized Germany"⁴³ in a scene of devastation that unifies distant places: the English capital and the German cities are all reduced to the degree zero of their urban and national identities. Slothrop sees "never a clear sense of nationality anywhere, not even of belligerent sides, only the War, a single damaged landscape." ⁴⁴

⁴² For a study of Berlin during the Second World War, see Werner Oichslin, ed. La ricostruzione della città. Berlino (XVII Biennale, Milano: Electa, 1987) and Patrizia Montini Zimolo, ed., Berlino Ovest tra continuità e rifondazione (Roma: Officina, 1987).

⁴³ Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow, p. 166.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 299.

On these recent ruins, Pynchon rewrites The Waste Land, ⁴⁵ the dystopic London field that T. S. Eliot after the First World War depicts in terms of a ruinous landscape of debris, crossed by cosmopolitan figures, an urban desert resulting from a Fall, actualizing the threat of the cruel God of Leviticus to transform the cities of those who transgressed his Laws into waste lands and the transgressors themselves into permanent exiles in Babelic foreign countries. ⁴⁶

Reflecting the trauma produced by atomic devastation, Pynchon's novel is still pervaded by an anti-technological mode and by a Luddite streak that the author more openly vindicates in his article "Is it OK to be a Luddite?"⁴⁷ But the anti-technological, dystopic attitude motivated by devastating military technology does not prevent the zone of ruins to become the refuge for an underground population which, opposing the monolithic scientific logic producing total weapons, finds in the ruins a space of survival, like all conspirators and the poet in the crowd who, according to Benjamin, finds a safe shelter in the ruined

⁴⁵ For the influence exerted by T. S. Eliot's writings on Pynchon, see the author's introduction to Slow Learner, p. 17, and Francesco Binni, "Romanzo di famiglia: il mito dell'eterno ritorno nella fiction del postmodernismo", in Caratteri esclusivi, p. 110.

⁴⁶ Leviticus, 27-34.

⁴⁷ Pynchon, "It is OK to be a Luddite?", Times Book Review, (Oct. 28, 1984), 1-2.

city, in the depressed areas of the industrial landscape.

In the disfigured, vanishing city where all army leaders from different countries are after the atomic bomb as the holy object of a sacred quest, as the catalyst of all their energies,⁴⁸ a Babelic population lives in permanent exile with the most diverse aims and tongues, dispersed in "wan, preterite places"⁴⁹: the gypsy Geli Tripping, the East End population in London and the underground of bombarded German cities are among them. These marginals inhabit a trash-world, living at the outskirts of civilization, like the Bohemian poet. Like the Benjaminian city of ruins, the dump is a space of subversion, a field where a marginal like Flange in "Low Land" (1960) learns to think of his life "as a surface in the process of change, much as the floor of the dump was in transition."⁵⁰

They transform the sites of devastation into an hybrid area of tolerance crossed by polyglot individuals whose status the color of their uniforms cannot define:

⁴⁸ The V4, the prototype of the atomic bomb, has the same attractive power that Henry Adams attributed to radium in the industrial age and to the Virgin in the twelfth century. Cf. Henry Adams, The Education, cit..

⁴⁹ Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow, p. 510.

⁵⁰ Pynchon, "Low Lands", Slow Learner, p. 64.

Slothrop drifts in and out of dozens of these quiet, hungry, scuffling migrations [...] He's stripped all the insignia off Tchitcherine's uniform, trying for less visibility, but very few people see to care much about insignia.

⁵¹

In the underground world, Geli Tripping lives with other "human palimpsests"⁵² with cosmopolitan names, such as the The Waste Land's characters Mr. Silvero, Hakagawa, Madame de Tornquist, Fraülein von Kulp, etc. Pynchon's zone is not, however, a another Baudelairean configuration of Babylon after the Fall, but a city of technological ruins which, as Henry Adams prefigured, always has a double nature, where order and anarchy coexist, ⁵³ and where it is impossible to think in terms of frontiers and boundaries; a city that proves to be a cosmopolitan receptacle of different cultures marginalized by Western ethnocentric and military power:

Forget frontiers now. Forget subdivisions. There aren't any [...] You'll learn: It's all suspended. Vaslav calls it an "interregnum." You'll have to flow along with it.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow, pp. 640-2.

⁵² Ibid., p. 57.

⁵³ "Adams proclaimed that in the last synthesis, order and chaos were one, but that the unity was chaos." Cf. Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams, p. 400.

⁵⁴ Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow, p. 294.

As a result, the zone does not identify with the military technology, but discloses a "trans-marginal," paradoxical underworld "where ideas of the opposite have come together, and lost their oppositeness."⁵⁵ This enigmatic site in which opposites coexist, as in the Duchampian monstrous universe, is the reflection of a relativistic, Heisenbergian logic that contrasts with the Manichean determinism of the technocrats. The zone has the vitality of contradiction, and ultimately refers to the Conradian notion of darkness, and leads to a rejection of the deadly order of science adopted by Western cultures to "civilize" and submit foreign countries to the ideology of power:

In Africa, Asia, Amerindia, Oceania, Europe came and established its order of Analysis and Death. What he could not use he killed and altered [...] Now we are in the last phase. American death has come to occupy Europe. It has learned Empire from its own Metropolis. But now we have only the structure left us, none of the great rainbow plumes, no fittings of gold, no epic marches over alkali seas. The savages of other continents, corrupted but still resisting in the name of life have gone on despite everything.⁵⁶

This renewed darkness does not reappear in a natural environment, but rather in an ultra-urban world which similarly questions the superiority of one culture over

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 842-43.

another, the Calvinist division between the "elect" and the "preterite":

Maybe for a little while all the fences are down, one road as good as another - the whole space of the Zone cleared, depolarized, and somewhere inside the waste of it a single set of coordinates from which to proceed, without elect, without preterite, without even nationality to fuck it up.⁵⁷

In this realm of darkness where the ultimate Text is darkness ⁵⁸, Slothrop, the hero of the story, renounces the role of the quester and becomes the pursued, taking on the multiple shape of the object of desire. He changes uniforms; passes from one Zone to another, turning from a member of a military group into a multifarious, Melvillean confidence man, moving "like a tourist"⁵⁹ through a global world that stretches well beyond his own limited perspective.

Surrendering to the logic of chance that the street represents, the hero suspends his quest for meaning, concluding:

The zone can sustain many other plots beside those polarized upon himself [...] this network of all plots may yet carry him to freedom. He understands that he should not be

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 556. For the polemical attitude of Pynchon toward the Manicheism implied in the American Protestant culture see Tony Tanner, Thomas Pynchon, (New York- London: Methuen, 1982).

⁵⁸ "[...] the real Text persisted, somewhere else, in its darkness, our darkness." Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow, p. 520.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 338.

so paranoid [...] but ride instead their kind underground awhile, see where it takes. ⁶⁰.

Touring "the ruins, the high-desert traces of an ancient European order,"⁶¹ Slothrop, like the hero of John Hawkes's The Cannibal (1949) who crossed on his motorcycle the "evil zone" of a German village also demolished by bombs, tries to devise "hypothetical lines of communication"⁶² in a foreign country that he never knew in times of peace and in its originary architecture. But the ruins and debris produced by bombs turned the city into a desert, canceling all traces of urban topography, any traces of rational order. The war zone, which is also a persistent site in both the autobiographical and the narrative world of J. G. Ballard, is an "inner space [...]" where the inner world of the mind and the outer world of reality meet and fuse," ⁶³ a Neo-Surrealist space for mental maneuvering.

Heaps of ruins, as Benjamin says, are bric-à-brac of fragments, turning the map of the city into a

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 703.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 509.

⁶² John Hawkes, The Cannibal (1949) (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 129. For a discussion of the author see Marisa Bulgheroni, Il nuovo romanzo americano 1949-1959 (Milano: Schwarz, 1960).

⁶³ J. G. Ballard, "Introduction to the French edition of Crash, (New York: Random House, 1985), p.3.

puzzle, ⁶⁴ such that Slothrop, like the American soldier in Hawkes' story, faces a "ruinous mosaic." ⁶⁵

He does not, however, become obsessed with mental topography, as Stencil does, among the ruins of the bombarded city, nor does he disappear like Porpentine, a fin de siècle spy who marked with his own death his retreat before the new entropic codes introduced by electronics. ⁶⁶ On the contrary, resisting the impulse to structure his own existence according to causal logic, he abandons the inquisitory syndrome of the spy and, in a gesture common to many Pynchonian characters, he ends up dismembered, dispersed in the territory,

⁶⁴ "Il ricordo del rimuginatore dispone della massa disordinata del sapere morto. Il saper umano è per lui frammento in un senso particolarmente pregnante, vale a dire come il mucchio di pezzi tagliati a casaccio coi quali si compone un puzzle. Un'epoca poco incline alla rimuginazione ne ha mantenuto l'atteggiamento nel puzzle. Si tratta in particolare dell'atteggiamento dell'allegorista. L'allegorista estraе ora qui ora là un pezzo dal fondo scompigliato che il suo sapere gli mette a disposizione, lo affianca ad un altro e prova se si adattino l'uno all'altro: questo significato a quest'immagine o questa immagine a quel significato. Il risultato non può mai esser previsto, giacchè fra i due non c'è nessuna mediazione naturale." Benjamin, Parigi, p. 481.

⁶⁵ "What ruinous mosaic, facing outward into the Waste outward from the sheltering city ... readable only to those who journey outside ... eyes in the distance...barbarians...riders...." Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow, p. 103.

⁶⁶ Cf. Pynchon, "Under the Rose," Slow Learner, pp.95-131.

with a weak identity, ⁶⁷ "scattered all over the Zone,"
⁶⁸ resisting interpretation and leaving the reader
 alone with his deductions:

Like signals sent out for lost travelers,
 shapes keep repeating for him. Zonal shapes
 he will allow to enter but won't interpret,
 not anymore. ⁶⁹

Lost in a crowd of indices, he becomes a drifter
 like the Bretonian Nadja and Benny Profane in V., ⁷⁰
 making his exit from the novel with no answer:

Well right now Slothrop feels himself sliding
 onto the anti-paranoid part of his cycle,
 feels the whole city around him going back
 roofless, vulnerable, uncentered as he is.⁷¹

He passes from the meandering of his inner space, or
 psychological identity, to the street, becoming an
 errant soul symbolically abandoning the deciphering
 effort of the mind in his quest for indices, to become

⁶⁷ For a discussion of the "weak subject" in Post-modern culture, see Gianni Vattimo's essays, Le avventure della differenza: Che cosa significa pensare dopo Nietzsche e Heidegger (Milano: Garzanti, 1980); Al di là del soggetto: Nietzsche, Heidegger e l'ermeneutica, (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1981) and La fine della modernità (Milano: Garzanti, 1985).

⁶⁸ "Scattered all over the Zone. It's doubtful if he can ever be 'found' again, in the conventional sense of 'positively identified and detained.'" Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow, p. 830.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 660.

⁷⁰ Profane spends his time "yo-yoing" in the subway, like the hero of J. G. Ballard's story, "The Concentration City" (1957), who takes the subway to and fro, with no final destination.

⁷¹ Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow, p. 506.

"a crossroad,"⁷² at one with a street, which in the end loses the name of zone to assume the "transmarginal" definition of "linguistic wilderness":

Does no one recognize what enslavement gravity is till he reaches the interface of the thunder ? [...] No time to work out puzzles [...] It's a linguistic wilderness here. ⁷³

Scattered among the debris of the zone, he becomes himself a trace for his pursuers and the object of the quest for the reader himself, leaving a last index of his existence in the confused message of a mural graffiti, and later in the photograph in which he is portrayed with other members of a rock group, playing electronic music mixed with noise and disharmonic sounds. ⁷⁴

This state of coexistence of heterogeneous and cosmopolitan cultures that Pynchon calls zones, thus locating them beyond the city limits, is expressed at narrative levels in the omnivorous language of linguistic compresence better known as Postmodern pastiche, derivative of Surrealist collages and assem-

⁷² Ibid., p. 729.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 530.

⁷⁴ Rock music is the musical genre of entropy, according to Pynchon. It is the music broadcast by Mucho Maas in a radio program in The Crying of Lot 49, a character who, after questioning himself about self-identity in the entropic age, accepts work as a disc-jockey, removing all existential doubts among the chaotic signals of his radio broadcasting.

blages, and also giving a voice to discarded or ignored aspects of life, such as castaways, fugitives, the trash, the rejects of a rational, advanced technocracy.

In this multifarious shape the text gives voice to the crowd. In Gravity's Rainbow, the rational-scientific idiom of technological power is undermined by the myriad of idiolects and esoteric practices of the people of the ruins. The metafictional, inter-textual aspects of his novel are mixed into a larger semiotic dimension of mass culture and electronic idioms. The passage of Slothrop in the war ruins, as the Postmodern iconography of catastrophe also demonstrates,⁷⁵ is a journey through a space of communication dominated by electronics, which started in World War II with the discovery of radar: exactly the instrument by which to control the trajectory of adversary missiles. Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow transcends the spatial-temporal context of Berlin in 1945 to announce the multinational and cultural dimension that Capitalism began to assume after the war, unifying the

⁷⁵ We may think of the illustrations in the issue dedicated to catastrophe in Phototeca (Milan), II, 5, 1981, or those in Zone, pp. 390-417, not to mention films about urban catastrophe like Jim Jarmusch's Permanent Vacation (1980) depicting an atomic catastrophe that supposedly destroys New York and that history does not account for.

cosmos through electric wires.⁷⁶ In other words, what initially seems to be like a war novel ends up being a phantapolitical narrative anticipating the cybernetic future, in a peculiar form of science fiction of the present, which J. G. Ballard defined in his French preface to Crash as "a cataclysmic novel of the present day":

I was dissatisfied with Science Fiction's obsession with its principal themes - outer space and the far future [...] primarily I wanted to write a fiction about the present day [...] Science and technology multiply around us [...] they dictate the languages in which we speak and think [...] The future envisaged in the SF of the 1940's and 1950's is already our past [...] the future is ceasing to exist, devoured by the all-voracious present.⁷⁷

In other words, in Gravity's Rainbow the Babelic zone alludes to the dematerialized territory of information society, diffusing the trash of mass culture which started dominating the air with the advent of the first transistor radios. The narrative is often interrupted

⁷⁶ Nicola Tesla made the project of a world entirely unified by language fluxes carried by electricity. Cf. Jonathan Crary, "Eclissi dello spettacolo," Oltre la città, la metropoli, p. 239.

⁷⁷ J. G. Ballard, Crash (1974) (New York: Random House, 1985), pp. 8-9. In Italy Carlo Pagetti has extensively discussed this genre in Il senso del futuro. La fantascienza nella letteratura americana (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1970) and in "La città delle illusioni," La città e le stelle, 3, (Spring 1985), 25-31.

to incorporate pop song lyrics, film fragments, interferences and "noise," diverting both Slothrop's story and the reader's attention.

This "ruinous mosaic" of interfering data and linguistic material does not order events into a progressive story, into an international intrigue developing into a dénouement: it produces, instead, an increasing entanglement of the plot which ends with no solution.⁷⁸ Throughout the narrative, Pynchon seems very engaged in disseminating traces of possible solutions to the mystery of the secret platform where the atomic missile is going to be launched. In doing so, he creates a Melvillean "whale of a book," a colossal display of subplots and secondary characters (some of them mere fugitive appearances). The search for the technological fetish is juxtaposed to that of the scientist Pökler who pursues his daughter Ilse-Bianca, and that

⁷⁸ Gianni Celati devises in the absence of recognition a feature of the archeological search in the ruins: "La Storia, sia come storiografia sia come adattamento letterario, epica o romanzo, tende sempre a risolvere il senso dei grandi insiemi di fatti attraverso l'artificio dell'agnizione: quel punto, scena madre o dichiarazione di una verità, in cui le discontinuità si annullano per mezzo dello svelamento della loro direzione [...] L'archeologia, al contrario, ha una vocazione discenditiva, o catagogica: non fornisce all'insieme molare degli avvenimentalcun punto di agnizione; lavora sempre su insiemi locali o molecolari, non riuscendo a compiere il salto dalla quantità alla qualità, a scegliersi una assiomatica astratta che renda conto della totalità degli avvenimenti attraverso un punto focale." Gianni Celati, "Il bazar Archeologico," in George Teyssot, ed., Oltre la città, la metropoli, p. 236.

of Tchitcherine and the Soviet troops tracking down the S-Gerät, in a series of subplots which gets more complicated as the flâneur-hero moves from one zone to another, from one linguistic universe to another. In the meantime, the city loses its original geographical dimension to become a dispersive producer of multiple stories, "the ultimate erratic zone."⁷⁹ This narrative flânerie opens new pathways to the reader, finally taking him back to the initial displacement in an entropic form that renders the pan-linguistic redeeming writing of T. S. Eliot a distant utopia.

The open-ended novel becomes a territory of mental obsession for the reader, virtually containing all possible solutions, because, as Henry Adams wrote, facts do not speak for themselves but can be organized in different plots:

All opinion founded on fact must be error, because the facts can never be complete, and their relations must be always infinite.⁸⁰

In the Babylonian territory where different nations confront themselves beyond all boundaries, the enigmatic object of their search, the catalyst for all human energies in the electronic age, the V4 rocket, assumes as many shapes as are the dreams and projections of those who keep on pursuing it:

⁷⁹ Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow, p. 767.

⁸⁰ Adams, The Education, p. 410.

The Rocket has to be many things, it must answer to a number of different shapes in the dreams of those who touch it.⁸¹

Allowing a variety of readings, like a mapless city where everyone finds his own way out, the novel constantly decenters the reader's expectations, simulating epiphanies that are punctually disappointed, and always offering the reader alternative directions. Towards the end of the novel, the object of the quest becomes a sublime mythical fetish left for the reader to shape. As in Duchampian aesthetics, the novel becomes an open field of performance for the reader.

3. Post-industrial ruins: the highway city and the doubts of Oedipa Maas in "The Crying of Lot 49"

So cry me a river that leads to a road
That turns into highway that goes and goes
And tangles in your memories
So long. So old.

Laurie Anderson, "My eyes"

Apart from the ruinous European cities during the war and the cosmopolitan places crossed by permanent tourists in V., another scenario that Pynchon adopts

⁸¹ Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow, p. 847.

for individual dismemberment and dispersion in space is the highway, an area of transit transcending city boundaries.

In The Crying of Lot 49, Pynchon elects the Los Angeles four-level highway as the landscape of errance where Oedipa Maas, the inquiring protagonist, ends up driving with no final direction.

It is worth noting that, in the years when this novel was first published, the first systematic studies of the American "car culture" were appearing. The perception of the driver and of a "city in motion" emerges in a time of development of the suburb and ultra-urban areas.⁸²

Continuing a metastatic process in the urban territory initiated after the middle of the nineteenth century by the so-called taxpayer strip (the road at the periphery of cities where trades and commerce flourished, far from the congested center⁸³), the commercial center of the city was increasingly moving

⁸² "Planning for the city in motion" is a chapter in Hans Blumenfeld's essay on urban development beyond metropolitan boundaries, in which we read: "It is always the gateways and the channels of movement which are the most permanent elements on the city and which determine its basic structure. Only in moving through this network of channels can the city as a whole be experienced and understood." Hans Blumenfeld, Metropolis and Beyond, Paul D. Spreiregen FAIA ed. (New York-Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1979), p. 279.

⁸³ Cf. David R. Goldfield, Blaine A. Brownell, Urban America: From Downtown to No Town (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), p. 14.

beyond the urban perimeter, determining a decline, since the twenties, of the "main street" as a shopping area, and the consequent appearance of the Miracle Mile, a new commercial district rising near the highway, like the Wiltshire Boulevard in Los Angeles.

Kevin Lynch's essay on the driver's perspective on the American landscape was published only a few years before The Crying of Lot 49.⁸⁴ As early as 1965, however, Tom Wolfe sensed the importance of the "electrographic architecture," the phantasmagoric billboards located at the edge of the highways for the use of the car-driver speeding away.⁸⁵ Later on, in Learning from Las Vegas, the Postmodern architect Robert Venturi celebrated such gigantic and heavily decorated road signs in which "the building and the symbol are one and the same thing,"⁸⁶ as a fundamental feature of American architecture, shaping most of the urban territory of Las Vegas, the city of casinos and advertised com-

⁸⁴ Donald Appleyard, Kevin Lynch, John Meyer, The View from the Road.

⁸⁵ Tom Wolfe, "Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can't Hear You! Too Noisy!) Las Vegas!!" in The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (New York: Farrar: Straus & Giroux, 1965).

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 112.

modities, basically consisting of a main road endlessly traversed by cars: the strip.⁸⁷

The size and the colorful, eye-catching decorations of road signs prevail on the architectural structures, such as the gas-station, restaurant or store that they advertise. And is not Pynchon's description of the kitsch sign of the motel in San Narciso where Oedipa temporarily stops an ironic homage to the commercial architecture?

