

Sveučilište u Zagrebu

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IMAGE INC: POPULARNA VIZUALNOST I POSTMODERNI AMERIKI ROMAN

IMAGE INC: POPULAR VISUALITY AND THE POSTMODERN AMERICAN NOVEL

Magistarski rad

Zagreb, 2005.

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## IMAGE INCORPORATED: AN INTRODUCTION

### 1980s (It Was a Very Good Year)

This text is an attempt to explore the relations between popular visibility and the postmodern American novel. The novels I work with are Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and Douglas Coupland's *Generation X*. What these novels have in common is the obvious fact of their saturation with images and visual technologies from contemporary popular culture. However, these images and technologies are not just random, innocent or disinterested, elements in the narrative: they are symptoms of a pervasive visual culture that these novels are immersed in and respond to. This active visual field is deeply imbricated in the power relations constitutive of the American culture of the eighties – this fact is crucial for my reading of these texts. The most visible instance of the close involvement of the (cultural) image and (political) power is the figure of president Ronald Reagan. Reagan's acting background is never left out of critical accounts of his presidency (1981-1989); indeed, his career in the film and television industry is usually referred to as the key to his otherwise dubious political success.<sup>1</sup> Examples abound: Robert Dallek cites contemporary media sources that refer to Reagan as "America's first television president" and "the first true Prop President, one whose real self is the image on the TV screen and whose shadow self is the

man in the White House" (12). Jimmy Carter's media adviser Gerald Rafshoon reportedly said that Reagan was "not a great actor, but he knows how to play sincere people ... If you play sincere people in 59 roles, its' got to rub off" (Feldman, L. 1997: 808). J. K. Smith similarly asserts that Reagan's success was primarily based on rhetorical effects: "Ronald Reagan may have been rhetorically successful because he was able to connect with so many members of the electorate through the filmic *persona* he had developed in 30 years of filmmaking" (821, emphasis in original). Douglas Kellner, in a an extensive analysis of "Reaganite Entertainment," concludes that "Reagan's own mindset was molded by his Hollywood and network television experience, and he translated this mindset into a political vision [...] Reagan's Manichaeic view of the world thus reflected the mythologies of Hollywood genre films [...] as well as television entertainment molded on this format" (141). In numerous speeches that included references to movies and movie-stars, Reagan showed that this employment of American film and TV heritage for political goals was not incidental. Speaking at the All-Star Tribute to Ronald "Dutch" Reagan in Burbank, California in 1985, Reagan, for the purpose of entertainment, formed a Hollywood government:

You know, when I first started in my present job, I'd sometimes put together in my mind my own dream Cabinet – you know, John Wayne as Secretary of State – [laughter] – Clint Eastwood at Defense – [laughter] – Jack Benny as Secretary of Treasury – [laughter] – Groucho Marx at Education. [Laughter] But even

Presidents can't have everything, except tonight; tonight, all of you here, well, you've really made my day. (Reagan 1985)

Such mixing of fact and fiction, which according to Reagan's critics was not always intended (cf. Kellner, and especially Rogin 1987), was also a crucial element in the Reagan assassination attempt. Notoriously, the would-be assassin John Hinckley was inspired by Martin Scorsese's *Taxi-Driver* and completely unable to distinguish between the film and reality when shooting Reagan in 1981. (Hinckley was later found not guilty by reason of insanity.) The cited examples show that the figure of Ronald Reagan embodies several important aspects of contemporary US culture: as a subject, he is constituted by visual culture – his actions are inseparable from his participation in the TV and film industry. Moreover, he strategically uses the same visual culture as a (rhetorical) means for sustaining his political power. Naturally, such strategies rely on an audience (or, in political terms, a body of voters) that will recognize them. In other words, the thoroughly visually mediated character of the Reagan presidency depends on an audience that is already itself immersed in the same visual culture through which the political power is effected.

It is thus highly significant in this context that the figure of the actor-president appears in two out of three novels under discussion. In *Vineland*, Reagan's role is the most active, since his budget cuts set the narrative in motion. In *White Noise* we hear an echo of Reagan's All-Stars speech when he appears in a tabloid alongside John Wayne, who will

"help [him] frame U. S. foreign policy." (DeLillo 1999: 146) In *Generation X* Reagan is conspicuously absent, but, as we will see, the active principles of his political heritage are very much present. Taking Reagan, the actor-turned-president as the high point of a spectacular, aestheticized politics, these novels, to put it very simply, signal a strategic manipulation of facts and fictions that has quite literally become the *governing* principle of contemporary US political life. In other words, these novels register what Michael Rogin formulates as "a shift in American politics from appeals to history (however mythicized) to the more immediate power of the screen." (1987: xviii) This criticism rests on the assumption that in a hypermediated, information-saturated environment ignoring the ubiquitous media constructions of social reality leads to straightforward political manipulation. The foregrounding of the active role of the visual media in these processes becomes thus in itself a critical move.

## **Paramount Pictures**

The problems exposed so far clearly suggest the complexity of a historically informed study of relations between visuality and the novel: the stakes are high, the flow of elements seems chaotic, and it is easy to get both distracted and discouraged. What contributes to a sense of dizziness is the accumulating variety of approaches to visuality, which both show and

increase its importance. Through its use as a metaphor for a number of theoretical problems, visuality has come to carry a huge load of different and complex meanings. Vision is, and this does not need much elaboration, a culturally privileged mode of knowing; our civilization rests on an "epistemology of vision" – to see means to know (cf. Simmons 44). But, there is a spatial play of surface and depth that complicates the too easy metaphorical equation: the opposition of superficial appearance (which is false) and deep truth (which lies "beyond or beneath the surface of the text", Eco 30). According to Eco, this "hermetic tradition", in which interpretation is an indefinite process, is as present in contemporary criticism as in the apocryphal *Corpus Hermeticum*. I will, however, limit my interpretations of popular visuality in these novels to the questions that follow from these general observations on the role of visuality in contemporary culture and cultural theory:

[1] Visuality, related to contemporary technology and media, is the current cultural dominant. This point includes the problems of an economy of the image: its production, manipulation, distribution and, eventually, domination to which the novels under discussion respond.

[2] Visuality is involved in the questions of power and subjectivity. In the psychoanalytic and Foucauldian tradition: 'to be' means 'to be seen', but also 'to be watched' – the double logic of visuality includes socializing/publicizing and controlling as two aspects of the same formative process.

One might ask why the term *popular* visuality. The adjective could seem superfluous, since to analyze different forms of visuality (either in film, or in literary texts)

means to enter into a discussion of a number of issues predetermined by existing theories. Yet, the term 'popular' does help to roughly demarcate one aspect of the approach. 'Popular visuality' is a shorthand term for 'visual forms of popular culture'. What I have in mind here is the cultural sphere constituted by visual technologies, primarily television and film (not excluding photography and other contemporary visual media).

The existing critical literature usually treats the problem of visuality in these novels in the context of popular culture. Film and TV are thus seen primarily as popular cultural phenomena. This approach is useful in that it situates literary production in a wider cultural and economic framework. However, such readings are rarely able to relate the (important) historical context to the specificities of individual texts. I consider it possible and welcome to reread these visually saturated novels after the various experiences of popular culture studies. By qualifying visuality as "popular," I want to emphasize my interest in the material historical conditions of the production of these novel. However, I intend to relate these conditions to the productive features of the literary texts themselves. To put it another way, my concern in this analysis is also with how these visually saturated texts register the emergence of a particular subjectivity and encourage specific subjects positions.

This idea assumes that the dominance of the visual media in the US culture of the Reagan era that these novels reflect on, affects human condition in significant ways. The general relevance of the the media space for the constitution of subjectivity is postulated in McLuhan's classical study of "extensions of man," where he claims that "Cervantes had lived



in a world in which print was as new as movies are in the West, and it seemed obvious to him that print, like the images now on the screen, had usurped the real world." (304) Like McLuhan's Cervantes, the novels under discussion react to the visual usurpation of reality by using, interpreting and incorporating the omnipresent and powerful image. As W. J. T. Mitchell puts it, "The difference between a culture of reading and a culture of spectatorship [...] is not *only* a formal issue (though it is certainly that); it has implications for the very forms that sociability and subjectivity take, for the kinds of individuals and institutions formed by a culture." (Mitchell 1994: 3) The problem of relation between the visually dominated cultural environment and subjectivity, the two general points I referred to earlier, is central for my reading of these texts. In this respect, I find the culturally informed psychoanalytic approach of Kaja Silverman's *The Threshold of the Visible World* to be highly relevant for any treatment of visuality, be it in visual or verbal texts. Silverman summarizes the problematic exposed so far when stating that

[w]hat is specific to our epoch is not the specular foundation of subjectivity and the world, but rather the terms of that foundation – the logic of the images through which we figure objects and are in turn figured, and the value conferred upon those images through the larger organization of the visual field. (195)

In other words, while acknowledging (and in readings that will follow resorting to) this

perspective, I want also to stress the cultural aspect of the problem of visibility: the present logic of the images in an image-oversaturated (American) popular culture.

