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Narrative and the Reconfiguration of the Humanist Subject in Robbe-Grillet, Ballard, and Ligotti

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Narrative and the Reconfiguration of the Humanist Subject in Robbe-Grillet, Ballard, and Ligotti

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

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        This thesis examines the utility of the novels, short stories, critical writing, and
generically indistinct work of Alain Robbe-Grillet, J.G. Ballard, and Thomas Ligotti in
developing a critique of the contemporary manifestations of liberal humanist social, economic,
and political subjectivities. To this end, the concurrence of formal fragmentation and sublime
aesthetics in early Gothic fiction models the manner in which narrative structures can appropriate
structural tropes of dominant institutions, critically reflecting ideological fracture. Read
according to the assemblative approach outlined by Deleuze and Guattari, these authors serve as
a productive and incisive response to the hegemony of capitalist territorialization with
ontologically provocative critique.

Introduction

Though there is critical contention surrounding the boundaries of the novel as a genre, its
modern incarnation is grounded in political, economic, and social developments during the Age
of Reason. A central conceptual figure guided the discourse surrounding sovereignty,
knowledge, and the individual aiding in the formulation and legitimation of dominant and
enduring philosophies, economies, and political systems. The liberal subject, a reification of
Enlightenment rationality, exemplified the condition of individual freedom that structured
narrative worlds and served as the rhetorical substrate of Western thought. The naturalizing and
universalizing nomenclature of humanism is frustrated by its reliance on categorical and
hierarchical exclusion (racial, gendered, economic, etc.), which is mirrored in the prejudices of
the narrative form with which it shares generative territory. Scholars have argued that a defining
characteristic of the novel is a character's comfort or contention with, as described by D.A.
Miller, "his identity as a 'liberal subject'', whose private life, mental or domestic, is felt to
provide constant inarguable evidence of his constitutive 'freedom', but also to, broadly speaking,
the political regime that sets store by this subject" (*The Novel and the Police,* 5). Such readings
demand inquiry into the nature of subjectivity and subjecthood that underlie much of the
scholarship of the nature of narrative fiction. The stable subject, the legible human, and the path
through language to knowledge are written into the novel's generic fundamentals. Must this be
the case? As a corollary, must literary experimentation solely serve to expand the scope of the
human and more adequately describe the experiences of individuals who fall under its banner?

Paradoxically, there is a current that runs contrary to the expansive subjectivity of the novel and turns language's sovereignty on its head. There is a progression well worth tracing in the world of fiction which exemplifies the contrary thematic tendencies and orientation of the novel, and narrative more generally, away from confirmations of the humanist trajectory. Literary historian William J. Harvey describes the classic understanding of the novel as "the distinctive art form of liberalism" characterized by an inherent "acknowledgement of the plenitude, diversity, and individuality of human beings in society, together with the belief that such characteristics are good as ends in themselves" (*Character and the Novel*, 25). The larger issues of truth, knowledge, and freedom which are often used to qualify *why* the novel is a vital artistic format are underscored by a coherent relationship between man and language, which is arguably his most natural, and certainly his most useful tool. There is much to be made of the interrelation between language, narrative, and the ideological environment which is confirmed as stable and successful through the coherence of its architecture. Of particular interest are the crystallizations of fiction in which this model collapses, where language fails and undermines both characters and readers, implicitly calling into question the power relations that would be fundamental to its stable operation. Scholarship regarding language's unreliability is part and parcel of any exploration of modernist fiction and the tumult of genres and ideologies emerging, splintering, and recombining in the wake of the World Wars. These characteristic narrative challenges to dependable linguistic and narrative functions, however, are rooted in novelistic maneuvers that both predate and prefigure the experimentation of the modernist period.

Despite frequently operating outside the demarcations of literary value, and often consumed by women who had been left out of the schematics of liberal agency, Gothic fiction occupied a distinct space in the margins of eighteenth century English literature. While a

particular aesthetic sensibility served to dictate generic tropes, sublimity and the supernatural were all too frequently presented to the reader in tandem with the theme of language's insidious tendency to undermine its users. A hideous but irresistible intruder with the ability to throw his voice metaphysically authors a family's ill fortune in Charles Brockden Brown's 1798 novel *Wieland; or, the Transformation.* In Anne Radcliffe's 1791 tale, *The Romance of the Forest,* a fugitive heroine encounters a degraded and illegible manuscript that draws her attention from her own prophetic and ghost-ridden dreams. William Beckford's *Vathek*, published in 1782, employs untranslatable text swirling on a pair of swords, only cohering to warn the titular character against pursuing forbidden knowledge. In these texts, as in many others, language, and particularly narrative imposition of language upon characters and readers, serves as a locus of destabilization, misdirection, and fracture within the fictive environment. These fissures, in turn, open a space in which the cultural logics underpinning the construction and predominance of the novelistic form can be called into question and critiqued. The confluence of formal and aesthetic features that characterize these texts implicitly antagonize the ideological environment that incubated them; despite the narrative, economic, and political championing of the individual and his ascent through reason, the nascent liberal-humanist subject is rendered defenseless. This liberal ideology grows exponentially, its hallmarks shifting, and its scope expanding to a totalizing eclipse. Meanwhile, metastatically present in the body of narrative, a Gothic uncertainty asserts itself, folds into new forms, and seizes upon new manifestations of technology, violence, and art. Invigorated by formal and thematic experimentation across medium and genre, these tendencies respond to the hegemony of capitalist territorialization with phenomenological and ontological provocation.

This effort's initial exploration of interventions into the liberal subject's stability, both chronologically and in the sense that it grounds the criticism of the two following chapters, looks to the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet, the French novelist and filmmaker. Robbe-Grillet's novels are central to an avant-garde francophone literary movement known as the *noveau roman*, or "new novel", and he served as the popular face of the style as well as one of its prime theoreticians. The foundational works of the *noveau roman* are characterized by an unconventional treatment of space, fixation on distance, and erasure of depth that radically reconfigures traditional narrative subject-object relations, the distinction between interiority and exteriority, and the sense of access that art provides to real qualities or objects. These aims are programmatically declared in Robbe-Grillet's primary critical contribution to literature, several short pieces of theoretical writing collected in 1963 under the title *Pour un Nouveau Roman* (*For a New Novel* in English). His essays deal at length with his own work, though the characterization of these texts as simply avant-garde manifestos valorizing the author's own production or attempts to theorize his way out of negative reviews fails to fully capitalize on the critical material. On the contrary, it is this reflexive energy, which redoubles itself in endless recursions, that can be seen in the work of the three authors with which this project primarily concerns itself. Weaving together both the fiction and nonfiction of Robbe-Grillet, J.G. Ballard, and Thomas Ligotti is a skepticism about any individual's ability to act in an agential capacity when confronted with certain qualities (anonymity, technology, alienation, pessimism, horror) endemic to contemporary life. As writers, this comes to bear on their work in a number of respects, but manifests in all three authors as an indistinction between their fictional and critical projects and a correlative relation between the authorship of narrative meaning and the crisis of meaning's absence in the aftermath of catastrophic war and capitalist assimilation. Rather than

merely serving as particularly proximal critical insight, *For a New Novel*, *A Users Guide to the Millennium,* and *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race* (the major nonfiction volumes of Robbe-Grillet, Ballard, and Ligotti, respectively) function as lenses that focus and reflect the frequently bizarre narrative devices back towards the author or reader, and outside of the texts in which they operate; simultaneously welcoming otherwise exterior figures and forces into their operational space.

Space is a fundamental concern of Robbe-Grillet's work, and two of his early novels, *La Jalousie* and *Le Voyeur* (*Jealousy* and *The Voyeur* in English), present particularly interesting meditations. The former maps what is generally considered to be an intensely personal and interior experience, jealousy, onto the observations of an unnamed narrator, never acknowledging or describing any emotional reality, simply relying on spatial reconfiguration, narrative gaps, and the untrustworthy qualities of language to generate the friction of conflict. The latter conflates memory, fantasy, and observation that demands an answer to the hole in the middle of the text while signifying precisely how useless it is to speculate about either a hidden depth to or outside of the text that simply does not exist. Beyond demonstrating, perhaps more effectively than any other writer could, the reflexivity of an author and text that are primarily concerned with the operation of language, Robbe-Grillet's narratives radically redirect the classically understood trajectory of the novel. Indeed, Robbe-Grillet proclaimed his goal for his work to be the systemic elimination of all traditional elements of novelistic structure, and he found at least partial success. The tactically superficial object observations which force the process of data collection into a narrative format foreshadows Ballard's fascination with the dehumanizing qualities of technological sublimation in the world of objects as well as the audience and the lens. His sense of the manner in which authorship and the construction of

narrative draws one towards madness and the unknown provides a point of entry into Ligotti's overall project, which casts fiction as an antagonist of human sanity. Finally, an analysis of Robbe-Grillet's collaboration with Jasper Johns demonstrates the expansive and systemic qualities of his structural counterintuition, erasure, and formal play. His efforts towards the construction of art objects as closed systems, or operational spaces, gestures towards a potential narrative *telos* that retains a fundamental skepticism towards the contemporary, ideologically constrained, production of meaning.

Considered by many to be the preeminent figure of science fiction's experimental "New Wave", British author J.G. Ballard's prolific output matched sustained contention with the genre's boundaries and community, spanning from his first publications in the 1950's to his death in 2009. His interviews and critical commentary express a derision for the techno-homogeneity of conventional "space" fiction, an embrace of the formal experimentation ushered onto the literary stage by high modernism, and a turn to surrealist visual art and psychoanalysis for thematic and aesthetic vision. In equal measure, he advocates fiercely for the genre's unique vitality in an age where novels of human relations only inspire boredom and he continued to publish in the pages of science fiction fan magazines well after the establishment of his literary reputation. Ballard's substantial productivity and evolving interests subvert any attempt at unifying his multifarious social and textual interventions. Despite this, the reflexivity of his textual body; the elliptic quality of his thematic resonances; and the extensive intersection of his novels, short stories, autobiography, criticism, and generically perplexing texts offer an extensive array of vectors into his work, which simultaneously urge towards a productive territory akin to Robbe-Grillet's textual space. Perhaps as a generic requisite, however, Ballard transposes Robbe-Grillet's relentless interrogation of narrative space onto an equally conceptually fraught

situation: technology and its modern inhabitants. Vitally, for Ballard, technology is not simply a

matter of space exploration or household robots; rather, technologization encompasses the

strategies and mechanisms (the lens, the mass media apparatus, the government archive, the

housing complex, the automobile, language itself) that both produce and describe modern

reality. Echoing the sublime aesthetic of Gothic fiction, Ballard's technological space seduces

with the promise of the unknown, frustrates the efforts of reason, and subsumes the acting

individual into its inherent anonymity.

The assessment of Ballardian anti-subjectivity begins with a reading of his novella,

Running Wild, which borrows the format of a forensic psychologist's case report. The borrowed

(and questionably narrative) formal structure of the text evinces a particular significance in

consideration of a Foucauldian reading of the archive as an accretion and application of power,

both technologically contingent and deeply entrenched in the contemporary, biopolitical iteration

of eighteenth century political and economic projects. Reason and rationality, virulently

reconfigured into an accumulative, evidentiary model for knowledge, betray their vicious

ideological habitation. Ballard's assumption of non-narrative formats is even more pronounced

in his short stories. "A Guide to Virtual Death" is presented as a list of television

programs; "Theatre of War" as a script for the gruesome news coverage of a British civil

conflict. Both stories develop Ballard's sense of the intrinsic entanglement between screen

mediated alienation and extreme violence. "The 60 Minute Zoom" further capitalizes on this

association, recalling Robbe-Grillet's proclivity for visual observation and murderous impulse,

heightening the fetishistic *topos* of description and exploiting the mechanical role of the lens in

the study of passivity, authorship, and psychosis.

Although many of Ballard's protagonists fixate on the idea that there is something

distinctly wrong with their circumstances, they are often inclined toward resignation. His regular

characterization of resistance to a modernity that is both total and infinitely adaptable as futile or

counterproductive displays Ballard's curious approach to the individual and also foreshadows the

stark pessimism that underscores Ligotti's work. The protagonist of "The Overloaded Man"

exemplifies a Ballardian agency, resisting the mundanity of the world by visually dissociating

form from meaning. Of course, the impersonal automation of industrial consumer culture is

mirrored in his escape; both the destruction of his wife and his success in becoming-object

negate a clear ethical impulse in the text. Ballard translates the vacuum of reason into narrative,

robbing it of its easy development of moral or ideological meaning. Still, he relentlessly revisits

thematic territory; reworking characters, conceptual material, and fictional devices through

dissonant narrative forms. There is likely no better example of Ballard's assemblative technique,

textual recycling, and formal discord than his fragmentary "anti novel", *The Atrocity*

Exhibition. The book is a magnum opus in the sense that it utilizes swaths of material from

across his literary body and represents his most striking challenge to the conventions of narrative

fiction. On the other hand, it resists engagement at nearly every level: characters lose their

identities, the book is structured as if numerous unrelated stories have been cut and pasted

together, and different editions of the text contain distinct footnotes and illustrations that are of

equal narrative import to the "primary" content of the novel. In many respects, *The Atrocity*

Exhibition reads like one of Robbe-Grillet's spatial exercises, only the conflation of literary,

exterior, and psychic space are augmented by Ballard's dystopian vision. Though he lacks the

systematic imperative against literary tradition that facilitates the assessment of Robbe-Grillet's

oeuvre as metafiction, Ballard's work persistently undermines the larger ideological fantasy of

modernity. This denaturalization spotlights the stable, agential subject at the core of that fantasy from all the angles that best illuminate his fracture.

The literary output of Thomas Ligotti, an author of contemporary horror fiction who until quite recently wrote in relative obscurity, most directly re-synthesizes aesthetic sublimity with a cynicism towards reason and the legacies of humanism which ground this intervention in the shades of early Gothic fiction. Concurrently, Ligotti presents a number of challenges to any reading that seeks to articulate anything resembling a productive space in which to exercise destabilising logics or mechanisms contrary to dominant ideology. Though Robbe-Grillet and Ballard both endured accusations of nihilism, the pessimism intrinsic to Ligotti's work is both deliberate and totalizing, beyond either of his predecessor's most despairing passages. Too, it is infused with a distinct misanthropy, particularly blunt in his nonfiction, that threatens to dampen the utility of his texts. However, few authors so effectively (and often, beautifully) elucidate the yearning for the eternally and totally inaccessible that captivated authors such as Georges Bataille, Emil Cioran, and others who wrote at the edge of madness. The ruthlessness with which Ligotti excoriates metaphysical certainties offers a seductive potentiality to the scope of any critical utility that one might extract from his texts. His fiction conveys the most explicit sense of the sublimity that destabilized narrative's reasoned exercise in Gothic fiction, though the indeterminacy of his referent often prompts a difficulty locating a target with any sense of specificity. Still, his work displays a strikingly similar metafictional quality to Robbe-Grillet's and Ballard's, offering the possibility of an associative praxis.