[...] when she got a look at the next motel, she hesitated a second: A representation in painted sheet metal of a nymph holding a white blossom towered thirty feet into the air.⁸⁸

Driven into the amnesiac space of the Los Angeles highway like the protagonist of Joan Didion's Play it as it Lays who drives away with no destination in order to exorcise doubt and pain,⁸⁹ Oedipa Maas, housewife and improvised detective in Pynchon's second novel, crosses the new artificial scenarios: parking lots, motels, drive-ins, aero-spatial stations and factories, commercial architecture anonymously built with the highways and expanding beyond individual horizons, "lined by auto lots, escrow services, drive-ins, small office

⁸⁷ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas (Cambridge, Mass.-London: MIT Press, 1972).

⁸⁸ Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49, p. 14.

⁸⁹ Joan Didion, Play it as it Lays (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970).

buildings and factories whose address numbers were in the 70 and then 80,000's."⁹⁰

Commercial architecture, ephemerally materializing on the unlimited horizon of the highway, is the direct heir to the Benjaminian magasin, the new phantasmagoric area of consumption for the flâneur on the move.

It is notable how, in his book on arcades, Benjamin viewed the European city not so much in its monumental and architectonic features, but in its artificial structures of consumption, as well as in the anonymous areas of transit - the railway stations, the department stores, the arcades - that develop the circulation of commodities. This ahistorical, artificial habitat, whose model for Benjamin was the American metropolis,⁹¹ was increasingly dominated by temples of consumption, ordinary buildings becoming irresistibly attractive to the flâneur despite their constitutive ordinary architecture and bad taste,⁹² because "la dozzinaliz-

⁹⁰ Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49, p. 14.

⁹¹ "Un criterio per stabilire se una città è moderna: l'assenza di monumenti ('New York è una città senza monumenti,' Döblin)." Benjamin, Parigi, p. 504.

⁹² "I lavori architettonici più caratteristici del XIX secolo: stazioni, padiglioni, grandi magazzini (secondo Gideon) hanno tutti per oggetto il bisogno collettivo. Il flâneur si sente attratto da queste costruzioni 'di cattivo gusto, ordinarie', come dice Gideon." Ibid., p. 590.

zazione dello spazio è l'esperienza basilare del flâneur."⁹³

Even though between his nineteenth-century Paris and the Pynchonian San Narciso and the decentered Los Angeles, there intervenes the war and the post-war years, the culture of consumerism and the opening of a cultural market that de-materializes physical products, the Benjaminian intuition finds a correlative in an archeological industrial landscape in decay, constituted by closed factories, and showing the first signs of the obsolescence of one of the first technological fetishes, of status-symbols such as the car, which in The Crying of Lot 49 reappear as used cars in the second-hand store of Mucho Maas. The used car is a wreck, a ruin hiding a mysterious past, the invisible lives of those who were using it. The un-glamorous, commercial architecture described by Pynchon has a close link with the catastrophic city of the war zone in Gravity's Rainbow. Oedipa encounters an highway landscape with factories in demolition, full of mechanical and industrial wrecks as ruins of the mechanical era.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 546.

After the trash heaps appearing in "Low Lands" in the shape of underground paths opened by gypsies in the trash, industrial ruins constitute new palimpsests with no origins, cryptic routes at the border of the highways reflecting the individual difficulty of finding a way through signs. In Hopper's paintings as in Pynchon's stories, the technological degradation of industrial hardware is more visible in the peripheral areas, in the areas of open transit.

Roads like Interstate 75, connecting Michigan with Florida, which were very much used in the sixties, have more recently been abandoned for the creation of the "superhighway," leaving behind it the ruins of older gas stations, of parking lots, motels and fast food restaurants located there for the convenience of the passing driver. ⁹⁴ Reacting to rational Modernist designs in architecture and celebrating the giantism of the opulent industrial city, ⁹⁵ Postmodern architecture has moved ruins into the temple of consumerism: a group of New York architects (SITE) founded by James Wines and Alison Sky was able to complete the "Notch Pro-

⁹⁴ Diane C. Thomas, "Lonely Road Now," Atlanta Magazine, (Nov. 1978), 57, cit. in Chester H. Liebs, Main Street to Miracle Mile (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1985), p. 36.

⁹⁵ Cf. the exhibition of the iconographic materials of advertising structures and architecture, "Les années 50," at the Galerie du Centre Pompidou in Paris which took place from June 30 till October 17, 1988.

ject," a big mall belonging to the BEST chain, consisting of a big square building apparently similar to other out-of-town malls which, with walls that simulate demolition and a broken masonry, in an example of "dis-architecture." In the same spirit, a group of preservationists has turned the first McDonald's restaurant, opened in 1955 in Des Plaines, Illinois into a museum,⁹⁶ emphasizing the rapid dissolution and ephemeral dimension of the first commercial structures.

The Crying of Lot 49 presents a post-industrial vision of an aerospace factory closed for the weekend, anticipating J.G. Ballard's story, "Myths of the Near Future" (1982), in which Sheppard, the astronaut of Apollo 12, returns after thirty years to the Cape Kennedy platform in demolition, surrounded by empty hotels, silence, dust, and drained swimming pools, as in David's Hockney's "A Bigger Splash" (1968).⁹⁷ These "archeological ruins" of the industrial era form what Georges Teyssot defines as "un'architettura criptica come i codici dimenticati di un linguaggio geometrico abbandonato."⁹⁸

⁹⁶ C. Liebs, From Main Street to Miracle Mile, p. 226.

⁹⁷ J.G. Ballard, "Myths of the Near Future", Myths of the Near Future (London: Grafton, 1987), p. 18.

⁹⁸ Teyssot, Oltre la città, la metropoli, p. 19.

In The Crying, the abandoned aerospace center on the Los Angeles highway is another place that witnesses a decline of the technological myth of progress, converting the temples of scientific research into a Surreal and rather psychic dimension, into a Ballardian "psychic disaster area, a zone of ill omen,"⁹⁹ expressing the psychic lability of the protagonist, Oedipa, self-divided by doubts.

The post-industrial landscape of ruins that Pynchon envisions in the late Sixties emanates a magnetic sense of uncertainty. In their tendency to repeat themselves, the suburbs and the peripheral, extra-urban areas define a territory of unstable projections. While cataloguing the Inverarity estate in her search for the legitimate heir to this property, Oedipa crosses a neutral, artificial territory: the highway labyrinth marking the impossibility of her deciding where to turn.

At one point, she climbs up a hill to get a panoramic view of the city, which appears to her as the printed circuit of a transistor radio with its hieroglyphic tangle of electric wires, a vision that, as the 1967 photos by Edward Ruscha included in Thirty-four Parking Lots in Los Angeles demonstrate, finally

⁹⁹ Ballard, "Myths of the Near Future," Myths of the Near Future, p. 18.

marks the passage from the industrial urban landscape to its ruins in the electronic age:

She looked down a slope [...] onto a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit [...] she knew even less about radio than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out). ¹⁰⁰

Confronting the enigmatic landscape, Oedipa, whose emblematic name attributes to her the destiny of solving enigmas, synthesizes the two typologies of Pynchonian characters so far presented: she is engaged, with the tenacious patience of a spy, in finding the mysterious heir to the Inverarity Estate, but, at the same time, she leads her search in the ruinous outskirts of the city and in the labyrinth of the highway, where she wanders like a drifter.

When she gives up conjecture and mental architecture, Oedipa lets herself go in the amnesiac transit of Los Angeles, an hypothetical, centerless city, unlike San Narciso, the self-reflexive toponym of sterile mental elaborations, which, like Borges' "Circular Ruins," is "less an identifiable city than a grouping of con-

¹⁰⁰ Pynchon, The Crying, p. 12.

cepts"¹⁰¹: a topos of dispersion where the driver, as Banham notes, is "shut up in (his) own private metal capsule in the abstract limbo of the freeways."¹⁰²

Oedipa's reflections on the indices at her disposal are conceived and deconstructed on the dispersive, high speed road of the highway,¹⁰³ where at some point she is strongly tempted to disintegrate herself, anticipating the "scattering" of Slothrop in the zone of ruins:

Here in San Francisco, away from all tangible assets of that estate, there might still be a chance of getting the whole thing to go away and disintegrate quietly. She had only to drift tonight, at random, and watch nothing happen [...] She got off the freeway at north beach, drove around.¹⁰⁴

As in Slothrop's metamorphosis into a crossroad, Oedipa is a divided self as she confronts the different possible roads open before her, suspended as she is between truth and paranoia in another quest that ends in new questions and doubts:

Behind the hieroglyphic streets there would either be a transcendent meaning, or only the earth [...] For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰² Cf. Reyner Banham, Los Angeles, p.237.

¹⁰³ "Amid the exhaust, sweat, glare and ill-humor of a summer evening on an American freeway, Oedipa Maas pondered her Tryster problems. All the silence of San Narciso - the calm surface of the motel pool, the contemplative contours of residential streets [...] had not allowed her to think as leisurely as this freeway madness," Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49, pp. 79-80.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

America, or there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant to it, was an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia. ¹⁰⁵

As Charles Newman points out, "rather than the zone of memory, the street is a non-selective present." ¹⁰⁶ Far from being an urban center and the object of the quest, the Postmodern city is a place where meaning (the "vehicle" of communication) never gets to its destination, but keeps on deviating from its course. Its dispersive logic, like the allegorical war-ruins on the zone or the Baedeker reductive geography in V., finally marks the transformation of the map into a cryptographic territory of communication where the individual is more and more physically committed and mentally scattered.

1.4. Becoming a landscape: individual dismemberment and humor in "Vineland"

"The human body becomes landscape."

William S. Burroughs

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 136-7.

¹⁰⁶. Charles Newman, Understanding Thomas Pynchon, (Columbia: North Carolina U.P., 1986), p. 38.

The dismemberment of the Postmodern character and his dispersal in the territory is a phenomenon that Ihab Hassan amply discusses, tracing its origin in the Modernist tradition of silence.¹⁰⁷ It is, however, worth pointing out that the evasion of the city as the profound domain of the unconscious and the consequent Orpheic dismemberment in urban space not only marks a loss of identity (finally and fatally doomed to remain hidden in the chaos of ruins in the bombarded city¹⁰⁸), but also the Duchampian acquisition of a multifarious personality and of multiple incarnations in one's encounter with the heterogeneous languages of the city. In other words, dismemberment, as Slothrop's experience shows, finally leads to a crossing of cultural boundaries. The individual dismemberment accounted for in the Postmodern novel is a further development of the "allegorical dismemberment" Benjamin wrote about in the flânerie in the Modern, technological city.¹⁰⁹ For

¹⁰⁷ Ihab Hassan, The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature (Madison: Wisconsin U.P., 1982).

¹⁰⁸ It is significant that, in V., the armies of the Axis destroy the Major's office with all anagraphic data, leaving many, like the polyglot Paola Maijstral, with no official identity: "She could be of any age she wanted. And you suspected any nationality, for Paola knew scraps of all tongues." Pynchon, V., p. 6.

¹⁰⁹ Benjamin relates such a dismemberment to the choc experience and the projection of the poet's imaginary world onto the urban environment. Benjamin, Parigi, p. 477.

Slothrop, the alter-ego of the obsessive quester Stencil, the myth of Osiris stands for a dispersion which is not merely psychological and interior, but also physical. As in McLuhan's hypothesis, the new flâneur, the drifter, becomes an extension of the machine. Such is the destiny of Slothrop, better known as "Rocket-man," and such is the very nature of bio-robots like Bongo Shaftsbury (the spy in the electronic age, criss-crossed by electrical wires and relying on "the perfection of their internal machinery" in "Under the Rose"¹¹⁰); not to mention Fergus Mixolydian in V., becoming "an extension of a TV set,"¹¹¹ or the young Nazi soldier Gottfried, whose body is finally fused with the "S-gerät", the facsimile of the atomic bomb at the end of Gravity's Rainbow. These are all characters who keep their relation to technology inscribed on their body, marking the passage from the allegorical Modern mind to the "electronic postmodern body," which was anticipated

¹¹⁰ In the short story, "Under the Rose," Pynchon tells the story of a spy who relies on his intuition to resolve international intrigues, and later is taken over by technological monsters like Bongo-Shaftsbury who is entirely covered with electric wires and able to communicate by means of new secret codes introduced by information technology, in a new society in which, as Porpentine comments before dying, power is no longer identified with a human figure, but assumes a disquieting electronic body. Pynchon, "Under the Rose," Slow Learner, p. 117. On robots and monsters in Postmodern narratives see also Guido Carboni, La finzione necessaria: Narrativa americana e postmodernità (Torino: Tirrenia, 1984), pp. 166-67.

¹¹¹ Pynchon, V., p. 45.

by Duchamp's anthropomorphic machines.

Jonathan Crary comments on such a physical metamorphosis referring to J.G. Ballard's Crash, a novel published the same year as Gravity's Rainbow :

A paradox of Crash is the remoteness of its violence from a modernist experience of shock, which presupposes a subject autonomous enough to maintain a distance from the ceaselessly evolving collage-city, founded on the chaos of anarchical industrial production. Ballard's derelict and amorphous city is concurrent with the global dispersal of the body of the multinational correlation into shifting mobile arrangements, and the relation of the subject to this new city is not one of opposition. Rather he outlines the subject's decomposition, scattering and remapping onto its new surfaces, paralleling related processes in Thomas Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow, published the same year as Crash. There are then no independent agents, defining their own trajectories and meeting in random collisions. Instead, Ballard details a permanent condition of interface, of sheer contiguity, an invasion of the subject so thorough that his frequent use of the word 'dream' no longer describes anything interior. The city coincides with the promiscuity of forms, an infinity of intersections, in which the accidental is no longer possible.

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What results is a Neo-Surrealist continuity between the internal and the external, between the animate (the individual) and the inanimate (the machine), where it is finally impossible to distinguish object from subject; where the "real" can only be elaborated in the non-psychological form of "dream," in the hal-

¹¹² Jonathan Crary, "J. G. Ballard and the Promiscuity of Forms," Zone 1/2 (New York: Urzone, 1986), p. 165.

lucinatory, allegorical sense, and man is transformed into interface, into an "electronic monster": a late outcome of the Duchampian Bachelor-machine.

Of this fusion of the human body with the technological, dematerialized environment, Pynchon sees the liberating aspects in terms of a suspension of cultural prejudices and value judgments. He also, however, envisions in it the risk of losing consciousness of oneself and of things, ¹¹³ so demonstrating himself to be suspended between the perspective of total contamination with the entropic world and the humanistic fear that this will suppress all spaces of individual and critical autonomy, transforming him into an inanimate creature. ¹¹⁴

As in Ballard's Crash, Mucho Maas in The Crying of Lot 49 has one entropic vision of the used cars he is selling at his trade-in store: the wrecked sides of the used car sold after the accident emanate the mysterious

¹¹³ In this ambivalent position he certainly follows Robert Wiener's theory of cybernetics in society, in which Wiener states that "Organism is opposed to chaos, as messages is to noise." Robert Wiener, The Human Use of Human Beings, p. 129.

¹¹⁴ As F. S. Schwarzbach writes: "the Pavlovian Pointsman who manipulates Slothrop, or the SS Captain Blicero, who launches the S-Gerät [...] imitate schemes they believe will allow them to control their own and other destinies, but they lose control and, like Frankenstein, are left at the mercy of their monsters." F. S. Schwarzbach, "A Matter of Gravity," Pynchon: A Collection of Essays (Eaglewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1978), p. 62.

drama of the Bretonian trouvaille, which they cannot entirely account for, metonymically standing for the individual that at some point was actively driving it, leaving trash, food residue and lost objects on his old car seats:

[...] he had believed in the cars. Maybe to excess [...] trade-ins: motorized, metal extensions of themselves, of their families and what their whole lives must be like, out there so naked for anybody, a stranger like himself, to look at, frame cockeyed, rusty underneath [...] you had to look at the actual residue of these lives, and there was no way of telling what things had been truly refused [...] all in bits and pieces coated uniformly, like a salad of despair, in a gray dressing of ash, condensed exhaust, dust, body wastes [...] the violence that had caused each wreck being infrequent enough, farenough away from him, to be miraculous, as each death [...] to exchange a dented, malfunctioning version of himself for another, just as futureless, automotive projection of somebody's else life. As if it were the most natural thing.

¹¹⁵

In his most recent novel, Vineland, published after almost seventeen years of work ¹¹⁶, Pynchon faces the problem of the individual relation to information technology in a different way. He transfers the vital underground from the margins of the metropolitan environment, pulsating with equivocal signs, to the green, mythical Vineland county, initially appearing as an ecological refuge to linguistic saturation. The

¹¹⁵ Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49, pp.44-5.

¹¹⁶ Pynchon, Vineland (New York- Boston: Little Brown, 1989).

green valley burning on the fine cover photograph with what is left of the underground culture and the Californian anarchic communes, however, has little of the "ecotopia" (ecological utopia) and much more of the "reservation," of the confinement of an ethnic group suppressed and expelled from the campuses of the students' revolt.

The action takes place in the Orwellian year 1984, under a sky continually crossed by military airplanes. The puzzle that Prairie - the daughter of a hippie who evokes with her name the sublime territory, uncontaminated by the technology that her parents had dreamed of - is confronted with is the very existence of another enigmatic woman: her subversive, fugitive mother Frenesi Gates. Like V., she is another lost, errant object of knowledge and desire, being a former creature of the underground and an activist in the students' revolt of the Sixties whose traces seem to have mysteriously dissolved with hers.

Throughout the novel, in spite of her vitality, who is depicted as a figure of compromise, an "infiltrated" who cooperates with an FBI agent, contributing to the fall of the so-called Popular Republic of Rock and Roll. The real corrupted presence in the commune of recruits of the underground, however, is what Guy Debord defined as the "society of spectacle," insinuating the virus of language announced by William S. Bur-

roughs among lisergists and rockers, hippies and pacifists, by means of television, radio and all the technological paraphernalia of Late Capitalism.

The valley of dissent, whose roots the author traces back to the old democratic tradition, to "pre-digital times," before the fragmentation of perception, seems doomed to turn into a virtual reality emanating from tv serials, like the Duluth described by Gore Vidal, where it is impossible to distinguish between real and unreal.

The Luddite faith of the underground culture - of which Pynchon partakes in the substance in his practice of leaving his residence and private life secret¹¹⁷ - seems to provide no better alternatives. The author avoids, however, dim apocalyptic conclusions, adopting instead a strategy of discourse that is ironic and humorous at the same time, and so partially mitigating his dystopic conclusions.

He significantly attacks Deleuze and Guattari and vision of the world as a mere surface of simulacra, placing himself between the two opposite dimensions of the ecological "hothouse" and the chaotic signals of the street, in a sort of "humorous irony," a position

¹¹⁷ It is worth noting here that Thomas Pynchon never appears in public and only seldom intervenes in the critical debate in the press.

of puzzled displacement, reminding us of the Duchampian "ironisme d'affirmation."

A lucid connoisseur of the mental abyss like Henry Adams,¹¹⁸ Pynchon acknowledges the impotence of irony, developing a discourse which is both ironical and humoristic, allowing him to ridicule the underground eccentricities without standing for power.

In Vineland, though distinguishing between the "zoomorphic," vital world of Zoyd - Prairie's hippy father - and the "thanatoid" t.v.-addicts, Pynchon immerses both types in a form of "magical realism," suspended between fact and fiction, reality and dream, as the product of the constant mediation of media technology in man's life.

In other words, what distinguishes this author's critique of progress from the Eliotian dystopic perspective is that, while the latter tries to withdraw from contamination by creating alternative worlds and self-reflexive labyrinths in the defensive repositioning of the Baudelairean paradigm, Pynchon (and with him Ballard and Barthelme) confronts technology by choosing electronics as a privileged metaphorical field, as a producer of new forms of language and narrative.

¹¹⁸ Henry Kariel, "The Limits of Social Science: Henry Adams' Quest for Order," American Political Science Review 50 (Dec. 1956): 1974-92.

He, therefore, lets the novel be entropically invaded by the so-called media, by subcultural trash, and by what is left of underground culture, incorporating at the same level advertising and pop songs, science fiction and all the artificial mythologies inhabiting our mind, in a juxtaposition of modes producing the effect, like the indeterminate quality of a hyperrealistic painting, of an Estes' photorealistic reproduction on canvas of supermarkets, simultaneously fake and lifelike.

It is probably in this light that the "trans-fenestration" of Zoyd at the opening of the novel must be read: the jump of the outsider into the phantasmagoric window that is now located at the city margins, or inside the television screen. The outsider's crossing of media technology, like the spurious writing of Pynchon, is a symbolic passage into entropy which does not merely produce void replicas or a drifting of signifiers, but today opens new avenues of political satire and critique of the present.