This popular culture is sometimes still casually referred to as one made 'for the people by the people'. Today, however, it is almost exclusively a culture 'made for the people' but not by themselves, since, as Zygmunt Bauman writes, "postmodern society engages its members primarily in their capacity as consumers rather than producers" (2000: 76). The logic of visibility in the present context is governed by a corporate and profit-driven media industry that is mainly seen as attempting to re/produce "the positions of the dominant hegemonic political forces" (Kellner 47). But, even in Bauman's pessimistically inclined phrasing, a tension between "the society that engages" and "its members" is still visible, and this tension opens up a fissure, a space however potential and minute, for popular engagement in social activities. In respect to a wider historical setting, this text is a continuous glance back at Stuart Hall's observation that

Popular culture carries that affirmative ring because of the prominence of the word 'popular'. [...] Hence, it links with what Mikhail Bakhtin calls 'the vulgar' - the popular, the informal, the underside, the grotesque. That is why it has always been counterpoised to elite or high culture, and is thus a site of alternative traditions. And that is why the dominant tradition has always been deeply suspicious of it, quite rightly. They suspect that they are about to be overtaken by

what Bakhtin calls 'the carnivalesque. [...] However, as popular culture has historically become the dominant form of global culture, so it is at the same time the scene, par excellence, of commodification, of the industries where culture enters directly into the circuits of a dominant ideology -- the circuits of power and capital. (469)

The involvement of Pynchon's, DeLillo's and Coupland's novels in the visual forms of popular culture is thus a risky enterprise: the popular culture they incorporate in their texts always bears a trace of the conditions of its production – it is always an industrial capitalist commodity – but it also carries a utopian hope of intervention in the "circuits of dominant ideology." As we will see, these novels do indeed offer different possibilities, modalities and degrees of critical involvement.

The suggested ambivalence in the novels' relation to popular visuality could be formulated in Linda Hutcheon's terms: since these are postmodern novels, they are involved in a "complicitous critique" of their subject matters (cf. Hutcheon 3). This view rests on Hutcheon's contention that "[p]ostmodernism's distinctive character lies in this kind of wholesale 'nudging' commitment to doubleness, or duplicity." (1) This probably does describe postmodern works, but leaves the question of how they work yet to be explained. Of course, postmodernism is a notoriously slippery term to handle, which makes its use as an efficient analytical term almost unattainable; thus, I would like to restrain from giving precise

definitions and focus instead on a working circumscription of various meanings of postmodernism that are relevant for my analysis.

I would like to use the term primarily as an attribute describing the late twentieth century Western/US society and culture. As Stuart Hall noted in his 1986 interview "On postmodernism and articulation," postmodernism is "precisely about American culture" (131), "it *is* about how the world dreams itself to be 'American'", and "is irrevocably Euro- or western-centric in its whole episteme" (132, emphasis in original). Apart from this geopolitical limitation, two related elements are particularly important for my use of the term. The first one is the centrality of consumption in the discussion of the present US culture. In an extensive overview of the characteristics of what they call "Millennial Capitalism", Comaroff and Comaroff claim that "[c]onsumption, in its ideological guise -- as 'consumerism' -- refers to a material sensibility actively cultivated, for the common good, by Western states and commercial interests, particularly since World War II" (293). This sensibility-cum-ideology has, not surprisingly, become "prime mover" in theory, too:

Increasingly, it [consumption] is the factor, the principle, held to determine definitions of value, the construction of identities, and even the shape of the global ecumene. As such, tellingly, it is the invisible hand, or the Gucci-gloved fist, that animates the political impulses, the material imperatives, and the social forms of the Second Coming of Capitalism--of capitalism in its neoliberal, global

manifestation. (293)

The other element rests exactly on the immateriality of that "invisible" animating hand, and has an economic as well as cultural facet: it is the evasiveness and inaccessibility of contemporary power. In the present US economic context, this reflects the removal of production literally out of sight, to the so called underdeveloped countries (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff, Bauman 1998 and 2000. As we will see, in DeLillo's *White Noise* these countries are constantly reappearing on television as sites not of production, but catastrophe.) In the field of cultural production, this development is paralleled by a total supremacy of electronic and, I would like to stress, visual media. "Power can move with the speed of electronic signal", observes Bauman; it has become "truly exterritorial" and "*post-Panoptical*" (2000: 10-11, emphasis in original). As the numerous analyses of the Reagan presidency point out, American eighties were marked by a growing concern for the consequences of what some perceived as a dangerously increasing power of the visual, manifested most visibly precisely in the media-driven politics of the actor-president.

This geopolitical and economical focus allows us to read these novels as texts produced by a specific culture. It is certainly not insignificant that this culture is itself, as the visual media *within* it, a globally dominant one. Moreover, the novels' under discussion, all written by white middle-class men, seem not to fit the current critical trend of interest for marginalized subjects, primarily in terms of race, gender and ethnicity. It is certainly true that

postmodernism is, as Zygmunt Bauman claims, only "one of many possible accounts of postmodern reality," one that "leaves unaccounted for and unarticulated other experiences, which are also an integral part of the postmodern scene." (1998: 101) Of course, this does not make the reading of high postmodernist texts irrelevant. In different ways, these texts show the mechanisms of constitution of specific subjects and exclusion of others at work.

### **Left to Write**

In a thus roughly delimited postmodern situation, in which consumerism and the workings of power meet on the common ground of popular visibility, it might be useful to repeat Genette's question formulated in 1964, a year in which the infamous mass culture was already well underway to consume the complete cultural landscape, as some lamented: "How will literature survive the development of other media of communication?" (22) By now, statements such as that "the contemporary novel survives as a residual form in a mass-cultural environment dominated by television, film, radio, and advertising" (Simmons 84) seem mere common sense. The US visual culture is dominated by a ceaseless – supposedly both ecstatic and numbing, potentially liberating and ever controlling – drift of images which reflect both the unlimited range of compulsory consumer choices and the overwhelming appropriating power of late capitalist society.

It seems that the novel, as a residual cultural form, can survive in the new media ecology and position itself as a reliable critical narrative (meaning more reliable than others, such as popular cultural narratives of film and TV), but it must contest the discursive and political power of the visual media, which, as we will see, these novels predominantly represent as agents of an oppressive system. However, popular visibility is in these texts found not only as a theme, but also as a force shaping the narrative – and this is, so to speak, the critical point of their critical interference. To quote Simmons once again, "[a]s the novel has become immersed in and partially constituted by the society of the spectacle, it has itself come increasingly to draw on the energies of spectacular performance" (85). In other words, not only that the novel rather unproblematically survives in a visual culture, but also visibility survives – or, perhaps, it is appropriated – in the novel.

We might readily assert that in resisting the appropriating powers of the visual culture, novel strikes back by appropriating visibility. But such claim does not account for the actual dynamics of these texts; for that we will have to turn to close readings and see how the novel constructs the position of its reader and differentiates it, say, from the position of a TV-viewer. (Also, it would be interesting to look to the institutional side of these discursive practices: the forces of academia, media and publishing industry and the market. This aspect, however, lies outside of the scope of this text.)

The critical impulses of these three novels could perhaps most easily be detected in dissatisfaction they express with contemporary US society and the active critique they

embark on in different attempts at undermining the existing configuration of power. Since these novels are themselves an integral part of the capitalist system of mass production and consumption, and their strategies by necessity framed by the social system they target, the critical spaces they open up for their reader's are obviously not able to provide a material basis for social change. However, these spaces or positions do, in my view, have a value in the active reconfiguration of the reader's perception and, consequently, the wider social context. This "effect" of texts on the subject is of course not limited only to these, but all representational practices constituting a certain culture – it is precisely in this fact that the justification for the necessity of such active representational enterprises can be located. It is not my intention here to add to the extensive debate on the possibility of a critical cultural practice in the era of postmodernism.<sup>2</sup> However, that a critical tendency exists is in my opinion beyond dispute.

I am aware that after this introduction many issues will be left open. It was my intention to give here basic historical, theoretical and thematic coordinates for the analyses that follow. If these postmodern novels offers certain politics of visibility, they can do so only because they find themselves in-the-middle-of, entangled (or interested) in all the problems that popular visibility – in this case the one constituting American culture of the 1980s – brings with itself (Hall's succinct "circuits of power and capital"). These problems are, again, reflected in the novels both thematically (as subject of critique) and structurally (directing



narrative in significant ways). The first chapter of this paper, *Will Not Be Televised*, deals with Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* and its take on contemporary visuality as well as its historical alternatives. The chapter centers on how the novel uses the everyday TV-viewing experience of its readers to construct subject positions that (can) subvert it and open up a critical space for active engagement with a visually conceptualized power. Since this reading relies on a particular account of the process of identification, the chapter also provides for an initial theoretical framework for such a reading of the novel form. The second chapter, *Seeing Others*, draws further on the thus posited theoretical model. It is a reading of Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, a novel that dwells on the ethical responsibility of the act of looking directed towards various others. DeLillo's novel shows how the visual media intervene in and complicate the relationship between the subject and the other. The third chapter, *All is Pretty*, focuses on Douglas Coupland's *Generation X*. I read this text primarily in terms of its involvement with the visual forms of popular culture and the strategies the novel employs in an attempt to elude the economic and cultural principles defining the historical moment. This is, however, just a provisional delimitation of main topics of my readings. History and memory, identity construction, power, commodification and possibilities of opposition – all of these inescapably remain in sight of these texts, be it only, paraphrasing Pynchon, at the corner of their vision.

## WILL NOT BE TELEVISED

Ronald Reagan, the actor? Then who's vice president, Jerry Lewis?