Ligotti's assessment begins with a grounding examination of Gothic sublimity as an aesthetic and formal communion that levied distinct challenges to the dominant narrative forms alongside which it emerged. Edmund Burke's aesthetic writing demonstrates the entangled

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projects of establishing a social order rooted in reason and effectively bounding the sublime experience within mediating formal structures and the way in which the Gothic embrace of the aesthetic undermines this order's stable operation. Ligotti's uncanny spatial observations in "The Red Tower" bring his work directly into conversation with Robbe-Grillet and theorists of the *noveau roman*. This offers a vision of Ligotti's texts as a conceptual working space, or perhaps machine in itself, and allows for the story's overt engagement with the horror of language to begin to subvert dominant models of reason and rationality. Georges Bataille, who straddles the structural critical efforts and the sublime aesthetics that are at play in Ligotti's texts, emerges from a reading of "Tsalal" as a particularly useful historical precedent to Ligotti's project. He highlights a sense of the utility (and inevitability) of madness that recalls Ballard's work, as well as the precarity of this critical territory. "The Shadow, the Darkness" provides an example of Ligotti's metafictional play, which complicates non-narrative texts such as the introductory material to *Grimscribe* and *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*. Elements at play in each of these texts resonate together in a dark chord as they develop into an expansive, even totalizing horror that reflects and affirms contemporary ontological uncertainty. Finally, an acknowledgement of the current philosophical tendencies with which Ligotti writes in dialogue offers the notion of *withdrawal* to his body of work, an idea that aids in characterizing the morphology and mobility of his inscrutable "outside". It also frames an operative potential for Ligotti's pessimism that could augment the inevitability of resignation that haunts his writing.

The collected interviews and criticism of Robbe-Grillet, Ballard, and Ligotti are all sufficiently explicit about the artistic and literary figures that each author admires and to which each feels that their own work owes some debt. In particular, Ballard's commentary on the spatial qualities of Robbe-Grillet's film *Last Year at Marienbad* and his annotations to the 1994

edition of *The Atrocity Exhibition* describing the Warren Commission's report on John F. Kennedy's assassination as a "a tour de force in the style of Robbe-Grillet" (40) suggest the tempting promise of a linear history of influence. While interesting, the utility of this approach to an examination of the critique of epistemological humanism seeded throughout these authors' texts is diminished by the imposition of a super-historical perspective and a centrality of authorship tightly bound to that totalizing ideology. Naturally, the apparent omnipotence of the phenomena that this work problematizes seems to back its interlocutors into an inescapable corner. It is no surprise that a sustained engagement with any of these literary offerings can leave the reader with a sagging sense of despair; a base nihilism that blooms into stagnant resignation and defeat. Undoubtedly, certain texts embrace this, and all three of these authors capitalize on the lugubrious weight that drags on contemporary ontological speculation, however casual. Ligotti, in particular, appears to scorn any sense of, or appeal to, hope. Still, the actions and efforts of literature seem to insist some ethics or praxis; likewise, the fascination with the alien, the inaccessible, and the (perhaps dangerous) allure of an outside underscore this tendency.

While certainty and answers remain in short supply, an assemblative reading of these three authors is both productive and appropriate, specifically in regard to their consideration for chance, gaps, indeterminant friction, and the destabilization of traditional literary roles. The eccentric spatialization and imperfect repetitions resonant throughout this textual accumulation intimates a useful metaphor: the destructive echo. The neurotic fracture of Ballard's inner space takes on the the stark surfaces of Robbe-Grillet's rigorous observation. Reverberating throughout, the unknown forces of Ligotti's horror entangle with any number of imperceptible oscillations and vibrate contrary to the landscape's stability. Of course, the rational subject who simultaneously contains and inhabits this space, fully invested in its solidity, perceives a distinct

malevolence. The literature at work here does not assuage this trauma by shifting the logics of domination and exclusion towards some new margin in order to maintain the supreme position of agency. Rather, it investigates and exploits the inadequacy of the nomic structures as it makes an effort towards undermining the entanglement of knowledge and domination.

Chapter 1. Robbe-Grillet, Object Orientation, and the Reconfigured Subject

As the chief architect and most notable practitioner of the French *noveau roman* (known in English as the New Novel), Alain Robbe-Grillet occupied a distinct nexus, often replete with outright hostility, of the discourse on experimentalism, tradition, and the avant garde in postwar French literature. Robbe-Grillet is only one author amongst what grew to be considered, loosely at least, a literary movement in its own right. Despite this, his critical essays, particularly those collected and published under the title *Pour un Noveau Roman* (*For a New Novel*) in 1963, articulate the most frequently referenced and cohesive vision for the *noveau roman*. These stylistic choices were frequently criticised as unnatural, excessive, and cold as they were structured around the systematic inversion and negation of all traditional markers of a novel's success. Character, plot, metaphor, and ideological commitment are all reduced to anachronisms; their champions tarred as hopelessly entrenched in the past. His radical trajectory for fiction armed his critics with a peculiar array of ammunition; a theoretical framework that obliterated any potential value in his texts, yet could also be used as a criteria by which to judge his project a failure when any elimination of classic novelistic device was read as incomplete. Too, Robbe-Grillet employs extensive critical terminology with radically revised definitions; his expansive sense of objectivity imbues his work with both critical utility and the potential for dismissal on the grounds of incoherence. His insistence on idiosyncratic approaches to and reconfigurations of terminology with definitions steeped in extensive literary history and scholarship is a useful alternative to a methodology that either assigns or diminishes value to established conventions. This methical orientation towards language itself, in conjunction

with the concern for narrative structure, suggests a metafictional quality to his texts. In consideration of his denigration of the realistic novel and his christening of the stylistic eccentricity of the *noveau roman* as a "new realism", metafictional readings produce some productive complications.

The realism that Robbe-Grillet sets in his sights is one that promises a smooth mimetic operation. Functionally, this stakes a claim in accurately representing the textual world which is judged by the proper functions of narrative. Veiled within this claim are tacit, normatizing judgements on the nature of the external world which is fundamental to an expansive understanding of Robbe-Grillet's disruptions. The nouveau roman works against the naturalization of traditional narrative construction through its constant and obsessive externalization of its own activities. Reading the author's essays positioned as the subject of other theorists' assessments of the *noveau roman* aids in both establishing the appropriate position of his criticism relative to his fiction as well as his treatment of the text as an object. Of particular value is David Carroll's analysis of interiority, exteriority, and alterity which weaves itself into Robbe-Grillet's specific objectivity to articulate a useful reimagination of the argument that the *noveau roman* offers laboratories in place of narrative. *La Jalousie* (*Jealousy*) introduces a vital, spatial component to his narrative *telos*. The novel's narrator translates into text observations which are rife with incomplete or inscrutable schematics, strobing images, and fixed instances revealing themselves to be shadows of an unwritable kineticism. Even the wordplay of the novel's title furthers this ambiguity, the conflation of an architectural object with an emotional experience emblematizing a fundamental step in the transposition of textual intricacies onto a critique of the logic surrounding human agency and distinction from the objects that it theoretically operates upon.

Le Voyeur (*The Voyeur*), another early novel of Robbe-Grillet, prefigures the meticulous observation of a self-contained space that *Jealousy* refines. An island community, rather than a plantation home, falls under the eyes of this text's protagonist. Memory and fantasy are the interior phenomena complicating this narrative space, seducing the reader with a gap at the center of the plot, a void that would, if treated with the same scrutiny exhibited by the protagonist elsewhere,, transform into the text's primary event. Like Robbe-Grillet's fiction more generally, however, *The Voyeur* permits no internal logic to be taken for granted. It allows no easy correlation between evidentiary talismans, what they mean, and where they fit into a chronology. The object of his metafiction is a crystallized meditation on its own process rather than a narrative; its cosmology of objects compose a sign-structure but never a comfortable world that would allow for prediction or prescription. Drawing on Foucault's writings on sign systems and the temporal distance of memory, the spatialization of narrative bleeds further into the interior, subverting both its distinction and an identity quarantined from the uncertainty of its habitat. The threat that this inward turn poses to Robbe-Grillet's rejection of depth looms much larger in *La Cible* (*The Target*), a collaboration with American painter Jasper Johns. The project is of particular interest because, while subverting Robbe-Grillet's program through the direct acknowledgement and exploration of emotional engagement in a sensory world, it also defies generic constraint and presents fragmentary text in direct, ordering relation to the art objects provided by Johns. As the objects in Johns' assemblage are sometimes represented recognizably in the text of *The Target* and other times indicated obliquely through ephemeral resonances, isolated formal qualities, or subconcious suggestion, the relations between narrative, metafiction, and the spatial associations of the art space offer a closed system of objects in an indeterminate relation. Abstraction, objectivity, and productive space all conspire to problematize the rational

supremacy of the individual in the transaction of meaning. The "cell" of frenzied yet futile

interpretative activity occupied by Robbe-Grillet's first-person narrator provides the architecture

for the reader/viewer's dislocated sense of agency, implicating the audience as part of an

ambiguous world of indefinite referents and imperfect recursions.

Ardent critics of Robbe-Grillet's position on the subject-figure argue that he has crafted a

straightforward ideological inversion of the centrality of human characters and offered in its

place a navel-gazing sterility. Were one to concede that Robbe-Grillet's novels have done away

with the human, transformed the text into a language laboratory, and dismantled traditional

novelistic structure it could be argued could this literary nihilism is substantively devoid. This

characterization of aesthetic valorization of the coldness and detachment which conventional

readers find so off-putting compared to literary novelty fails to account for the stylistic

precedents that Robbe-Grillet himself acknowledges in his essays. It also ignores the complexity

of his approach, which simultaneously addresses numerous spheres of a text's operation. The

noveau roman and a textually oriented structuralist literary criticism saw concordant

development in French literary and intellectual circles. Given this, one could argue that the

formality of Robbe-Grillet's texts enacts the same focus on language's operations and specificity

that concerns literary theorists such as Jean Ricardou, Roland Barthes, and Gerard Genette, who

all wrote extensively on the genre. In a more contemporary analysis of the *noveau roman*,

specifically the work of Claude Simone, critic David Carroll describes the locus of this

"theoretical break" as an

> interest in language as the fundamental element of all theory and as *the matter* of
>
> all texts … which tends to situate the subject and thus undermine its originality
>
> and dominance. The subject finds itself now within, not at the source of,

language, a function determined by language and not an origin 'outside' the
textual-linguistic systems surrounding it. (14-15)

Robbe-Grillet shares the skepticism towards ideology that underlies the structuralist position, mapping the "falseness" of ideological meaning in particular onto the delineation between what is real and what is not. Still, Robbe-Grillet's claims about the aims of his project undermine the full divestment from the subject and turn towards form as a locus of systematic meaning that characterizes the most scientific structuralists. Though he concedes, in an essay entitled "New Novel, New Man" that "there were many objects in our books, and … there was something unaccustomed about them" he insists that the characterization of his novels as objective, in the traditional sense, is "an absurdity". Rather, central to his work, is an "orient[ation] toward the object" (*For a New Novel* 138). The function of the book is to report the "limited and uncertain" (139) experience of the man on the other side of that orientation. While Robbe-Grillet's conceptual reconfiguration of subjectivity and objectivity are central to some of the confusion regarding *For a New Novel*, his revision of, rather than simple opposition to, the terms is usefully complex. Drawing on the elements of the aforementioned approach can aid in both clarifying and expanding the scope of his theoretical writing.

Though his essays target traditional narrative devices such as character, plot, and metaphor with arguments of obsolescence, using them solely to demarcate success or failure at his own project is an insufficient reading. Rather, one can capitalize on Robbe-Grillet's own skepticism towards genre and fixation on the relation between objects to develop a sense of positioning *apropros* his texts. He begins to resemble Ricardou's writer-subject who, "expropriated by his writing, eccentric to himself … can read his 'own' text only from a position of exteriority, from the position of the Other" (qtd. in Carroll, 16-17). Robbe-Grillet's analysis

of his own work, then, takes on a quality very much like the object descriptions in his novels, the author "*always* engaged … in a kind of emotional adventure of the most obsessive kind, to the point of often distorting his vision and of producing imaginings close to a delirium" (*For a New Novel* 138). Of course, the scrutiny of *For a New Novel* should not be taken as an implication that Robbe-Grillet has the final word on his own work. In contrast, careful reading frequently problematizes the idea of his nonfiction as a manifesto or program that can fully explain his work or the work of the *noveau roman*'s other practitioners. What it does, however, is begin to imagine a space of narrative objects, fixed but subject to that recursive delirium which reveals itself so often in his textual environments. When Robbe-Grillet writes that "in this future universe of the novel, gestures and objects will be 'there' before being 'something,'; and they will still be there afterwards, hard, unalterable, eternally present, mocking their own meaning" (31) one can begin to read the implications of Robbe-Grillet's systems of object relations beyond the object in literature and towards the literary object. This introduces a certain fracture into the system of traditional literary roles, spurs generic indistinction, and advances a fiction that practices and enacts his theory, rather than sitting stagnant as the subject of analysis.

Perhaps the most radical departure from traditional novelistic form in Robbe Grillet's work, as well as the locus of criticism of his novels' inhumanity, is his erasure of character as a central component of the text. In her study of Robbe-Grillet and his contemporaries, *The Noveau Roman and the Poetics of Fiction,* Anne Jefferson historicizes this stylistic development, arguing that

> in the European novel of the nineteenth century the *telos* of fiction was largely
>
> provided by character, which took precedence over plot as the basis of artistic

coherence … the novel was a biography of one or more individuals whose

personalities provided the main focus of interest in the text. (61)

Robbe-Grillet's difficulty with the historical understanding of character as central to the novel

stems from his assessment of modernity as having fundamentally shifted from a time "when it

was something to have a face in a universe where personality was both the means and the end of

all exploration" (*For a New Novel* 29). The transition from a culture of individuals to an

anonymous culture prompts Robbe-Grillet's assertions that eliminating characters from his

novels in favor of observational and featureless narrators is, contrary to the popular conception

of his work, a realist project. Despite giving this terminology his particular treatment, he does

not position himself as the architect of this new realism. Rather, he sees the roots of his quarrel

with character in the great "modern novels" of the postwar period. He asks

> how many readers recall the narrator's name in *Nausea* or *The Stranger*? Are
>
> these human type? … and does *Journey to the End of the Night* describe a
>
> character? Does anyone suppose, moreover, that it is written in the first
>
> person? Beckett changes his hero's name and shape in the course of the same
>
> narrative. Faulkner purposely gives the same name to two different persons. As
>
> for K of *The Castle*, he is content with an initial, he possesses nothing, has no
>
> family, no face; he is probably not even a land surveyor at all. (28)

The argument that the *noveau roman* is distilling a tendency already present in literature, rather

than offering a program for a novel of the future indicates a responsiveness to his

project. Though he is specifically acknowledging literary precedents, his gesture toward

anonymity also speaks to a cultural environment that had "already given way to a larger

consciousness, one that is less anthropocentric" (29). Though Robbe-Grillet insists on man's

(and the observers that he cites as a defense against the charges of inhumanity are always men[1])

presence in his fiction, his man's mastery of and access to everything else has been upended. As

such, the relations of objects and systems take on new value and the accidents of meaning

prompted by man's failures and insufficiencies rupture the logic of reason that coded narrative

tradition.