In this perspective, the lexical virtuosity, the Duchampian word-play, the acrobatic neologisms that Pynchon creates to refer to the ephemeral existence of t.v.-programs, movie stars and fugitive medial realities, finally aim at decentering the attention of the reader toward a Conradian darkness, which now pervades the high-tech landscape. The circulation of high

and low languages in our technologically advanced society shows the traces of marginal languages and forms of knowledge, a pervasive plural constellation inhabiting the underworld of the post-industrial landscape. They take part with equal right in the author's "poetics of allusion"¹¹⁹ as in his erudite quotationism that critics have tired to decipher with philological rigor as if they belonged to a merely literary universe.

And if one risks losing the map in this semiotic domain full of signals and dense with ambivalences and contrasts; if the narrative elliptically jumps from one point of view to another, from the time of the story to a sudden flashback, the author will have succeeded in immersing us in the nervous, intermittent rhythm of television reception, at the same time resisting surrender to the Babelic relativism of a "thanatoid" present that is often misread as the inevitable result of the so-called "Postmodern condition ."

¹¹⁹ Cf. David Cowart, Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion (Carbondale, Ill.:Southern Illinois U.P., 1980).

Chapter 6

The Collage-city and the displaced narrator in the short stories of Donald Barthelme

New York [...] monstrous dream, chimeric reality,
 Oriental delight, Shakespearian nightmare,
 unheard-of riches, frightful poverty [...]

 with its dreadful, closed windows,
 barren of flowers.

Joseph Stella, for the canvas
 "New York Interpreted"

[...] to picnic in the ruins that we leave.

Wallace Stevens

Donald Barthelme, a New Yorker by adoption since 1962, grew up in Texas, the son of an architect in Houston who in the Thirties built a Modernist house inspired by Mies van der Rohe's Tugendhat in the middle of the Texan prairie, with the shocking effect we can imagine. Strongly influenced by Duchamp, he never lost a taste for incongruous matches and a paradoxical humor which he transfers to his writings.

The author of several collections of short stories, Barthelme has refined a writing form based on

the collage of heterogeneous languages, that a critic has compared to a canvas of Surreal objects.¹ He has often accompanied his short stories with bizarre illustrations and personal drawings, depicting strange, composite Surrealist images in an ironic clash of iconic styles.

Barthelme's narrative is a fantastic journey through metropolitan semiosis, humoristically juxtaposed to quotations from the literary tradition, in an hybrid combination simultaneously giving access to the literary labyrinth ("metafiction") and to the commercial, semiotic urban landscape. In this mixture of high and low materials, Barthelme seems to find a narrative equivalent to the Duchampian aesthetics of the ready-mades aidée, juxtaposing literary quotation with the profane materials of mass culture, as Duchamp did by using a Rembrandt painting as an iron board.

Following the Surrealist poetics of displacement and bricolage, Barthelme's synesthetic pastiche is in constant dialogue with coeval forms of American urban art and architecture developed under the influence of Surrealists. Environmental art, "anxious objects" and, more recently, Postmodern architecture often constitute the "urban setting" and the allegorical background of

¹ Cf. Wayne B. Stengel, The Shape of Art in the Short Stories of Donald Barthelme (Baton Rouge-London: Louisiana State U.P., 1983), p. 3.

his stories, partaking as they do of the same aesthetics of displacement, incongruously reconciling unrelated styles, the artificial world of commodities and that of tradition.

1. "City Life"

The metropolis that Barthelme clearly has in mind is New York City, a cosmopolitan city expanding far beyond its geographical perimeters: "It's big and vast," says Simon, the Postmodern architect in Paradise,² without naming it. This indeterminacy posits the city as a quintessential Babelic and multiracial field that transcends the domain of any specific urban community.

Conceived as a linguistically and geographically expanded field, the very notion of the city becomes such a relative one that, although the titles of Barthelme's stories - City Life,³ Overnight to Many Distant Cities⁴ keep referring to an urban habitat, the

² Donald Barthelme, Paradise (New York: Putnam, 1985), p. 103.

³ Barthelme, City Life (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968). The quotations that refer to this collection of short stories from now on will appear in the text.

⁴ Barthelme, Overnight to Many Distant Cities (New York: Putnam, 1983).

emerging vision of the city is that of a densely populated and hybrid conglomerate; in other words, a phantasmagoric geography that seems to incorporate all countries and nations, disregarding the very sites and corners of the urban topography celebrated in the long tradition of New York's literature. ⁵

In City Life, a collection of short stories which may be defined as indistinctly urban, the cosmopolitan city is named "Paraguay," assuming the name of a nation geographically contiguous with Borges' Argentina, and equally presenting the labyrinthine convergence of heterogeneous languages and cultures. ⁶ In the short story "Views of My Father Weeping" belonging to the same collection, the autobiographical narrator enters another xenomorphous city which, like Benjamin's Parisian streets, is a mixture of cultures, a catalogue of foreign countries, a cosmic vision which Benjamin evoked as subversive of the spatial and visual order:

Tra i fanatici della rivoluzione ci fu chi propose una volta di trasformare Parigi in un mappamondo, mutando i nomi di tutte le strade e le piazze e ribattezzandole con i nomi di

⁵ Cf. Melville's Bartleby, Stephen Crane's Maggie: A Girl of the Streets, Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth and Henry Roth's Call It Sleep, all New York novels reflecting his map. C. Peter Conrad, The Art of the City. Views and Versions of New York (New York-Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1984), and Robert A. Gates, The New York Vision: Interpretations of New York City in the American Novel (Boston: University Press of America, 1987).

⁶ Barthelme, "Paraguay" in City Life, p. 23.

luoghi e oggetti notevoli, sparsi qua e là nel mondo. Si faccia la stessa esperienza nell'immaginazione e si capirà, dalla sconvolgente impressione di una tale immagine ottica e fonetica della città, il grande significato dei nomi delle strade.⁷

In the cosmopolitan territory depicted in Barthelme's stories, the protagonist searches for the killer of his father, run over by a carriage in mysterious circumstances. His city, in the wild juxtaposition of temporal and spatial levels typical of the Postmodern pastiche of styles, grows beyond any order of space and time. It is simultaneously crossed by commodities and by aristocrats travelling in old carriages and dressed in eighteenth-century clothes, and records the loss of the symbolic paternal guide, the death of a central authority representative of an absolute truth or ideology, whose myth declines in the Babelic field of metropolitan codes and races. Like the Duchampian "n-dimensional field" inhabited by enigmatic creatures, Barthelme's "collage-city" is a space of indifference. Ambivalent and nationally hybrid creatures walk in his fictional streets, in a quest - the quest for the dead father- that had ended in advance. The autobiographical narrator, who is often the protagonist of Barthelme's stories, portrays himself in a city that is a real Babylon: at the beginning of the novel he finds himself in the English-speaking King's New Square (6), then he

⁷ Benjamin, Parigi, p. 667.

follows the presumed killers of his father as far as the Parisian "rue de Bac" (11), where he later discovers that the carriage driver and his aristocratic master both have Scandinavian names (14), in an undistinguished urban field where the protagonist exchanges foreign currency such as "crowns" (9) and "öre" (10). In this spatial and temporal labyrinth with no more boundaries between one country and the next, nor limitations to anachronisms, the most absurd and incongruous matches take place.

Like Charles Moore, a Postmodern architect who eccentrically erects in the center of New Orleans a "Piazza d'Italia," a kitsch structure combining stylized Roman ruins and a series of Italian geographical stereotypes like the peninsular booth, Barthelme depicts a "cosmic" city that simultaneously refers to different national cultures. His Babylon instantly expands in several directions - "Overnight to many distant cities," as the title of another collection of short stories says, rendering contiguous what is distant, and almost embodying the multiethnic configuration of Miami, the "city of the future" which collects within its decentered urban area the multiple traces of different waves of immigration, offering what Celant defines as "una visione da bricolage architettónico e storico." Describing Miami's urban landscape, Celant explains:

Lo stile "art déco" di Miami Beach è un misto di moresco e di razionalismo, mentre Downtown Miami, Coral Gables e Little Havana rispecchiano le culture e le pratiche architettoniche degli immigrati, così da intrecciare stili latino-americani ed europei.⁸

Interestingly enough, Miami is the city whose language is "Spanglish," an hybrid mixture of English and Spanish, a linguistic palimpsest similar to the fictional idiom spoken in the Los Angeles of Ridley Scott's film Blade Runner (1982), the movie version of a novel by Philip Dick,⁹ which also depicts a 21st-century high-tech metropolis that actually corresponds to a cultural condensation: simultaneously resembling Tokyo, Hong Kong and New York, and its "city speech" is a "mish-mash of Japanese, Spanish, German, and whatever."¹⁰

It goes without saying that, in the fictional space of Barthelme's city, the simultaneous encounter of distant cultures produces an effect of displacement on the reader, forcing him to move abruptly from one geographical context to another. As Stengel argues:

In disconnected, elliptical sentences and paragraphs, the tale jumps across a continent

⁸ Germano Celant, "MIArt" in Oltre la città, la metropoli, p. 207.

⁹ Philip K. Dick, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?, (New York: Balantine, 1982).

¹⁰ Cf. Giuliana Bruno, "Ramble City: Postmodernism and Blade Runner" in October 41 (Summer 1987), Cambridge-London, MIT Press, 61-74.

and through a man's mind as he maps the landscape of a modern world.¹¹

This Babelic cartography reaches the reader in a fragmented shape, like the collage-city envisioned by the American urbanists Rowe and Koetter, demonstrating how the city today resists Le Corbusier's Modernist diktat to divide the city into functional areas (Athens paper, 1933), finding instead the shape of a stylistic palimpsest, in a sort of encyclopedic architecture.¹²

Barthelme, like Breton and the Surrealists, is fascinated by the idea of reporting the totality of urban experience into art, and by the project of reflecting in narrative the amorphous, magmatic "out there" that always escapes global definitions:

Any reading of the literature [...] (I mean the theory of the artistic creation) however summary, will persuade you instantly that the paradigmatic artistic experience is that of failure. The actualization fails to meet, equal, the intuition. There is something "out there" which cannot be brought "here".¹³

Despite the dissolution of a panoramic vision (map) of the cityscape, however, what the writer can do is resort to the Surrealist mode of collecting informational scraps, in a non-selective catalogue of all

¹¹ Wayne B. Stengel, The Shape of Art in the Short Stories of Donald Barthelme, p. 130.

¹² Cf. Colin Rowe, Fred Koetter, Collage City (Cambridge, Mass.- London: MIT U. P., 1978).

¹³ Barthelme, "The Sandman" in Sadness, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), p. 93.

heterogeneous urban codes. This is the overinclusive shape taken by the automatic writing of "Sentence" (City Life), consisting of a single long sentence with no full stop, as if potentially unlimited, like a "litany".

"The only form of discourse of which I approve," said Miss R. in her dry, tense voice, "is a litany." ¹⁴

It is interesting how the catalogue, the unfinished list of indices and incongruous data, reminds one of the unrelated memories and occurrences accounted for in Nadja, and of the collection of unrelated objects at the flea market, which in Barthelme, however, does not include any emotionally overcharged trouvaille, but rather a series of opaque ready-mades, presenting itself as a "dissipative," non-epiphanic structure:

Barthelme's stories are filled with such objects whose values as signs, or whose intelligibility as reservoirs of significance, has begun to malfunction. This is one reason the stories often resort to lists, which can be seen as attempts to 'add up' or point to some overriding significance, but always end up as merely a collection of things. ¹⁵

Barthelme's display of indeterminate objects, however, never betrays the sense of a frustrated desire to con-

¹⁴ Barthelme, "The Indian Uprising," Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts (1964) (New York: Ballantine, 1968), p. 8.

¹⁵ Charles Molesworth, Donald Barthelme's Fiction: The Ironist Saved from Drowning (Columbia-London: Missouri U.P., 1982), p. 59.

vert the city into a space of revelations experienced by the autobiographical narrator of Nadja. Barthelme's narrative is intentionally incomplete, and playfully open to any projections or semantic intergrations on the part of the reader. Significantly, the above-mentioned short stories, "Views of My Father Weeping," ends with "Etc."; "Sentence" has no final full stop, and another short story entitled "And Then" is wholly devoted to the difficulty of bringing the narration to a close. ¹⁶

In other words, Barthelme's unfinished form differs from Bretonian analogic writing which deals with fragments likely to turn into epiphanic signs: Barthelme's collage consists of allegorical fragments whose origin is finally lost in the darkness. The narrator, like Duchamp, is himself displaced and drifting in the linguistic trash that constitutes his discourse. ¹⁷

Barthelme's literary production rarely acquires the extended and "finished" form of the novel: he wrote several collections of short stories and only three novels, ¹⁸ consciously founding his rhetoric on parataxis, as Benjamin does in his book on arcades. An

¹⁶ Barthelme, "And Then" in Amateurs (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1977).

¹⁷ Barthelme, Snow White (1965) (New York: Atheneum, 1984), p. 97.

¹⁸ Their titles are Snow White (1965), Paradise (1985) and The King (1990).

advocate of litany, the narrator of the story "See the Moon?" declares that he trusts only fragments, because he is capable of merely partial and non-totalizing visions:

Here is the world and here are the knowledgeable knowers knowing. What can I tell you? What has been pieced together from the reports of travelers. Fragments are the only forms I trust. ¹⁹

What is left of the city is therefore only scraps of discourse with no metonymic value, in a collage of linguistic detritus where the part is never synthetic of the whole, and where "The instants are points which organize themselves into a line, but what is important is the instant, not the line."²⁰

Compared with the generative Surrealist technique, Postmodernism moves from the assemblage of objects to the pastiche of languages and styles, expressing what Benjamin, thinking of Surrealist texts, already defined as a "Carnival di styles."²¹ Like Duchampian ready-mades in Surrealism, linguistic fragments are violently extracted from their ordinary context and casually juxtaposed, in spite of any stylistic coherence and any

¹⁹ Barthelme, "See the Moon?" in Unspeakable Practices, p. 160.

²⁰ Barthelme, "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning", Ibid., p. 85.

²¹ "Il carnevale di stili che avanza durante tutto il XIX secolo è la conseguenza dell'ibridarsi dei rapporti di dominio." Benjamin, Parigi, p. 287.

intention of representation, producing a final effect of displacement.

One finds an interesting isomorphism in the very method of Duchamp's incongruous juxtaposition of objects and in the one that Barthelme explains:

One of the funny things about experimentalism in regard to language is that most of it has not been done yet. Take mothball and vagina and put them together; maybe you're not happy with the combination and you throw that on the floor and pick up the next two and so on. There's a lot of basic research which hasn't been done because of the enormous resources of the language and the enormous number of resonances from the past which have precluded this way of investigating language.²²

Both support the aesthetics of the incongruous not in a final attempt to surmount dissimilarity, as Breton wrote in Les Vases Communicantes, but in order to emphasize it.

Barthelme, however, without undermining the inter-textual and plagiarist aspects that seem to characterize the Postmodern scene as a whole, includes literary quotations in his anti-aesthetic collage of discrete languages, races and commodities: these erudite reflections add to urban linguistic materials a metafictional level. In the Preface to Guilty Pleasures, he writes:

The pieces in this book were written on all sorts of occasions and in response to all sorts of stimuli and overstimuli [...] and some are pretexts for the pleasure of cutting up and pasting together pictures, a secret

²² Barthelme, "A Symposium on Fiction" in Shenandoah, 27, (Winter 1979), 15, 20-1.

vice gone public. Guilty pleasures are the best.²³

But the whole Barthelmean enterprise is never reducible to this self-reflexive turn: its eclecticism and mixed nature is still derivative of the Avant-garde art, where, as Benjamin writes, "arte ed esistenza profana si compenetrano a vicenda."²⁴ As a result, the Barthelmean city is at the same time very erudite and very prosaic: it collects, in a syncretic pastiche, media messages and literary quotations, advertisements and quotations of important literary figures, refers in the same tone to Tolstoi²⁵ and a brand of vegetable oil advertised on television, in a decentered information universe where messages and commodities are on the same level, questioning, like in Duchamp, the Manichean distinction between high and low culture.²⁶ Mixing elite

²³ Barthelme, Preface to Guilty Pleasures (1963), (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1974), p. III.

²⁴ Benjamin, Parigi, p. 426.

²⁵ Barthelme, "The Tolstoi Museum", in City Life.

²⁶ Binni writes of Barthelme: "La tecnica di un Barthelme distrugge ostentatamente ogni distinzione tra ciò che è centrale e ciò che è periferico nell'esperienza umana [...] parodia di gesti verbali e culturali, la sua fiction è così principalmente congegnata come un collage di scarti linguistici, uno studio di quello che l'autore stesso chiama "the trash phenomenon" nel linguaggio. Inevitabilmente l'essere umano di questa fiction è nulla più di una presenza smembrata priva di (o incapace di possedere) quel 'vecchio old self' considerato ora più un aggravio che un illuminante centro di riferimento." Binni, "Romanzo di famiglia", in Caratteri esclusivi, p. 119.

culture with the transient, in a syncretic pastiche where the center and the peripheries of language coincide, linguistic entropy increasingly intensifies: a leading narrative perspective is missing, including that of the autobiographical narrator, whose adoption of the first person is just another way of starting a Duchampian dialogue between the "me" and the "I."

Incompatible ideologies and referential places constantly mix and change in Barthelme's city life, in an heterogeneous field that resists definition, turning a big city into "a great argument for cities."²⁷

2. The Narrator's "flânerie"

In this ambiguous palimpsest of cultures and idioms, the city turns from a Semiopolis of unequivocal signs into what Foucault defines as a Surrealist hétérotopie²⁸ which, far from becoming an alienating

²⁷ In Paradise, we read this hilarious dialogue between urbanites:

'I like a quiet reflexive bath.'

'I'll come in and put toads in the water.'

'Where would you get toads in New York City?'

'Toad store. They got big toads, little toads, horned toads, non-horn toads.'

'It's a great city.'

'It's a big argument for cities.'" Barthelme, Paradise, p. 57.

²⁸ Michel Foucault, Les mots et les choses (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 9.

and anomic Babylon, loses in postmodernism all its uncanny features to become an oxymoronic, Satanic Paradise, as the title of a recent novel by Barthelme reads. In this eccentric world, Late Romantic feelings of ennui disappear: the paranoia of Pynchon's spies is never accounted for, but is replaced by a humorous mode that deserts the deep meandering of the unconscious in order to wander on a surface of assemblages and arbitrary juxtapositions whose disorganic nature is vital. The metropolitan street becomes an enormous receptacle of bizarre situations, of eccentric human types engaged in unusual activities, whose incongruous variety produces comic effects:

One man hung all of his shirts on the railing bordering a sidewalk, he had thirty-nine, another was waxing his fine moustache, a woman was marking cards with a little prickly roller so that her husband, the gambler, would win forever. A man [...] dipping his glass-blowing tube into a furnace of bubbling glass, there on the street, and blew a rathskeller of beer glasses, each goldenly full.²⁹

Incongruous situations produced by strong contrasts and surprise finally transform the city into a phantasmagoric circus:

He looks out of the window. On the street a man in violet running shorts is carrying a woman on his shoulders, she's in fact riding him, her legs around his neck [...] The man

²⁹ Barthelme, "Overnight to Many Distant Cities" in Overnight to Many Distant Cities, p. 89.

runs in circles, the woman waves like a circus performer.³⁰

The circus, which, according to Benjamin, entered the city bringing the merveilleux and its monsters at a time in which the department stores had assumed a spectacular dimension,³¹ presents in Barthelme the abnormal, devoid of all its uncanny aspects. The humorous, Postmodern monstrous style does not threaten man's organic nature because the subject perceives himself to be a monster among other monsters. As Caillois argues, distinguishing between the magic and the fantastic, a zoo full of monsters would be incapable of causing disorientation: it is the emergence of the monster in real space that does.³² In a generalized Surrealism, in a city of monsters disorientation and ennui is replaced by a humorous indifferentism of a scattered individual who also perceives himself as a monster, as Barthelme's version of "The Sandman" by E.T.A Hoffmann demonstrates.

In the information city, where commodities are consumed in the form of language and where "Strings of language extend in every direction to bind the world

³⁰ Barthelme, Paradise, p. 193.

³¹ "Cresce pertanto (coi grandi magazzini) in modo straordinario l'elemento circense e spettacolare del commercio." Benjamin, Parigi, p. 87.