-- *Back to the Future* (1985)

### Dis/Apearances

I would like to begin this analysis of Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* by looking at the opposition between "appearance" and "reality". This opposition is often used both in theoretical and fictional texts to delimit the epistemological field in which the visual, or image, functions as a peculiar intermediary. The act of visual mediation is in such instances perceived as having crucial consequences for the construction of specific subjectivity (as in Baudrillard's reading of American culture) and for the relation to history (in Jameson's *Postmodernism*). As my reading will show, both of these problems are significant for Thomas Pynchon's visual conceptualization of power in *Vineland*.

In the discussion of the contemporary interplay of appearance and reality it is difficult to avoid the mention of two philosophers, Plato and Baudrillard, who mark a possible departure point and a potential end. What separates them is a historical development

of a technological/media culture that is visually oriented and literally image-saturated. This development results both in a radical critique of the visual culture and its celebration. The critics, as Simmons notes, show a concern

over the possibility that mass cultural images have robbed us of any genuine understanding of history and the self. The terms in which the problem is stated are themselves the product of an epistemology of vision, inherited from the Western philosophical tradition, that makes vision the primary analogue for knowledge and thus makes the image a metonym for all forms of information and communication. With the unprecedented power of today's mass media, the pressure of this metonymic substitution is too great for the image to bear. The much touted 'crisis of representation' said to characterize the postmodern condition is the result of making traditional epistemological demands of images at a time when the nature of the image has been transformed by the technologies of the mass media and the corporate structures of late capitalism. (1997: 44-45)

The use of the appearance/reality opposition that has served in philosophy as the ultimate metaphor for the possibility of knowledge has, due to the technologically induced development of contemporary visual culture, become a cultural obsession. Baudrillard's example shows that the two sides of cultural analysis can coexist, although perhaps uneasily,

in a desperate and apocalyptic account of such a condition. It was during the Reagan era, in 1986, that Jean Baudrillard published his celebratory accusation of the American way of life in which he discovers America as "perfect simulacrum" (1996: 28), a "cinematic country" (56), where "everything is destined to reappear as simulation" (32). When attempting to look at "America" from a political angle, Baudrillard is met by Reagan's smile, "the smile of advertising" (34). Baudrillard concludes that America is a place where "image alone counts" (109). The opposition between a false appearance and a deeper meaning (truth) has, in Baudrillard's reading of American culture, been eliminated and turned into a position of "surface intensity and deeper meaninglessness" (37). This position, which corresponds to the historical period of postmodernity, is significantly politically disinterested. In Jameson's influential study of postmodernism the loss of the political is too lamented by way of the same opposition. Discussing the "depth models [...] repudiated in contemporary theory," he foregrounds the erasure of "the dialectical [model] of essence and appearance (along with a whole range of concepts of ideology or false consciousness which tend to accompany it)" (1991: 12). Both theorists identify a temporal dimension to this spatial development (or perhaps devolution): namely, the ahistorical character of postmodern culture. While Baudrillard sees it mostly as indifference towards the future (because for him America is utopia achieved), for Jameson the problem is in an indifferent "historicism." He relates it directly to the lack of political vision, claiming that "the retrospective dimension indispensable to any vital reorientation of our collective future – has meanwhile itself become

a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum" (1991: 18). In both cases, the postmodern is equated with an image-induced apolitical and ahistorical apathy.

The same opposition is a persistent motif in postmodern fiction, and Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990) is no exception; although, as we shall see, it uses it to contest the popular visual media and counter the dominant tendencies depicted by Baudrillard and Jameson by both recreating alternative histories and offering alternative subject positions for its readers. Alternative histories are a constant theme in Pynchon's fictions: the WASTE postal system in *The Crying of Lot 49* and The Counterforce in *Gravity's Rainbow* both fall into this category. However, *Vineland* is different from Pynchon's earlier work in that it locates resistance to the dominant order wholly on the American ground and, more importantly, gives it an all-American history. Introducing the figure of Ronald Reagan as one of the clearly negative characters, the novel is also Pynchon's most direct political assault on Reaganite conservative hegemony of the 1980s. In this criticism, the medium of television has an especially important position.

Significantly, one of the central scenes in the novel, that of Zoyd's transfenestration, deals with a televised event, or a pseudo-event. But even before that scene, the text offers us a long sequence of false appearances. The main character, Zoyd Wheeler, wakes up one morning in 1984 and starts preparing for his annual televised insane act. All introductory details that lead to the event are characterized by a persistent interplay between the misleading surface image and the real thing beneath. The appearance/reality opposition

discloses itself in numerous (and humorous) examples:

Zoyd, choosing a dress "that would look good on television" (4) dresses up as a woman; the Log Jam does not look like it used or is supposed to look. There, Zoyd is approached by a man: they are mutually identified by their appearance (6, "from your fashion message I can tell," the man says); people in the bar think Zoyd is Cheryl; and when things go wrong Zoyd is "trying to maintain a quickly fading image of dangerousness. [...] But underneath, we're still just country fellas," says the bar owner, "From the looks of your parking lot, the country must be Germany," Zoyd replies (7).

Looks, images, appearances – visual notions dominate the opening pages of *Vineland*, and, blurring the boundary between appearance and reality, they convey a sense of instability: the value of reality in the novel is thus from the beginning suggested to be indeterminate. The same mechanism is present throughout the text; both epistemological and ontological instability are conceptualized in visual terms<sup>3</sup>. From the start, *Vineland* insists on a radical discrepancy between image and reality, suggesting that the former is inherently unable to adequately signify or stand for its referent. The responsibility for this indeterminacy, the examples show, lies in the field of the visual; and the scene that these passages are preparing us for will further elaborate on this problem by introducing in the line of action a concrete visual apparatus, television, and showing its critical involvement in the constitution of subjectivity. In *Vineland*, a novel that is saturated with popular visual images, where the interplay of fiction and reality is a narrative constant, this mechanism of visually

related instability is raised from a metanarrative device to the level of historiographic method; it becomes a way of relating the ultimately "spectacular" and visually mediated historical context of the US eighties. In other words, *Vineland's* mixing of fiction and reality (everyone acts like TV/film characters) and self-conscious acknowledging of its own fictional status (in many instances the text takes as its models popular films and TV series) are grounded in popular visibility. Since this is a historiographic novel, the same mechanism speaks of the history the novel takes as its subject: the US 1980s, a time dominated by an overflow of electronic images, not the least images of the actor-president.

Central for this aspect of the novel is a real/historical blurring of reality and fiction and its political consequences. It is significant in this context that *Vineland's* access to the past depends on a close connection with film. In the context of the history of the leftist movements of the 40s and 50s this connection is thematic: Frenesi's parents are involved in the conflicts of the Hollywood labor unions. In the context of the history of resistance in the 60s, the connection is also structural: these years are presented primarily through the images found in the archive of Frenesi's film group, the 24fps. A fictional link between these two periods is Frenesi, the revolutionary film-maker; but a historical link is present, too. Ronald Reagan is in *Vineland* mentioned both as a figure involved in the notorious Hollywood blacklisting of 1947 and the figure serving as president of the United States in 1984. The character of Ronald Reagan thus connects the two histories, and also functions as a point of intersection between film and politics, or image and power – the two issues that are central to

Pynchon's *Vineland*.

Obviously, the "image" that is the target of the novel's critique is not an abstract concept, but a historically, technologically and ideologically specific type of discourse, that has earlier been termed "popular visuality." Pynchon's use of visuality as a destabilizing force, I would suggest, also aims at raising the novel's authority in the cultural field dominated by visual media. As we shall see, this implied discrediting of the visual media is matched in the novel by an explicit critique of television, and an ambiguous relation to film.

### **Will Not Be Televised**

With its critique of television, *Vineland* enters the discussion of the ideological effects of the medium on its audiences. This discussion is by no means limited to theoretical debates only: there is a long tradition of criticizing television in US culture. According to Andrew Ross, this tradition seems to be as American as the proverbial apple pie, and its inception can be traced back to the (then) cool medium's first steps in the black and white world of the Cold War. Ross outlines this tradition in his study of the change in intellectual attitudes towards popular culture, where he shows how TV enters the early debates about mass culture as "the latest unredeemable object," or "the new bad object" (1989: 104-105). Such negative or low cultural status of television did not remain unquestioned, but it did significantly mark many



future debates. In her article "Television in the Family Circle: The Popular Reception of a New Medium," where she is analyzing popular magazines and print advertisements, Lynn Spigel claims that, in the fifties, media discourses on television "were organized around ideas of family harmony and discord" (1990: 74). According to Spigel, these popular discourses that constructed the new cultural form saw television as a contradictory element associated both with integration and disintegration of this social unit. While refusing to resolve this contradiction in favor of a single conclusion, Spigel's text suggests that the tension itself works to advance (and is supported by) a basically consumerist culture: the simultaneous splitting and rebuilding of the family unit contributes to the construction of a greater variety of consumer-positions (or marketing niches; such as "family," "parents," "children," "dad," "wife" etc.). Spigel starts her argument with a telling example: in a scene from the *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) the static of the TV set "is heightening the sense of family discord" (73). While Spigel's stress is on TV's status as an influence on family relations, the reading of this scene can easily slip into a critical take on the emerging popular medium from the part of a well-established one, Hollywood film. In this case, the stress seems to be on the medium's effect of disintegration.