The *noveau roman* was not, at least according to Robbe-Grillet, an effort aimed at a readership

of literary expertise. Still, nothing he published ever enjoyed anything approaching unanimous

critical or public acclaim. His enduring reputation as a "difficult author" and the regularity with

which his essays begin by responding to bad reviews is a testament to this. In "The Use of

Theory", Robbe-Grillet confesses that "[his] novels have not been received, upon publication in

France, with unanimous enthusiasm; and that is putting it mildly" (*For a New Novel* 7). This

lack of enthusiasm was perhaps most pronounced following the 1957 publication of *Jealousy*,

which exemplifies the author's exacting descriptiveness, tendency towards geometrical

description, and rigorous rejection of anything generally understood as character. The events of

the text are related to the reader in first person by a narrator who is Robbe-Grillet's observer *par*

excellence. *Jealousy* privileges the visual to an extreme, exemplifying Roland Barthes'

description of the novelist's technique as "requiring only one mode of perception: the sense of

sight. For him the object is no longer a common-room of correspondences, a welter of

sensations and symbols, but merely the occasion of a certain optical resistance" ("Objective

Literature" 13). The sense that what one knows about the novel's tropical plantation home is

beholden to the narrator's sight is reinforced by the map prefacing the text. The center is

incomplete; while the rooms of the house are given contents, space denoted on the map by "X"

receives the curious designation of "Storage room or other (not described)" (*Two Novels* 37). While this room experiences no treatment or application of a substantive mystery, it signals to the perceptive reader that access to information in this novel is circumscribed by a very particular focus. Too, it suggests that description can be meticulous, precise, and still incomplete.

Even were one to ignore the map (as it is likely that many readers do), the narrator of *Jealousy* first addresses to the reader commences a lengthy and recurrent accounting of the fictional space. In the manner of a film's establishing shot, the first words of the novel are his dry, geometric description of a shadow, a column, a veranda, and the angles formed by the terrace and the two vertical surfaces of the house's corner. This is particularly curious in consideration of the scene that follows, in which a woman incompletely designated as A…, who is presumably the narrator's wife, writes a letter that later assumes the status as evidence of an affair. The privilege afforded to exacting descriptions of island home's visual qualities and the lack of any speculation or conjecture is the first indication that something unnatural is occurring in the text. Robbe-Grillet's narratives, though, are denaturalized constructions. Though readers can, and do, ascribe the jealousy indicated by the title to an experience of the narrator as he observes his wife's deception, this assumption ignores the author's insistence that there is no narrative reality outside of these observations. Just as the the lack of description of the storage room leaves a hole in the map, the text's visual dependence displays emptiness where most narrative texts seek a verisimilitude. In a critical examination of the novel's fixation on surface, Bruce Morrissette points to this "absence of any attempt at psychological *analysis* or any use of the vocabulary of psychology, total rejection of introspection, interior monologues, 'thoughts,' or descriptions of states of mind" that underscore the text's singular strangeness. The aversion to

21

any inward examination is counteracted by a "systemic use, almost like that of music, of 'objective themes,' including a network of *stains*" (*Surfaces and Structures* 7). Destabilizing the meticulously constructed narrative space through visual aberrations begins to highlight the commonalities of the text's architectural objects and the narrative architecture of the novel itself. The narrator's precision colludes with his presentation of irreconcilable events to indicate both spatial contamination and systematic uncertainty.

The most glaring observational revisions involve a squashed centipede, which is presented to the reader gradually, frustratingly, and out of chronology. Initially, the narrator notes a "blackish spot marks the place where a centipede was squashed last week, at the beginning of the month, perhaps the month before, or later" (47) while describing a conversation between A…, and Franck, her guest and potential lover. This stain is used to disturb the reader's situation of the narrative events in time when, later in the text, "the dining-room wall seems to have no spot on it" (57). The narrator's recurrent revisions of the centipede's presence in the home replace any vocalization of suspicion, reflection on domestic instability, or judgement. The uncertainty is mapped onto the domestic space itself, growing in detail and specificity with each new encounter. When the reader is finally made privy to the scene of the centipede's death, the insect is given the precise description that now seems indicative of a narrative psychosis. It cuts back and forth across the wall, followed by the eyes of A…, before Franck dispatches it with a wad of napkin. Twenty pages later, this event repeats itself with Franck delivering the killing blow with his shoe on the tile floor. It is difficult not to try and elicit some sense of meaning from the the disjunction and incoherence of these observations, particularly in light of an earlier description of the scene which is perhaps this narrator's closest approximation of a metaphor:

The image of the squashed centipede then appears not as a whole, but composed

of fragments distinct enough to leave no doubt. Several pieces of the body ...

remain reproduced with the fidelity of an anatomical drawing: one of the

antennae, two curved mandibles, the head and the first joint, half of the second,

and three large legs. Then come the other parts, less precise: sections of legs and

the partial form of the body convulsed into a question mark. (62)

Though the narrator refrains from asking questions, the reader surely has many. The final, and

most radical revision of the incident with the centipede occurs after the mark has disappeared

and then reappeared mysteriously while Franck (the centipede's ostensible killer) was away from

the home. In this, the centipede has grown, occupies a hotel room in which the the narrator

describes the presence of A… and Franck, and must be eliminated with a bedsheet rather than a

napkin. This scene immediately transitions to a vision of Franck crashing his car into a flaming

scene, the crackling of which echoes the sounds of insect movement, suggesting that it is a

correlative fantasy. The frustrated desire for the truth of the centipede mimics the irresolution of

the issue of fidelity. Here, Robbe-Grillet dangles numerous narrative structures that urge a

reading beyond the text, only to let them collapse. Still, the imperfections of *Jealousy*'s narrative

descriptions provoke a query of whether its objects and its gestures are doing something other

than what the narrator's precision would suggest.

Focusing on the domesticity of the home offers a seductively simple reading of *Jealousy;* were

one willing to accept the the centipede as a metaphor for the sullied vows that must lie at the

heart of the narrator's obsession. Robbe-Grillet himself cautions readers against these

conflations, arguing that

in this future universe of the novel, gestures and objects will be *there* before being

something; and they will still be there afterwards, hard, unalterable, eternally

present, mocking their own 'meaning,' that meaning which vainly tries to reduce

them to the role of precarious tool, of a temporary and shameful fabric woven

exclusively - and deliberately - by the superior human truth expressed in it. (*For*

a New Novel 21)

Under Robbe-Grillet's rubric, the home setting of *Jealousy*, definitively treated as an object,

cannot accumulate the suspicious human qualities of moral significance. Rather, it functions as a

site in which paranoia can be enacted, asserting the new role of description positioned by Robbe-

Grillet as inherent to any novel of the future. The observations of the house in *Jealousy* echo

Robbe-Grillet's pronouncement that "the role of description has changed completely … [what]

once served to situate the chief contours of a setting, then to cast light on some of its particularly

revealing elements … now asserts its creative function" (147). Indeed, the narrator's syntax and

diction readily resemble a highly structuralist reading of a novel, the literary sense of his

observations reinforced by their slippage, revisions, and suspicion that they are doing some kind

of work. Morrisette speculates that this narrative quality forces an identification, which "installs

us in the 'hole' that he occupies in the center of the text, so that we see, hear, move, and feel with

him" (*Surfaces and Structures* 7). Ascribing that sort of agency and motivation to the narrator is

tempting. In her essay "A Note on *Jealousy*", Anne Minor makes similar associative leaps

between the technical terminology he employs and a desire to convince himself of his own sanity

in light of obsessive torment. This reading of *Jealousy*, however, thwarts Robbe-Grillet's

professed disinterest in metaphor and distaste for the application of that "superior human truth"

as well as his textual focus. Returning to his particular metafiction, one can examine the tropes of jealousy (suspicion, investigation, paranoia) as narrative enactments, bound to a certain legibility. The authorial qualities of his narrator's observations are revealed in what his descriptions do: their conflation with the standard role of narrative progression and attention to its "creative function" impose these enactments on the physical space, most notably at its moments of failure. Reflecting Robbe-Grillet's derision for the "dead rules" of distinction between form and content, this imposition gestures towards a useful fluidity to his metafictional grounding.

The title of *Jealousy* further contributes to the undoing of interiority and exteriority at work in the novel: the French *La Jalousie* delineates both the emotion of jealousy and the window blinds through which the novel's narrator observes the home. A binary reading offers a choice between the internal and external, identification and representation, narrative questions of motivation and descriptive difficulties with accuracy. Neither reading provides, in and of itself, a satisfying or sufficient impetus to the novel, nor does it account for the text's tendency towards territorial overlap. The semantic ambiguity of the title is energized by the inherent poetry of the homonym and its capacity to invoke associative relations between ideas that often evade categorical determination. It is a playful maneuver, discouraging the reader's desire to discern *what is really going on*. Robbe-Grillet's own explanation characteristically points to the finality of the text: he comments that it is absurd to insist that "there existed a clear and unambiguous order of events, one which was not that of the sentences of the book" and that "the narrative was on the contrary made in such a way that any attempt to reconstruct an external chronology would lead, sooner or later, to a series of contradictions". While he scorns the notion of a reality for the novel outside of the text, he acknowledges that the the occurrence of the novel *functions* "nowhere else except

in the mind of the invisible narrator, in other words of the writer, and of the reader (*For a New Novel* 154). Again, he deconstructs the normative literary roles in a confusing admonition against impositions on the text followed by a conflation of the imaginative spaces of the narrator, author, and reader. The metafiction of *Jealousy* is not just a distortion, nor is it merely an obscurant a-chronological rehash of otherwise stable timeline; rather the text operates as a system oriented towards itself, which does not attempt to make its logics accessible to an outside that it doesn't acknowledge.   The reader may search for the familiarity of story and significance, frustrated by Robbe-Grillet's relentless insistence that objects are simply objects. Though the text repeatedly thwarts interpretation, the feedback loop of its imperfect system offers, in the right moments, dissociative energy and radical reconfiguration.

Published two years prior to *Jealousy*, *The Voyeur* furthers Robbe-Grillet's frustration of traditional narrative expectations while offering its own challenges to his rubric for a successful novel in the age of anonymity. Upon initial examination, *The Voyeur* falls short of the the radical departure from character offered by the absence of an *I* figure in *Jealousy*. Rather than wonder as to the potential presence of an unnamed observer who forces the reader's observations of space and gesture, *The Voyeur* introduces a central figure with a name and, as evidenced by his digressions into memory and flashback, a situation in history. This man, Mathias, still occupies the ferry upon which readers initially encounter him when they are made aware that he is reluctantly returning to to the island of his birth in anticipation that the trip will prove a successful business venture. Though a series of calculations regarding stock of wristwatches (the sale of which is Mathias' profession) and profitability initially appeals to comparison with the unnamed narrator of *Jealousy,* Mathias quickly distinguishes himself from that constant outward orientation with the acknowledgement of intention, expectation, plans, and memory. Despite his

habit of counting and a general inclination towards the visual, Mathias seems to superficially contradict Robbe-Grillet's idea that a character who "must have a name … must have a profession" (*For a New Novel* 27) is an "obsolete notion". Indeed, as Mathias' ferry pulls into the harbor he recalls that "the houses on the island were so much alike that he was not even sure that he could recognize the one in which he had spent almost his entire childhood and which, unless there was some mistake, was also the house where he had been born" (*The Voyeur* 17). It begins to appear that this will develop into the kind of text that prompted Robbe-Grillet's critics to praise his work on the condition that it had failed to exemplify his own theoretical models. However, like *Jealousy*, *The Voyeur* capitalizes on a central absence to contradict narrative expectations and conceptually redirect the devices at work.

As in Robbe-Grillet's first novel, *Les Gommes (The Erasers)*, there is a criminal act at the the center of *The Voyeur,* and in an interview with *The Paris Review* Robbe-Grillet is quite transparent about his interest in experimental possibility of that formula's exploitation. He acknowledges that "it seems that the structure of police investigation is very close to the technique of modern novels, in particular the non-resolved investigation, as in *The Castle*. The difference is that in the traditional detective novel there *must* be a solution, whereas in ours there is just the principle of investigation" ("The Art of Fiction" 91). Attempts to read *The Voyeur* according to conventional narrative frameworks provide a fairly succinct set of questions central to the "principle of investigation", none of which yield a satisfactory answer. By the time the plot resolves, a girl is dead and the narrator's meticulous notation of time has somehow lost track of an hour. In conjunction with the violent nature of his fantasies and his systematic erasure of all physical evidence as to his presence on the island, the refusal of the novel to confirm his unseen crime strikes many readers as a failure. André Brink devotes a

chapter of his examination of narrative structure, *The Novel*, to the problems presented by *The Voyeur* and argues that the frustration around the lack of answers to what "actually happened" during the lost hour and whether or not Mathias is guilty or innocent have left the text "strangely misunderstood and misread". Too, despite "being flogged to near-death by generations of critics, it still preserves much of its initial sense of mystery" (207). While it may be impossible to argue that the text does not produce these questions, their centrality to the sense of investigation that ushers the reader through the narrative is commensurate with the kind of criticism that, Robbe-Grillet warns, "desperately seek[s] to imprison [new work] in the past" (*For a New Novel* 18). Again, Robbe-Grillet is willing to allow the promise of neat narrative packages and simple pleasures to draw a reader in, but he intensely resents the judgement of his works' success by these criteria. He writes that "the duration of the modern work is in no way a summary, a condensed version, of a more extended and more 'real' duration which would be that of the anecdote, of the narrated story" (152, 153). Mathias, then, is much like the narrator of *Jealousy*. He is circumscribed by the stubborn reality of the text. Rather than direct an investigative impulse towards resolving a question that has no answer, a critical reading must rigorously investigate the text which insists, repeatedly, upon "its own reality for itself" (154). Taking Robbe-Grillet at his word, at least as he presents it here, there is no action outside of the events of the text and, as such, there is nothing occupying the gap at the center of the text for the reader to uncover. Still, Mathias' identity is constructed with much more attention to traditional characterizing qualities than many of Robbe-Grillet's other protagonists, introducing a problem and an opportunity.

Looking to Mathias' presence as a named and temporally situated character as a simple failure of Robbe-Grillet's theoretical rigor or a concession to the demands of traditional narrative fails to

take into account the idiosyncrasies of Mathias' relations to his own memory, as well as

memory's narrativizing function, of which Robbe-Grillet demonstrates intense critical

awareness. The juxtaposition of Mathias' interiority, departing as it seems to from Robbe-

Grillet's general attitudes towards characterization, with his calculating approach to taking stock

of his wristwatch inventory indicates Mathias' objectivizing attitude to the production of

memory and its subsequent analysis. Though he desires a short and profitable visit to the island

of his birth, is suspicious that the juxtaposition of memories onto experiential input may prompt

distortion, both visual and conceptual. He speculates that

> even supposing that everything, down to the smallest detail, had remained just as
>
> he'd left it, he would still have to reckon with the errors and inaccuracies of his
>
> own memory, which experience had taught him to mistrust. More than any real
>
> changes on the island, or even hazy recollections … he would have to be wary of
>
> exact but false memories which would here and there have substituted themselves
>
> for the original earth and stones (17)

Memory, in *The Voyeur*, is distinctly image oriented. The temporal distance from one's own

memory threatens the descriptive prowess and accuracy that his characters fixate upon. The

narrator of *Jealousy* meticulously maps the text's paranoid signifiers onto the obsessive revision

of physical space and perceptions of gesture. *The Voyeur* operates in a similar manner,

conflating literary space, physical space (still image-oriented, albeit less architectural than that of

Jealousy), and the space of memory (again, dealt with as image) through the process of

objectification central to Robbe-Grillet's larger project. Barthes assumes an appropriately

violent rhetoric in his assessment of the visuality of Robbe-Grillet's objects, positing that "by his

exclusive and tyrannical appeal to the sense of sight, Robbe-Grillet undoubtedly intends the assassination of the object, at least as literature has traditionally represented it" ("Objective Literature" 16). Though Robbe-Grillet's objects lack any investigable depth, an understanding of how distance and relative position operate in physical space, this relational system latches to new territories that Robbe-Grillet objectifies. Mathias' treatment of memory (and by way of this, Robbe-Grillet's treatment of narrative) reflects what Barthes again violently describes as "the first step of this knowing murder … to isolate objects, to alienate them as much from their usual functions as from our own biology" (16). Echoing the defamiliarization that motivates formalist literary criticism, the denaturalized object potentially assumes new utility and value according to a previously unforeseen or unimaginable *topos.* Reflection, redirection, and a refusal of depth is particularly important to understanding the multifaceted topography of *The Voyeur,* as is the sense of distance at play in his systems of objects.