³² Roger Caillois, Au Coeurs du fantastique (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 68.

into a rushing, ribald whole,"³³ the narrator is immersed in a stream of dissimilar messages which ends up constituting him as a linguistic agent:

The rationalized art is dispatched from central art dumps to regional art dumps, and from there into the lifestreams of cities. Each citizen is given as much art as his system can tolerate.³⁴

While the Baudelairean flâneur experienced disorientation moving in the flux of commodities, the Barthelmean flâneur (who often is the narrator himself), like Slothrop, drifts with it, collecting, as a recent version of the chiffonnier, the linguistic trash circulating in the extended urban field, finally transforming the novel into "a laboratory of discourse."³⁵

Immersed as he is in the artificial space of his fictional enterprise, the Barthelmean flâneur has no illusions about regaining authenticity through artistic enterprise or about finding fulfillment in the achievement of a perfect literary form. Unlike Joyce and T.S. Eliot, he does not trust the universalizing power of art,³⁶ and in his metanarrative interventions he defines himself a sort of Duchampian mob-man, an

³³ Barthelme, "The Indian Uprising" in Unspeakable Practices, p. 11.

³⁴ Barthelme, "Paraguay" in City Life, p. 23.

³⁵ "The modern novel can indeed be considered a laboratory of discourse." Barthelme, Snow White, p. 9.

³⁶ Cf. Barthelme, "After Joyce" in Location 2, (Summer 1964), 13-16.

artificial voice within an artificial environment, absorbing all the heterogeneous linguistic materials he encounters in a narrative (discourse) that no longer belongs to him. He does not mold them into a completed form, but assembles them into an entropic pastiche with no epiphanic moments of synthesis. In other words, according to Barthelme, art is no solution for entropy, the Modernist exorcism of chaos through perfectly balanced forms, but instead derives its materials from entropy itself, transforming every text or object that the narrator encounters into a topic for a new story.

The multiplicity of languages that the Barthelmean narrator encounters produces a displacement which provides a great richness of discourse: the incommensurability of the city is not an emptiness, but a fullness, producing, like Pynchon's zone, a variety of plots, generating an open space of communication, a crossroads of heterogeneous signals indifferently converging in the Postmodern pastiche.

As in Surrealism, chance plays an important role in the production of narrative: any sign found along the way (an advertising poster, a bizarre event witnessed in the street, an erudite quotation coming to mind...), even a dog falling from an upper floor, as in the story "The Falling Dog" (City Life), immediately saves the sculptor/narrator from a creative block. As an insatiable consumer of linguistic trash, the narrator

incorporates all the signs that he finds on his way as creative materials, shaping his rough narrative out of the junk, out of the refuse of our post-Gutenberg culture. An euphoric flâneur in the information city, the Barthelmean narrator incorporates even the most prosaic messages:

In the run-mad skimble-skamble of information sickness we must make a decision as to whether we should proceed, or go back, in the latter case enjoying the pathos of eradication, in the former case reading an erotic advertisement which begins, 'How to make your Mouth a Blow Torch of Excitement [...]' attempting [...] to make a better sentence, worthier, more meaningful like those in the Declaration of Independence. ³⁷

In this revival of the avant-garde use of low culture and urban detritus, the Postmodern narrative marks the final loss of the Modern artist's aura, ³⁸ and the abandonment of literariness conceived as the receptacle of eternal values, redeemed from referential, urban contexts. In comparison with the insularity and anti-urban spirit of Modernist writers like Henry James, who argued that the city inhibited exploration of the interior world, ³⁹ Barthelme refers to an artist who is deeply committed to - and even constituted by - the

³⁷ Barthelme, "Sentence" in City Life, pp. 113-14.

³⁸ Cf. Terry Eagleton, Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, p. 1.

³⁹ Cf. the essay by Henry James on the art of Zola in Selected Literary Criticism, Morris Shapira, ed. (Harmonsworth: Penguin, 1963), pp. 282, 308.

expanded semiotic space that the city has now become, experiencing no separation between the signs he incorporates from the outside world and those he produces.

He complacently reflects a metropolitan Babylon which is redeemed from the guilt of the Fall: "Bless Babel," a character in a short story exclaims ⁴⁰ The agile, ludic awareness of the unexhaustible chaos that Schlegel talks about⁴¹ in terms of a territory of infinite narrative possibilities brought about by chance is a Duchampian domain of the possible, produced by unexpected juxtapositions. In his writing, where narration and metanarration often coincide, Barthelme declares: "I pursue Possibility: That's something."⁴² His work, however, cannot be reduced to mere "metafiction": while Coover and John Barth create "metafictional spaces" when they respectively claim to invent an island and to enter a "fiction-city" while writing,

⁴⁰ Barthelme, "Henrietta and Alexandra" in Overnight to Many Distant Cities, p. 80.

⁴¹ Friedrich Schlegel, Ideen, in Athenaum, vol. III, fasc. I (Berlin: 1900), n. 69. Barthelme dedicates a story, "Kiekergaard Unfair to Schlegel," to the Romantic writer in City Life.

⁴² Barthelme, "The Sea of Hesitation" in Overnight to Many Distant Cities, p. 103.

⁴³ Barthelme's narrator begins the collection Overnight to Many Distant Cities by depicting himself as a construction worker about to create another Babel:

There was never any question of hanging back [...] the exercise of our skills, and the promise of the city were enough. By the light of the moon we counted our chisels and told stories of other building feats we were involved in : Babel, Chandigarh, Brasilia, Taliesin [...] and saw the new city spread out beneath us. ⁴⁴

His Babylon, however, is not another Borgesian "library of Babel," not another literary and fictional city like Calvino's Le città invisibili⁴⁵ but, like a city that the construction worker narrates and sees spread out before him. He incorporates what he sees, and does not invent the city. The city that emerges from his writing is not an imaginary realm, a fantastic labyrinth, a work of fiction, but a work in progress, a construction work never completed, depending on the Surrealist aesthetic of the unfinished, in a space that is both factual and fictional, neither entirely invented, nor entirely representable, which may be defined with the

⁴³ Cf. Robert Coover, "The Magic Poker," Prick-songs and Descants (New York: Plume, 1970) and John Barth, Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice (New York: Bantam, 1968).

⁴⁴ Barthelme, Overnight to Many Distant Cities, pp. 9-10.

⁴⁵ "Non è detto che Kublai Kan creda a quel che dice Marco Polo quando gli descrive le città visitate nelle sue ambascerie." Italo Calvino, Le città invisibili, p. 13.

Surrealist form in mind as a non-epiphanic "magic realism," a phantasmagoric world where hallucination and dream enter ordinary life.

The flânerie in the entropic environment plays an essential part in the creation of the narrative: the narrator defines his enterprise as a "linguistic trip":

My nourishment is refined from the ongoing circus of the mind in motion: Give me the odd linguistic trip, stutter and fall, and I will be content. ⁴⁶

Dismembered as an individual, the narrating hero becomes a linguistic agent, a "universe of discourse" ⁴⁷ who is fed from other "universes of discourse", solipsistically processing them in his stories.

The metaphor of food is not a casual one, for the narrator presents himself as a being whose hunger can never be satisfied, corresponding to a desire as unfulfillable as sexual desire. He omnivorously absorbs every discourse, assembling rather than organizing them into a plot. This form of overinclusive narrative takes the narrator beyond his individual limitations transforming him into a plural, intersubjective voice, a linguistic monster: "an intersubjective atrocity, a mouth, a mow." ⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Barthelme, Snow White, p. 9.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 44.

⁴⁸ Barthelme, "Daumier" in Sixty Stories (New York: Dutton, 1982), p. 219.

Besides the metaphor of the voracious mouth, Barthelme insistently adopts one of libertinism and sexual mania, pursuing the Surrealist line of Nadja's coquetterie in the city. He depicts adulterers, happily living in a state of polygamy. The 20th-century Snow White who furnishes the title to his first novel is the concubine of seven men, looking forward to the arrival of an eighth companion able to save her from boredom. Similarly, in Paradise, a Postmodern architect who enjoys producing the most eccentric matches when he designs his buildings, surrounds himself with three women, without excluding other possibilities of encounter:

Some days they were angry with him, some days they were angry with each other. Four people, many possibilities [...] Simon liked young men, within reasonable limits, and approved, in general, of the idea of young men and young women sleeping together in joyous disregard of history, economics, building codes.

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This faith in polygamy, this celebration of promiscuity is the hymn to libertinism by a "tourist of emotions."⁵⁰ Promiscuity, - the libertine metaphor not alien to Surrealist culture - is reintroduced by Barthelme to refer to the multiplication of cultural perspectives in the contemporary urban field. Sexual depravation and perversion, recurring in Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow,

⁴⁹ Barthelme, Paradise, p. 178.

⁵⁰ Barthelme, "Daumier" in Sixty Stories, p. 227.

refers to the hybrid encounter of dissimilar hermeneutic systems producing paradox and puzzles. In other words, Barthelme is metanarratively referring to a form of "textual" libertinism,⁵¹ consisting of the "incestuous" mésalliance of high and low languages, extending the hybrid mode of the Duchampian incongruous encounter at the macrotextual, narrative level.

In such a hybrid subversion of order and codes, the provocative Surrealist gesture of subverting common sense and preordained systems of history, economy, architecture in order to substitute for them absurd copulations,⁵² is still recognizable in the continuing possibility for one "to reshuffle the cards in play, in order to find another chance, another prospect."⁵³

⁵¹ Barbara Lanati writes of Postmodern novels that they are "'spazi' in cui più facilmente si liberano le censure dei 'viaggiatori' che in quegli spazi si muovono [...] alla ricerca frustrata di esperienze erotiche altamente liberatorie, se non altro sul piano dell'immaginazione." Cfr. Barbara Lanati, "Preface to 'La finzione necessaria,'" Calibano, p. 22.

⁵² It is worth mentioning that Kathy Acker, a New York writer from the Lower East Side published Postmodern porno-novels in the Eighties in which the nymphomaniac impulse is closely related to the poetics of pastiche and of the incongruous, obscene use of quotations and plagiarism. Cf. Kathy Acker, Great Expectations: A Novel (New York: Grove Press, 1982) and Don Quixote: Which was a dream (New York: Grove Press, 1986).

⁵³ Iain Chambers, "A Handful of Sand..." in "Modernismo e Postmodernismo," Anglistica-AION of the Istituto Universitario Orientale of Naples, XXVIII, 3, Naples, (1985), 18.

If Pynchon partially identifies with Stencil's obsession to distinguish communication from interference, the Barthelmean narrator situates himself directly within the chaos of urban signs, with no more illusions of organizing them into a coherent discourse. He is not haunted by dilemmas or paranoia, but is rather possessed by a compulsion to speak which reminds us of Beckett's solipsistic narrator in The Unnamable: "I can't go on, I go on."⁵⁴ In the middle of an epistemologic crisis, he euphorically moves through a city of paradoxes where, after Duchamp, the gap between subject and referent, between communication and reception is so large as to leave the reader a chance at a creative intervention.

The discourse of pastiche, like collage, assemblage and other forms of Surrealist origin based on fragmentation, does not aim at synthesis, but at new questions: at the impossibility of drawing conclusions and giving a picture of contemporary life as a symbolically coherent and recognizable world. Linguistic trash does not produce communication, but rather "white noise," leaving the interpretation open to the reader. Dispersed and scattered among fragments of different nature, the narrator abandons his omniscient power,

⁵⁴ Samuel Beckett, The Unnamable (1952), translated from French by the author (New York: Grove, 1958). It is worth noting that Barthelme acknowledged Beckett as the writer who taught him how to write.

declaring the impossibility of organizing a linear, coherent discourse out of a myriad of discourses. As in Duchamp, multiplicity invokes tolerance and a suspension of value judgments.

Wandering in the city and digressing, the Post-modern drifter-narrator has a scattered point of view, is diminished in his omniscient functions by becoming a processor of other universes of discourse:

The moment I inject discourse from my universe of discourse (u. of d.) into your u. of d., your yourness of yours is diluted.⁵⁵

In other words, he is exactly the reverse of a narcissistic narrator: he is an oceanic figure with no personal quest or enigmas to solve, placing himself at the center of the narration in order to be overwhelmed by the heterogeneous materials he is using. He becomes, like the performance artist Laurie Anderson, a mere mediator of signals, limiting himself to making Babelic messages circulate in their opacity and resistance to interpretation.

3. A City of Churches

The paradox of the hybrid Barthelmean city is that, in the absence of an ironic perspective on the part of

⁵⁵ Barthelme, Snow White, p. 46.

the "dismembered" narrator, it becomes an open play of incompatible ideologies and credos. The Duchampian crowd of tolerance, the Babelic street that Pynchon causes to coincide with an underground in permanent conflict with the technocratic power and its Manichean ideology, reappears in Barthelme in the form of a non-oppositional coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups:

[...] this wondrous street where our friends and neighbors live in Christian, Jewish, and, in some instances, Islamic peace.⁵⁶

The collage-city turns from an area of conflict, as Baudelaire's and the Surrealists' Paris still was for Benjamin, into a relativistic field where no leading ideology dominates. As in the Duchampian encounter of incongruous units multiplied to n-dimensions, in Barthelme's city different traditions and cultures live contiguously, in a linguistic cosmos of parallel worlds. The hybrid nature of the metropolitan cultural identity becomes a symptom of the crisis of Western ethnocentrism, started in the States after the last wave of Asian immigrants, entering the Western metropolis with values utterly incommensurable with the

⁵⁶ Barthelme, "A Sea of Hesitation", Overnight to Many Distant Cities, p. 107.

Western logos. ⁵⁷

The xenomorphous and cosmopolitan city that Barthelme humorously depicts - not to mention the equally plural zone that Slothrop crosses in Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow - is an expression of the Heisenberg theory of indeterminacy and of the discovery in non-Euclidean geometry of an n-dimensional space which Duchamp adopted to conceive an art of multiple perspectives. In Postmodern times, the poetics of indeterminacy and performance finds further support in the theory of scientific paradigms and in post-structuralism. ⁵⁸

The absence of absolute truth, of magical epiphanies and of infallible hermeneutics in contemporary culture is represented by Barthelme by the pluralism and variety of esoteric and spiritual cults in metropolitan life. In one story, a clairvoyant, supposed to be offering a magical reading of events,

⁵⁷ For a theoretical discussion of the dialogue with non-Western cultures see Vincent Crapanzano, Tuhami (Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1971) and the recent debate on ethnocriticism led by Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics (London-New York: Methuen, 1987) and reported in Nelson Moe, "La politica del postmoderno: il dibattito negli Stati Uniti" in Allegoria, I, no. 3, 1989, 132.

⁵⁸ Cf. Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (1962) (London-Chicago: Chicago U.P., 1970).

paradoxically wears a t-shirt reading the signs of her skepticism:

Harris went to see Madame Olympia, a reader and advisor [...] She was wearing a t-shirt that had "Buffalo, City of No Illusion" printed on it.⁵⁹

The city, where "dead fathers" endlessly reappear (as in the stories "Views of My Father Weeping" and "A Manual for Sons") and are moved around as living corpses in the city streets (The Dead Father⁶⁰), reflects a general crisis of the authority figures traditionally established as the possessors of privileged knowledge. The saint, the genius, the angel, and the technocrat, as receptacles of truths, are irreverentially parodied through the technique of the ready-made réciproque, which situates them in a banal, skeptical environment.

The Duchampian world devoid of fixed categories and rules, finds in Barthelme its main figure in the oxymoron, its ultimate logic in paradox, and its metaphor in the crowd, in the dissimilar nature of beliefs and of ephemeral cults:

Cynthia formerly believed in the 'enormous diversity of things'; now she believes in

⁵⁹ Barthelme, "Overnight to Many Distant Cities" in Overnight, p. 31.

⁶⁰ Barthelme, The Dead Father (1975) in Sixty Stories, cit..

Kong. The man whose pronunciation I had corrected emerged from the kitchen. ⁶¹

In his neo-Surrealist mode, Barthelme represents the epistemological crisis of the Modern world inventing a "City of Churches" - Prester - where everyone lives in the church he likes, in a palimpsest of different confessional doctrines and architectures:

Both sides of the street were solidly lined with the churches, standing shoulder to shoulder in a variety of architectural styles. The Bethel Baptist stood next to the Holy Messiah Free Baptist, St. Paul's Episcopal next to the race Evangelical Covenant. Then came the First Christian Science, the Church of God, All Souls, Our Lady of Victory, the Society of Friends, the Assembly of God, and the Church of the Holy Apostles. The spires and steeples of the traditional buildings were jammed in next to the broad imaginative flights of the contemporary designs. Most people [...] live in the church of their choice. ⁶².

This parable is also an homage to Postmodern architectures which also reflects the crisis of totalizing ideologies by mixing up incompatible styles. As the carnival of unrelated images - the marché aux puces - produces the possible, a city of churches does not produce disorientation and a stronger desire for identification but an humorous vision of indifference. At some point, a displaced "tourist" in the Postmodern city of Churches asks her chaperone if this contiguity of

⁶¹ Barthelme, "The Party", Sadness (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1972), p. 60.

⁶² Barthelme, "A City of Churches," in Ibid., pp. 49-50.

credos and doctrines does not produce conflicts or problems of coexistence:

"Do you think it's healthy for so many churches to be gathered together in one place?" she asked her guide. "It doesn't seem ... balanced, if you know what I mean." "We are famous for our churches," Mr. Phillips replied. "They are harmless." ⁶³

The disharmonic existence of several different churches - which also stands as a metaphor for the contemporary American multiethnic city - is a harmless and tolerant, a Jeffersonian democratic utopia. Its ultimate meaning remains opaque. As J. Hillis Miller writes,

As the parodies multiply, (they) tend to suggest that there is no 'natural' or 'true' style. ⁶⁴

One may wonder if this city of ideological tolerance actually reflects the factual cross-cultural dialogue among unequals, which, in more recent years despite Postcolonialist ideology, has not exorcized the growth of Fundamentalism and of Separatist fanaticism. Crapanzano suggests that:

It may well be -- the Marxist would certainly argue -- that discursive egalitarianism, hegemonic failure, and all the self-reflexive talk about postmodernism are in fact con-

⁶³ Ibid., p. 51.

⁶⁴ J. Hillis Miller, Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1976), p. 80.

temporary mystifications, a bit decadent, no doubt, of real class relations. ⁶⁵

Barthelme's city of churches is not, however, a space of conflicts, as, according to Benjamin, Baudelairean Paris still was, ⁶⁶ but a carnivalesque, almost utopian bricolage of cultures which, like Lévi-Strauss's archeological ethnology, questions the very basis of Western ethnocentrism in a bricolage able to approach unfamiliar cultural systems that resists the appropriation of the white, Western man. ⁶⁷ Such fragmentary order points, like the allegorical Surrealist knowledge, to the disappearance of a common myth in a Babelic nowhere place where the confusion of languages and ideologies does not belong to the Civitas Diaboli of the Fall, but to a non-synthetic vision of separate cultures, whose sparse traces endlessly resist the narcissistic mechanisms of identification on the part of the observer. ⁶⁸ Like Duchamp, Barthelme never draws conclusions or makes any clear political statements in

⁶⁵ Vincent Crapanzano, "The Postmodern Crisis. Discourse, Parody, Memory", in Cultural Anthropology, p. 10.

⁶⁶ For a discussion of the metropolis as a space of class-struggle, see Romano Luperini, "Costruzione di una 'costruzione': Il 'Baudelaire' di Benjamin, il moderno, l'allegoria" in Allegoria, I, no. 3, 1989, 7-36.

⁶⁷ Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, Tristes Tropiques (Paris: 10/18", Plon, 1965).

⁶⁸ Lévi-Strauss, L'homme nu (Paris: Plon, 1971), pp. 620-21.

order to escape the assumption of an authoritative function that would deconstruct his whole project. Like Duchamp, he suspends his critical function, turning into a viewer of multiple, unrelated languages, like the traveler in the semiotic city that Wittgenstein talks about in his Philosophical Investigations.

After all, we always find characters at the center of his narratives who are unable to maintain a clear position: they are Protean and mobile drifters in the indeterminate cityscape, unpredictable "Marivaudian beings" with no preconceptions, constantly reshaping their own ideas in the face of a multifarious environment:

The Marivaudian being is, according to Poulet, a pastless futureless man, born anew at every instant [...] The Marivaudian being has in a sense no history. Nothing follows from what has gone before. He is constantly surprised [...] In consequence, he exists in a certain freshness which seems, if I may say so, very desirable.⁶⁹

The ideologically "dismembered," postmodern subject, like the Duchampian man of the mob and the Pynchonian drifter, is what Kristeva would probably call "le sujet en procès,"⁷⁰ a sort of mobile identity who never identifies with a single project apart from the one implying the very absence of a project, as Simon, the

⁶⁹ Barthelme, Snow White, p. 52.