A 1980s example (to get to the historical period under discussion) uses similar rhetoric, but now – matching television's already well-established position of cultural authority – with a more pronounced critical strain. In Tobe Hooper's and Steven Spielberg's horror *Poltergeist* (1982), the medium through which evil ghosts infiltrate into and break

apart a model yuppie family by kidnapping their daughter is a TV set. Accordingly, the movie ends with the family happily reunited and the television set thrown out of their new home.<sup>4</sup> The critique of TV "in the family circle" can be related to a wider critique of the US socio-economic system, although the connection requires a certain effort on the part of the viewer: the family house, as well as the whole neighborhood, is built by the firm that the father works for on an old Native American graveyard. Thus the appearance of "evil" ghosts is justified by the violation of a natural/traditional order by the forces of a ruthless entrepreneurial spirit characteristic of the new Reagan economy. However, thus laid out argument is not further developed: we see the father throwing out the TV set, but not quitting his job at the construction firm. Blaming TV for the family's misfortune directs critical attention in a wrong direction. It is significant that ghosts use the TV as a communication channel for their mischiefs only after the end of the official program, which is itself presumably harmless and is left (unlike the family ideal) uninterrupted. Obviously, the movie abstracts the medium of TV from its content, the cultural context in which it functions, and leaves the scaffolding of the seemingly demonized economic principles only partially exposed, but essentially intact. This critique of TV hence falls short, since it has been severed from the social context; and the ghosts, which in such a problematic situation cannot but occupy an ambivalent position, are better understood not as forces of evil, but of the carnivalesque. Following Bakhtin's classical formulation, the host of ghosts in *Poltergeist* can be seen as a "carnavalesque crowd" that is "outside of and contrary to all existing forms of the

coercive socioeconomic and political organization" (Bakhtin 1968: 255). The ghosts are indeed set into action to oppose the specific socioeconomic interests of the real-estate company that desecrates the Native American burial ground. The horror they produce is merely a matter of special effects – their meaning (or, in the movie's terms, the root of a dubious "evil") is in their association with the repressed, literally underground forces that oppose the dominant system, and not in their hijacking of TV as a communication medium. It seems that the film here relies on the mentioned critical tradition only to use TV as a cover for the other (economic) sources of familial trouble, thus trying to occlude a possibly more radical critique of the system. This is not the only moment in the film where the carnivalesque is virtually contained. When the official, scientific solution to the poltergeist problem fails, a psychic midget woman is brought to solve it. Eventually, she succeeds, but only under the strict supervision of the scientific team which films all her actions. The scientific camera eye significantly points in two directions: towards the ghosts (as a seeing mechanism) and towards the psychic (as a controlling mechanism). The two directions, in effect, turn out to be one: both the ghosts and the psychic come to occupy the same position in relation to the official forces of the dominant order. These are represented by the ghosts' and the psychic's opposites, the construction firm and the scientific team, respectively. Thus, the position of both ghosts and the psychic is one of unofficial truth, and has to be put under strict video surveillance of the official authorities. According to Bakhtin, such non-official aspects of the world, that the psychic and the ghosts stand for and that are under permanent

threat of official regulation, are a defining characteristic of carnival. Thus, in *Poltergeist*, we witness an attempt at silencing a critical potential that draws on the energies of the carnivalesque.

This is containment of the carnivalesque gains on significance if we relate it to the film's popular cultural status. The concept of carnival is a theoretical constant in the studies of popular culture, which typically assume a carnivalesque potential even for the culture that is distributed through what is traditionally viewed as the most manipulative – "ideological" in the radically negative sense of the word – medium: television.<sup>5</sup> The typical position is formulated by Fiske:

Carnival might not always be disruptive, but the elements of disruption are always there, it may not always be progressive or liberating, but the potential for progressiveness and liberation is always present. Even in the carefully licensed, *televisually* modified versions there are traces of the enormous vitality and energy of popular forces that survive defiantly and intransigently. (1994: 101, my emphasis)

In *Poltergeist*, the carnival does indeed take place with the help of television – that is why the carnevalized TV set has to be thrown out of the new family refuge.

The TV set similarly provides the background for the familial troubles in

*Vineland*, but here it functions as part of the rhetorical mechanism that effects a significant reversal in the subjects positions that the novel constructs for its readers. The above quotation from Fiske, in which several moments relevant for the discussion converge, may also serve as a rather appropriate description of Zoyd Wheeler's televised performance with which the novel opens. As part of a deal with a federal agent, Zoyd has to earn his mental disability check (i.e. his living) by annually acting insane and jumping (this year in drag) through a window; but, the event is organized, documented and broadcast by local TV stations. The ex-hippie drug (ab)user Zoyd is turned into a metaphor of the commodified and co-opted counterculture of the 1960s in the symbolically all too loaded year 1984, the year of Reagan's re-election. "Televisually modified versions" of the carnival do not seem to offer liberating possibilities. In fact, *Vineland's* critique of television is excessive and thorough, matching only – paradoxically – its relying on popular visibility as the virtually only source for the novel's vocabulary and imagery.

In the transfenestration scene, Zoyd is both mislead and misread by TV: not only that things around him are not what they should be, but the place that he chooses for his acting out of insanity is itself inappropriate. The appropriateness of place is decided by the presence of the media, which thus control the movements of one of the main characters. Later in the text we learn that Zoyd is actually hiding, trying to achieve some sort of autonomy from the repressive state, but the autonomy is achieved only under the terms of his regular appearance on TV: he can be left alone, but he can not disappear: he must remain visible.

Clearly, TV is in *Vineland* represented as the ultimate medium of surveillance. At the same time, the discourse that puts the subject into his place is exposed as a fiction: the TV audience in *Vineland* is not aware of the fact that the event is staged by the same medium which presents itself as faithfully representing it. The news anchor, intentionally misinterpreting the already staged scene, tells the viewers that the TV station was "alerted by a mystery caller" (14). What gives the readers of the novel access to the reality covered by the media is Pynchon's narrative, laying bare not (only) its own, but the unseen devices of television. This is achieved by showing us the position of a completely manipulated subject from his point of view. The focalizer in the transfenestration scene is Zoyd himself, and just before the jump he is looking through the window at the TV cameras pointed in his direction. The window acts as a screen, dividing the image (Zoyd) from the viewers (cameras). The crucial point here is the inversion: we, the readers, are now watching with Zoyd as if from inside the TV set (from the unreachable, other part of the TV screen). TV is here perversely stripping the subject of all agency: even if Zoyd acts as an active producer (of a performance), he is reduced to a mere product, an image that is routinely sold to the viewing audience (which includes himself). The moment of Zoyd's contact with the stunt-glass window, or the moment of the emitting of the image through the screen, is the instant in which the subject in question is effectively commodified.

## The Unarmed Eye

Such reading of the scene, in which the novel shows us how a subject is mastered by television, presents us with the question of how the two contemporary media function in relation to their audiences. *Vineland* implicitly counts on its readers' experience of watching TV. The self-evidence of this viewer-reader experience should not diminish its importance for the reading of the novel. As I suggested earlier, the text here counts on the effects of TV in order to dismantle them. In DA Miller's terms, *Vineland* relies on a specific "discursive framework" in order to subvert it (1988: 25). In *The Novel and the Police*, DA Miller is concerned with how the Victorian novel "produces" and "provides for" "privatized subjects" (82), and offers a model of reading that would permit to see how the novel form constructs subject positions for its readers. Although Miller's theory of the novel primarily deals with the "close imbrication of individual and social" (83) in the dominant medium of the time, I think its wider repercussions make it applicable to my current concern. In the analyzed scene, seeing *with* the subject of manipulation reveals the manipulating power of TV; but it is the experience of watching TV that provides the discursive framework in which the dramatized event is to be apprehended. In a twofold critical motion, the novel relies on the readers' experience in order to disclose its disciplining aspect – while *Poltergeist* simply throws out the TV set, *Vineland* tries to break it apart from inside.

The fact that this critical take is backed by an imbrication of the televisual and the

novelistic (to paraphrase Miller) does not necessarily mean a tacit affirmation of the contested medium. For Miller, the effects of the novel form are inescapably regulatory: "[w]henver the novel censures policing power it has already reinvented it, in the *very practice of novelistic representation*" (20, emphasis in original). However, I believe that the intricacy of the ideological status of the novel form is far from being resolved once and for all. In a historical context of apparently total visual domination, a novel that aims at criticizing the existing power relations has to, in one way or another, perform a textual clinch with the visual media. In order to argue this point further, I turn to another example for illustration.