A particularly alien quality of *The Voyeur* is the disjunction that stems from Mathias' insistence on accounting for time and methodical depictions of visual phenomena in the midst of a narrative that is marked by inexplicable reversals, gaps, repetitions, and quasi-cinematic scenic treatment. Too, there is no narrative acknowledgement of when Mathias shifts his descriptive operation between the textual present, fantasy, and flashback. According to Robbe-Grillet's rubric, as components of the same text-object, distinction between these modes would be misdirecting. Still, this introduces another layer of detection to *The Voyeur*, with a different evidentiary model than those offered by any conventional detective novel. Ben Stoltzfus addresses this in his article "A Novel of Objective Subjectivity" and he is partially correct in his assertion that the reader of *The Voyeur* must "become a psychoanalytic sleuth if he is to grasp the inner necessity and artistry of [the] novel" (501). An important distinction and deviation from its

general critical practice is that that "psychoanalytic", in this case, simply indicates a sphere of operation rather than a strategy. There is no "depth" to Mathias, psychologically speaking, that one could penetrate with the application the appropriate therapeutic model or technique. Rather, Mathias' descriptions of his memories and fantasies occupy the same "reality" as the ostensible events of the text and deserve investigation, or assessment, as equal components in any reader's efforts to make a meaningful approach to *The Voyeur*. Robbe-Grillet has little use for boundaries between thought and reality, as their turbulences have the same texture. In particular, components of a narrative system have their distinctions flattened as they become embedded in the text. Developing this critique towards the larger structural systems of language, Michel Foucault writes in "Distance, Aspect, Origin" that

> signs are not deciphered through a system of differences; isomorphisms are
> followed through a depth of analogies. Not a reading, but rather a drawing
> together of the identical, and immobile advance towards a state lacking
> difference. There, the distinctions between real and virtual, perception and
> dream, past and fantasy … have no more value than being moments of the
> passage, relays more than signs, traces of the same steps. (101)

The difficulty readers experience extricating Mathias' fantasy and memory from the more directly descriptive areas of the text underscores a problem rooted in the sense of language as an operational environment. If the ideologically contingent narrative structures that comprise language offer one his or her only access to experience, Foucault's characterization of a fiction as a "constant and mobile relation [of] interior to language itself" (102) offers an avenue for Robbe-Grillet's metafictional critique. Robbe-Grillet's treatment of the interior spaces of *The*

31

Voyeur as generative systems serves as a recursive effort to situate the abstract domain of imagination in the comprehensible space of language. In *The Voyeur*, Robbe-Grillet accounts for a number of imaginations at play; his own, Mathias', the reader's, Julian Marek's, and that of the elusive narrative figure (who slyly asserts his presence by registering an observation of Mathias standing apart from the other ferry passengers in the novel's first scene). In doing so, he further problematizes the distinction between the literary, the interior, and the exterior. The productive logic at work in these zones slides along the associative restructuring of Robbe-Grillet's object orientation. The blurring of their distinctions alters the rules regarding what can be conceptually practiced in each.

The competition of the interlocutors occupying Robbe-Grillet's productive narrative space is particularly salient in understanding the psychological facet of *The Voyeur*'s topography. While Morrissette takes issue with "certain critics, like Maurice Blanchot, [who] deny the 'truth' of the crime of *The Voyeur*, though such interpretation seems impossible to reconcile with the images of murder that break through into Mathias' consciousness toward the end of the narrative" (6); this reading loses sight of the fact the director of Mathias' gaze is demonstrated on numerous occasions to be a figure other than Mathias himself. If this narrative figure can direct observation at Mathias as he stands on ferry or, perhaps more tellingly, at Mathias as he speculates about his own observations of a fisherman, then Mathias' entire external reality can be read as a textual construct removed by one further degree from the reader. Brink looks to this narrative function in an almost evidentiary manner, arguing that the arrangement of language such as "the gaze of a young girl with large eyes … sweets to lure her; a length of cord forming the pattern of a figure 8 with which she may be tied up, hands behind her back, legs apart" are an "obsessive presentation to Mathias" which constructs the framework

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for a crime in the mind of the reader (229). If one is particularly interested in examining the

implicit commentary that *The Voyeur* makes upon the production of narrative discourse, the role

of the narrator who stands behind Mathias and serves to simultaneously direct his gaze towards

the objects that populate the novel as well as the codification of his actions in language is a

crucial one. Though issues who who is precisely responsible remain unclear, Mathias' tendency

towards revisionism actually extends to the destruction of certain significant text-objects. In the

third section of the novel he is commonly understood to be working at eliminating the evidence

of his presence on the island and prior to leaving his rented room for the last time he pulls out the

newspaper from his pocket which describes the earlier murder of a young girl. Then,

> he reads this printed text from beginning to end, chooses a word in it, and after
>
> tapping the ash from his cigarette, brings the red tip near the selected spot. The
>
> paper immediately turns brown. Mathias gradually presses harder. The brown
>
> spot spreads; the cigarette finally burns through the paper, leaving a round hole
>
> ringed with black … thus no trace of the news item discernible to the naked eye
>
> remains (202, 203)

This passage reinforces the necessity of dealing with text at the level of the object and calls a

reader's attention to the connotation of absence at the heart of any narrative or textual

system. The language at play here displays an *unreasonable* structure and shown to be subject to

revisions and indeterminate logic. Robbe-Grillet's evasion of straightforward action or clear-cut

statements are a desertion of the rational model. This is a necessary component of any attempt to

elucidate meaning in the distance that frustrates comprehension.

Both *Jealousy* and *The Voyeur* revise narrative expectations and function according to spatial considerations and his fixation on the role of objects. This attention crystallizes into a particularly productive example in his collaboration with Jasper Johns, *La Cible* (*The Target*). Though the text was later incorporated into another novel, its first presentation was as an introduction to the catalogue for Jasper Johns' 1978 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. In a reversal of Robbe-Grillet's earlier models, *The Target* contradicts genre convention by offering narrative in place of the interpretive commentary about objects (artworks) that would normally comprise such an introduction. It also positions the text as a fragmentary object of variable proxemic relation to the art objects populating the space. In consideration of the discourse of how art can indicate or generate meaning, this introduces new systemic operations to be broken down and re-presented throughout Robbe-Grillet's project. *The Target* revisits Robbe-Grillet's familiar technical territory with calculated, first person spatial navigation. It is, however, curiously infected with the acknowledgement and contemplation of internal realities that he avoids in other fictional texts and admonishes in his critical work. Take, for instance the resigned self-reflection:

> Plunged thus into total darkness of the blackest kind … I venture a few steps in what I believe to be the right direction, opposite from the one which, according to my calculations, leads towards the interrogation rooms. But, having gone no more than 15 or 20 feet, I feel completely lost. (56)

The engagement with memory and emotional experience threads through *The Target*. The page becomes an associative zone for Robbe-Grillet's usual meticulous observation and the the hazy, internality unfamiliar to his work. At one point, the narrator acknowledges a ruler by building a

description of its physical qualities. Then, in a relational stream, it strikes him that he must keep

this object in order to later place it in a room that only it can complete "by become the numeral

1". He then seems to lose track of the image, and likens it to a memory that he is "unable to

bring back to the surface nor dismiss" (62). Passages such as this bring a number of systems

(narrative, object-oriented, cognitive, architectural, numeric), into contact and conflict with one

another, including those of which Robbe-Grillet himself strives to avoid the uncritical

conflation. In particular consideration of the text as a component of an art space, *The Target*

emblematizes the possibility of Robbe-Grillet's fissured systemic approach.

The art world has its own discourse surrounding meaning that has some distance from the

standards of narrative structuring. This grows from an investigation of how art objects can be

thought to create or aid in the creation of meaning into a larger inquiry about its possibility and

operation the world more generally. Niklas Luhmann's *Art as a Social System* is an interesting

contribution to this discourse that has more explicit vectors into Robbe-Grillet's project in light

of his collaboration with Johns. Luhmann problematizes the anthropological stability of

perception as a vector into an art object's meaning by noting that "what appears to be an external

world is, in fact, generated not by the resistance of an external world but rather by a resistance of

the system against the operations of the system" (151). This examination of consciousness and

sensory functions as imperfect and resistant systems within systems is a useful analogy for

Robbe-Grillet's unconventional narrative worlds and Johns' "objects". The connotative effect of

their proximity illuminates how Johns' works resemble Robbe-Grillet's texts, as they are

themselves the evidence of an obsessive consideration of objects in a system. The chiasmus born

from this recursion hints at the cascading vacuum of meaning and truth, but the insistence on

unconventional and unseen potential for meaning in its absence provides a creative

impulse. Robbe-Grillet is a destructive force, to be sure. He cannibalizes systems, negates their

rules, and constructs his own arbitrary and ambiguous guidelines. Still, his relentless

interrogation of the abstract and the concrete articulates new, indefinite, productive

zones. Robbe-Grillet's turn towards the unforeseen utility of failure and fragmentation in the

face of totalizing super-systems outlines a tendency that grows in both Ballard and Ligotti's

work. A reading of this interrelation that capitalizes on his proxemic system of meaning compels

a sense of operating assembly[2] in which mutually constitutive interactions generate novel,

recursive utility.

Notes

1. Robbe-Grillet's overwhelmingly violent treatment of treatment of the female body is discussed at length in Raylene Ramsey's *Robbe-Grillet and Modernity*: *Science, Sexuality and Subversion*.

2. My reading of the text as machine and assemblage is grounded in Deleuze and Guattari's *1000 Plateaus.*

Chapter 2. Ballard, Technologizing Space, and the Neo Novel

In a 1971 essay on the future of science fiction, written for the magazine *Books and Bookmen*, J.G. Ballard provocatively asserts the genre as "the only fiction which has any influence on the world around it ("Fictions of Every Kind", 237) and lays down the charge that "social relationships are no longer as important as the individual's relationship with the technological landscape" (237). One could accept this proclamation as playful advocacy of the author's chosen genre in response to literary criticism that sought to push it towards the margins of pulp and amateur fan magazines, though his relationship with the larger science fiction community resists this. Best articulated in the 1962 essay "Which Way to Inner Space?", Ballard's regular dismissal of the genre's most reliable tropes articulate a critical position towards and distance from the larger movement. The disinterest Ballard's work displays in charting the variety of exciting technological advancements that render the space age worthy of speculative fiction is matched in equal measure by a keen eye for exploration of the manner in which the experience of being in modernity has been *technologized*; that is, subsumed into an aggregate of strategies, mechanisms, and machinery that both produce and comprise reality. Towards the end of his essay, he associates the science fiction author, himself implicitly included, with the sort of anonymous assemblages that design and manufacture automobiles, "consumer durables", or advertisements. Concordantly, a substantial portion of his fictional output does away with the crutches of the "social novel" wholesale; plot, character, traditional narrative positioning, or the recognizable formal structuring of literature. Instead, readers encounter the sorts of texts more readily associated with the various faceless laboring

components of the mundane worlds of production, institution, and mechanization. Ballard

constructs police reports, advertisements, questionnaire responses, indexes, fictional film scripts,

television program guides, and fragments of found medical text, rendering his work critically

accessible via numerous vectors of social research.

As with Robbe-Grillet, the interplay between Ballard's novels, short stories, and critical

writing indicates a reflexivity and systemic quality to his body of work. While political,

spiritual, psychological, and social allegory are present in his stories, the standard actors whom a

reader would generally utilize in order to recognize an ethical or moral underpinning are often

contradictory or simply absent. Rather, his texts frequently reflect, both in form and content,

what his critical writing suggests to be the simultaneous substantive depletion and accelerative

energy that characterize Western modernity. This shift of the burden of realism from the text's

content to its formal structure echoes Robbe-Grillet's attitude regarding the distinction between

the two categories as anachronistic. This attention to form, particularly in his shorter texts,

distinctly reflects the metafiction of the *noveau roman*. Associating Ballard with an avant garde

thrust similar to the energy of the *noveau roman* opens an avenue for assessment according to

Robbe-Grillet's theoretical output as well as other critics, such as Ann Jefferson who recognize

the value of the style's response a "crisis in the reading of fiction" (*The Noveau Roman and the

Poetics of Fiction* 5). Unlike Robbe-Grillet, however, his formalism is often guided by

derivations and fractured inversions of extra-fictional models. This even more explicitly brings

narrative together with the sense of language's technology and utility, in turn developing a

technologized and transformed sense of identity that permeates many of Ballard's

texts. Apropos of Ballard, one can further capitalize on the work of thinkers, such as Foucault,

who situate experience in language. There is tension here, between the uncannily productive

indeterminacy of Robbe-Grillet's systems and the inescapable power relations that Foucault charts so relentlessly. Though his early novels construct the kinds of apocalyptic fantasies that more commonly earn the designation as "dystopian", Ballard's shorter works frequently distill some particularly troubling sense of modern ontological distress. What texts such as *Running Wild*, "The 60 Minute Zoom", and *The Atrocity Exhibition* share, despite divergent narrative strategies, is the sense that individual agency and identity are becoming lost amongst insidious and powerful competition for the prime operational role in the world's order. As such, theories of the archive, the role of identity, and the technologies modern experience are of marked utility in any critical approach to Ballard's work, specifically any attempt to chart the manner in which his fictions compose a radical critique contemporary social relations.

Ballard's 1988 novella, *Running Wild*, provides a rich initial example of the manner in which institutional archival material can stand in for narrative relation, conflating the operations of power at work in two seemingly distinct discursive environments. The main body of text is prefaced, in type differentiated by font and case, with the words "FROM THE FORENSIC DIARIES OF DR. RICHARD GREVILLE, DEPUTY PSYCHIATRIC ADVISER, METROPOLITAN POLICE" (3). Though the technique of providing a number of narrative lenses, often through the use of prefatory material that seemingly sits outside of the primary text, is nothing new, Ballard's example calls to mind some of the qualities of the archive that media theorist Josh Lauer explores. He looks to historian Carlo Ginzburg's use of the term "clues" to designate the previously trivial bits of information, such as fingerprints or the records of psychoanalytic interviews, as part of a new approach in the twentieth century to the assessment of truth and knowledge. Lauer locates the construction of Ginzburg's "evidential paradigm" in the role of media as a "technological extension of human perception … introduc[ing] new

possibilities for conveying and organizing information" and stating succinctly that "new media not only mediate, they produce new forms of authenticity and truth" (571). Greville, *Running Wild's* protagonist, is a professional in the field of psychiatry, who serves the police in a profiling capacity: that is, he gathers evidence that would elude the layman and assembles it into a legible psychological "type" which can be easily utilized by the state apparatus that applies and exercises force, surveillance, and other mechanisms of control. The design of *Running Wild,* too*, mirrors a case file, immersing the reader in the experience of flipping through photographs, statements, and records in conjunction with the investigators. Finally, after a brief statement of record from the doctor, the text immediately jumps to the description of physical pieces of evidence (photographs, video, eyewitness statements) and is shot through with lists, bullet points, and demarcated sections noting what sort of information will follow.