⁷⁰ Julia Kristeva, "Le sujet en procès," Tel Quel, 52, 1972.

postmodern architect in Paradise, points out: "My absence of a plan is itself a plan." ⁷¹

The contiguity of different languages and beliefs in the collage-city poses the problem of the relativity of knowledge, which coincides with an epistemological crisis, hostile to any form of ideology of power:

This is an age of personal ignorance. No one knows what others know. No one knows enough.
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The prevailing mode of Barthelmean urban narrative is therefore the suspension of value judgments, transforming the referential city into an indeterminate "sea of hesitation" - like the night-sea in Desnos' L'Amour ou la Liberté - another image of lost direction to express the narrator's weakening of his will to powerful assertion:

Truth is greatly overrated, volition when it exists must be protected, wanting itself must be obliterated, some people have forgotten how to want. ⁷³

The adequate form for the "sea" of incertitude, where all absolute truths and fixed categories are questionable, is collage, an unfinished, enigmatic genre. In an interview, the author compares it to a wreck absorbing all the detritus of the sea that fluc-

⁷¹ Barthelme, Paradise, p. 72.

⁷² Barthelme, "The Genius" in Sadness, p. 25.

⁷³ Barthelme, "The Sea of Hesitation" in Overnight to Many Distant Cities, p. 105.

tuates around it, creating condensed linguistic forms whose very opacity is undefinably suggestive:

Barnacles growing on a wreck or a rock. If you have a wreck to begin with, that's a wonderful thing. I'd personally rather have a wreck than a ship that sails. Things attach themselves to wrecks. Strange fish find your wreck or rock to be a good feeding ground and after a while you've got a pretty interesting situation out of the wreck.⁷⁴

The opacity deriving from the linguistic saturation is the main feature of the collage-city and of the Post-modern city in general: it also pervades the Pynchonian zone and the highway city, also speaks the Babelic language of indeterminacy originated by the contiguity of different styles and plots produced in the big city.

Barthelme's collage-city, like Pynchon's indistinct urban areas, produces the effect of different plots occurring simultaneously, in a overinclusive narrative that lets no any prior message emerge.⁷⁵ The narrative voice itself is too overwhelmed by the multiplicity of signals imploding in its narrative, producing a entropic effect of "white noise," of "Code Overload":

[...] the softening of language, usually lamented as a falling off from former practice, is in fact a clear response to the

⁷⁴ Interview with Barthelme quoted in Maurice Couturier, Régis Durand, Donald Barthelme, "Contemporary Writers Series" (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 63.

⁷⁵ Couturier and Durand comment that the writer "always seems to have too many stories to tell ... impairing his reader's ability to get things into focus." Ibid., p. 9.

proliferation of surfaces and stimuli. Imprecise sentences lessen the strain of close tolerance. Silence is also available in the form of white noise. ⁷⁶

Pervaded by this "noisy silence," the narrator resigns his illocutionary function of persuasion, making chaos and creativity coincide in this late allegorical form of "creative disorder"⁷⁷ founded on the contiguity of opposites, and adopting the decentered structure of the collage, where no style, and therefore no theoretical hypothesis, prevails. Situating all codes and languages of urban communication at the same level, Barthelmean writing finally reminds one of marivaudage, a decentered narrative constituted by opaque structures such as neologisms, oxymorons and "counterpointed plots" without assuming a clear critical position, which is necessary in order to make satiric parody emerge. ⁷⁸ Significantly, Genette distinguishes the

⁷⁶ Barthelme, "Paraguay," City Life, p. 27.

⁷⁷ "Resta da analizzare che tipo di rapporto intercorre tra la frammentarietà degli accessori che compongono il mosaico allegorico e questo disordine creativo." Benjamin, Parigi, p. 278.

⁷⁸ In his study of literary palimpsests, Genette assimilates marivaudage in pastiche: "Le nom de pastiche apparaît en France à la fin du III^e siècle dans le vocabulaire de la peinture. C'est un calque de l'italien pasticcio, littéralement "paté" qui désigne d'abord une mélange d'imitations diverses, puis une imitation singulière [...] un verbiage où n'entend rien [...] une manière à la fois thématique (subtilité sentimentale) et stylistique (néologisme, oxymores, adjectives sustantivés, abstractions) [...] finira par porter un nom commun formé sur le nom propre de son inventeur: marivaudage, bien sûr." Gérard Genette, Palimpsestes: La Littérature au second degré (Paris: Seuil, 1982), pp. 96-99.

form of pastiche as an "imitation sans fonction satirique," to which postmodern novels belong, from parody, "comportant irrésistiblement la connotation de satire et d'ironie." ⁷⁹ In this perspective, the overarching use of the term parody for the postmodern pastiche initiated by Lynda Hutcheon is questionable. ⁸⁰

Barthelme's black humor is a humor of indeterminacy like Duchamp's, who declared in an interview:

Humor and laughter - not necessarily derogatory derision - are my pet tools. This may come from my general philosophy of never taking the world too seriously - for fear of dying of boredom. ⁸¹

Disjunctive paradox, the oxymoronic logic of the possible, as opposed to parody and repetition (the "re-written" of literary labyrinths), is the main figure of postmodern writing, where scraps of different texts are enclosed in an enigmatic, incomplete assemblage, relying on the incongruous Duchampian language of incommensurability:

You must hold yourself inconsistently in inconsistency, and mix segments of con-

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

⁸⁰ Fredric Jameson also speaks of an eclipse of parody in Postmodern culture to the advantage of a "blank parody" devoid of satiric impulses. Cf. Fredric Jameson, Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, p. 17.

⁸¹ Duchamp interviewed by C. Kuh, in "Marcel Duchamp," p. 90.

sistency in with it, and make them
indiscernible from the others. ⁸²

In other words, as in Pynchon and Barthelme, fact and fiction, urban materials and literary quotations, must mix in order to produce an effect of inconsistency, implying that every unit involved corresponds to a separate perspective, irreducible to any order, even to the theory that prescribes chaos and lack of order. In the absence of a realistic aspect, one would enter a fantastic, imaginary realm and therefore another ideal, unreal city. In the Duchampian "ironisme d'affirmation", on the contrary, the reverse of logic is dis-logic, an "inclusive disjunction," ⁸³ not the illogical or the fantastic. As Lyotard says:

This is not the aestheticism of deconstruction, negotiation of the gross dialectics: these are partial drives playing their game without regard for the terrorist organon: dissipation. ⁸⁴

Suspended in a magic realism between fact and fiction, and combining the high language of literature with the profane world of commodities and mass-media communication, Barthelme creates strange condensations, lexical monsters and oxymorons, rhetorical figures of paradox, narratives with a self-ironical, self-denying

⁸² Duchamp, cit. in J.F. Lyotard, Duchamp's TRANS/formers, p. 25.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 121.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 113.

structure in which the same fact is narrated from an antithetical perspective, as if to demonstrate the impossibility of an objective, unequivocal account of the same fact.

In "Engineer-Private Paul Klee Misplaces an Aircraft between Milbertshofen and Cambrai, March 1916" (Sadness), two different viewpoints - Paul Klees's on the one hand and the police's on the other - are juxtaposed, commenting on the mysterious disappearance of an airplane and offering opposed accounts, so that what happens to the airplane finally remains a mystery. This "counterpointed plot," as Molesworth defines it,⁸⁵ finds at the microtextual level a correlative in opaque lexical forms that apparently seem to be printing errors, but that are instead neologisms resulting from the juxtaposition of incongruous linguistic materials such as the "buffalo humps" in Snow White :

They are "trash", and what in fact could be more useless and trashlike?⁸⁶

Mysterious condensations like "vatricide" in the same story⁸⁷ are also part of the same strategy, as mot-valise, denominations inherited by the Surrealist

⁸⁵ This structure is also typical of "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" and "Views of My Father Weeping." Molesworth, Donald Barthelme's Fiction: The Ironist Saved from Drowning, cit..

⁸⁶ Barthelme, Snow White, p. 96.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 164.

poetics of Carroll, Lear and Duchamp, which the narrator attributes to monsters:

I remember once we were out on the ranch shooting peccadillos (result of a meeting, on the plains of the West, of the collared peccary and the nine-banded armadillo).⁸⁸

In other words, Barthelme's texts, like Pynchon's, which also pursue a narrative strategy founded on antinomy, are full of puzzles. The narrator, metanarratively explains:

We like books that have a lot of dreck in them, matter which presents itself as not wholly relevant (or indeed at all relevant) but which, carefully attended to, can apply a kind of 'sense' of what is going on. This sense is not to be obtained by reading between the lines (for there is nothing there, in those white spaces), but by reading the lines themselves - looking at them, and so arriving at a feeling not of satisfaction exactly, that is too much to expect, but of having read them; of having "completed" them.
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In the Babelic collage-city, contradictio in adiecto, ambivalent expressions which, for example, see the coexistence of an hyperbolic term and of another denying or attenuating the previous meaning, are recurrent. Phrases like "Almost wonderful,"⁹⁰ "approximately fantastic," "slighly wonderful but also mildly superb,"

⁸⁸ Barthelme, "Views of My Father Weeping" in City Life, p. 4.

⁸⁹ Barthelme, Snow White, p. 106.

⁹⁰ Barthelme, "The Big Hug" in Sixty Stories, p. 315.

⁹¹ are oxymoronic constructions emerging from an improbable, surrealist juxtaposition of two or more distinct ideas. As we have also noticed in Pynchon, the post-urban space is an antinomic field where contraries coexist. It is in this paradoxical contiguity of incompatible terms that the ironical nature - in the Duchampian sense of black humor - of these texts is to be found. ⁹²

Barthelme's stories are illustrated with black boxes, psychological Rorschach tests aimed at stimulating the reader's free association and revealing the thoughts of those who interpret rather than those of the author: a performative technique of gradual diminishment of the narrator's role, involving the transformation of the reader into creator of the opaque text, because the emphasis, in these narratives, is no longer on facts, but on the multiple ways of interpreting them:

Reader [...] I am free associating, brilliantly, brilliantly, to put you in the problem. ⁹³

⁹¹ Barthelme, "Lightening" in Overnight to Many Distant Cities, pp. 51, 45.

⁹² Cf. Vladimir Jankélevitch, L'ironie (1964), It. trans. Fernanda Canepa (Genova: Il Melangolo, 1987), p. 113.

⁹³ Barthelme, "Florence Gree is 81" in Come Back, Dr. Caligari (New York: Anchor Books, 1985), p. 2.

Rosenberg's idea that anxiety is the intrinsic nature of contemporary art⁹⁴ is confirmed by the entropic forms of Postmodern art, which is a decentered discourse, an "idiom of displacement," as Couturier and Durand refer to Barthelme's language.⁹⁵

Faced with the monstrous lexical and narrative structures of Barthelme's fiction, the reader actually places himself as if before a puzzling "anxious object" of art and architecture, a term that Harold Rosenberg used to define the enigmatic quality of art in the United States from Pollock to Abstract Expressionism.

Like Barthelme's collage-city, creating a non-specular, heterogeneous landscape through a language of non-assimilation under the influence of Marcel Duchamp, performance art and the mysterious combines of Rauschenberg have, since the Sixties, created undecidable objects, irreducible to a monolithic message and to interpretation, which would later be continued in the hybrid forms of postmodern architecture.

As Barthelme points out in an interview, New York, his ideal collage-city, is a space of fragmentary messages that assumes ambivalent and unpredictable meanings for the reader:

⁹⁴ Harold Rosenberg, The Anxious Object: Art Today and Its Audience (New York:Horizon Press, 1964).

⁹⁵ Maurice Couturier-Régis Durand, Donald Barthelme, p. 28.

New York City is or can be regarded as a collage, as opposed to, say, a tribal village in which all the huts [...] are the same hut, duplicated. The point of collage is that unlike things are put together to make, in the best case, a new reality. This new reality, in the best case, may be or imply a comment on the other reality from which it came, and may also be much else. It's an itself, if it's successful: Harold Rosenberg's "anxious object", which doesn't know whether it's a work of art or a pile of junk.

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Like Rauschenberg's combines, Barthelme's writing, strangely suspended between a work of art and a trash heap, is itself an "anxious object" which enigmatically imposes itself on the reader's attention as a reversible object, wittgensteinianly presented (as opposed to re-presented) to the imagination of a "self-educating audience"⁹⁷ who, perplexed, happen to confront it.

The audience's confrontation with the anxious objects of his contemporary visual art and architecture is actually insisted upon by Barthelme, a writer who often illustrates his stories with surrealist pictures and who directed the Museum of Modern Art in Houston, contributing to the literary and graphic part of the journal Forum, and who co-founded with Harold Rosenberg and Thomas B. Hess the synesthetic journal of art and literature, Location, which discussed texts of McLuhan,

⁹⁶ Cf. Roy R. Bahrens, Joe David Bellamy, The New Fiction: Interviews with Innovative American Writers (Urbana, Ill.: Illinois U.P., 1974), pp. 51-52.

⁹⁷ Rosenberg, The Anxious Object, p. 257.

Gass, Bellow, John Ashbery , Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch in their relation with abstract expressionists like Larry Rivers and Robert Rauschenberg.

Besides the lexical and morphological virtuosity, the decentered narrator and the creation of phantasmagoric space and time that assimilates Barthelme's techniques to those of Surrealists, this writer constantly refers to the art world and to the contemporary experiments in visual art of their movement, presenting in his stories the enigmatic shapes of environmental art, the marvellous juxtapositions of Postmodern architecture, the hybrid forms that Surrealist art had assumed in the United States, diffusing its discourse of suspension and indeterminacy in the urban landscape.

This synesthetic link between the way Surrealist and Postmodern aesthetics of performance developed in the United States under the influence of Marcel Duchamp is here worth stressing briefly. The same atmosphere of suspension and coexistence of discrete signals that we find in Duchamp permeates the lexical, structural and thematic levels of the Barthelmean narrative collage, which can be considered as a kind of extended Duchampian sentence, finally transforming fiction into an object of performance.

3. Narrative as Anxious Object: allegories of art and architecture in Barthelme's stories

While the Benjaminian art of fragments maintains a quality of secrecy that still allows recognition of the source of alienation, Barthelme's collage is a thoroughly enigmatic form in which magic is no prelude to revelation. Devoid of an ideological center, his open-ended text is ultimately offered to the reader's interpretation as an event. In performance art, the undecidable form, derivative of the Duchampian aesthetics of indeterminacy, implies the viewer's encounter with an heterogeneous, non-symbolic "environment" that the performance artist exhibits but never explains.

In Surrounded Islands (1980-83), Bulgarian artist Christo deliberately aimed at creating an "incongruence" in the American landscape, covering the islands near Miami with a synthetic, shocking pink material, in a form of environmental art that produces an indeterminate change in the perception of the occasional viewer. In the early Seventies, following the example of Robert Smithson, performance-artists like Claes Oldenburg, Edward Ruscha and Vito Acconci - recently participating to the environmental project, "Art in Public Places" - left the elitist space of the galleries to give space a sculptural sense, breaking the continuity of styles in the city and transforming the territory into a cryptic map of ephemeral "actions"

in the environment." The use of space as a concrete and physical context for the artist to intervene with three-dimensional objects, blurring the distinction between art and non-art (and between genres like architecture, sculpture, painting and theater), emerged as a major feature in the art experience of the decade.

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The urban and extra-urban space is used as a text where the artists inscribe mythical, enigmatic objects - in Celant's words, "'cose' mosse da leggi indecifrabili e insondabili"⁹⁹ - attracting the puzzled interest of the urbanite.

Barthelme does not limit himself to molding his narrative according to the neo-Surrealist aesthetics of the "anxious object," but actually elevates such conceptual urban sculptures to the very topic of a story he wrote in the Seventies. In "The Balloon,"¹⁰⁰ he writes of an enormous balloon dominating the Manhattan sky, as an enigmatic presence producing a series of discussions among the passers-by:

The apparent purposeless of the balloon was vexing (as was the fact that it was "there" at all) [...] Critical opinion was divided.

⁹⁸ Cf. Renato Barilli, Informale oggetto comportamento, vol. II (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1979), p. 13.

⁹⁹ Celant, "MIArt" in Oltre la città, la metropoli, p. 206.

¹⁰⁰ Barthelme, "The Balloon" in Unspeakable Practices, p. 21 ff.

[...] It was suggested that what was admired about the balloon was finally this: that it was not limited, or defined [...] This ability of the balloon to shift its shape, to change, was very pleasing, especially to people whose lives were rather rigidly patterned, persons to whom change, although desired, was not available. The balloon, for the twenty-two days of its existence, offered the possibility in its randomness of mislocation of the self, in contradiction to the grid of precise, rectangular pathways under our feet.

¹⁰¹

The "balloon" is actually one of the "scenografie permanenti nella tessitura urbana"¹⁰² which, once offered to the viewer to be decodified, are able to assume all imaginable forms, like the object of the postmodern hero's quest. As the narrator of "The Balloon" seemed to anticipate while writing that "balloon and building seemed a unity,"¹⁰³ environmental art and Postmodern architecture seem to follow the same allegorical logic, both being forms of art without a symbolic and functional intention, offering themselves as performative events to the flâneur's associations.

More recently, Barthelme's stories have shown other indefinable objects in the shape of Postmodern architecture which Bletter considers akin to the collagistic art of the Sixties:

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 25, 27-28.

¹⁰² Celant, "MIArt" in Oltre la città, p. 206.

¹⁰³ Barthelme, "The Balloon" in Unspeakable Practices, p. 24.

Inspired in part by Pop Art, as well as the collaged works of Robert Rauschenberg and of Jasper Johns, Venturi sought to incorporate in his designs references to several layers of meaning, references that would include all at once the vernacular, the commercial as well as high art and architecture. The result would be a palimpsest of social and cultural strata. ¹⁰⁴

In order to redefine the city in the shape of a multifarious, plural environment, Venturi found his model in the pop language of advertisements, in the "electrographic architectures" of the commercial strip of Las Vegas, ¹⁰⁵ whose phantasmagoric combination of graphic art, street signs and commercial architectures provided the syntax for the linguistic palimpsest, to the pastiche of styles and languages that are constitutive of postmodern art and architecture.

Like Venturi and Gehry, Simon, the protagonist of Paradise designs buildings, incongruously juxtaposing different styles, not excepting the "vernacular" of the commercial structures, in a conception of the city as a receptacle of fragments, as a pastiche of languages.

In the new consumer kitsch architecture of the strip, as well as in the the no-towns which today have transformed part of the American field into an area of

¹⁰⁴ Rosemarie Haag Bletter, "Transformations in the American Vernacular: the Work of Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown" in Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown: A Generation of Architecture (Krannert Art Museum, 1984), p.3.

¹⁰⁵ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, Learning from Las Vegas, cit..

transit, "the building and the symbol are one and the same thing."¹⁰⁶ In order to attract people's eyes, the variety of styles evoked by commercial architecture on the strip produces an environmental phantasmagoria, provide a Baedeker for the passing driver, juxtaposing, as in postmodern writing, distant places and unrelated styles. Banham describes the national stereotypes reproduced on the Los Angeles highway: from the colonial restaurants next to the fast food diners shaped like Loire castles, from the "totally improbable Aztec hotel in Monrovia, intended by its designer to be Mayan rather than Aztec",¹⁰⁷ to imitation Tahitian restaurants. This clash of styles redeems the strip from monotony, transforming it into a fantastic "atopia."

This noisy, polychrome pluralism of style constituting, according to Venturi, the American "vernacular,"¹⁰⁸ the Postmodern architect transfers the Modernist, rational idiom, to the American metropolis, in the attempt to break with the stylistic continuity

¹⁰⁶ Reyner Banham, Los Angeles, p. 112.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 115.

¹⁰⁸ For a discussion of the work of Robert Venturi and his associates, see Bletter, "Transformations of the American Vernacular: the Work of Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown" in Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown: A Generation of Architecture, p. 3, and also Cesare De Seta, origini e eclisse del movimento moderno (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1980), p. 12.

of the so-called International Style, on the basis of the theories expressed by Le Corbusier in Toward a New Architecture (1923). ¹⁰⁹

In Barthelme's novel Paradise, the protagonist is a Postmodern architect who, like the amorphic Barthelmean narrator, presents himself as a "ghost" in the city, as a Duchampian man of the crowd, conceiving of himself as the point of convergence for dissimilar languages:

Simon enjoyed life as a ghost, one of the rewards of living in the great city. So many units rushing to and fro that nobody notices anything much or had time to remark on strangers in the house, in the neighborhood.
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The "Carnival of styles" appearing in the stories of Donald Barthelme finds a direct, spatial correlative in the iconoclastic montage constitutive of these buildings. Ambivalently defining themselves as "Post-moderns" or as the direct heirs of the Modernist move-

¹⁰⁹ Before the second World War, the "International Style" was diffused in the United States at the International Exhibition of Modern Architecture which took place at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932. Under the impulse of scientific research and the technological revolution in transportation, Le Corbusier had encouraged architects to use modern materials such as glass, steel and cement, and to conceive buildings inspired by the rational design of aereodynamic means of transportation, opening a new functionalist period in Architecture generically referred to as "Modernism."

¹¹⁰ Barthelme, Paradise, p 119.

ment,¹¹¹ American architects such as Philip Johnson, Frank Gehry, Robert Venturi and Peter Eisenman have introduced invention and creativity into the landscape of certitude and symmetry expressed by the Modernist sky-scrappers (so-called crystal-boxes).