The readers of *Vineland* are familiar with the position of the viewer, which is considerably directed by the perspective of the TV cameras. This perspective is represented in the text as producing a pacifying and disciplining effect. A presumably insane person is waving a chain-saw in the direction of the camera; the viewer is thus put in the position of the victim; s/he is "being attacked," but the cameras are there to absorb and filter the potential danger. TV screen thus functions as a safeguard: it controls both the violent acts it stages and restricts the subject positions the viewer can take. The fact that Zoyd's act is a mere simulation of violence – his miniature chainsaw a fashion accessory, the broken windowpane a stunt-glass window – only emphasizes television's power to produce real dangers and enemies out of manipulated images. The screen that separates and positions its subjects also secures their affective investment in the selected target (which can be made the object of fear, hatred or love). Analyzing the media coverage of the Gulf War, Michael Shapiro notes that



the only perspective offered the viewers of American news was that of the American soldier: they were allowed to see only "in the light of the tracer bullets and missiles guiding pilot vision" and "with the same thermal imaging devices that had provided the pilot with night vision." Shapiro's conclusion is significant for the subject of TV in *Vineland*:

Through media control, coupled with the development of sighting with weapons, those with the power to wage war displayed "war" through the sighting dimension of its killing devices. Nothing was available to show for those with the will and potential power to resist the interpretive imperatives that the logistical displays entailed. The weapons-eye view became sovereign, then, in the sense that it was authoritative, controlling and largely legitimated by the perspectives of the subject/viewers. While with respect to some public policy dynamics sovereignty is constituted through a contentious process over the significance of various objects – that is, eligibility to determine significance is dispersed among scattered perspectives – in this case the range of possible contention was diminished and "channeled" through the medium of television [...]" (102)

Shapiro here relates the unavailability of different subject position for the TV viewers to the monologic media representations of the Gulf War. Moreover, he notes the importance of the process of legitimation of the dominant gaze (what he calls the sovereign "weapons-eye") that

is carried out through the elimination of other possible perspectives that the viewers could take. It is exactly this problem of availability of alternative positions that would offer a possibility for a critical stance in relation to TV that *Vineland* acts out for its readers.

Whether in the position of a victim (as in Pynchon) or of an attacker (as in Shapiro), the TV viewer's perspective appears totally controlled by the medium. This would seem to anachronistically fit Miller's argument about the policing function of the nineteenth-century novel form, since the novel too regulates subject positions its audience can take. Miller argues that the novel not only "dramatize[s] a certain ideology of power; it [...] produce[s] this ideology as an effect – and in the mode – of its being read as a novel" (52). However, what secures the disciplining effect is in Miller's account something that he variously terms "omniscient narration" (23), "panoptical narration," "faceless gaze" (24) and, relying on Bakhtin, "monologism" (25). In other words, what turns out to be crucial for Miller's argument is a "discipline inherent in the novel's technique of narration" (52). However, *Vineland*, as Zoyd's case shows, produces a position for its readers that is unavailable to the TV viewer. The narrative technique employed in the text is indeed important. By setting up the narrative situation and constructing opposite subject positions for the reader and the TV viewer, the novel tries to effect a revolutionary change in the position of its readers, take them momentarily away from the grip of their TV sets and expose the "true nature" of television. This is what Silverman, following Eisenstein, calls a "dialectical leap into opposition" (91). The new subject position constructed by the novel (it is the same jump that

turns Zoyd into an image) is something that the ordinary TV audience (TV victims of *Vineland*) can not achieve. Consequently, the novel constructs for itself a supervising position in relation to the contested TV discourse by placing itself and its readers on the side of "knowledge."

The above argument might be criticized because it rests on a particular view of identification. It might be claimed that the underlying assumption is that the reader inescapably identifies with the focalizer, as the TV viewer, in the example from Shapiro, inescapably identifies with the camera eye. I would like to stress that this is not the case. By offering alternative subject positions, the text of *Vineland* encourages – but does not determine – different, un-usual identifications. In that, its representational politics differs radically from the one of the news coverage analyzed by Shapiro or the one criticized by the novel itself.

### **Lights, Camera... Revolution**

The centrality of the transfenestration scene can be fully understood only in the light of past events that lead to it. Zoyd's act remains pure spectacle unless we know its history. This is, however, what the (presumably factual) TV coverage does not do: its disinformation quality lies in the simultaneous erasing of history and production of fiction; it is the novel that

provides its readers with the essential historical background. As John Johnston puts it, "*Vineland* seeks to restore the pressure of real historical time to this video time" (210). In other words, what follows Zoyd's performance – and that is basically the whole novel – is the explanation of why it takes place, and this explanation differs radically from the media coverage of the event. The complicated narrative of *Vineland* counters television's dehistoricizing narrative strategies by interweaving a variety of focal points and diegetic levels. As Jane Feuer notes, "television as an ideological apparatus strives to break down any barriers between the fictional diegesis, the advertising diegesis, and the diegesis of the viewing family, finding it advantageous to assume all three are one and the same" (105). On the contrary, *Vineland* is not insisting on leveling or unification, but diversification of diegesis, and thus becomes, in Bakhtin's terms, thoroughly heteroglot (cf. Bakhtin 1990, esp. 312-315 and 330-331). The different voices that resonate throughout the novel and that often cast different light at same events operate as textual analogy for the complex network of historical processes behind the televised event.

*Vineland* can be read as Pynchon's attempt at recovering histories that have been erased or distorted by the official media, an attempt that is by no means limited to this novel. Chiefly, *Vineland* offers a specific view of the revolutionary events of the 1960s. This historical or retrospective orientation of the novel, that has often been identified as Pynchon's nostalgia for "the Mellow Sixties" (38), is also secured by a close relationship with the visual, in this case with film. In fact, the access to the past in *Vineland* is largely technologically

mediated and depends on an interplay between what we might call, borrowing a productive phrase from Benjamin, the armed and the unarmed eye (cf. 1988: 223). In thus emphasizing the process of mediation, the text stresses the fact that access to history is never "media innocent" (as Zoyd is described at one point). Furthermore, the act of recollecting history is represented as possessing an oppositional potential.<sup>6</sup> This act pertains both to the characters and the narrative of *Vineland*, and figures most prominently in the scene to which I turn next.

In the novel, the guerrilla film group 24fps represents the revolutionary act of seizing the media and using them for the benefit of "the people".<sup>7</sup> The main protagonist of the sixties events is the 24fps camerawoman Frenesi, Zoyd's ex-wife. In the narrative present, she is ironically, and similarly to Zoyd, sponsored by the same system she was fighting in the sixties. However, to say that Frenesi is the main focalizer that provides us with facts about the sixties would be a simplified account of the actual narrative situation. Focalization is here complicated by visual devices: most notably the screen and the camera. The narrative switches to the 60s events in the episodes in which Frenesi's daughter Prairie searches for her mother in other people's memories. However, the main source of information on Frenesi proves to be the 24fps film archive. There, Prairie spends hours watching old documentary footage on which she rarely sees her mother, but – since it is filmed by Frenesi – it makes her see as her mother. Looking for Frenesi, she finds Frenesi *looking* for her, in the literal sense of "doing the looking." In this instance, the perspective of the camera eye clearly provides the point of identification: Prairie, a child of the 80s, has to re-live the 60s through her mother's

(camera) eyes, in order to find her. More than presenting her with a historical narrative, the 24fps film makes Prairie "feel the liberation [...], the faith that anything was possible, that nothing could stand in the way of such joyous certainty" (210). What is transmitted is not merely a body of historical data, but primarily a utopian feeling. Prairie continues the same subversive tradition that Frenesi "inherited" from her parents, although in a different historical context and by other means, however these might seem dubious: her shoplifting in the mall ("the Great South Coast Plaza Eyeshadow Raid," 328), or her active involvement in the punk-rock subculture, represented by Billy Barf and the Vomitones.<sup>8</sup> Although *Vineland* shows a critical attitude to the 60s resistance, blaming it partly for its own defeat, the memories of these events prove to have an emancipating potential. These memories are in Prairie's case induced in the process of watching the 24fsp films. Thus, Prairie is inscribed in the lineage of subversive elements by identification with her mother's story, which becomes her history. This process of identity construction by means of reclaiming history is in the text significantly acted out in visual terms. Thus, the novel positions the visual field as central for identity construction.

Now, the process of idealization and identification depends on the configuration of what Kaja Silverman terms the "cultural screen". The screen is constituted by the "cultural representations" that are "carriers of – among other things – sexual, racial and class difference" (57). Silverman claims that

[r]epresentational practice generally work to establish which objects are worthy of being idealized. It does so [...] by embedding them in a symbolic matrix which extends and deepens their semantic range, and so solicits libidinal investment.

Certain objects are so widely represented as being worthy of idealization that they assume the status of normative ideals. (40)

However, Silverman does not argue *against* idealization and identification, without which there could be no meaningful relation to the other, but calls for ethically/politically minded representational practices which would help us "learn to idealize oppositionally and provisionally" (37). After naming cinema, television and photography as the "primary contributors to our cultural screen," she concludes that

if it is through textual production, especially in its visual or imaginary forms, that the subject is encouraged to idealize certain bodily parameters, it can only be through the creation and circulation of alternative images and words that he or she can be given access to new identificatory coordinates. [...] The textual intervention that I have in mind is one which would "light up" dark corners of the cultural screen, and thereby make it possible for us to identify both consciously and unconsciously with bodies which we would otherwise reject with horror and contempt. It would also inhibit our attempt to assimilate those coordinates to our

own in order to "become" the ideal image. (81)

It is important to stress the significance of historical circumstances for such a textual practice.