The issue at the center of the plot is the identity of the perpetrators of a mass-murder and the location of a group of missing teenagers, evoking the same investigative *telos* that motivates Robbe-Grillet's early work. One could argue that the text does not truly challenge traditional narrative structure, citing the formal structure as simply staging material for Greville, who plays a standard narrating role. His operating model is, in contrast, quite similar to the protagonist of *Jealousy:* he follows the guidelines of description, uninterested in restructuring or withholding information from the reader in order to heighten any sense of drama. This stylistic imposition does not reflect the metafictional desires of the author, as in Robbe-Grillet's text, so much as the standardization of a particular model for forensic investigation and coding the resulting information as *evidence*. At the end of the text, Greville provides a plain explanation of his theory of what occurred and when (including time stamps), with a brief gesture towards questions about the future actions of the youthful criminals. This does not enact the confirmation

of concordant successful uncovery of the "facts of the matter" which would designate standard piece, providing pleasure in the form of "connecting the dots" along with a protagonist. The sense of a mysterious center to the text is deceptive and requires little investigative prowess to piece together. More interesting is Greville's speculation, theorizing, and psychological inquiry intruding upon his demands to construct an official record according to a definite model. This proximity of dissonant systems of meaning generates a substantive friction at the site of narrative, problematizing the modes of knowledge at work.

Greville is not simply a producer of or contributor to the police force's file on the event at the ill-fated Pangbourne Village; he serves as a transcriber, collating information from all manners of official documents against one another in a search for the evidence or kernel of meaning that will make sense of the massacre. He describes the

> detailed dossiers which the Special Branch had compiled, in the hopes that the
> identities of the murdered residents might suggest some elusive clue. The sets of
> photographs, entries from *Who's Who*, the photostats of birth and marriage
> certificates, share portfolios and bank statements, academic qualifications and
> honorary degrees … the records of gifted lives so brutally ended (15).

The mechanisms of record and control that permeate the lives of the Pangbourne Village's residents are used to different, ideologically plagued ends, rooted in the archival models of two distinct eras. These systems are distinguished initially by Foucault and further developed by Rudi Laermans and Pascal Gielen in their essay "The Archive of the Digital An-Archive", where they note that "in pre-modern times, to become the object of description and of remembrance via archives was the privilege of the powerful. Their lives and deeds were documented, and the

documents were stored in a relic-like fashion in family and official archives" (3). Traces of this

pre-modern configuration are apparent in Pangbourne Village. The surveillance cameras, fences,

armed guards, exclusive schools signify of extreme affluence. They are rigorously documented

throughout Greville's case-file, sub-textually insisting that *these are not the type of people who*

are killed en masse *or disappear.* Indeed, this extensive record keeping is an implicit assertion

of status, of a class elevation that is inherently permanent and signified *ad nauseam* as insulated

from the outside world. Ironically, it is these very mechanisms that instigate the murderous

operations of the village's teenagers who seek to use the "truth" of the archive (through both

their association with all things prestigious and their manipulation of surveillance apparati to

avoid recording any of their crimes) to conceal their involvement and ensure a successful

disappearance.   It is only through a "failure" of the evidence-producing media that Greville

discovers the identities of the Pangbourne killers.

It is this discovery that situates him in his role as an archivist and designates him as the

site of a collision between the pre-modern model that insinuates power and a disciplinary

reconfiguration that reflects the transformation of posh schoolchildren into murderers. The

advent of disciplinary societies, argues Foucault, turns the revenant paradigm of the pre-modern

archive on its head, and ensures that the collection and regimentation of information

> is no longer a monument for future memory, but a document for possible use. And
>
> this new describability is all the more marked in that the disciplinary framework
>
> is a strict one: the child, the patient, the madman, the prisoner, were to become ...
>
> the object of individual description and biographical accounts (*Discipline and*
>
> *Punish* 191-192)

This turn both depersonalizes forces at work in the archival model and appropriates the logic of rationality. This aids in translating the humanist project, which formerly manifested power in the form of the sovereign figure, into something that begins to resemble the modern constructions of corporate personhood or the fatherland of fascist ideation. As Lauer notes in his references to "assemblages" and "institutions", photographs, phonographs, and other pieces of evidence were significant in their ability to be curated, ordered, and structured, lending their sense of inherent truth towards the legitimation of a larger collection of information. The archive quickly shifts from an accumulating system of meaning to a conferer of the ability to arbitrate truth upon its operators. Ballard's novel is more than simple commentary on the darker aspects of constant scrutiny and data collection; it designates as a literature the processes by which institutional systems and social ordering transpose their ideologies and mechanisms onto the page. A Ballardian revision of the metafictional systems motivating the *noveau roman* draws these structural formulations into the zones of indistinction and irreconcilability that force narrative fracture towards through the feedback loops of chance production. He inverts the evolution of humanist strategies towards the disciplinary institution, capitalizing on the alienation of mechanical form from a traditional approach to meaning and energizing literature cognizant of this approach's inadequacy.

Delving further into Ballard's territories of narrative idiosyncrasy leads to the 1992 short story "A Guide to Virtual Death", which contains neither plot, narrator, nor characters. The text presents as a fragmentary relic of total human extinction "for reasons amply documented elsewhere" (1173) in the form of a day's worth of television programming, which ranges from the wry ("Breakfast Time. Gourmet meals to watch as you eat your diet cellulose") to the truly unsettling ("Housewives' Choice. Rape, and how to psychologically prepare

yourself.") (1173). While the inclusion of a virtual reality reenactment of the Kennedy assassination is nods to frequent Ballardian themes, the text's total dispensation with recognizable narrative form echoes Robbe-Grillet's sense of the fixed text object. He admonishes against the the humanization of objects through the application of human qualities such as sympathy in "Nature, Humanism, Tragedy" and, crucially, cautions against the drive towards comprehension, which he associates with science and not literature (70). With no interior nature to be uncovered, the distance from which an object is experienced is privileged as a zone of productive slippage. Ballard's crystallization of prose into the bare format of the list designs this distance between the readers and any human traces in his text, encouraging revisitation and undermining the sense that the text can be completed by an understanding of what motivates its actors. Again, Ballard employs a defamiliarizing technique, aimed at the "text as object". The distance confers a sense of *literariness*, albeit one that is strange distinctly Ballardian. "A Guide to Virtual Death" is not, however, a mere metafictional exercise or bit of formal experimentation. It asserts itself as a component of Ballard's systemic literature through thematic resonance.

The formal and thematic structures of "A Guide to Virtual Death" are equally pertinent to an understanding how the text helps to comprise Ballard's critique of modernity. Again, he is indebted to a literary precedent that seeks to abolish this distinction. The association of television programming with humiliation and suffering echoes a general sentiment of Ballard's fiction regarding screen mediated experience and a turn towards the antisocial. In a 1974 interview with Carol Orr he concludes that "people don't want to be together in a physical sense, in an actual running crowd on a pavement. People want to be alone. They want to be alone and watch television" (*Extreme Metaphors,* 70). While one may expect fictional engagements with

this lack of empathy and entertainment contingent upon the suffering of others to contain a moral imperative, Ballard seems unwilling to cede to this assumption. Rather, the formal structure reflects towards the evidentiary quality fundamental to the institutional truth models that Ballard appropriates. The television program schedule functions to a "terminal document", a device Ballard describes in "The Voices of Time" as a scientist's "collection of final statements about *homo sapiens*. The complete works of Freud, Beethoven's blind quartets, transcripts of the Nuremberg trials, an automatic novel, and so on" (183). Surpassing human civilization, the fragment of surviving text will continue unapprehended by any archaeologist or historian. Considering "A Guide to Virtual Death" in this light perhaps best exemplifies the Ballardian record of the human and begins to characterize the pessimism that encroaches upon his literary efforts. While a framing narrative could add the sense of some alternative, the sadism and isolation take on an inevitability by way of their association with the idea of the record and its system of truth. Indeed, Ballard's final document is a schedule, perhaps the format most emblematic of modernity's preoccupation with the fixation of events in time. Keeping this sense of structure in mind, the association of violence, visual distance, and alienation that underscore Ballard's record of social modernity are at work in his dislocation of the individual from its conventional conceptual framework..

Ballard's early fiction does not venture as frequently as his later work into appropriations of institutional formats, but 1967's "The Overloaded Man" manifests the alienation, regimentation, and crisis of meaning inherent to Ballard's vision of postwar social developments in the story's construction and treatment of its protagonist. Faulkner, the story's narrator, finds himself bored and alienated by his academic existence and his inhabitation of the "psycho-modular system" of "the Bins", an ultra-modern housing project. To cope, he passively detaches

from life, neglecting his job and habitually distance himself from reality by an almost meditative practice of dissolving the bonds between the visual qualities of objects and their substance. Retreating from connection with his peers, his wife and, his colleagues, he ultimately slips free from the moral inhibition against crushing his wife's throat as if she is a ball of clay. Though the text, like many of Ballard's, chronicles an aberrant psychological experience and an individual who finds himself suddenly apart from his surroundings, it is not simply exercise in the sort of psychological or interior science fiction that Ballard discusses in "Which Way to Inner Space". Rather, Ballard's psychosis is structurally contingent and operates in the productive distance between man and the surfaces he perceives. Whereas the narrator of *Jealousy* "reads" his spatial environment and relates this information in the form of geometric description, Faulkner authors his visual landscape through its systematic negation. In a further inverted revision of Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy's* fantasies of violence that interrupt the cold observation are transformed into barely noticeable instances of real violence that drift across the hazy, relational space that dissolves from comprehension.

Faulkner's psychosis is a translation of alienation from dominating cultural logic, and is enacted through narrative operation on both the physical and textual spaces. This process assumes the model of mimetic representation, but is thwarted by the distortion of distance and fracture of stable selfhood in the shadow of anonymizing developments. Walter Benjamin characterizes this modernist mimicry in the inherent frustration at the drive to construct one's own identity in relation to an identifiable other. Drawing on the visual sense and narrative function, he argues that

> the highest capacity for producing similarities … is man's. His gift of seeing
> resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in

former times to become and behave like something else. Perhaps there is none of

his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive

role. ("On the Mimetic Faculty" 333)

Benjamin's naturalization of the compulsion to internalize the other presents a distinct difficulty

when embedded the traumatizing structures of the Ballardian environment. His association of

the mimetic faculty with the cognitive core problematizes the idea that it is man who

fundamentally acts upon his exterior world. Ballard's text demonstrates the unsettling results of

this faculty playing out in a space where all the candidates for mimicry have been drained of

meaning. The logic of stability and agency at the core of humanist ideology's modern revision

sits in uneasy contention to the mechanical cultural operations and dehumanization required to

sustain an accelerating, hierarchically contingent structure. Faulkner's neurosis reflects the

fruitful recursion and rupture that provoke incorporation of this instability into narrative

systems. The potential danger of these experiments shows in the addictive draw that Faulkner

feels towards his own negation.

The mental exercise of dissociating exterior objects from their visual tethers to some

deeper quality reads for much of the story like a meditative practice. At the end of the text, as he

floats and feels"the puttylike mass of his body dissolving" (253) it has become clear that his

fixation on the dissolvable world has drawn him further into the indistinction at every point of

access. This seductive quality that calls from the haze reflects what theorist Michael Taussig

describes as "an almost drug-like addiction to mime, to merge, to become other - a process in

which not only images chase images in a vast, perhaps infinitely extended chain of images, but

one also becomes matter" (*Mimesis and Alterity* 43). The double bind of this desire playing out

in a fundamentally alienating shows itself when Faulkner attempts to theorize and understand his

own distanced condition. He characterizes his tendency to space out as a desire to "escape the nausea of the external world" (253), though he is paradoxically drawing himself further into its vacuum. This seductive and destructive appeal to the unknowable recalls the Gothic terror of the sublime, reconstructed in the shadows of more pervasive and insidious structures. Faulkner's friend Hendricks remarks that "by any degree to which you devalue the world so you devalue yourself" (247), but but this reads as too hollow in the face of the systemic degradation of value to function as useful philosophical position or proscription. Faulkner's response to his own devaluation is to resign. Like many of Ballard's individual works of short fiction, Faulkner is a crystallization of a problem. Faulkner is the ugly, reflective systems of modernity written into an acting body.

There are strong ideological signifiers embedded in Faulkner's hypermodern ontological crisis. The readymade quality and slick plastic sheen of his physical surroundings are the aesthetic trappings of the rabid capitalism at the center of Benjamin's schematics for modern alienation, and his skepticism towards advertising and lingering sense that the mechanisms of consumer culture are neurotic and self undermining permeate Ballard's prose. Indeed, the first object from which Faulkner manages to dissolve the associations of meaning is his television set. Shortly after, he begins to test

> out the new talent on other objects, found that it was particularly successful with over-associated ones such as washing machines, cars, and other consumer goods. Stripped of their accretions of sales slogans and status imperatives, their real claim to reality was so tenuous that it needed little mental effort to obliterate them altogether (246)

Mapping the language of advertising onto the objects themselves as an example of object "over-association" that further degrades an object's ties to reality implies a critique of the practice itself. Robbe-Grillet's spatial concerns in the text more generally mirror Benjamin's assertion that the advertisement "abolishes the space where contemplation moved and all but hits us between the eyes with things" ("One Way Street" 85). The commodity-object, for Benjamin, sits at the extreme limit of the artifice of value assignation, frustrating both utility and observation with with the systems of signification imposed by the advertiser. Ballard hyper-associates this sort of thwarted transaction and information overload with his dystopian modernity. The characters of "The Overloaded Man" exemplify this; they occupy a prefabricated development, *Life* magazine does glossy spreads of new "living trends", and mass produced furniture populates an "intolerable world". The threat of this existence is quite real to Ballard; in a 1994 interview with Will Self he associates the confluence of extreme superficiality and mechanical homogenization with the potential for traumatic rupture. He speculates that, quite soon, affluent countries will become

> not just a planetary suburbia, a future of utter boredom, lit by totally unpredictable acts of violence. The forces of social cohesion will ensure we get the drab city of plain again. These unpredictable acts of violence may take all sorts of forms, not necessarily physical violence. There could be weird consumer trends or bizarre vacation schemes, financial scams (*Junk Mail* 367)

Neither Ballard nor Benjamin's critiques are simply moral imperatives against consumerism; each examines the reconfiguration of value associated with contemporary economic systems as a sort of interzone that facilitates extreme behavior. The Ballardian subject's association of the

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mundane trappings of life's day to day operations with explosive instances of violence helps to articulate the systemic quality of Ballard's critique. Neither phenomenon is necessarily symptomatic of the other, and they remain stubbornly inextricable. What's more, efforts to operate outside of or against the systems are frequently reconfigured into new apparatuses that further constrain and totalize. Still, the issue of representation and narrative remain useful tools, energized in the laboratory of Ballard's expansive metafiction. Further developing their interrelations with the technologies that they often inhabit offers further potential to navigate Ballard's turbulent sense of identity.