In Paradise, the Postmodern architect of the story defines himself, with great satisfaction, as a bricoleur, an enthusiastic follower of Venturi and Graves:

I love the excesses of my profession, Simon thought, heroics and mock-heroics. Michael Graves and Robert Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction as a text. All those form-givers enjoying themselves as Michelangelo, Wright and his cape, Mies and his pinstripes. Michelangelo: "Where I steal I leave a knife." An appropriate Renaissance sentiment.
112

To the rational and functional forms of the Modern movement contemporary architects oppose decorated façades (Michael Graves), the revival of picturesque ruins and past styles (Charles Moore), and the adoption of the poor materials used in commercial architecture

¹¹¹ A lively debate has seen the confrontation of those like Charles Jencks, who have stressed the innovative aspects of this architecture, and of those like Cesare De Seta who opted instead for the hypothesis of continuity with the Modernist movement, pointing out that: "era stato proprio Rogers in un editoriale di Casabella - dall'inequivocabile titolo Continuità o crisi? - a porsi con lucidità il problema dei rapporti con la tradizione del movimento moderno." Cesare De Seta, Origine e eclisse, p. 22 and Charles Jencks, The Language of Post-Modern Architecture (London: Academy, 1977).

¹¹² Barthelme, Paradise, p. 119.

and in the urban landscape (Robert Venturi, Frank Gehry), in the common project of producing a creative form of building to be conceived as an art object, as a form of urban sculpture located in an enigmatic landscape expressing a lack of coherence and organicity, what Venturi refers to as "complexity and contradiction" in a seminal work for the development of a Postmodern style. ¹¹³

Referring to the multiple idioms and different cultures coexisting at the same level and unreconciled in the contemporary city, Postmodern architecture juxtaposes apparently incompatible styles in incongruous matches, undermining the Manichean distinction between sacred and profane, high and low cultures.

Like Barthelme's and Pynchon's stories and Rauschenberg's combines, which gather heaps of trash, the Postmodern house of the Californian architect Frank Gehry was built in 1978 with the poor, unrefined materials of urban sites such as the plexiglas, wire netting, metals and wood that constitute the materials for playgrounds and parking-lots. ¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Robert Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, "The Museum of Modern Art Papers on Architecture," (New York: MOMA, 1966).

¹¹⁴ "[...] the formal principles of this shell are not based on practicality [...] built of metal and wood and wire netting it gives the initial impression of a temporary structure [...] He uses cheap materials [...] seen this way, Gehry's 'non-finite' architecture is an attempt to revive building as an artistic activity." Heinrich Klotz, "Introduction" to Postmodern Visions: Drawings, Paintings, and Models by Contemporary

His architecture, expressing a strong taste for the clash of styles, finally harmonizes with the commercial landscape of Los Angeles, made of square stucco warehouses with the sophisticated design of European "studio-houses" of the Thirties, as is the case for Gehry's studio-house on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles, a model of non-residential architecture which, while maintaining undeniable aesthetic qualities, surprisingly matches the commercial area where it is located. ¹¹⁵

It is a complex, parodic creativity that Post-modernism expresses, referring back to the surprising surrealist appearance of a familiar element encountered out of context. ¹¹⁶ The result of this incongruous encounter is a suspension of judgment. As in the bricolage of Surrealist painting, postmodern pastiche limits itself to stimulating only a partial recognition of the two or more symbolic worlds that it simultaneously evokes. The allegorical fragment, the ruin is generative of postmodern architecture, as it is of Postmodern writing. In order to enter this field of

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Architects (New York: Abberville, 1985), p. 48.

¹¹⁵ Cf. Banham, Los Angeles, p. 198.

¹¹⁶ Rosemarie Bletter suggests a similar technique in "Transformations of the American Vernacular: the Work of Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown," Venturi, Rauch & Scott Brown, p. 13.

clashing elements, it is necessary to think in terms of a dis-architecture, of the catastrophe of spatial and temporal orders. As the Barthelmean architect points out, the single brick must prevail over the finished, stable idea of the fortress:

He had settled for being a competent, sometimes inventive architect with a tragic sense of brick. Brick was his favourite material as the fortress was the architectural metaphor that he had, more and more, to resist. ¹¹⁷

The architectural Postmodern poetics of ruins accounted for in Paradise is anticipated in the short story "Henrietta and Alexandra," where a designer of "artificial ruins" locates her allegorical sculptures in the desert of Arizona, a natural, solitary land where the fake ancient Greek ruins that she reproduces are incongruously located, paradoxically assigning an ancient memory to a context that never knew the forms of Western classicism:

As a designer of artificial ruins, Alexandra was well-known. She designed ruins in the manners of Langley, Effner, Robert Adam and Carlo Marchionni, as well as her own manner. She was working on a ruin for a park in Tempe, Arizona, consisting of a ruined wall nicely disintegrated at the top of one end, two classical columns upright and one fallen, vines, and a number of broken urns. ¹¹⁸

The reference to an opaque, allegorical past is not to be mistaken for memory, a sign for the nostalgic

¹¹⁷ Barthelme, Paradise, p. 59.

¹¹⁸ Barthelme, "Henrietta and Alexandra" in Overnight to Many Distant Cities, p. 84.

return to the past. In the pastiche of Postmodern art, in which artificial trash collides with the mythical-symbolic ruins, historical meaning never prevails but rather contributes to the opacity of the object in its simultaneous power to evoke distinct contexts, or, as Barthelme says, "many distant cities." As Klotz points out:

The reference to historical architecture is designed deliberately to call attention to itself. Contrast and tension are often created between historical motif and modern form in order to express the desired statement. A major part of this architectural language consists of playing off the contrasts between a modern form, relevant to the present, and a historical reference. For example Charles Moore places the neoclassical scenery of his New Orleans Piazza d'Italia within a complex of modern buildings.¹¹⁹

In another story, Barthelme ironically refers to an architect of imitation Gothic cathedrals - Pynchon's symbol of a totalizing ideology and a prescriptive past. In Postmodern times, the fake cathedral is erected in Nebraska, with a building frame of cement, a modern material incongruously providing the very foundation of a would-be mythical Gothic style:

Perpetua met many new people. She met Henry, who was a cathedral builder. He built cathedrals in places where there were no cathedrals - Twayne, Nebraska for example. Every American city needed a cathedral, Henry said [...] "Architecture is memory, Henry said."¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Klotz, Introd. to Postmodern Visions, p. 8.

¹²⁰ Barthelme, "Perpetua" in Sadness, p. 43.

The revival of ruins questions, rather than evokes the certitude of faith represented by the Gothic cathedral. Such a sense of stability, as Henry Adams already understood at the turn of the century, was lost forever in the industrial age of commodities, as the rebuildier of cathedral himself recognizes:

The ribs of your vaults intersect collecting the vertical and lateral thrusts at fixed points which are then buttressed or grounded although that's not important anymore when you use a steel skeleton as we do which may be cheating but I always say that cheating in the Lord's name is OK, as long as He don't catch you at it. Awe and grace, Henry said, awe and grace, that's what we're selling and we offer a Poet's Corner where any folks who were poets or even suspected of being poets can be buried just like Westminster Abbey.¹²¹

This principle of remake as artifice has the same incongruous effect as the quotations from literary tradition disseminated in Pynchon and Barthelme's narratives. Displaced as they are among commodities and media culture, they point to a past that is not a solid tradition to refer to, but rather a vague, confused memory. The neo-baroque art of architecture, composed of disorganic juxtapositions and ambiguous combinations of manipulated units, still refers to the Surrealist bricolage of decontextualized fragments allegorically converging in a disorganic space.¹²²

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 44.

¹²² Klotz, Introduction to Postmodern Visions, pp. 8-10.

In stark contrast to the abstraction of the purely stereometric, functional forms of Modernist buildings, the Barthelmean Postmodern architect suggests a creative architecture founded on daring combinations, on a phantasmagoric circus, on a carnival of symbols and signs:

New Architecture is "soulless," Simon reads, again and again and again. He had trouble disagreeing when what is being talked about is a seventy-story curtain-wall building on Sixth Avenue. People don't like to live or work above the second floor in any building, the third at the outer extreme. No building should be taller than a ship. People like light; on the other hand they also like caves. An austere façade pleases architects; people like decoration, a modicum of drama [...] The messianic-maniacal idea that architecture will make people better, civilize them, central to much 1920s-30s architectural thought, Corbusier, Gropius, even Wright, abandoned. Although modesty is not what architects do best, there is more restraint now, Simon thinks [...] The image that seems to him really on the mark is the circus.¹²³

This return to Surrealist creativity and manipulation, expressed in the palimpsests of styles of postmodern architecture is produced, as in postmodern fiction, by a mélange of recent materials and déjà vu, turning the building - despite its function of office, apartment, or public place - into an art object, a mythical and allegorical presence that produces the effect of a displacement of the conceptual urban sculpture, while providing an incongruous alternative to the uniform

¹²³ Barthelme, Paradise, p. 68.

language of historical buildings and Modern architecture.

As in Barthelme's stories and in Pynchon's novels, in the eccentric work of Postmodern architects we find the simultaneous adoption of past culture and of trash, the inclusion of tradition and commercial structures in a combination that is neither symbolic nor narrative in nature, founded as it is on the union of high and low languages. Mixing classic quotations with the "vernacular" of commercial architecture, Michael Graves' "Portland Building" (1980) adopts the acrylic colors of street signs and advertising to decorate a building otherwise structured according to the Modernist style. Transforming the Modernist language of order and symmetry into the polymorphic, opaque quality of contemporary communication, Graves adds a bronze garland atop the building, a mythical-allegorical, incongruous detail, a decoration which, once added to the acrylic colors of the façade, evokes the memory of a vague past as an enigmatic trace on top of the Modern structure, in a puzzling contiguity of sacred and profane materials which does not emphasize any of the historical and linguistic universes simultaneously evoked. In the eccentric Barthelmean Paradise, the Postmodern mixture of synthetic colors and ruins metalinguistically reappears:

"Simon, your're famous!" Veronica says. She's waving a copy of Progressive Architecture.
"You saw the piece."

"Looks beautiful. Big building ... It's got a very fancy outside."

"Some of that fiberglass. We had to make molds to reproduce a lot of the capitals, that stuff on the top of the columns. It drives you crazy because you've got to add a fire-retardant to the gel coat and that can change the color and you're trying to match the color of the existing building."¹²⁴

Configured as pastiche, as antinomic objects of paradox, postmodern architecture (like environmental art), and postmodern writing speak an enigmatic language, transforming the city into an ever-changing semiotic field which does not refer to an ultimate, absolute hermeneutic system.

Postmodern language emphasizes the phatic (as opposed to the symbolic) function of the artefact, aiming at establishing a performative contact with the reader. Therefore, this architecture does not get from the Surrealist collage the iconoclastic, provocative gesture - which today seems lost in the Babel of signs - but rather its puzzling quality, its method of provoking what Bletter defines as "a puzzled response of partial recognition,"¹²⁵ creating a building that breaks the coherence of the historical-monumental and

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

Modernist landscape, which continues to speak a language of symmetry and certitude.¹²⁶

Instead, the Postmodern pastiche of styles that constitutes Postmodern art makes the city break into a series of separate and circumstantial forms of knowledge, ultimately left to the free associations of the flâneur, like the bits of a Barbara Kruger montage that continually warns him: "We are your circumstantial evidence."

The logic of indeterminacy, as the Barthelmean architect finally recognizes, is the only measure for such an overdetermined landscape where, paradoxically, the sudden convergence of distinct linguistic systems neutralizes their semantic power:

"By me everything's temporary. Good things and bad things."

"That must be fascinating. The indeterminacy."¹²⁷

In other words, bringing together wildly disparate elements into a new whole, Postmodern aesthetic forms have

¹²⁶ By contrast, Venturi writes: "Architects can no longer afford to be intimidated by the puritanically moral language of orthodox Modern architecture. I like elements which are hybrid rather than 'pure', compromising rather than 'straightforward', ambiguous rather than 'articulated', perverse as well as impersonal, boring as well as 'interesting', conventional rather than excluding, redundant rather than simple, vestigial as well as innovating, inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct. I am for messy vitality over obvious unity." Venturi, Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, p. 2.

¹²⁷ Barthelme, Paradise, p. 13.

no transparent message to communicate: they are events that call on Gestalt psychology, requiring the reader's creative intervention, leaving him the last word, the chance of finding by himself a path among the opaque, unstable "anxious objects" he encounters in the contemporary urban field. In conclusion, urban sculptures as well as Postmodern architecture metalinguistically appear in Barthelme's narratives in order to partake of the creation of a textual "atopia" in which the city transcends its geographical and historical identity to turn into a Babelic nowhere place, producing an allegorical discourse of allusion.

Chapter 7

Electronic bodies and humor in Laurie Anderson's empty places

Je voyage pour connaître ma
géographie.

Notes of a madman, Paris, 1907

Nothing exists, all is a dream
God - man - the world - the sun, the
moon, the wilderness of stars, - a
dream, all a dream, they have no
existence. Nothing exists save
empty space and you.

Mark Twain,

The Mysterious Stranger

1. The technological city of dream

Laurie Anderson is an artist who, under the
influence of Robert Ashley's "text-sound composition,"
turned in the Seventies from sculpture and performance
art - conceived as happening and environmental art - to
a synesthetic art that perhaps defines rock-
performance, an audiovisual combination of text, music

and film making her sophisticated experimental art accessible to a mass audience.

Anderson's relation to postmodern writers is not casual: she made tours in the United States with William S. Burroughs, ¹ and explicitly refers to Thomas Pynchon in her lyrics, borrowing the extra-urban typology of the highway as labyrinth and the poetics of linguistic disorder and entropy in a high-tech urban space from him. ²

On the other hand, in its character of "glossolalia," electronic, or new wave, rock music is often regarded by postmodern writers as a representation of entropy. As I mentioned, before dissolving into zone, the protagonist of Gravity's Rainbow leaves the last trace of himself on the cover picture of a rock album, the same kind of music that insistently returns in The Crying of Lot 49 as the disharmonic performances of the "Paranoids" and that, in the earlier story "Entropy," disturbs the symmetric Bach fugues to which Callisto and Aubade listen in their hothouse.

Barthelme also wrote a story where in "The New Music" stands for the alogic and fragmentary structure

¹ Some of their performances are recorded by John Giorno Poetry System's collective album, "You are the Guy I want to spend My Money With" (New York, 1981).

² She dedicates a song, "Gravity's Angel," to Pynchon clearly evocative of the novel in Mr Heartbreak (New York: Warner, 1987).

of his narratives; he writes: "The New music burns things together, like a welder." ³

Borrowing many of Pynchon's themes and a cutting-up operating both at the visual and the textual level, Anderson seems to synthesize aspects of the two texts examined so far: that is, the problem introduced by Pynchon of the production of meaning in the electronic city and the necessity of finding an allegorical, fragmentary form, more adequate to express the plurilinguistic nature of the city: a non-representable place that Surrealists had already transformed into a montage of unrelated fragments, and that Anderson transforms into a multimedia collage, interspersed with apologues, a form of short, enigmatic narrative.

In this shape, Anderson's urban stories possess the same open-ended, suspended quality of Postmodern writing, emphasizing their conceptual nature in order to pose unsolved questions and verbal riddles to the reader.

It would certainly be a partial enterprise to attempt only a literary analysis of these texts, as they are dependent on an entire audiovisual project, meant to be perceived at multiple sensory levels. Furthermore, it would be equally risky to reduce her multimedia enterprise to the written word, on the basis of

³ Barthelme, Great Days (London-Henley: Routledge & Kegan, 1970), p. 348.

an intersemiotic reading that may prove insufficient, if, as Anderson declares, quoting Steve Martin: "To talk about music is to dance about architecture." ⁴

Another methodological problem posed for the student of performance art is its constitutive ephemeral nature of event, which often makes the very transcription of Anderson's texts problematic. What matters here, however, in the closing chapter of our discussion of the allegorical city from Baudelaire to Post-modernism, is that Anderson translates the entropic metropolitan environment into a media language of simultaneous montages and fractured images passing by on a series of multiple screens and "instant sets" that she situates on the stage. ⁵ This visual background presents a kaleidoscopic montage of metropolitan life: aerial photographs of big cities like New York and Chicago, subway cars coming and going, and all the technological paraphernalia of a high-tech environment (telephones, screens, cars, street-signs, xerox machines, etc.), speaking an electronic language that man has learnt to understand. She juxtaposes this fragmentary visual language with analogical, unrelated apologues, producing an audiovisual collage led by

⁴ Laurie Anderson interviewed by Michael Kantor, Theater Week, vol. 3, no. 10 (October 16, 1989), 14.

⁵ Anderson has passed from the monolithic screen of slides of her 1983 performance United States to the multiple screens of Empty Places (1989).

chance and the circulation of a myriad incompatible signs and signals. Her poetics is, again, the poetics of Surrealist displacement:

When you do think of an apple - and the thought or image "heart" springs to mind - you've got one of those double situations mentioned above - and the fact that this apple does remind you of an heart - makes it a better apple - because you've just doubled every thing - and now you've got everything you'll ever need to write poetry or make any public or private statement which people will probably take seriously (enough) because you're not just saying what you're saying, you're saying something else ...and ...uh...it's more economical. ⁶

In these terms, the technical jargon, the codes and idioms saturating the space of her performance are not a means of communication, but linguistic materials for her combinatorial, entropic art.

Her non-selective art of combination is an attempt, like Barthelme's collage, to relate, as she says, the "so-called real world with the other world, an alternate world of possibility and chance: a dream world. ⁷" Such a world is not an interior and merely individual domain, but emerges from the encounter between the individual and electronics, between man and machine, in an intersection of media technology and humankind which, as we already noticed in both Pynchon and Barthelme,

⁶ Anderson, A Few Notes on Songs, priv. publ. (winter, 1976-77), p. (25).

⁷ Anderson, Empty Places, New York, B.A.M., October, 3-15, 1989, p. 29.

does not produce anomie and alienation, but rather an incongruous language. Ballard defines this middle ground as "non-psychological subjective space," a turning in a world of dream which does not coincide with a rejection of the outside, entropic world or with an entrance into a world of self-absorption or retreat.⁸ Magic realism is the humorous, narrative dimension that she embraces in order to bring together man and machine, marking the final decline of the Modernist technological dystopia, and interpreting a new phase of electronic fruition in which the individual has direct access to post-atomic technology (through the VCR, the personal computer, the mouse) compared to a time when technology was only accessible to an invisible technocracy, in an institutional, bureaucratic dimension to which Pynchon still refers to some extent in Gravity's Rainbow.⁹

While in Gravity's Rainbow Slothrop's pursuers moved under a menacing sky of missiles, when Anderson, while discovering a technological universe full of

⁸ J. G. Ballard, interviewed by G. Revell in Re/Search, 8/9 (San Francisco: 1984).

⁹ The transition from Debord's "Society of spectacle" to a "third video phase" is described by Mario Perniola in "La cosa videomatica" in Transiti (Bologna: Cappelli, 1984). On this question see also Alberto Abruzzese, Il corpo elettronico, and Jonathan Crary, "Eclissi dello spettacolo: L'apparato disciplinare della cultura digitale," in Oltre la città, la metropoli, p. 239.

cross-purposes and uncertainties, looks at the sky, she envisions a Surrealist dreamworld full of surprises having nothing to do with psychological reflections. Anderson seems to continue Gravity's Rainbow from the point at which Slothrop, dismembered in the electronic world, makes his exit from the story to join a rock group and enter a field of errance.

In other words, Anderson's performance features a dispersed subjectivity scattered in the entropic landscape, reflecting the crisis of the psychoanalytic paradigm and an interest in coping, as Ballard says, "with the modern urban landscape, the whole series of enciphered meanings that lie half-exposed within the urban landscape we all inhabit and to some extent contribute to [...] a radically new set of mythologies that aren't concerned with the past - with trying to explain the origins of, say, personality conflicts." ¹⁰

Dominated by electricity, full of lights and t.v. screens as in a novel by William S. Burroughs, this technological landscape, instead of producing vertigo, dissociation and anomie, stimulates a sensorial, empathic participation. As opposed to the cerebral response of the urban type that Simmel describes, ¹¹

¹⁰ Ballard interviewed by G. Revell, in Re/Search, p. 39.