Namely, if a text encourages idealization against "what the cultural screen mandates as 'ideal'" (Silverman 1996: 78), it necessarily depends on the context in which the cultural screen is set. The scene of Prairie's watching 24fps films illustrates that. Pynchon's identification of (ex)hippies as the alien bodies in Reaganite America finds historical confirmation even in Reagan's own assertions. Reagan is quoted as saying that "a hippie [...] was someone who 'dresses like Tarzan, has hair like Jane, and smells like Cheetah', and he promised to 'clean up the mess at Berkeley,' in particular the 'sexual orgies so vile I cannot describe them to you'" (Berger 1995: 9). On the film that Prairie sees, "Led Zeppelin music blasted from the PA, bottles and joints circulated, one or two couples [...] had found some space and started fucking in the background" (209-10). The film makes Prairie "feel the liberation" and identify precisely *against* the normative ideal. The 24fps film shows Prairie something "she'd never seen [...] before" (210) and thus provides her with an identificatory model for her personal resistance. In this respect the 24fps film illustrates Silverman's claim that "the aesthetic work is a privileged domain for displacing us from the geometral point, for encouraging us to see in ways not dictated in advance by the dominant fiction" (184).<sup>9</sup>

Memories play a crucial role in this process: texts "implant" in the viewer or reader

"synthetic" memories which resonate with more "indigenous" memories "through which [a



subject's] wishes find expression" (185). In this instance, the film acts similarly to *Vineland*: its activity of "displacement" is analogous to the one the narrative effects in Zoyd's transfenestration scene.

The same strategic move applies to the novel itself and locates its political aspect in the wider cultural field. Prairie's watching of 24fps movies is not her first encounter with images of the past, but it is nevertheless a completely new experience: the "slow pan shot of 24fps" (196) presents her with a history "she'd mostly never seen, except in fast clips on the Tube" (198). Obviously, the films of the 24fps can show what TV – again the paradigmatic medium of the system – does not. The main intention of the 60s media activists was, as Pynchon puts it, "lighting up the things networks never would" (203). As my reading of the transfenestration scene shows, the same slogan is a felicitous description of the intention of *Vineland*.<sup>10</sup> In this case, *Vineland* obviously shares its own critical or oppositional status (constructed as early as the transfenestration episode) with the activist media practice of the radical film collective. As Stefan Matessich notes, by appropriating its characters' narrative reconstructions of the 1960s, *Vineland* "takes over their nostalgic voices, and becomes another veteran of the time" (221). Although this act of "appropriation" or "repetition" (Matessich's terms) is, according to Matessich, dubiously grounded on an external and "moralistic" (212) point of reference, it does work to stress the text's "responsibility to an underlying narrative of political continuity" (221). In other words, by stressing its difference from officially proclaimed truths, the text both positions itself on the side of the 24fps and

claims its place in the tradition of alternative, counter-cultural representational practices.

In Zoyd's scene we saw how the text had to center itself on and revolve around the camera in order to show the regulatory effects of TV. But the same is true of *Vineland's* attempt at imagining resistance: what organizes this narrative strand too is the camera eye. This inflection between the textual and the visual marks the novel's critical interference mentioned in the introduction. All main characters in *Vineland* are positioned in relation to the camera, as if it were the mechanism that both gives and takes life. Indeed, the camera is the instance through which subject positions are regulated. However, the status of the camera in is always ambivalent. Its meaning continuously oscillates between technological apparatus supporting a specific material practice (TV, film, photography) and metaphor for what has so far been termed power. This double status of camera in the text reflects the complex semantic field of visibility discussed in the introduction. So far, I have tried to show how visibility, figuring as camera, regulates subject positions for Zoyd and Prairie. In those two cases the material aspect of visibility/camera is more pronounced, although the metaphoric one is undeniably there. The case of Frenesi Gates presents us with a more symbolically charged situation.

Having in mind *Vineland's* visually conceptualized theory of power, it might seem strange that the novel's most powerful character has, apparently, nothing to do with visual devices.<sup>11</sup> As I intend to show, this is not quite so; visual terms are essential to the textual construction of Brock Vond. Among these, the most important is light, the motif and

metaphor constantly associated with him. Light is also associated with Frenesi, who is at one point described as "the bringer of light" (261). Indeed, what complicates *Vineland's* critical position is the fact that, although the text unambiguously identifies the forces of repression, it simultaneously represents the opposition as complicit in the same processes it wants to resist. Frenesi, the main 24fps/resistance figure, is from the beginning involved with the federal agent Brock Vond.

Light is most directly related to power in a passage that describes 24fps', and especially Frenesi's obsession with light: "Against Howie's advocacy of available light because it was cheaper, Frenesi wanted actively to commit energy by pouring in as much light as they could liberate from the local power company" (201). For the purpose of "liberating light" she uses grid-access devices inherited from her father, "intended for draining off whenever possible the lifeblood of the fascist monster, Central Power itself [...]" (202). The activity of the 24fps thus literally depends on the electricity network that here metonymically stands for the networked power of the state. Brock, the power's main representative and the man Frenesi is irresistibly attracted to, is in a significant passage described as "more photogenic than cute" (200). In this passage, which is framed by Prairie's watching of 24fps materials, we see Frenesi filming Brock; it is the first time she sees him. The focus in the scene seems to shift from Frenesi to Brock and back, but the choice of words in the description of Brock suggests that it is focalized by Frenesi. The source of his attraction is pinpointed by the ambiguous term "photogenic." According to the OED

etymology of the word, its meaning is variable; it can mean (1) that which is produced by light, (2) photographic, (3) that which produces or emits light (also "photogenetic") and, finally, (4) a good subject for photography. All the definitions find confirmation in the text, but the crucial for my reading is the meaning that describes the photogenic subject as both producing and being produced by light.<sup>12</sup> Brock's photogenic nature aligns him with the power-network that 24fps depends on and that Frenesi dreams of. Dreams play a central role in these subjects' fantasies of power: Frenesi dreams of Central Power whose face always remains invisible (202); in Brock's dreams, in which "*lucid* intervention was impossible" (274, my emphasis) he visits houses of "people so rich and powerful he'd never even seen them" (275). It is the visual manifestation of his position inside the system: he is an envoy of a power that is for himself – as for Frenesi – unreachable. Although he effects power, he is not its ultimate instance: his colleagues call him "Death From *Slightly* Above" (375, my emphasis) and, as we learn, he has to worry about his "overseers" (279). Brock thus occupies a mediating position, similar to that of the text's central mediating device, the camera. What reinforces this similarity is the fact that in the scene where he is shot by Frenesi, it is his unarmed eye, and not the one armed by the camera, that manages to efficiently position the other. While Frenesi is filming him, Brock cannot see her face, but notices her legs: for him she is already (stereotypically) established as a sexual object, or, in visual terms, spectacle. I would like to refer again to Silverman's intricate argumentation, since it proves useful in the reading of Pynchon's visual exploration of im/possibility of resistance. Silverman refers to

the gaze as "the inscription of Otherness within the field of vision, [which] radically exceeds the human looks through which it often manifests itself [...]," (56) and, "the intrusion of the symbolic into the field of vision. The gaze is the 'unapprehensible' agency through which we are socially ratified or negated as spectacle" (133). However, she adds,

the gaze does not photograph us directly, but through the cultural representations which intervene between it and us – representations which Lacan calls the 'screen'. Although we often treat these representations as simple mirrors, they do not so much reflect us as cast their reflection upon us. (56-57).<sup>13</sup>

As Silverman elaborates, the gaze depends on the look for its operation: "the subject's look is often a provisional signifier of the gaze for that other who occupies the position of the object in relation to him or her" (221). The encounter between Brock and Frenesi could also be read in these terms. Analyzing Ulrike Ottinger's film *Bildnis einer Trinkerin (Ticket of No Return, 1979)* Silverman argues that the main character of the film, Madame, "attempts [...] to retreat from specularly to vision – to position herself as gaze, and thereby to achieve the narcissistic gratification which is denied her in her capacity as image. But this is an impossible aspiration. The subject always looks from a position within the field of vision." (60) Frenesi's project appears to be quite similar: in the relevant scene, her attempt at filming Brock ends up with him looking at her legs. Her ambition to position herself as gaze turns into her being

positioned as image. On the other hand, Brock's position of power aligns him with the gaze.

However, the objectification Brock's gaze performs on Frenesi requires the confirmation of the other to become functional. It is after Frenesi removes the camera and Brock has a look at her "uncovered" face (201) that she fails to actively resist his humiliating remarks, and silently accepts his look ("She was wondering instead why she'd worn this little miniskirt today when it would have made more sense to wear pants." 201). In other words, Brock's look in relation to Frenesi functions as the TV cameras functioned in relation to Zoyd – it places the subject in a specific (subordinate) position.

Similarly to Zoyd, Frenesi seems unable to resist this powerful look, and is consequently used as a medium for Brock's own purposes.<sup>14</sup> Her camera – and herself – become media for the functioning of the power she originally aimed to resist. When, near the end of the novel, Prairie sees Frenesi, she has "sun damage in her face" (367), as if hurt by the exposure to direct light. Considered in the context of the above argument, this detail becomes significant; it confirms 24fps' theory that when "power corrupts, it keeps a log of its progress, written into that most sensitive memory device, the human face" (195). Of course, the 24fps aimed their cameras at the faces of the likes of Brock Vond, although with unpredictable consequences. Frenesi's camera turns out to be an inappropriate hiding device; but it is also, as a representational practice, centrally responsible for the creation of alternative identificatory possibilities for the likes of Prairie.

## Apocalypse Now and Then

Both Zoyd's and Frenesi's examples seem to show that Pynchon's novel does not offer any grounds for even a remote possibility of agency in the face of a repressive system. Indeed, what has often been recognized as a crucial element in *Vineland* is not a possibility of efficient opposition, but a "powerful utopianism" (Maltby 1991: 181). However, it seems to me that the text does both enact and offer a specific oppositional politics that is constructed primarily in visual terms. This was so far most obvious in my reading of the relation between Frenesi and Prairie.