Ballard's fascination with the screen, the production of the moving image, and its subsequent reception and documentation is conflated with his standing interest in writing the pathological individual in the 1976 short story, "The 60 Minute Zoom". This revisitation and revision of familiar territory signals his obsessive tendency to work and rework certain characters, themes, and premises. This obsession presents itself as a quality of many Ballardian protagonists, the "I" figure of "60 Minute" being no exception. In the first section of the text the unnamed protagonist ruminates on the expense and quality of the film equipment he is utilizing to film an illicit affair between his wife and a stranger, noting the "first hints of an erection" that form at the simultaneous recognition of the zoom motor's pleasing whirr and the "degrading but exciting months of anger and suspicion" (856) regarding his wife's unfaithfulness. This introduction perfectly illustrates what Corin Depper refers to as "the curious tension at the heart of the cinematic image between an attachment to an 'ethical' capturing of the real, and an acknowledgment of its voyeuristic potential" ("Death at Work", 55-56). The narrator's attachment to his camera is reflected both in his painstaking and affectionate descriptions of its inner workings and his seeming desire to reproduce the machine's passive role of observation

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and recording. Ballard's conflation of the observational narrator and his device recalls the curious object orientation of "I" protagonists in the *nouveau roman*. When Ann Jefferson references the wordplay of *La jalousie,* she associates the descriptive perspective indicated by the translation as a window blind with a neutral "camera" (following the terminology of narratologist Norman Friedman). If this narrative approach can afford the novel a wholly descriptive function, the text becomes "simply the objective imprint left by the external world, (quoting Friedman) a 'camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking" (*The Nouveau-Roman…* 133). While Robbe-Grillet's objectivity is much more complex than the general definition, the sense that it can be technologically facilitated creates a strange relationship between the object-oriented observer and the technologies of observation and recording. Ballard's begins to enact this, with the narrator's fetishization of and seeming desire to inhabit the camera. His passive position is upset more clearly with the revelation at the end of the text that the narrator is not actively filming but, instead, viewing a film of his wife's murder that he has already produced. While his psychosis is shown to be much more extreme, it also indicates a fracture between the author and viewer of narrative operation. This fracture is technologically contingent: the automated zoom lens serves as facilitator of both the camera's mechanized observational role as well as the narrator's simultaneous occupation of space on both sides of the text's screen. This rapid reconfiguration positions the sordid "I" alongside the reader as repetitious voyeur and complicates the notions of recording technology, audience, and mediation that are foundational to Ballard's construction of modernity. The camera and the screen are shown to be complicit as well, both sides of their narrative operation playing some productive role in the strategies of violence afforded to their users.

"Theatre of War" further addresses the inextricability of the lens and the screen from violence. Like "A Guide to Virtual Death", the story is assembled in the format of a non-literary genre; in this case, a script for a television documentary. Ballard's childhood experiences with war, occupation, and violence are well documented with various degrees of fictionalization in novels such *Empire of the Sun,* numerous essays, and interviews. Though his discussion of violence in first person narration often take a cold and clinical tone, a similar disjunction between subject matter and affect are particularly startling in the format of a script. The commentator's narration and portions of the text indicating what the audience will hear mimics the detached stylistic manner of a voice over newscaster, while the descriptive imagery of what will ostensibly occupy the screen is quite brutal. The opening passage exemplifies the dissonance between the tones in the text. The script describes a scene in which

> a tank stops by a house and soldiers dart in. A moment later a woman emerges, followed by three exhausted children and an old man carrying a bedroll. They run past with stunned faces. Bodies lie everywhere. Two negro GI's drag away a dead enemy soldier with shoulder-length hair. The picture freezes, and the camera zooms in on the union jack until it fills the screen, soaked in the soldier's blood" (953)

Suddenly, Ballard's curious relationship to depictions of violence in his novel-length works do not seem as wholly generated in the vicissitudes of "inner space" as they may seem. While the blase, clinical depictions of brutality that permeate Ballard's fictions benefit from a psychologically oriented examination, such an assessment is incomplete without taking into account the technologically contingent relations which circumscribe much of the modern

experience of violence. It is not just the screen which is at work here, though. Ballard's sense of technology is expansive, and the discursive techniques of the media are shown to be alienating in a similar manner to the screen or the image more generally. This coheres into a system of narrative meaning which Ballard exploits to both textual and critical effect.

The implicit critique of "Theatre of War" echoes that of "The 60 Minute Zoom", though the former text abandons the aberrant individual psychopathology of the latter's narrator and operates in the systemic territory of mass media production. This is a consistent thematic device of Ballard's that Michael Deville, in his critical volume entitled *J.G. Ballard*, ties to the author's tendency to craft emotional distance from the violence in his prose. This operates at numerous narrative levels, indicating Ballard's sense of "our gradual alienation from any kind of direct (that is, unmediated) response to experience - combined with the unlimited expansion of the mind's possibilities afforded to us by modern technology" (30-31). While the directorial musings of the narrative voice in "The 60 Minute Zoom" can be written off as the pathologically aestheticized fantasies of a cuckolded cinephilic psychopath, the sterile tone of the newscaster is present in every home that contains a television. When Major Cleaver dismissively responds to a query of whether or not it is difficult to shoot his own people with, "they're not our own people any longer. This is the whole point of war" ("Theatre" 966), the mundanity implicates an entire system of social relations, rather than an identifiable outsider. This is made even more explicit by the closing text of the story, an acknowledgement crediting "all the dialogue above, to General Westmoreland, President Thieu of South Vietnam, Marshall Ky, and various journalists, US and ARVN military personnel" (967). This final bit of text complicates the format of the story much further than the rest of the story indicates. Considered as cut and pasted revision of actual newscasts, the text takes a new shape as what Umberto Rossi describes as "a crafty textual

collage" ("Is the War Inside Your Mind?" 98). In his essay, Rossi discusses this technique as exemplary of a similar "displacement strategy" used in novels such as *The Drought* and *Drowned World* to defamiliarize the physical landscape of Great Britain, albeit with warfare substituted for natural disaster. This does not, however, simply affect the way a reader engages with the text by providing a visual referent. Rather than introducing fictional elements to a familiar landscape, Ballard, reintroduces his reader to subversively familiar *language* through a formal revision. This demonstrates the powerful associative quality of meaning that is regularly at work in his fiction. Simultaneously, it holds up a mirror to the painful discomfort generated by the dissonance between violent imagery and formally neutral language. This dissonance is not simply present in fiction: Ballard insists that it is a component of his readers and their experience of the real world.

Ballard's utilization of carefully considered and structured depictions of gratuitous violence to force the fissure of textual and narrative convention is grounded in a literary history in which Robbe-Grillet plays a prominent role. A consideration of the two authors according to this thematic consistency is an important component of any attempt to draw out their larger critical tendencies. Elvira Laskowski-Caujolle characterizes Robbe-Grillet's obscene passages as efforts to "push back the limits of traditional fictional structure, to question the established order and its moral behavior" (44). She also historicizes the the geometric and arithmetical devices at work in his novels as echoes of the numerical descriptions of de Sade's victims. This is implicitly bound to the desecration of the human body in both authors' work, operating as a distancing element that "makes identification impossible, destroys any chance of recognition, and plays a major role in the process of abstraction" (48). This metafictional reading is commensurate with an understanding of many of the devices which shock his readers into a

jarring departure from their expectations. It is also considerate of Robbe-Grillet's insistence on

directing all of his critique towards fictional structure itself. Though Ballard's work echoes the

various experiments in literary form that precede him, his efforts are not as steadily aimed

towards reconfiguring novelistic convention as those of the *noveau roman*. Ballard's

applications of violence placed into relation with Robbe-Grillet's sense that it can destabilize

firmly entrenched architecture introduces ambiguity and contradiction to a mechanized

institutional hegemony. By mimicking and drawing from mass media formats and their own

violent fixations, Ballard simulates and spotlights the effects of an increasingly technologized

space within a literary environment. The *telos* of this practice is a demonstration of the systemic

collapse of these structures under their own logics; Ballard's metafiction ascribes to this failure a

sense of utility.

An examination of Ballard's oeuvre as an effort to textualize the sense of crisis

permeating the period in which he wrote leads definitively in the direction of 1970's *The Atrocity

Exhibition*, easily Ballard's most experimental and fragmentary piece of writing. It is a

distinct departure from representation, described by Jake Huntley as "a jarring montage of jump-

cut prose ... concentrated, condensed and compressed, randomized bursts triggered from a faulty

space– time continuum ... more like the field notes for some wayward medical research than a

novel" (21). The text dispenses with any semblance of conventional novelistic form, enacting

the psychotic break that it seems to chronicle in a spectacular collision of form and

content.   Replete with hallucinatory language, fragmented structure, and substantively revised

and republished twice since its initial appearance, *The Atrocity Exhibition* is a challenging text in

every sense of the word. Resembling a Ballardian overture, it contains thematic, textual, and

conceptual material from many of his other works. The most notable of these shards is a

"condensed story" that was later developed into the novel *Crash,* for which Ballard is arguably most famous. Given Ballard's oft-discussed penchant for "inner space" exploration, *The Atrocity Exhibition* can be read as textual representation of total psychosis, but the engagement with numerous social and linguistic systems also serves to map the protagonist's shattered space onto *them*. The interrelation between these systems and the narrative space is reinforced by the sentiment, expressed in *Crash,* that we "live inside an enormous novel" (8). The characters of *The Atrocity Exhibition* live inside of a text dominated by a recursive imperfection, exemplified by instability of even the narrator's name (Talbot, Talbert, T, Traven), that asserts itself at every narrative level. Section titles sometimes recur in the text that immediately follows, leading to a sense of capture: the reader is left wondering what he or she has already read. In other instances the correlation between the title and the section is unknown or misdirecting, as if a neurologist's notes have been dropped and hastily reassembled. The aleatory appropriates the technical specificities of numerous institutional disciplines and technologies in an exploded reconfiguration of Robbe-Grillet's conflation of the narrative form and exhibition catalogue. It leaves behind any gesture towards full comprehension in favor of fullest possible exhibition of said disciplines' traumatic self-destructiveness.

The Atrocity Exhibition takes place loosely within the confines of a medical facility in which patients' work is on display (the eponymous "exhibition") for the benefit of the facility's staff. The psychopathology is not only at work in the patients, however. It is the primary authoritative figure, Dr Nathan, who's schismatic affect seems most threatening. Addressing a subordinate doctor's query about the nature of strange advertisements that seem to offer nothing for sale he proposes that "these advertisements constitute an explicit portrait of yourself, a contour map of your whole body, an obscene newsreel of yourself during intercourse … these

images are fragments in a terminal moraine left behind by your passage through consciousness"
(71). This passage reads remarkably like Ballard's address to a reader about the function of his
work, underscored by sense that Dr Nathan is the force behind much of what is "going on" in the
staccato sections of text. The power and stability of the authorial voice is, of course,
ideologically situated, which Ballard addresses explicitly in his annotations. He writes that "Dr
Nathan represents the safe and sane voice of the sciences. His commentaries are accurate, and he
knows what is going on. On the other hand, reason rationalizes reality for him … and there are
so many subjects today about which we should be unreasonable" (89). Ballard's voice here, and
throughout the annotations more generally, never fully rises out of the text. It is unclear whether
the characterization of Dr Nathan as "safe and sane" is an ironic gesture or meant to prompt
skepticism to Ballard's authorial voice as well. Indeed, the annotations operate at the same
creative level as the "primary" body of the text and introduce new questions as frequently as they
provide any answers. Still, Ballard's comment dangles the idea of an ethics to his confusing text
with its acknowledgement of what he thinks we "should" do. His "unreasonable response" is a
reflective psychopathology that threatens established order through the reverberation of its most
destabilizing qualities.

The substantial alteration (introductions, annotations, illustrations) to *The Atrocity
Exhibition* indicates the lack of finite boundaries that Ballard sees in his narrative
systems. Returning again and again to further anatomize the illogical, tyrannical, or pathological
structuring of the dominant forces at work in the world, Ballard's work assumes its
qualities. There is a danger in his willingness to press his foot to the gas pedal and his tacit
encouragement of his readers to do so as well. It is important to keep in mind his self-
consciousness as a writer of science fiction, which implicitly demands constant attention to a

sense of future. There is not techno-utopia or post-human promise at work here; Ballard's

technologies are of interest due to their counterintuitive operation and sense that the frustration

of their logics may produce the unpredictable. The shedding of legible formatting that reaches

its peak in *The Atrocity Exhibition* is the most concrete instance of the Ballardian future,

subsumed in abstraction. Though Ballard is unclear about his sense of possibility that there is a

legible strategy to averting any of his dystopias, in a literary landscape where there is a fraught

relationship between intentionality and effect aversion is not a clear goal. Ballard's neuroses,

like the aesthetics of gleaming chrome which he so admired, reflect a perverse distortion of the

agentive rationality. His lunatic materialism and relentless futurity technologize the structural

reflexivity his textual machines share with the *noveau roman*, kinetically redirecting the

metafictional productivity at work amongst the turbulence of his terminal zones.

Chapter 3. Thomas Ligotti and the Withdrawing Sublime

There is both a chronological and thematic logic to closing this project with an

exploration of the contemporary horror fiction of Thomas Ligotti, an American author who

published in the relative obscurity of post-Lovecraft "weird fiction" journals prior to a recent

surge of interest in his work. More widely available editions of work previously published by

small presses have become available following (uncredited but later acknowledged) quotation of

his writing on the television show *True Detective*. In conjunction with growing popular interest

(and likely responsible for it to some extent) Ligotti has received a certain attention (in the

shadow of Lovecraft) from philosophers associated with the surges of scholarship surrounding

object-oriented, speculative realist, and pessimist thought. Graham Harman, Reza Negarestani,

Eugene Thacker, and other authors associated with these tendencies have pushed for a

reconsideration of Lovecraft's sense of cosmic indifference to the presence of the human as

fertile ground for provocative ontological questions. Ligotti, as evidenced by his own

nonfictional output (notably his "contrivance of horror", *The Conspiracy Against the Human

Race)*, is writing in light of and in dialogue with these philosophical tendencies. In light of this,

his work displays a concern for the world of objects and interest in destabilizing many

fundamental assumptions, offering numerous transactive vectors with Ballard and Robbe-

Grillet. Too, his situation in the horror genre places his fiction in the aesthetic lineage of the

Gothic. Ligotti's primary horror is a seductive, malevolent, unknowable inhumanness that

reconfigures the sublimity of the early Gothic akin to the fractured metafictional systems of

Robbe-Grillet and Ballard. This reading offers a potential to revitalize the sublime critique of

humanist models levied by Gothic aesthetics and form in light of those models' contemporary institutional and systemic revisions. In equal measure, the depth of Ligotti's pessimism threatens inescapable despair.