¹¹ Georg Simmel, "The metropolis and Mental Life" (1903), in Classical Essays on the Culture of Cities, R. Sennett, ed. (New York: Prentice Hall, 1969).

the Andersonian urbanite alogically tours this magical field full of lights and seductions, in a late Baudelairean form of jouissance de la foule:

Gee, all those lights and all those screens. The New York experience is mind-boggling. I don't think I've ever seen that many screens, and I'll probably come again: It was really amazing. It boggled my mind.¹²

To enter this dematerialized, entropic landscape, Anderson needs, like the Barthelmean narrator, to dismember the self and to blur her narrative standpoint. Refounding the metropolitan subject, she creates an electronic version of the Duchampian "bachelor machine": an humorous, transexual self surrealistically suspended between the inside and the outside world, who privileges his transactions with the electronic world instead of a fixed, organic sense of individual identity that in this hybrid encounter inevitably comes apart.

Resolving the dissociation between man and machine, typical of Modern times, and the cult of individual identity which in Pynchon degenerates into mere obsession, Anderson presents a dispersed subject who

¹² Anderson, "Americans on the Move," parts I-II, first represented at the "The Kitchen", New York, (Spring 1979). The text is partially printed in "Laurie Anderson: Performance Artist," The Drama Review. Women and Performance, vol 24, no. 2 (June 1980), 55.

identifies with the technological objects surrounding him, like Pynchon's character Mucho Maas who metonymically stands for his inanimate car. Inspired by Tesla's vision of man as an extension of an electric world, later borrowed by McLuhan, Anderson shows an encounter between man and electronics producing a language of contamination.

In the post-atomic era of electronics, the technological world expresses a potential creative fusion with technology which was previously depicted under the uncanny, menacing form of Surrealist mannequins, of uncanny objects and, more recently, in the shape of Philip Dick's "electric ants" (1976), and of cold, insensitive "biorobots" like Bongo-Shaftsbury in Pynchon's juvenile story "Under the Rose" (1961). In her "Coolville", however, Anderson does not depict an environment of cold machines entropically cancelling human space, but rather assumes the notion of "entropy" in the non-dystopic sense of linguistic disorder, as a plural space where the city becomes part of the subjective experience, a territory of visions and new anthropomorphic humanoids, speaking a Duchampian language of chance and possibility.

2. The empty place: a city of nomadic voices

Though constantly referring to the American landscape in her titles and images, Anderson depicts a non-specific geographical reality, a cosmopolitan, undifferentiated place like the Pynchonian zone or the cosmopolitan collage-city that Barthelme talks about. Positing the technological aspects as constitutive of the urban field nowadays, Anderson defines "empty places" as the global media landscape whose sky is the open space of communications where the waves of media messages freely circulate beyond geographical boundaries. This dematerialized urban field, constantly fragmented and reproduced through television montages is what Paul Virilio defines "electronic shadow zones,"¹³ the trans-urban palimpsests, the nowhere place produced by media culture.¹⁴ This amorphic, pluralized techno-world is suspended between the asphalt landscape and the sky - the immaterial world of communication -

¹³ Paul Virilio, "The Overexposed City," L'espace critique, 1984, rpt. in Zone, Michel Feher and Sanford Kwinter, eds., 1/2, (New York, 1986), p. 23.

¹⁴ Ballard asks himself: "[...] the American landscape, particularly as perceived through the mass media - through advertising, consumer goods and so on - has it begun to fragment, or is it still basically one landscape? [...] I got it from Koyak and Vegas and the Rockford Files! [...] I think one doesn't need to travel - TV travels for you." Ballard interviewed by G. Revell, in Re/Search, pp. 30-34.

"the Land of sky blue waters," as Anderson calls it,¹⁵ a dreamworld of audiovisual waves constantly animated by disembodied human voices and sound waves, fluctuating in open space like "strange angels," like immortal souls:

VOICES ON TAPE: Sound is composed of waves [...] When the wave form begins, we hear it as sound. But long after the sound has disappeared, the waves continue to move back and forth [...] with sensitive stereo microphones, we were able to record these waves, and then translate them into their original form: words.¹⁶

The image of the disembodied sound wave as a symbol for a dispersed subjectivity in open space appeared long before in Pynchon's early story, "The Secret Integration," where a young radio transmitter sees at some point his rooms "filled as the hour grew late with disembodied voices [...] all these coming down, filtering through to populate his dreams so that in the morning he'd never know which had been real, which he'd hallucinated."¹⁷

In one of her short apoloques, Anderson imitates voices on the air, the messages of the pilot on a

¹⁵ Anderson, "Hiawatha" in Strange Angels (New York: Warner, 1989). This song is a transparent parody of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's legend of native Americans.

¹⁶ Anderson, United States (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), part III.

¹⁷ Pynchon, "The Secret Integration" (1964) in Slow Learner, pp. 140-41.

plane, the neutral tone of journals like Newsweek or Time, and the messages left on answering machines, all voices mediated by media which gradually substitute for direct interaction between individuals:

Hi! How are you? Where've you been? Nice to see you [...] Listen Laurie, uh, if you want to talk before then, uh, I'll leave my answering machine on ...and just give me a ring...anytime. ¹⁸

Anderson envisions a world that, according to Tesla, is entirely composed of electric wires and electronic terminals: an utopic world in which technology is diffused and not monopolized. With the direct access to information that extended computer marketing allows, the subject covers his body with electronic appendices: remixing data, he surrealistically creates personal assemblages of images (a "hypertext") escaping the imposed programs, in more direct participation with the technological media which in the eighties is also emphasized by "cyber-punk" writers.

Crossed by anthropomorphic machines and by electronic androids, the Andersonian technological world does not produce a regression to the mineral and inanimate state, as Pynchon's entropic vision still implied, but offers man the chance to multiply and expand his space of action beyond his body, in an "electronic body" which, as Abruzzese points out, works

¹⁸ Anderson, "New York Social Life" in United States, part I.

in an electronic technological dimension, experiencing "le trasformazioni socioantropologiche dell'uomo nella sua sempre più intensa e veloce integrazione con i mezzi di comunicazione, dalla scrittura al video ed altre." ¹⁹

In the Eighties, Anderson does not envision technology as a cybernetic power monopolized by a repressive "Big Science," still under the shocking effect of the atomic bomb, as Pynchon did. Instead of configuring biorobots completely devoid of an interior world, she depicts a "humanized" technology. Her project of "personal" art is not, however, "autobiographical," because in the context of the information city, the (dis-membered) individual who speaks in the first person is aware that his discourse is not self-referential, ²⁰ but is undissociable from the semiotic context that surrounds him. In William S. Burroughs's words, the human assumes artificial shapes: "The human body becomes landscape." ²¹

¹⁹ Abruzzese, Il corpo elettronico, p. VII.

²⁰ For the debate on autobiography in contemporary literature and in media culture, see Philippe Lejeune, Je est un autre: L'autobiographie, de la littérature aux médias (Paris: Seuil, 1980).

²¹ Burroughs, "Introduction" to J. G. Ballard, Love and Napalm: Export U.S.A., American edition of The Atrocity Exhibition (1970), republ. in Re/Search, p. 143.

Anderson provides an example of performance situated in a technological environment, where the subject is immersed in a continuum of media codes. Dressed in black, like a puppeteer mimicking the background, she reduces the autobiographical, individual perspective of herself as artist to "a neutralized marginal presence."²² In reaction to body art and the aesthetics of "presence" that characterized performance in the Seventies, she enters the entropic space of her high-tech stage as a dismembered, externalized individual, whose psychological landscape is amplified and dispersed in the electronic world.²³

Like the Barthelmean narrator whose point of view is finally overwhelmed by the materials he calls into play, Anderson gradually transforms her individual body on stage from an autobiographical presence into a polymorphic and polyphonic "electronic body." To do so, she carries with her a series of electronic appendices such as the "audiotape" and other electronic features she invented to deform and amplify her natural female voice, finally turning into a plural, transexual monster, into a receptacle of multiple personalities.

²² Vito Acconci interviewed by Lisa Béar in American Artists on Art, Ellen H. Johnson ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 234.

²³ Cf. Alan Sondheim, Individuals: Post-Movement Art in America (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), p. XV.

In a plurilinguistic urban field in which the individual body is scattered and dismembered, the artist's use of the first person is not to be read as a search for an autobiographical, authentic expression: the artist's "I" is not an autobiographical index, but a mere linguistic agent, the vehicle for other voices, in a sort of ventriloquism that gathers the sparse traces of a plurivocal subjectivity:

I always felt it was a mistake being labeled as an autobiographical artist [...] Most of the work that I do is two-part or stereo, not monolithic at all - so there's always the yes/no, he/she, or whatever pairs I'm working with.²⁴

Technological media, sound reproduction, and all the electronic techniques of amplification and distortion provided by rock instruments gradually transform the artist from a distinct, unique psychology into a multiple, plural subject who expands in the urban landscape, producing "an intensely personal art that is not simply autobiography."²⁵

In the information city that Anderson reproduces on stage, the opaque "white noise" of the disparate signs and sounds circulating in her performance prevails up on the "presence" of the artist's body: she is not the synthetic point of convergence for all the ambiguous

²⁴ Anderson interviewed by Mel Gordon in "Laurie Anderson: Performance Artist" in The Drama Review, p. 51.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 51.

and multiple audiovisual signs surrounding her. The artist's messages are disjunct from the artist's body, demonstrating that, in the electronic age, the voice does not necessarily identify with the individual body it temporarily assumes, in a dislocation of the subject that questions oral diction as an authentic, unique utterance, as a trace that openly reveals its very origin.²⁶ Reproduced, pre-recorded, deferred by technological media, the subjective voice becomes plural, and the body to which the voice once belonged is dematerialized, dismembered in the information landscape. Interestingly enough, it is exactly from the assemblage of the dismembered parts of distinct human bodies that the computerized image of Max Headroom, the television speaker, is finally produced.

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The Protean subjectivity that Anderson represents by counterfeiting her voice through a series of electronic filters reports a plurality of semi-autobiographical narratives, which (s)he causes to circulate freely in the air, unrelated or not identifiable

²⁶ See Derrida's critique of Heideggerian phonologism and of the very notion of "voice" as "presence" in the chapter dedicated to Rousseau of his essay De la grammatologie (Paris: Ed. de Minuit, 1967).

²⁷ Annabel Jenkel, Morton Jenkins, Max Headroom: 20 Minutes in the Future, 1988.

with the personal history of the artist. As Owens puts it:

[...] the only access to herself that she allows is through all kinds of technological filters which amplify, distort or multiply her actual voice in such a way that it can no longer be identified as hers.²⁸

In the 1980 installation "Dark Dogs, American Dreams" at the Holly Solomon Gallery, Anderson collected the recorded dreams of several individuals deliberately portrayed in self-effacing, out-of-focus snapshots. Their voices narrating in the first person produced the effect of thoughts from the crowd, like those miraculously gathered by invisible metropolitan angels in Wim Wenders' film, Himmel Über Berlin (American title, "Wings of Desire", 1987). As Anderson's solo-performance develops into a multimedia concert, the artist's "I" becomes the polymorphic voice of a multiple being who does not correspond to the person on stage, because, in the electronic space, the body at the origin of the voice diffused by mass media has vanished, and interpersonal communication is occurring elsewhere - on the air - in a dematerialized, saturated nowhere, endlessly collecting the ephemeral traces of

²⁸ Craig Owens, "Amplifications: Laurie Anderson" in Art in America, vol. 169, no. 3 (March 1981) 121.

individuals speaking and communicating almost exclusively through electronic media. ²⁹

The performance artist, therefore, becomes herself a mere moderator of signals, a phonic vehicle of incorporeal characters, like telephone, radio and television. She situates herself, like Duchamp's "bachelor machines," in a middle ground between the self and the machine, between subject and object, between female and male identity - since the electronic harmonizer allows the artist to deepen her voice, to reproduce a male voice, in an example of vocal electronic transvestitism. ³⁰

Like Rose Sélavy, the disembodied self of the artist transcends her sexual identity to speak a language of dissimilarity, produced in his encounter with electronics. In "Dark Dogs, American Dreams," the last voice from the crowd, the girl on the beach narrating her dreams, stands for all the other voices that simultaneously speak through her. She becomes a plural, spacial subject, the very place where the multitude of individual voices converge:

GIRL ON THE BEACH: [...] all these names and faces are somehow endlessly moving through

²⁹ Cf. Avital Ronell, The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech (Lincoln: Nebraska U.P., 1989).

³⁰ Craig Owens, "Sex and Language: In Between," Laurie Anderson. Works from 1959 to 1983, Judith Kardon, ed., Institute of Contemporary Art, Pennsylvania University, Oct. 15-Dec. 4, 1983.

me. It's not that I see them exactly - I'm not a person in this dream - I'm a place ... just a place and I have no eyes, no hands; and all these names and faces just kept passing through. And there is no scale - just a lot of details. And I'm thinking of a detective movie, you know, where the hero is dead at the very beginning - so there is no person, just a slow accumulation of details.³¹

This spatial subject dispersed in the city and devoid of a psychic, internal time, consists of linguistic fragments, of unrelated details, fracturing (her)self in a myriad of personifications, like Nadja or the mysterious V., without distinguishing any more between the existence of herself and that of others, becoming part of an inclusive "universe of discourse," of a plurilinguistic context from which she is never independent. She dissolves herself in a myriad of fluctuating "nomadic voices,"³² speaking through electric wires, answering machines, telephone lines, tele- and radio-broadcasted, in an errance occurring on the air in an open space:

When TV signals are sent out they don't stop. They keep going. They pick up speed as they leave the solar system. By now, the first TV programs ever made have been travelling for thirty years. They are well beyond our solar system now. All those characters from cowboy serials, variety hours, and quiz shows are sailing out. They are the first voyagers into deep space. And they travel faster and faster...intact...still talking...The sound

³¹ Anderson, "Dark Dogs, American Dreams" in Hotel, (New York: Tanam Press, 1980), p. 131.

³² Anderson, "Americans on the Move," partially publ. in October, 8, (Spring 1979), 45.

of their voices and sounds of speeding away.
Like a phone...continously...ringing. ³³

A famous film noir by Jules Dassin, The Naked City (1948), opened with a aerial view of New York and a background voice commenting:

There are one million stories in the Naked City and this is one of them.

In the amorphic information city, Anderson, becoming the technological mediator for the scattered voices on the air, embodies a multiple, "amplified" individual in a city full of stories whose originators nobody knows anymore. She replies to Dassin:

There are ten million stories in the Naked City. But No One can remember which one is theirs. ³⁴

3. The electronic body of the performance artist

Incongruously juxtaposing human and technological features, the artist shows the animistic vitality of the electronic landscape, inventing a series of anthropomorphic instruments and "technical incarnations" able to imitate noises, sounds and rhythms of the human body: the vocoder, a synthesizer that doubles and blurs her voice, the harmonizer, providing it with

³³ Anderson, "Americans on the Move" in The Drama Review, p. 64.

³⁴ Anderson, United States, part II.

a male tone, and the "tape bow violin," a speaking violin that reproduces human voices, breaths and grunts through a prerecorded tape that substitutes for the violin's strings.

This speaking violin, as the electronic alter-ego of the artist on stage, closes the film-performance Home of the Brave, inviting the audience to listen to the beat of its metallic heart ("Listen to my heartbeat").³⁵ Technology speaks with a human language, reflecting dreams, symbols, and emotional world of human beings. In the Tokyo filmed by Chris Marker in Sans Soleil (1980), in a society where the human relation with the machine is more organic than in the Western countries in which logos and rational logic prevails in the sensorial language of the body, the dualist principle (yin/yang) coincides with the binary logic of the computer. Accordingly, reconciling the iconography of technology with man's archetypal visions, in this film, a video-game assembler translates the ancient myths of his ancient culture into the symbols of the electronic game.³⁶ In a similar gesture, Anderson - who often

³⁵ Anderson, "Late Show" in Home of the Brave (New York: Warner-Talk Normal Prod., 1986).

³⁶ In the section of the Arcades' books titled "Teoria della conoscenza e del progresso," Benjamin discusses the continuity between the artificial and the mythical universes: "Ogni infanzia, nel suo interesse per i fenomeni tecnici, nella sua curiosità per ogni sorta di invenzione e macchinari, lega le conquiste della tecnica agli antichi universi simbolici. Non c'è niente nel campo della natura che per definizione si sottragga a questo legame. Solo esso non si forma

celebrates Oriental cultures in her work - invents machines reflecting the myths, the emotions and the imaginary worlds of individuals, in a technological universe which remains enigmatic and full of mysterious signals, but is never menacing and depersonalized, like the technocratic the power described by Pynchon in Gravity's Rainbow.

Constantly mediating human communication, electronic machines end up, like the Duchampian "machines célibataires," revealing a certain affinity with man, in an animistic, non-entropic vision of technology:

In English, words expressing electricity are connected somehow to life - "live wire," for instance - and there is some idea that something that has this much power must also be life. People working in the artificial intelligence, for example at MIT, claim that they are trying to make a machine that is so sensitive that a soul will want to enter her. This is the goal [...] The point that I'm trying to make is that, in a sense, as these two life forms - human and machine - begin to merge a little bit, we're talking about technology really as a kind of new nature, something to measure ourselves against [...] we're able to turn those into human terms as opposed as just trying to adapt to machine talk.³⁷

Strongly mechanized and organically linked with the electronic media at their disposal, Andersonian charac-

—

nell'aura della novità, ma in quella dell'abitudine". Benjamin, Parigi, p. 597.

³⁷ Anderson interviewed by Charles Amirkhanian in The Guests go in to Supper (Oakland, Ca.: Burning Books, 1986), pp. 222, 227-28.

ters are "biorobotical organisms" produced by post-industrial technology, the phase of capitalism in which, according to Martin Box, the editor of Ballard's stories, the microchip, the home computer, television itself are all invading people. ³⁸

Even in their private life, Anderson's characters project emotional needs, personal expectations and secret desires onto the artificial landscape they inhabit. In their romantic moments, they dream of t.v. stars under a sky of satellites. A girl travelling by plane gives an account of a love-affair in "computerese," "a kind of high-tech lingo," an artificial language of noise, which finally coincides with the animals' primitive, amorphic talk:

Is she didn't understand something, it just "didn't scan." Everything was circuitry...electronics...switching. We talked most about her boyfriend ..."DIGITAL." She just meant the relationship was on again/off again. Always two things switching. Current passes through. And then it doesn't. It was the language of sounds...of noise...of switching...It was a language of the rabbit, of the caribou, the beaver, the penguin. A language of the past. Current running through bodies. On again-off again. One thing instantly replaces another... a language of the future. ³⁹

The role-exchange between man and machine, the continuity between the individual and the technological

³⁸ Martin Box interviewed in Re/Search, p. 36.

³⁹ Anderson, "Modern America Moves," October, p. 48.

environment exorcizes entropy in the originary sense of human regression from the animate to the inanimate state. In Anderson, as in Duchamp, the distinction between the living subject and the inanimate landscape blurs. As Ihab Hassan points out, following the objectivizing mode of the nouveau roman, Postmodernism shows the scattering and dissolution of the subject in the world of things⁴⁰: while the inanimate machine becomes articulated and vital like men, in Anderson's high-tech world, human characters choose electronic media to express themselves, confirming the final compenetration between man and technology propheticized by McLuhan.

The performance-artist herself, a neutral figure on stage, posits herself as an instrument, as a transmitter of signals, which, like the mutants appearing in Pynchon's and Philip Dick's stories, seems to work by means of electricity, run as they are by electric wires, switches, and neon-lights, carrying the signs of the contamination with the machine on their body. Anderson's technomorphic body becomes an electronic percussion instrument through a microphone, the reverb, which amplifies even the slightest sounds she produces by moving. She comes on stage with large glasses similar to car-headlights, moving the neon-bow of her violin as if it were a windscreen scraper. Like Mucho

⁴⁰ Ihab Hassan, The Dismemberment of Orpheus.

Maas, she identifies with the car she drives, and adhering, like Oedipa Maas, to the artificial landscape that she encounters on her way:

You know you look like a car. From a distance, say from a few blocks away, you look exactly like a car. You look just like a car from a distance. ⁴¹

4. "Confessions of a Street Talker": getting lost on the highway

Stressing the transition from a city conceived as an architectural urban center to a dematerialized, dispersed space constituted by information and media technology (hardware versus software?), Anderson finds another "empty place", another spacial correlative of the contemporary expanded field of communication in the indistinct, extra-urban territories created by the superhighways.

Seen from the mobile perspective of the car-driver, the individual perception of space is shaped and mediated by the machine, which becomes an extension of the self, physically constitutive of it. The fusion of man and car that Pynchon depicted as crucial to the

⁴¹ Anderson, "Americans on the Move," The Drama Review, p. 63.

subjective experience of dismemberment in space, also recurs in Anderson:

I am in my body the way most people drive their cars. ⁴²

The performance United States, announcing a journey across the country of America, presents instead an indistinct urban landscape which, as in the indeterminate zones depicted by Pynchon and Barthelme, finds no recognizable correlative in any American city. This metropolitan area is conceived of as an expanded urban field of communication with no recognizable center, and, finally, as an indistinct area of endless car transit. Significantly, the crossroads and highway turnpikes celebrated by Pynchon as places of dispersion and enigma, reappear in Anderson in the shape of inter-urban spaces of transit like airports and highways, the unnamable ground that the traveler encounters in his transit from a city to another.