One obvious question has not been considered so far: what and where is Vineland? Pynchon takes the name for this imaginary "Harbor of Refuge" (316) from the Vikings. "Vinland the Good" was the name given by Leif Erickson to a continent once found and then lost again (cf. Safer 47), just like the "true America" about whose possibility Pynchon fantasizes in the novel. Vineland is a perfect place for hiding because, as Sasha tells Zoyd, "half the interior hasn't even been surveyed" (305). The first description of the area abounds in terms that suggest invisibility, like "invisible boundary" and "territories of spirit" (317). However, this unsurveyed territory is not un surveilled: it is located in the middle of a "regionwide network of military installations." In an interesting account of the militarization of space in the novel, Paul Maltby puts constant semblances between Vineland and Vietnam

in historical context. Referring to a study of American political economy by Mike Davis, he points out that

military overdevelopment [was] a crucial component of the "boom" manufactured by the Reagan administration. [Davis] explains the role of an exorbitant military budget – one trillion dollars for 1985-87 – in the recovery of key industrial sectors like aerospace and metals and in stimulating the massive growth of electronic technologies. (175)

This "military overdevelopment," which is in Pynchon's novel reflected as an inner military colonization of Vineland, matches a similarly aggressive occupation of the area by television networks: Vineland is partitioned into "Cable Zones." Television, Maltby concludes, is "figured as [...] a colonizing force, annexing territorial, domestic, and, ultimately, mental space" (177). The novel makes it clear that the county is very far from being free from intrusions on the part of the state. However, Vineland is at the same time not completely part of that same state that permanently attempts to bring it under control. The region thus occupies a paradoxical position of simultaneously belonging and not belonging, being and not being part of the system.

At this point, I would like to turn to a biographical note for an illustration that, in relation to the ideas exposed so far, functions as an instance of a deliberate, political act.



Pynchon's own avoidance of all attempts at media coverage has long become legendary. The mere fact that he is so reluctant to appear in public often turns into news material. In one of more interesting examples, the 1997 CNN report "Where's Thomas Pynchon? CNN tracks down literary world's deliberate enigma," we learn that "Thomas Pynchon is an enigma shrouded in a mystery veiled in anonymity" (Feldman, all subsequent references are to this article). Both "shrouded" and "veiled," Pynchon's behavior feeds the reporter's growing frustration at his refusal to play by the media rules. The report is rather awkwardly split in its attempt to properly cover its subject.

Pynchon is at first described as an unconventional best-selling author: "Yet, you won't see Pynchon hawking his wares on Oprah's book club. You won't find him signing his name for fans down at the corner bookstore. He so shuns publicity that he doesn't allow his likeness to be used on book jackets," and so on. After the CNN camera catches him on tape, "he phones back to strongly request that he [should] not be pointed out to viewers in any videotape (a request which, after much debate, CNN opted to honor)." At the end of the article, Pynchon "turns out to be" – too conventional: "He leads a somewhat conventional life in New York City."

The depiction of Pynchon in the CNN article is irreconcilably divided between these two extreme positions: first he is not normal because he is not appearing on TV, then, since all else fails – even a successful videotaping which obviously lead to some upheaval at CNN – he is depicted as actually being too normal; again, deviating from the media-imposed

norm. The split and paradoxically ambivalent position of the article shows how the media can not unproblematically cope with this kind of resistance to celebrity economy it enforces.

However, there is another twist to the story. The article ends as follows: "While CNN agreed not to isolate him and identify him specifically, he does happen to be among the people you will see in street scenes in the movie accompanying this story." In other words, Pynchon is both present and absent from the movie: we can see him, but we can not recognize him – the media have shown his image, but, since celebrities are media products, they failed to commodify it. The irresolution marking this event signals the specificity of Pynchon's politics of visibility: the example shows the actual situation regarding the possibilities of escaping or opposing the media power. What Pynchon's example offers is a strategic position of being both inside and outside the system.

It is in such an unseen, present-but-unreachable place that all socially unfitting characters of *Vineland* are situated. As Van Meter tells Zoyd, "every guy up here looks just like we do. You're dern near invisible already" (318). The many supernatural occurrences, in the first place the elimination-via-disappearance of Brock Vond, work to intensify the uncontrollable, carnivalesque aspect of *Vineland* (and *Vineland*)<sup>15</sup>. The end of the novel centers on the family reunion of the Traverses and Beckers, who represent the subversive lineage of which Frenesi and Prairie are part. The two of them are here reunited for the first time. The family bond is strengthened by a collective act of remembering, both in the reunion of the big family, and the mother and the daughter. It is here that the "perilous reconnecting"

of "strands of memory" takes place. The novel's last recollecting process relies on oral narration and is technologically unmediated. However, the reunion dissolves in this final image:

And other grandfolks could be heard arguing the perennial question of whether the United States still lingered in a prefascist twilight, or whether that darkness had fallen long stupefied years ago, and the light they thought they saw was coming only from millions of Tubes all showing the same bright-colored shadows. (371)

Like all the characters, some of the novel's persistent motives – the Tube, the light – are reunited at the end.

Related to the metaphor of light, the phrase "to light up" bears suggestive and powerful meanings in *Vineland*. It is also an expression employed often by Silverman, and I have used it to describe the radical representational politics of the 24fps with which *Vineland* aligns itself. Moreover, I find Pynchon's and Silverman's use of the expression to be compatible. In my reading of the novel I tried to prove that the happy correspondence between "lighting up the dark corners of the cultural screen" and "lighting up things the networks never would" is indeed significant. The (television) networks are in *Vineland* the representational practices dominating the cultural screen. The novel aligns itself with the

politics of the revolutionary filmmakers and effectively provides for alternative identificatory coordinates by way of its narrative mechanisms and a carnivalesque circulation of "alternative images and words." Thus, I would argue, *Vineland* represents an instance of the political textual intervention imagined by Silverman.

It is interesting that Silverman argues for a necessity of collective agency that would allow for the constitution of a truly effective oppositional look. She claims that "if the look acts in concert with enough other looks, it can reterritorialize the screen, bringing new elements into cultural prominence, and casting into darkness those which presently constitute normative representation." (223) The collective act of remembering at the end of the novel dramatizes the possibility of such collective oppositional agency. As we have seen, memory and its transmission through radical representational practices play a crucial role in this process.

What is not foregrounded in Silverman's theory, but is nevertheless obvious, is that the radical representational practices she imagines find their examples in texts that are un-popular and marginal in respect to their reception. If films by Harun Farocki or Ulrike Ottinger "help us to see differently," as Silverman pleads at the end of the book (227), they do so in fairly limited environments. Despite the mode of their production, they are without any doubt *not* popular products in the mode of their consumption.<sup>16</sup> This fact makes Silverman's appeal for a collective productive look that would be able to resist dominant fictions liable to accusations of elitism. However, such hidden character of radical textual practices does

resemble the model of resistance proposed in *Vineland*: the productive look has to be veiled, or difficult to see, in order to be able to resist being colonized by capital. As this novel suggests, it has to occupy a liminal position, both inside and outside the system that is capable, as *Vineland* repeatedly shows, of assimilating all oppositional practices in its reach.

## SEEING OTHERS

They do not look at other people here.

-- Baudrillard, *America* (60)

### **In the Ruins & Out of Sight**

In an inspiring reading of DeLillo's essayistic response to the terrorist attacks of September 11 2001, Marco Abel argues that the ethical value of the text lies in its refusal to adopt a moralizing, judgmental view of the event which is "irreducible" in its singularity. Suspension of plot and shifting points of view in DeLillo's essay are textual mechanisms which "allow the event to emerge with a 'crystalline ambiguity'" (2003: 1240). According to Abel, "the essay attempts rhetorically to position readers so that they become capable of *seeing* that which cannot be perceived in the event's endless televised images [...]" (1240, emphasis in original). Thus, in stressing the ethical inappropriateness of a pre-given meaning of the event and the necessity of responding, the essay aims at altering "our frame of practiced response" (1241) and "does not allow preexisting subject positions to remain unaffected" (1244). As this reading suggests, DeLillo's text has to work against mass-media representations which

are primarily responsible for conventional individual responses – or normal subject positions – of its audiences. Be it only implicitly, the text has to consider and revise the existing seeing ability of its readers. Obviously, this ability is thoroughly conditioned by visual technologies, or more specifically the camera eye; the media, here figuring as televised images, indeed *cover* the event, not letting the subject's eye take an immediate (or unmediated) look.

However, such an extreme opposition between a mediated (camera) and immediate look (eye) is unattainable, since the act of looking at the world is always mediated by what Silverman terms the "cultural screen," or the always already existing cultural representations that intervene between the gaze and the subject (Silverman 1996: 57). Of course, DeLillo's *In the Ruins of 9/11* is another in the series of such textual representations, although a potentially disrupting one.