Ligotti's body of work, like Ballard's and Robbe-Grillet's before him, is characterized by blurred boundaries between theory, fiction, and praxis. This generic indistinction aids in drawing out certain systemic tendencies at work across his project, but also introduces some difficulties to any attempt to operate within a "Ligottian framework," as its rubrics and semiotics continually metamorphose. The sheer scope of fundamental values and structures that his writing destabilizes is provocative and exciting, but the entanglement of his philosophical pessimism with a misanthropic shade often precludes a sense of any utility whatsoever in its urge toward smothering systems of meanings. Too, Ligotti's nonfiction is not immune from the criticism that his tendency towards poetic bombast (for example, his characterization of humans as "hunks of spoiling flesh on disintegrating bones," [*The Conspiracy* 28]) are reductions of serious thought to depressive sloganizing. Still, his critical writing and stories such as "The Red Tower", "Tsalal", and "The Shadow, the Darkness" thematically, and perhaps more importantly, formally, antagonize even the *idea* of a subject-agent whose experience provides a narrative skeleton upon which to drape meaning. Ligotti's writing, at its best, is an effort towards becoming non-being. His attempts to position language and narrative against life itself produces a difficulty of praxis. However, the lunatic frustrations of his shattering systems mirrors the totality of the structural sprawl that they undermine.

The interest in an outside to what can be known or experienced is not a new development within narrative fiction, nor did it begin with Lovecraft, Robert Chambers, or any of the other foundational figures of weird horror. Literary exploration of the limits of language and

understanding is central to even the earliest examples of Gothic fiction, a genre marginalized during its development by skepticism towards its literary merit in a manner that mirrors speculative horror. In her "poetics of Gothic," *Art of Darkness,* Anne Williams describes Gothic discourse "as narratives of 'otherness' distant in time and space" that "shows the cracks in the system that constitutes consciousness [or] 'reality'" (66). The Gothic is frequently discussed as a coherence of specific content-level tropes common across a body of cheap popular fiction, excepting a few stand out texts most notable for introducing or exemplifying genre-conventions. The inclusion of a cavernous ruined abbey; a wan, fainting heroine; and an evil Marquis is sufficient to tie a text to this nebulous idea of Gothic-ness. This formulation, however, does not take into account the complex relationship between the Gothic's conventions of content, formal qualities, textual structures, narrative idiosyncrasies, and the larger project of constructing the human subject in the tumult of emerging Enlightenment values. Sublimity is the aesthetic concept at the core of the Gothic, and the genre often simultaneously describes encounters with the boundaries of the known and functions as linguistic thrusts against those boundaries. Beyond them the legible logics of culture invert and undo, simultaneously indicating possibility and terror. While sublime thematics have waxed and waned from both popular and critical appreciation, Ligotti's approach to an "outside" capitalizes upon the trope's lengthy entanglement with narrative and, in the light of the postmodern decentering of the subject and the accelerating alienation spurred on by increasingly technologised life, revitalizes the sublime outside as a challenge to the project of humanism.

To contend that Gothic literature emerged as a clearly articulated response to eighteenth century political or economic conditions in Great Britain and Europe during the 18th century is excessively simplistic. However, the Gothic fascination with the unknowable or unspeakable

can be read as a manifestation of the destabilizing effects of emerging sociopolitical narratives and categories. The discourse surrounding sovereignty, knowledge, and the individual foregrounded by the so-called "Age of Revolution" developed the liberal subject that serves as the center around which dominant and enduring philosophies, economies, and political systems have been wrought. Enlightenment-era thought began to shift the value of the individual away from contingency upon heredity or historical relationships to power and towards his capacity to reason. Reason was not only the quality that placed the subject in a position of political and social validity; it also formed the basis for the construction of the world around the individual. Human society and human knowledge were to be seen as the products of reasoned debate under specific rubrics - the value of which can be seen in the emphasis of free speech and a free press that is foundational to nearly all liberal political thought. John Milton's contention, in *Aeropagitica,* that "the liberty to know, to utter, and to argue freely according to conscience" was to be valued "above all liberties" cements the relationship between reason, liberty, and language pointing to the latter, in the form of a publication or a debate, as an environment, of sorts, that facilitated the operations of reason and the development of knowledge. The liberal subject, an established figure at the emergence of Gothic literature in the eighteenth century, is centered around this rational consciousness and its authentic expression in both speech and writing.

There is a fundamental aporia between the internal consistency of the fully-elaborated and agential liberal subjectivity and the unfathomable and transcendental quality of the sublime. While engagement with the sublime is at the core of a variety of Romantic art forms contemporaneous to this period, Gothic literature's sublime aesthetics pose a specific challenge to language as a mediator between this subject and the outside as it showcases the tendency of

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words to obscure as often as they illuminate. Indeed, the specific mechanisms of language that tease out the uncanny qualities of knowledge's confrontation with the unknowable can be thought of as the moment of "Gothic-ness" that begins to draw together a variety of disparate texts into a genre. Gothic fiction was also frequently produced by and for women, who were tacitly excluded humanist project and enacted operational models of knowledge outside of conventions of reason, sequestered as it was in a white, Western, masculine developmental echo chamber. At the formal level of a Gothic text's construction as well as in specific in-text instances of writing and speaking, it is language itself which serves to obscure, convolute, and misdirect, leaving the subjects at the center of these tales terrorized, insane, or deceased. There is a metonymy at work here: where language is the domain of reason and liberty, we find the liberal subject; wrapped in a language that fails and cannibalizes itself of meaning lurks a Gothic anti-subject.

Examinations of sublimity in literature and art frequently fall back upon the aesthetic writings of either Edmund Burke or Immanuel Kant. Though there are numerous exhaustive comparisons the two thinkers' schematics, philosopher Timothy Morton's summation is particularly useful:

> both theories of the sublime have to do with human subjective access to objects.
> On the one hand we have Edmund Burke, for whom the sublime is shock and
> awe: an experience of terrifying authority to which you must submit. On the
> other hand, we have Immanuel Kant, for whom the sublime is an experience of
> inner freedom based on some kind of temporary cognitive failure (*Realist Magic)*

These attempts to collate knowledge and the unknowable are frequently bound up in language, which Burke addresses in contrast with "natural objects", relative to the production of the sublime, noting that "words have as considerable a share in exciting ideas of beauty and the sublime as any of those [natural objects], and sometimes a much greater than any of them" (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* 187). For Burke, language is the means by which one can negotiate the overwhelming nature of the sublime transaction. The final chapter of his *Enquiry* is an attempt to systematize the methods (representation, combination, abstraction) by which words translate the *experience of* sublimity into something palatable and comprehensible. He writes that

> poetry and rhetoric do not succeed in exact description so well as painting does; their business is to affect rather by sympathy than imitation; to display rather the effect of things upon the mind of the speaker, or of other, than to present a clear idea of the things themselves. This is their most extensive province, and that in which they succeed the best (195).

For Burke, the locus of usefulness in the sublime is that works of art or literature which induce this sensation construct scenarios in which "without danger we are conversant with terrible objects" and through which "the mind [claims] to itself some part of the dignity and importance of the things which it contemplates" (96). Here, Gothic literature and its antecedents subvert Burke's purposes for the sublime; for many a Gothic hero or heroine there is no reclamation of dignity, no sense of wholeness that follows the sublime experience. Gothic terror, in contrast, remains firmly rooted in the failure of Burke's systems of language and of knowledge itself. Anne Williams, in her *Poetics,* echoes this, writing that "in Gothic, language is

multifarious, duplicitous, and paradoxical. Words may be both supremely significant and horribly 'literal' … or they may be hideously, uncannily powerful" (67-68). Burke's project is limited by its reliance upon rational and systematic means to the completion of the sublime transaction. This is undermined by the Gothic instability in the face of the sublime, which as often as not finds the principal figures floundering at the juncture where language fails to explain or fully interrogate experiences that supercede the boundaries of rational understanding. This collapse of Burke's system, viewed from within the model of liberal subjecthood, prompts stress cracks of terror at numerous foundational concepts of contemporary being.

First published in the 1996 compendium, *The Nightmare Factory,* Ligotti's "The Red Tower" perfectly captures the author's sense of a technologically contingent sublime and the challenges that it poses to language and representation. True to form, the story is comprised of the commentary of an unnamed narrator as he or she attempts to describe the strange happenings of a tower in which disquieting objects produce themselves. The tower, which is described as a "phenomenon", "so closed off from the outside world" that it prompts "extreme fascination" (*Teatro Grottesco* 65) on the part of the narrator, produces "lockets whose shiny outer surface flipped open to reveal a black reverberant abyss", "lifelike replicas of internal organs and physiological structures, many of the evidencing an advanced stage of disease", and "a curious timepiece whose numerals were represented by by tiny quivering insects" (68). Curiously, no reference is ever made to any entity in charge of the production or distribution of these items, rather, it is always "the tower" which acts. Indeed, the only reference to *people* in the story is the mention of "the delirious or dying words of several witnesses" describing the "evaporation" or "fading" of segments of the tower and its machinery. A story comprised of object descriptions, of course, recalls the *noveau roman* of Robbe-Grillet, and the care and precision with which

Ligotti's narrator describes the objects produced by the Red Tower echo the French author's work. In his study of the genre, *The Subject in Question,* David Carroll describes a "phenomenological phase" of the genre onto which this portion of Ligotti's text maps quite accurately. Carroll writes that

> there are no longer any grounds for deciding what is 'objectively real' and what is not; in fact this question even seems without interest. An ideological remnant from another time. The differences between past and present, hallucination and perception, fact and fiction, the visual and the written, etc., are transcended in the consciousness of a living subject (a man of the 'here and now') present to himself at all times. (13)

Though this reading highlights the ideological impetus to the distinction between reality and fantasy problematized by both Ligotti and Robbe-Grillet, it falls short of fully characterizing both authors' work by ascribing a stability and centrality to the narrative figure. The authors' narrators often resist this representational fixture, and frequently render invisible any interior set of experiences. The challenge to this representational model, Carroll writes, stems from structuralist criticism's insistence on placing language itself in the position of the subject.

Rather than attempting to counteract the phenomenological critique of the *noveau roman* with a purely anti-representational analysis, Carroll posits a "truly radical questioning of the subject … by a repeated *working through* and undermining of the premises on which the subject depends and which depend on it" (26). Ligotti's tendency towards hallucination, imperfect repetition, and sublime interference is exemplary of this sort of work, and it quickly becomes apparent that his subject is not only marginalized, but self-undermining. After describing the

factory's evolution from the manufacture of simple novelty items towards the production of

"hyper-organisms" that emerge from "birthing graves" and the calamitous ruination of the

machinery that supersedes the prior "fadings", the narrator of "The Red Tower" concedes that

the strange building must have reached a terminus -- only to immediately suggest that rumors

persist to the contrary. He notes that nobody has actually ever seen the Red Tower, although

> wherever [he] go[es], people are talking about it. In one way or another they are
>
> talking about nightmarish novelty items or about the mysterious and revolting
>
> hyper-organisms … everything they are saying is about the Red Tower, in one
>
> way or another, and about nothing but the Red Tower. We are all talking and
>
> thinking about the Red Tower in our own degenerate way (76)

The voices of the narrator, the villagers, and the mysterious emanations of the tower itself cohere

into a din that signifies only madness. Rather than providing a logic for constructing and

experiencing the world, language has become a destabilizing force, perhaps the very force

responsible for the production of the tower's disquieting output. Here there is sense of inherent

horror in an individual's loss of self and agency as the entropic disorder of the collective

overtakes him. The promise of language's sense-making is undone by the blur of the multivocal

swarm. Peter Berger describes the depth of the instability introduced by the denigration of the

individual, evoking a sublime rending of reality itself. This is

> the nightmare *par excellance*, in which the individual is submerged in a world of
>
> disorder, senselessness and madness. Reality and identity are malignantly
>
> transformed into meaningless figures of horror. To be in society is to be 'sane'

precisely in the sense of being shielded from the ultimate 'insanity' of such

anomic terror (*The Sacred Canopy* 22)

Capitalizing on the horror of the dreamer's collapse into the dream, Ligotti reverses the efforts of

the subject to navigate encounters with the sublime through the reasoning powers of

language. Rather, acting upon what exists outside of knowability and experience with the tools

of language simply degrades its function and redirects it towards, in this case, sinister

ends. When the narrator remarks that "[he] must remain quiet for a terrifying moment. Then

[he] will hear the news of the factory starting up its operations once more. Then [he] will be able

to speak again of the Red Tower" (77) it does not resolve or stabilize any of the incoherence

about the tower's contents, existence, or status as "real". Rather, it lingers as a threat of what can

be spoken into being, the terror that looms at the borders of *nomos*.

Carroll's praxis-oriented approach to literary analysis is a useful intervention into the

sublime, as the "successful" product of a more fixed model would contradict sublimity's inherent

impenetrable quality: its escape from reason. Invoking the *noveau roman*'s skepticism towards

the subject's necessary centrality, Ligotti's fictions quarrel with both the stability of the agentive

subject and the discursively constructed, linguistically-situated subject produced by a structural

approach. The territory in which Ligotti does this work is the liminal zone between the

cognitively experiential and his own reconfiguration of the sublime space. The definitional

element of the sublime, its continuous escape from attempts to access or encompass it, creates a

malleable arena for doing the work in the recursive manner that Carroll discusses. Bringing this

critique back into the shadows, one can look to Georges Bataille, whose work straddles the

lineage of structural critique and the gravitational pull of the sublime in tune with Ligotti. In his

Unfinished System of Non-Knowledge, Bataille acknowledges the need for a systematic approach

to a taxonomy of knowledge while acknowledging the impossibility of completing, or closing, the system. He asserts that

> in principle, human knowledge is nothing more than this elementary knowledge giving form to cohesion through language. Knowledge is the agreement of the organism and the environment from which it emerges … without this agreement, life could not be imagined. (220)

He then maps this problem onto the producer and user of this "agreement", asking "what therefore is the organism in the world, if not the unconsidered flight of a possible into the heart of the impossible that surrounds it" (221). The means towards this agreement, under the rubric of Enlightenment rationality, is rational rumination that results in a discrete, stable, translatable idea or datum that can find its "authentic" (and accurate) expression in speech -- so valued by Milton and the other architects of humanism. The earliest instances of Gothic literature gesture towards this as an impossibility by presenting language's systematic failures in conjunction with sublime signifiers of the supernatural. This is not a simple aesthetic coincidence: it is a resonant trope fundamental to the genre, and it presents an implicit and novel challenge to the dominant epistemological models of the eighteenth century. Within Bataille's formulation, however, the irreconcilable urge toward the impossible is *always signified* by the accumulation of knowledge, which runs contrary to the humanist insistence of the supremacy of reason. The sublimity at the core of the ontological agreement denaturalizes the logics that make life comprehensible, underscoring an implicit threat at the heart of all speech and writing.