In an apologue of United States, Anderson speaks of ephemeral, "portable cities," of extra-urban pre-fab conglomerates built at the margins of the highway, like the "no-towns" recently created in the "Sun-belt":

When Buckminster Fuller went to Canada, he kept asking: "Have you really considered how much your buildings weigh?": he showed them plans of domed cities, cities with no basements, no foundations, cities that could be

⁴² Anderson, "Song for the Night Driver # 3," in October, p. 54.

moved in a minute. Portable cities. He said:
think of it as one big tent. ⁴³

The precarious existence of these nowhere places, to which David Byrne also refers in an episode of True Stories (1986), ⁴⁴ stresses the image of the city as a transit area of errance.

Nowadays, as the extra-urban vision of Pynchon and Anderson's car-driver seems to imply, the phantasmagoric city street has moved far from the city center, expanding into an out-of-town shopping mall, renewing the urbanite's language of errance in the Baudelairean passage. These inter-urban, indistinct areas become new sites for the metropolitan, phantasmagoric experience: in V., Stencil has the vision of a "gigantic supermarket" in the street, symbolic of the failure of his quest:

Though the street had claimed a big fraction of Profane's age, it and he remained strangers in every way. Streets (roads, circles, places, prospects) had taught him nothing: he [...] hadn't even learned to drive a car. He walked; walked, he taught sometimes, the aisles of a bright, gigantic supermarket, his only function to want. ⁴⁵

Vast shopping malls, new temples of consumerism, are erected in the "Flatland" of the highway city, transforming the consumer place into a meeting place, the

⁴³ Anderson, United States, p. III.

⁴⁴ David Byrne, True Stories (New York: Penguin, 1986).

⁴⁵ Pynchon, V., p. 27.

shopping center into a substitute for the public square, which Banham defines as "a civic center and an urban illusion that any city of the New World could envy." ⁴⁶ It is this nowhere place that David Byrne chooses as the setting for a fashion défilé in the film True Stories, and where a political speech is given in one of Anderson's humorous apologues:

Mr Private Property planned to give a little talk, a political speech, in a small town in Illinois [...] His advance men discovered that the center of the town had disappeared, and that all the commercial action was out at the mall. ⁴⁷

The Andersonian "notown" urbanite, constantly reading street-signs in search of a city center he never reaches, is lost in the indeterminate, inter-urban landscape. Caught in a tangle of crossroads and in an uninterrupted sequence of pre-fab buildings and construction sites, the car-driver embodies, in a technological demise, the errant hero of the American literary tradition, the Huckleberry Finn in constant search of the "good place":

Hey! Pal! How do I get to town from here? And he said: Well, just take a right to where they're gonna build that new shopping mall, go straight just where they're gonna put in the freeway, take a left at what's gonna be the new sports center, and keep going until you hit the place where they're thinking of building that drive-in bank, you can't miss it. And I said. This must be the place. Coo

⁴⁶ Banham, Los Angeles, p. 156.

⁴⁷ Anderson, United States, p.II.

Cooo Coo. Golden cities. Golden towns. And
 long cars in long lines. And great big signs.
 And they all say: Hallelujah...Every man for
 himself. ⁴⁸

This "passing landscape," ⁴⁹ this surface of
 uninterrupted transit located beyond the city limits at
 the highway crossroad ("New Jersey Junction"),
 reproduces the amnesiac drive of Oedipa Mass on the
 highway of Los Angeles, finally becoming "a city that
 repeats itself endlessly. Hoping that something will
 stick in its mind." ⁵⁰ Like Oedipa driving her car,
 Anderson's errant soul keeps asking herself endless
 questions:

Why these mountains? Why this sky? Why this
 road? This ugly train.... ⁵¹

The "traffic islands," "the airport culture," are also
 the inter-urban, indifferent areas providing the set-
 ting for many of Ballard's stories. Like the open space
 where media messages fluctuate, the emptiness of such
 an environment must be conceived of, like Pynchon's
zones, not as an entropic, inert space where life is
 absent, but as an open space to be filled up with
 ambivalent signs, with images and dreams:

⁴⁸ Anderson, "Big Science" United States, part I.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. I.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

"The word 'empty' to me doesn't necessarily mean desolate," (Anderson) says. A lot of the images have a lot of room in them."⁵²

This indeterminate, artificial landscape hides, as Baudelaire himself realized, a set of mysterious, allegorical signs. The periurban gigantic supermarkets where muzak is endlessly broadcasted, the deserted interurban areas "where nothing takes place but the place"⁵³ become another spatial receptacle of unstable signs, of visions and projections, a solipsistic dreamscape of associations where real and imagined places are juxtaposed.

In this sense, the "empty place" of mass communication and the dispersed highway junctions where the Andersonian "American on the move" drives with no final destination are akin, both metaphors of a multidirectional communication field that always provides new alternatives and input to the urbanite drifting through signs.

The Andersonian driver, like Oedipa in Pynchon's seminal representation of the obsessive quester in the street, becomes an absolute vehicle, both an extension of the car and the vehicle of communication.

⁵² Anderson interviewed by Catherine Texier, "Laurie Anderson Sings the Body Electric," The New York Times (Oct. 1, 1989), p. 39.

⁵³ Anderson, "A Few Notes on Songs," priv. publ., (Winter, 1976/7) n. p..

The United States depicted in Anderson's performance, like the linguistically saturated New York described by Barthelme and Pynchon's Babelic zones, are first of all a space of communication where the protagonists are on the move and never reach the center. The highway, for them, is an eternal side-street, an endless peripheral landscape, like the opaque urban sign that never finds a precise destination, a unequivocal meaning:

He thought of space that way: As something
you could fall into...falling for miles.
Sideways.⁵⁴

Significantly, the title Big Science (1982) simultaneously refers to the homophonic terms "science" and "signs" to indicate that technology - Big Science - constantly brings man face to face with problems of translation, disseminating big signs that are always opaque, like the phantasmagoric "electrographic architecture" on the strip that, according to Venturi, provides the constitutive syntax of the Postmodern city.

Anderson's performance opens and closes with a piece entitled "Lighting out for the Territory," a clear parody of Washington Irving's fable "Rip Van Winkle," the story of the Dutch colonial who wakes up to find himself a stranger in his own town. In Ander-

⁵⁴ Anderson, "Americans on the Move" in The Drama Review, p. 63.

son's version, the man is driving at night on a turnpike junction, looking for a city that is apparently near but that never appears. Wearing big, luminous glasses like car headlights, the electronic body of the artist impersonates both the car and the driver, trying to cast light on the extra-urban, enigmatic field:

You're on the edge of the city, and you've been driving all night [...] But somehow, it looks familiar so you keep driving. Hello. Excuse me. Can you tell me where I am? You have been on this road before. You can read the signs. You can feel your way. You can do this in your sleep. ⁵⁵

The man at the gas station where the driver stops to ask for directions invites him to read the sign language. But the code regulating the city is multiple and not univocal, such that the metaphor of transit alludes to the circulation of signals that escape communication, drifting aimlessly into space like the traveller who is at one with his vehicle of transportation/communication. Referring to Serres' idea that space has become a metaphor for language, in which the circulation of signs has been substituted for communication, and in which the linguistic agents are transmitters but not receivers, "Americans on the Move" uses transportation as a metaphor for unstable com-

⁵⁵ Anderson, United States, part IV.

munication - the uncertain transfer of meaning from one place to another. ⁵⁶

In this decentered space, the quest for knowledge becomes an uninterrupted, touristic interpretative journey made by drifting, displaced subjects who, instead of experiencing disorientation and anomie, confront an ever mobile and ever changing landscape:

We were people of no definite plans. Driving up and down the main street [...] You were rarely falling away from you. You thought of space that way - as something you could fall into - falling for miles - sideways. You never felt out of place - because you never stopped. I never saw you out of your car: And no one knew where you'd been. ⁵⁷

The errance of the Andersonian driver is the same as that of the drifting voices wandering in the air with their questions, their unsolved enigmas. These two types of drifting errance (of the permanent exiles on the highway and of the disembodied voice in the air), were already on Oedipa's mind:

She remembered drifters she had listened to [...] as if they were in exile from somewhere else invisible yet congruent with the cheered land she lived in; and walkers along the roads at night, zooming in and out of your headlights without looking up, too far from any town to have a real destination. And the voices [...] that had phoned at random during the darkest, slowest hours, searching cease-

⁵⁶ Michel Serres, "Laughs: The Misappropriated Jewels or a close shave for the Prima Donna" in Art and Text, 9, (Autumn 1983), 20, cit. in Craig Owens, "Amplifications" in Art in America, p. 122.

⁵⁷ Anderson, "Song for the night driver #2," in October, p. 53.

lessly among the dial's ten million possibilities for that magical Other.⁵⁸

Challenging the "white noise" of metropolitan language, Anderson's apologues borrow the non-linear narrative structure and the faculty of opening itself to multiple readings from the Surrealist avant-gardes. Like Surrealist bricolage, her performance breaks into brief, allegorical apologues, collecting the ambivalent signs of a pathological semiosis that does not immediately produce communication: "Language is a Virus from Outer Space,"⁵⁹ says Anderson, quoting Burroughs.

Collecting the ephemeral, nomadic voices on the air and those of endlessly travelling drivers, Anderson finally impersonates the street-talker,⁶⁰ the solipsistic urbanite wandering through the streets and talking to himself. The opaque, animated, one-way conversations of walkers in the street have the cryptic quality of Anderson's multimedia performance, which may be considered one of synesthetic forms that the Baudelairean, allegorical urban writing is taking nowadays.

One major part of her work concerns the problems of translation that occur in the transition from one

⁵⁸ Pynchon, The Crying of Lot 49, pp. 135-36.

⁵⁹ Anderson, "Language is a Virus" in Home of the Brave.

⁶⁰ "Confessions of a Street Talker" is the title of a piece by Laurie Anderson which appeared in Vito Acconci's journal Avalanche, "Center of the New Art Activities" (Summer, 1975), 22.

linguistic system to another in the encounter with unknown codes. The very instruments of the performer are shaped in order to produce ambivalence. The "tape-bow violin," the anthropomorphic violin incarnating the intense exchange between man and machine, is also representative of the reversibility of meaning, of the ambivalence of signals in the technological city. It bears, as we have mentioned above, a prerecorded tape in place of the strings, therefore producing "words in reverse" and different meanings as the player moves the bow back and forth (yes/say; no/one, and so on).

She tells of her encounter with a palm-reader, who tells her of a future and present destiny with which she does not identify, so that she starts making conjectures about the reasons for this misunderstanding:

[...] maybe it was a translation problem - maybe she had been reading from right to left instead of left to right [...] and thinking of mirrors. I gave her my own other hand. We sat there for a minute or two in what I assumed was a sort of strange participatory, invocatory ritual. Finally I realized that her hand was out because she was waiting...waiting for money. ⁶¹

Reading the obscure graffiti written on the walls of public places, she finds them insistently repeating their cryptic, condensed messages:

I saw a sign in the bathroom at the library. It was in red magic marker and it read, "I LIKE GRILS," in messy longhand. Underneath,

⁶¹ Anderson, "Americans on the Move" in October, p. 46.

in neatly pencilled caps was, "YOU LIKE GIRLS, DON'T YOU?" Below that, in the same red magic marker, was, "NO I MEAN GRILS!"⁶²

Language is scrambled, confused at the moment of reception, often revealing the ideology of the decoder rather than the meaning in question. Anderson writes in a notebook:

What we know is not that there exists a sun and a world, but that we have eyes that see the sun and hands that feel the earth.⁶³

Meaning seems to be produced hic et hunc; it has a contingent nature that depends on individual perception, such that the very act of interpretation coincides with the creative act. To observe already means to create, according to Heisenberg. Accordingly, the Andersonian urbanite in the street is constantly confronted with signs that appeal to her imagination and dreams: as a result, she is fatally attracted to unfamiliar languages that resist decodification, like Chinese, and, instead of retreating before their enigma, she projects on the street cryptograms of an arbitrary, ideosyncratic symbology, creating a Baedeker world where the ideograms magically turn into painted

⁶² Anderson, "Notes from 'Like a Stream,'" Performance by Artists, p. 47.

⁶³ Anderson, Transportation/transportation, Examples and Exercises from "Incidents of Travel, an ongoing work from June 5, 1947," publ. priv. (New York, 1973), p. (9).

words, into the familiar shapes of ordinary objects and animals, like houses, fish, birds.

Cross-purposes and alternative readings are an essential feature of communication in the global city: they partake of the partial dialogue and the (failed) encounter with distant cultures that Lévi-Strauss recognized long ago. In United States, Anderson tells of a group of American artists who give an account of the moon-landing to Chinese people: in Chinese, however, "moon" also means "paradise," so their interlocutors are surprised at the ability of Americans to go to Paradise and then return to earth.

The very word "performance" is explained by Irving Goffman in terms of an individual activity that produces a determined influence on a group of observers,⁶⁴ so that, the bigger the gap between signal and meaning, the more ambiguous the message the more it lends itself to the most diverse readings:

It's these little twitches, mistakes, slight changes of tense, when one language switches into another, that do me in. I like these short circuits, like short cuts that end up taking you the long way around [...] The crossword puzzle was that transition, that switch, the clumsiness of learning. And I thought of the performance I was working on and suddenly it seemed to be one big bridge between seeing and saying, the puzzle, the cross, the cross-word, everything was there,

⁶⁴ Irving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), p. 22.

complete, coded right into Grimmer Grammar
(all you have to do is translate). ⁶⁵

Making her own performance an erratic space of multiple signals, Anderson invites the audience to make a personal bricolage of the signals she sends out, participating in the actual, in the event which, as opposed to representation and theatre, stimulates a Surrealist logic of free association. Before acquiring a multimedia expression, Anderson's performance consisted in the presentation of "architexts," ⁶⁶ of polymorphous, condensed sound sculptures and conceptual installations resembling the dense, "anxious objects" that both Barthelme and Rosenberg talk about.

The enigma, as well as the chance of being misunderstood, is constitutive of Anderson's art. Her collage of apologues dealing with the problem of cross-purposes, failed communication, and missing feedback, often confronts foreign audiences, turning the artist herself into a spectator of the surprising reactions produced by her work. Anderson's performance "Duet on Ice," which took place in Genoa (Italy) in the early Seventies, meant to evoke the moment of her grandmother's death, which the artist associated with an

⁶⁵ Anderson, "Confessions of a Street Talker" in Avalanche pp.22-23.

⁶⁶ Anderson, "Three Architexts," Ear Magazine, nos. 5/6, New York: New Wilderness Foundation (Summer 1979), 6-7.

image of ducks trapped with their legs in an icy lake. She therefore allegorically presented herself on the street with a pair of skates stuck in a block of ice, playing her violin in a duet with a pre-recorded tape, until the ice block melted, condensing in her performance, as in a "dense object," a variety of personal and intellectual motivations:

"Dense objects" signify a full range of private memories or emotions [...] personal and metaphysical expressions of time passing (skaters), of internal and outer balance, of musical and anatomical rhythms. ⁶⁷

What the audience, however, gathers from the performance is always something different, creating a disjunction between the message and its reception, due to the language barrier, but also to the constitutively ambiguous, non-symbolic nature of Anderson's art:

One man who heard me tell the story was explaining to new-comers, "She's playing these songs because she and her grandmother were frozen together into a lake." ⁶⁸

The contents of the performance - a genre that, like Postmodern writing in general, is evocative and allusive, but never symbolic - are, after all, never determined, and always waiting to be actualized in the interaction with the reader/spectator, thereby creating

⁶⁷ Anderson interviewed by Mel Gordon, The Drama Review, p. 53.

⁶⁸ Anderson, Notebook, The Collation Center, New York, Artist Book Series, #1, Wittenborn Art Books, 1977, p. (28).

unfixed responses and humor. It is in this gap between message and reception - of which Duchamp was very aware - that all forms of allegorical writing situate themselves, making, emphasizing, what Wittgenstein defines as the ostensive aspect of presentation, as opposed to that of representation.⁶⁹

The Andersonian space of performance is a liminal territory, an open text with an high level of ambiguity which the reader contributes to produce, in an open-ended and always unpredictable aesthetic experience. Anderson's high-tech city is the domain in which the interaction between artist and reader/spectator prevails over any fixed ideas of representation. In this sense, the amorphic places presented in this collagistic art reject the idea of mapping, partaking instead of the allegorical nature of the fragment, of the partial communication introduced by Surrealist techniques which were the first to place the reader in the gap between reality and dream. Depending on Duchamp, American Postmodern art does nothing but expand the role of the reader in the actualization of the artwork.

Finding himself in the middle of the strong sensory stimulation produced by Anderson's technological apparatus while the artist ironically wears a black

⁶⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, Note sul ramo d'oro di Frazer It. trans. (Milano: Adelphi, 1975), pp. 72-5.

costume that reads "Talk Normal," the creative reader responds with his own chain of associations, with his own personal Baedeker to Anderson's humorous, allegorical apologues. Quoting Burroughs, Anderson warns the reader:

You connect the dots, you pick up the pieces,
the modern feeling. ⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Anderson, "Sharkey's Day" in Mister Heart-break.

Conclusion

In the space of fiction, both surrealist and post-modern cities reveal a ruinous, mapless structure that cancels out canonical references to the organic city, or polis, built around an historical center. The allegorical dreamworld that Breton inherited from Baudelaire later develops into a cosmopolitan space with no clear boundaries, where traces are replaced by puzzling objects of condensation, producing endless interpretation.

Highway cities, the zone of ruins, the "empty places," the new Babylons emerging in the most recent narrations discussed here, are decentered urban fields in both the semiotic and spatial sense, where permanent tourists are engaged in a journey suspended between fact and fiction which does not cast light, like the Bretonian flânerie, on epiphanic submerged worlds, but which opens the way to endless errance, finally turning the quest for supreme knowledge into a more superficial Baedeker tour among unrelated remnants of different cultures.

In contrast with the Late-Modernist tradition represented by T. S. Eliot, Joyce and Henry James, by choosing interiority or the literary Western tradition as the privileged space of experience postmodern narra-

tives present a renewed interest in the technological environment, following the impulse of the avant-garde to entertain dialogue with the technological innovations and the multiethnic cultures visible in the streets.

In a sort of symbolic dismemberment, taking the Baudelairean encounter with the crowd to the extreme, the postmodern drifter, the late heir of the canonical Baudelairean flâneur, breaks the shield of his interiority which separates him from the outside world and joins the crowd of information characteristic of a more advanced technological environment.

At the level of the language and of the narrative structures employed, this centrifugal movement from the internal to a middle, allegorical ground where inner and outer world incongruously coincide, corresponds to the presence in the narrative of ambiguous and condensed signs and in the product of an erratic discourse, constituted, like the analogical Bretonian plot, of stories with no recognition, facing the reader with a riddle or the multiple versions of an entropic, multiple reality which has finally broken all logical links of spatial and temporal continuity.

Questioned both as an architectural and rational order, in Surrealist as well as in Postmodernist urban writing, the metropolis has ceased to be the dystopic, Baudelairean space of malaise and ennui, becoming

instead a provisional space of sudden recognition which, starting from Breton's Nadja, grows more and more opaque and unable to shed light on individual psychological depths.

By creating his "bachelor machines," Duchamp creates the basis of an encounter between man and machine that speaks the non-psychological, condensed language of contamination. His monsters, whose literary correlatives are word-play and nonsense, express an unnamable convergence of opposite categories, in a combination that speaks the language of indeterminacy and pastiche rather than the disquieting language of the uncanny, referring back to the subjective grammar of the unconscious.

The resistance of such a condensation to any symbolic order determines the entrance into a domain of paradox and ambivalence, which undermines any conceivable quest for a map or representation. In order to make sense out of his ruinous mosaic of cryptic fragments, the drifting, Protean hero is asked to place himself in the gap between subject and object, in the intersection between reality and dream, in a space of reception where unequivocal recognition is replaced by the attachment of contingent, reversible meanings to signs.

To this fictional space of indeterminacy corresponds the enigmatic presence of Postmodern architec-

tures; the undecidable space of performance and environmental art - which often appear in the urban landscape to speak a non-rational, opaque language which produces a series of unpredictable associations on the part of the viewer. Therefore, following Duchamp's aesthetics of ambivalence and transvestitism, the Postmodern city becomes a virtual space of performance, an open field of projections and encounters which transcends fixed cultural and gender categories. A territory of unpredictable encounters and linguistic puzzles, the (extra)urban landscape is a space where the distinction between internal and the external, between man and machine, male and female is suspended, transforming the quest for the mysterious object of desire into the dispassioned awareness of the self as a monstrous, "anxious object" itself.

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