The tendency towards language's dangerous trace asserts itself ad nauseam in Ligotti's fiction, which adapts a Lovecraftian pattern succinctly described by S.T. Joshi as "the gradual

transformation of words into reality" (144). The danger in Ligotti's work, however, is not the

chants of an occultist or the text of a forbidden manuscript drawing the attention of a malevolent

God-monster: it is the seduction of the sublime that lurks in the contemplation of language's

functional limits. Andrew Maness, the protagonist of "Tsalal", is one such figure subject to this

allure. As in many of Ligotti's narratives, "Tsalal" contains the descriptions of another written

work. While Andrew does not explicate the book's contents, he paraphrases its sentiment with

the statement that "there is no nature to things". Contrarily, "everything … exists to only to be

drawn into the slow and endless swirling of mutations that we may see every second of our lives

if we simply gaze through the eyes of the Tsalal" (80). In Ligotti's universe, the contemplation

of what lies outside of experiences becomes an exponentially greater threat to the thinker's

ability to look away from the blackness. This is a darkness that robs systems of their structure

and that leads thought towards circular madness without end. Eugene Thacker locates this

sublimity at the core of Bataille's inhuman mysticism, which placed it amongst all desire for

ontological certainty. At the center of thought, he articulates a "darkness [that] denotes not just

ignorance or the lack of knowledge, but the blind spot of knowledge, the blind spot that in fact

inhabits *all* knowledge, the absolute limit that creeps beneath the surface of every relative

limit" (20). Bataille's supernatural interrogation of meaning foregrounds Ligotti's texts,

specifically his inescapable sense of the sublime. This Gothic revision underpins the

fragmentation and frustration that stem from a simultaneous acknowledgment of the

impossibility of capturing this darkness in language and the diminishing capacity to turn

away. Too, it capitalizes on the complication of interiority and exteriority that Robbe-Grillet's

work, appropriating the manner in which bounding efforts articulate both spaces in relation to

one another. Positioning the sublime at the center of language indicates an inward alterity and

destabilization of self speaks to the roots of the sublimity in perception and cognition and serves as an orienting force on Ligotti's critique.

Ligotti's protagonists their own insufficiency in nearly every story that he writes; the compulsion to continue wandering, writing, noting, or reflecting despite the growing confusion and sense of meaninglessness that the work evokes. This vacuum does not detract from the historically understood relationship of the elusive sublime to both the philosophical impulse and the urge to create art. Rather, it inscribes them with a useless recursivity. This reimagines Bataille's sustained interest in chronicling the failures of his own mystical and philosophical efforts, reflected in the paradoxical title of his essay-fragment, "The 'Lugubrious Game'". Though the contemplation of the unknowable reflects the systemic shortcomings of his discourse,

> intellectual despair results in neither weakness nor dreams, but in violence. Thus
> abandoning certain investigations is out of the question … whether one only
> wants to wander like a madman around prisons, or whether one wants to overturn
> them. (24)

The prison of language circumscribes Ligotti's obsessive characters as well. His depictions of individuals driven to madness by their own efforts to overcome the shortcomings of rational models artistically redirects the Gothic critique of rationality at the aesthetic developments of modernism and various *avant gardes* which sought to overcome the crisis of meaning through an expanded, creative agency. The Ligottian failure of the creative upends rational discourse, the liberal subject, and adherence to hegemonic ideology that make life livable and seemingly intelligible through a series of tacit assumptions never investigated. A yearning for "truth," "the

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creative," or "the sublime," leads to an obsessive consideration, a cascade of crumbling meaning, a lack of structure, and ultimately, the void. Any attempt to peer beyond the veil through focused creative inquiry leads to his characters to madness.

This unnamed figure at the center of "The Shadow, the Darkness" is a researcher in the process of compiling an *Investigation into the Conspiracy Against the Human Race.* One evening, while working, he collapses in a bout of crippling stomach pain, the sensation bringing him into contact with a "deep abyss of entity". He reflects that his artistic output which he believed "reflected in some way the nature of [his] self or soul" were actually wholly unremarkable, undifferentiated, and "like everything else … had been activated by the same pervasive shadow, the all-moving darkness" (260). Just as Lovecraft's anthropologists and explorers came into contact with the evidence of entities hideous in their incomprehensibility, Ligotti's artists and writers turn their own (and in a way, Ligotti's own) attempts to make sense of the suffering of the world, only to find that "there could never be anything written about the 'conspiracy against the human race … There is no … undermining or resistance or betrayal on either side. What exists is only this *pulling*, this *tugging* upon all of the bodies of this world" (279). The poetic inversion at work here ascribes the mobility and relational force generally associated with the living being onto nothing: it is the force in and of itself, acting upon the inoperational body. This reversal of the traditional schematics for agency entangles the unknowability of the sublime with the terrible potential of the supernatural, recalling this association's frequent appearance in the early Gothic. Too, the site of this association is the incomplete or contradictory function of language. The obsessive urges of the author are exteriorized into a sense that he or she is being acted upon. As the rational model is revealed to be less and less sufficient to explain the condition of the world, all that remains is the dominance

of this particular system, continually asserting itself. Here, the nightmare sets in: all of reality is subject to hegemony of this system, stagnated in a tautological relation in which its rationality confirms the supremacy of its rationality -- its constitutive outside is disreal, incomprehensible, unutterable; its margins the horrific domain of the unbounded, the unquantifiable, the a-categorical. To Ligotti's narrator (and likely to Ligotti as well), the sense of a "conspiracy" is the seductive fantasy of an outside: the desire to wake from life as if it was a dream.

While it is clear that there is some relationship between Ligotti and the protagonist of "The Shadow, the Darkness", the murkiness of this relationship is indicative of a general difficulty parsing his characters' identities to help facilitate a more traditional narrative analysis. His characters are frequently unnamed, unfixed from even personal history, and their behavior is more frequently dictated by obsessive or machinic interest rather than a legible ethic or ideology. What's more, inanimate objects, scenery, and conceptual forces are frequently described with the sort of agency and intention generally reserved for more traditional characters. The introduction to the story compendium *Grimscribe*, first published in 1991, exemplifies Ligotti's interest in subverting the generic boundaries and foreshadows an even more radical departure later in his career. The prose is, in a sense, the sort of fictional paratext Mary Shelley employs at the beginning of *Frankenstein*. Rather than drawing the reader in with the pretext of a found manuscript or authentic correspondence, the voice of the introduction muses on the difficulty of naming a source for text that follows. The true author is more of a force than a figure, some component of the "great blackness in which all names have their source … the numberless verses of an infinite scripture" . After a short reflection on the inherent horror of tales and telling, he collectivizes his sense of who is responsible for the darkness bubbling up from every instance of speech, turning the declaration "everyone needs a name. Everyone must

be called something" into the question, "what can we say is the name of everyone"? The final

sentence of the introduction, "this is our voice", blurs the distinction between author, reader,

narrator, and character in the practice of horror, and begins to postulate a theoretical

underpinning to Ligotti's sense of horror *itself* as a challenge to value structures which ostensibly

stabilize and order the world. While Ligotti seems to content to scorn even *life itself* as

valueless, the cognition and consciousness that facilitate rumination on the sublime cannot be

fully unsituated from history, biology, ideology or any of their other developmental

environments. Ligotti's interest in the problems afforded to being by the conditions of its own

contemplation insinuates his horror into a metaphysical discourse.

Ligotti advances his challenge to reason in the shadow of a surge of aesthetic and

philosophical interest in *objects,* indebted at least to Robbe-Grillet's project and its structuralist

responses. Similar strains of thought, aiming to make a break from the machinery of hegemonic

ideology, have found more contemporary coherence in the philosophical efforts falling under the

banners of *anti-correlationism*, *speculative realism*, and *object-orientation*. Volumes of output

from these positions have been devoted to dissecting what objects can *do* and what can *be done*

to them, but Graham Harman, who is foundational to both object-oriented philosophy and to the

reconsideration of Lovecraft as a figure deserving of rigorous scholarly interest, makes a

contribution most relevant to the project at hand. Harman asserts that "philosophy deals with

tension between real objects (which forever withdraw from view) and their accessible surfaces

(which do not)" (89). Ligotti takes as a starting point this state of perspectivally-oriented object

relations and uses it to grapple with the abyss, treating his sublime as an object that *always* and

only withdraws. As the sublime object actively recedes, withholds, or consumes, the

traditionally agentive subject is rendered passive, stripped of the capacity to forge meaning

through action. Considering withdrawal as a state of relation between one object and another helps read Ligotti's various characterizations of sublime space (blackness, the void, meaninglessness, the outside) as something substantially different than a bigger, less comprehensible Lovecraftian monster. It would be easy to critique scholarly readings of Ligotti by simply acknowledging that there is certainly no evidence that the universe hides a malevolent, agential nothingness which is eager to suck all of humanity into its gaping maw. Rather, and still echoing Lovecraft, the danger for Ligotti resides in the process of investigation. As both his fiction and nonfiction make clear, however, the author is not interested in (and perhaps feels the impossibility of) shielding his characters, his work, or himself from this inherent danger: it is an intractable quality of literature.

It is tempting to turn to Ligotti's most prominent work of nonfiction, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*, for insight into the speculation that underpins much of his fiction and the discursive environment in which it resides. Although *Conspiracy* is in many respects an attempt to historicize and contextualize the lineage of pessimism in which Ligotti situates himself, it is more useful to examine the text in light of his larger generic fluidity. Most obviously, the title recalls the investigatory efforts of the protagonist of "The Shadow, the Darkness", but one cannot simply position that character as a fictionalization of Ligotti or *Conspiracy* as some sort of metafictional extension of the story. Rather, this relationship gestures towards Ligotti's "working through" his speculative territory in a manner that recalls David Carroll's approach. Like Bataille's efforts which fracture and recombine as prose, poetry, fiction, and extrageneric fragments, Ligotti's nonfiction is writing his pessimism and writing about his pessimism in equal measure. Eugene Thacker surmises that "Ligotti has pushed the boundaries of horror fiction to the limit, where the next step would be to abandon the fictional

elements altogether, dispensing with narrative, character, and plot, in favor of the *ideas* of horror fiction" (*Tentacles Longer than Night* 159). By shedding the narrative trappings that signify a fiction at work, Ligotti is really acknowledging the fluidity with which he can move from one narrative to another along the logical consistency between a text and the reality in which it is contained. Ligotti's reflections on his philosophical precedents, the question of overpopulation, and the universal indifference that characterizes the terror at the heart of his work all give way to the scenes of puppets and empty towns that populate his books. Replacing the footnotes that would normally accompany this variety of text, a reader finds digressions to the sort of mad poetry that might fill one of his oft-referenced forbidden tomes. When Ligotti writes that "the supernatural has cleaved to you from the beginning, working its oddities into your life … to bring you to its horror" (223) it reads as inherently self-descriptive. Again, the traditional narrative roles are of little use; the direction of the address and the identities of utterer and audience do not hold under scrutiny. As in Ballard's work, the texts grate against one another, working into something like a body and dissolving again: the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction have become unimportant. Any utility prompted by Ligotti's work must acknowledge and energize the relentless negation and treat it as an operating system. All text, at one point or another, participates in the efforts to light the darkness. Rather than peer and hope that one will see beyond, one must wait for the moment when the sublime withdraws and they clatter against one another in a maddening racket before echoing into nothing.

Conclusion

At the risk of reducing critical orientations that have complexity, breadth, and inner-contention, there seem to be two general responses to a problematized humanism. One seeks, broadly speaking, to instill upon excluded categories a participatory and legitimate role in the humanist project. This expansion of authorized subjecthood to welcome the traditionally marginalized into its fold would capitalize on the liberatory thrust that has propelled its best qualities. The other aims more fundamentally at the structure of the legacy, citing the insanity of fascism and the tyrannical schematics of late capitalism, for example, as the logical developments of agential reason rather than its perversions. This is a much more dour assessment of the sense, best characterized by Elisabeth Anker in "The Liberalism of Horror", that "liberal society's most central political ideals -equality, freedom, consent, collective authorization of power -can be coupled to, and mobilized by, monstrous violence, coercion, demonization, imperialism, and fear" (823). My approach to Robbe-Grillet, Ballard, and Ligotti is grounded in the latter perspective due at least in part to my own academic background, the prejudices and strategies of the authors themselves, and the textual-formalist vector which naturally leads to structural considerations. That said, the insistent sense of indistinction that has permeated this research and writing also problematizes the binary distinguishing between the two larger approaches. While no effort could hope to account for every useful critical contribution to the discourse in which it is engaged, it would be remiss to ignore important work that speaks to gaps in my own.

Carelessly and implicitly valorizing dehumanization would be callous in a historical and contemporary social situation that has seen its vicious application used to enforce racial, gendered, national, religious, and other categories. Robbe-Grillet and Ballard's relentless treatment of women with spectacular violence and Ligotti's debt to Lovecraft's menacing darkness, entangled as it is with his racism, should not be the subject of criticism which only seeks to explain these difficulties away. While (for instance) metatextual readings of the feminine body in Robbe-Grillet's work *can* be productive and useful, any effort that engages with the boundaries of the human must take into account how they are established and revised. Lack of attention to the categorical asymmetricality of the activities of exclusion from humanism runs the risk of enacting what Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora designate as *surrogate humanism*: a posthuman approach that ignores the elaboration of historically situated discourses of humanization and dehumanization in its novel treatment of a potential techno-subject agent. Even as this flawed posthumanism promises to merge *the human* into a single category, distinguished only in its opposition to *the machine*, these categories "are replicated in emergent modes of work, violence, and economies of desire" ("Surrogate Humanism"). Against this, the authors chart various *unthinkings* of the human construct from decolonizing and feminist scholarship of science and technology. While neither Robbe-Grillet, Ballard, nor Ligotti offer any specific potential site that promises to overcome the limitations of humanistic models, the flaws in their systemic constructions are of great import to my sense of their promise. Particularly with Ballard, who is so eagerly reflective of institutional dysfunction, care is required to avoid buttressing the hierarchies of exploitation and reinforcing the logics of domination through their reinscription in critical systems.

The enduring tension at work across my engagement with all three authors is the navigation between the activity of systemic relations in imperfect friction with one another and the weight of resignation that nags at any serious quarrel with meaning. Especially difficult in regards to Ligotti, who embraces futility explicitly, the desertion of ontological security at work in and required by approaches to these authors' texts prompts a certain hopelessness. Too, their demonstrations of the entanglement of formal structures and their institutional sources relies on appropriation of suffering, misery, and emptiness to be cannibalized, given form, and reflected. As with Ligotti's sublime outside, recursive approaches to reading an ethics or praxis into these texts are both seductive and maddening. The systems rarely do what one wants them to do, and one's conditioning in the rational models that he or she seeks to undermine implicitly self-directs this antagonism. Still, the relational model afforded to this reading by the spatial and systemic considerations of each author recalls the occupant of Robbe-Grillet and Johns' gallery space at the first site of *The Target*. The frustrations and failures work back into the shifting proximal relations between the objects comprising the space to produce unforeseen and unexpected meaning, which Ben Stoltzfus describes as "think[ing] concretely about abstractions and abstractly about objects (76)." Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's sense of the assemblage is the guiding line of thought that helps account for how multifarious, contradictory directive impulses can "produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture" (3). While it does not indicate a programmatic ethics, many of which have emerged from dominant humanist models, they characterize the book (and by way of this relation, its reader) as "a multiplicity—but we don't know yet what the multiple entails" (4). Rather than entertain the humanist fantasy that our perceptive faculties conflate an ability to predict the future, one can turn to the logics by which the future is produced. In their moments

of fracture, the sublime reverberations of counter-systems in friction cleave through expectation and convention, luring towards the unknown.

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