DeLillo's text ends with the ambiguous scene of a New York Moslem woman kneeling on her prayer rug in the middle of the city rush. Apart from the writer, "no one seemed much to notice her" (DeLillo 2001). DeLillo muses on the "taken-for-granted greatness of New York. The city will accommodate every language, ritual, belief and opinion" (DeLillo 2001). As Abel rightly observes, "this image is characterized – indeed enabled – not so much by a liberal tolerance for difference as by the absence of recognition" (1247). Indeed, DeLillo's text suggests the opposite of what it claims: the city seems indifferent to the praying woman. It is the writer or text that perceives her; thus its potentially disrupting value. The final scene represents an attempt to bring into the view of the readers a

deliberately unseen other. The logic of the TV-conditioned response to the world, which is an implied subtext of the essay, suggests that the invisibility of the praying woman, as the inability of an authentic response to the terrorist attacks, is an effect of the dominant cultural screen, i.e. her status (presence or absence) in the media images.<sup>17</sup> For the analysis that follows, it is not insignificant that this invisibility had its counterpart in numerous government infringements of civil rights in the US immigrant communities.<sup>18</sup>

What both DeLillo's and Abel's texts insist on is, in Silverman's words, the "responsibility" of the look (221). The act of looking is involved in the relational processes in which it mediates between the self and the other. It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of the act of looking in Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1984): the novel is pervaded by looks, glances, sightings, acts of seeing, watching, observing. Tim Engles notes that "DeLillo [...] establishes immediately the novel's interest in the relational, dialogic nature of identity formation, showing that our perception of others necessarily relies on categorical placement in relation to categorical placement of oneself" (2000: 176). In fact, numerous examples demonstrate that it is in and through the act of looking that subject positions are established and the subjects embedded in or omitted from the collective gaze of the community. Identity formation in *White Noise* can indeed be described as "dialogical," but the dialogue is not as untroublesome as its apparent (stylistic) blandness might suggest. Moreover, it always includes a third party: the media image that interferes in the discourse. This interference is most obvious in the fact that phrases uttered by the TV set are scattered



throughout the narrative, but also in the images of one's self and the others constantly appearing on video-screens. The presence of others in the subject's field of vision thus becomes a vital ethical issue in the novel, since the question of how the others are seen is inseparable from the construction of one's self-image. As DeLillo's 9/11 essay illustrates, the hegemony of the visual media in the perception of reality is closely linked to the process of identity formation both for community and the individual subject in a "post-industrial" consumer society.

This issue is given a carnivalesque treatment in *Vineland*. Pynchon's novel ended with a glimpse into the possibility of escaping the repressive late capitalist system represented by television and the manipulating gaze of the camera. This oppositional act of seclusion is performed by system's "others" – ex-hippies, marijuana growers, the unemployed, old radicals – that go into hiding, using veiling as a "powerful strategic realization".<sup>19</sup> The autonomous zone of *Vineland* thus represents, in Bakhtin's terms, a "popular festive utopia" (Bakhtin 1968: 264), a place and time when the usual hierarchy and order temporarily cease to function, and "all existing forms of the coercive socioeconomic and political organization" (255) are suspended. That way, as far as possible from the controlling media of the oppressive state, an alternative, post-revolutionary community is established. The relative invisibility of the others was a guarantee of their relative autonomy; the relativity of both invisibility and separation, in turn, a necessary condition for the community's (again, relative) accessibility.

Stories of resistance to repressive systems are, of course, a frequent, be it only implied mark of many popular fictions. I will be referring to two of these, John Carpenter's *They Live* (1988) and George A. Romero's *The Dawn of the Dead* (1978), which provide us with interesting examples of entanglement between popular visuality and consumerism, the topics relevant for the discussion of *White Noise*. What makes these films comparable to the novel is the insistence on a split in American society; a polar configuration of the consumerist culture that builds its solidarity on a constant repression of its various others. These others figure as monsters, aliens, the diseased, foreigners, but their significant difference turns out to be an economic and racial one.

### **Seeing is Believing**

Carpenter's science-fiction horror *They Live* (1988) is an obvious example of popular social critique of the Reagan era. In its depiction of a repressive consumerist society governed by visual media, the movie touches upon similar problems as DeLillo's *White Noise*. Although the movie's plot is based on the assumption that the world is dominated by aliens who use mass-media to control humans, the beginning dwells on real economic problems of the 1980s. Nada, an unemployed construction worker, comes into a community of homeless, unemployed and otherwise disempowered people only to discover among them an

underground organization that leads a rebellion against the aliens. The prime alien weapon of mind-control is TV which poisons the brains of humans even when it is off. Consequently, TV is the main target of revolutionary action – the broadcast signal has to be destroyed in order for people to be able to see the world as it is. However, visual media do not act only as the main manipulating tool, but also as a weapon of resistance: the rebels can distinguish aliens from humans by using special sunglasses (or lenses). Still, this technologically enhanced sight appears to be superfluous, since from the mere beginning the movie constructs the opposition between the humans and the aliens in economic terms: the rich controlling the society through the media are the aliens, and the poor, the homeless, the labor and police force are the humans. In other words, once we are acquainted with the reality of manipulation, the manipulators are easy to discern: liberation can start once the truth is revealed.

With the help of the sunglasses, the main protagonist can clearly see that beneath the colorful variety of consumer products lies a uniform (and uniforming) repressive discourse. (Moreover, he now sees the world in black and white, thus reinforcing the movie's separation between us and them.) All the consumer products and advertisements around him carry the same message: obey, consume, watch TV, conform, reproduce, buy and so on. Jack Gladney, the main protagonist and narrator of *White Noise*, seems to be in search of some similar form of revelation.<sup>20</sup> One of the situations in which he apparently comes close to "a moment of splendid transcendence" (DeLillo 1999: 155<sup>21</sup>) is when his daughter pronounces

the words "Toyota Celica" in her sleep. Far from showing concern about the fact that even the unconscious of his children (and presumably his own) has been colonized by items of consumer culture, Jack observes that the "utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder" (155). This moment presents only one of numerous instances of Jack's virtual blindness to the reality around him.<sup>22</sup> Where the technologically enlightened Nada sees signs of manipulation, technologically manipulated Jack sees signs of transcendence.

The difference in their ability to see, and consequently revolutionize or transcend, is a function of specific subject positions the focalizers in each text occupy. Nada's position is clearly one of the system's rejects: he is both unemployed and homeless and joins a revolutionary organization. Nada is, as his name suggests, literally nothing. From the start, he is an observer looking from opposition, and his ability to see is a prerequisite of his personal liberation. Jack Gladney, a white middle class college professor, is aligned with the social forces supporting and depending on the system. His importance as the narrator has been extensively discussed in *White Noise* criticism. Lentricchia thus claims that the fact that the novel is a first-person narrative is "a fact of literary structure that will turn out to be decisive for all that can be said about the book's take on contemporary America and the issues that cluster about the cloudy concept of postmodernism" (1991: 92). The narrator's position, or, more precisely, the fact that the narrative is focalized through the character of Jack Gladney, is indeed crucial. Jack is at the beginning positioned as the one who is overseeing the events around him. In the introductory scene he is "witnessing" an annual "spectacle." (3)

However, as the Toyota Celica example suggests, Jack is also overlooking, observing phenomena without recognizing their actual meaning. The twofold activity of overseeing and overlooking is crucial for the treatment of visuality and visibility in the novel.

One scene is of particular importance for the understanding of Jack's position and the literal and metaphorical problems with his sight. When checking his bank-account at an automated teller machine, Jack feels he is interfacing with "the system" which is "invisible" and "distant":

What a pleasing interaction. I sensed that something of deep personal value, but not money, not at all, had been authenticated and confirmed. A deranged person was escorted from the bank by two armed guards. The system was invisible, which made it all the more impressive, all the more disquieting to deal with. But we were in accord, at least for now. (46)

Jack's remark shows that he is unable to see the system outside the interfaces the system offers him. The repression inherent in the system is obviously displayed in the spectacle of armed guards and the deranged person. However, Jack repeats the act of repression by ignoring it. He fails to perform his usual act of contemplation on the event before his eyes and remains absorbed in his own "pleasing interaction" with the system. The event is nevertheless significant for the dynamics of exclusion that is constitutive for Jack's individual

and collective identity. The fact that someone is being thrown out of the bank as Jack inserts his credit card in the bank machine seems to suggest that the pleasure of being "in accord" with the system rests on a repressive act of exclusion. The actual (physical) act of exclusion is performed by the system's repressive agencies. However, the violent act of the armed guards both relies on Jack's act of overlooking and intensifies it through an exemplary and potentially threatening display of power. The violent action is thus both expected and confirmed by Jack's look – as further analysis will show, the subject's exclusive look and systemic acts of exclusion are indeed interdependent: the pleasantly integrated subject excludes the non-systemic other from his sight, and turns what is visible into the unseen.

### **Secluded & Excluded**

The view with which the novel begins is a view to a community of consumers. What Jack observes from afar is in the first place a display of wealth. This wealth, as both his distanced look and his conversation with Babette suggest, is not quite accessible to the Gladneys.

Similarly, Jack is once more positioned in class terms when he observes the students in the library, whose physical posture communicates the "language of economic class" (41). The distance of the ironic observer is related to his exclusion from the most privileged social group and implies Jack's belonging to a different, middle class. As Engles rightly observes,

"Jack does not explicitly identify himself as a member of the middle class" (2000: 178). Moreover, he never explicitly defines himself as white in terms of race. Thus, from the beginning, the unspoken elements of class and race, that are nevertheless present in the narrator's field of vision, seem to be the deciding factors for the construction of Jack's identity. Race is particularly visually encoded. As W. J. T. Mitchell notes, "[r]ace is what can be *seen* (and therefore named) [...] Whiteness, by contrast, is invisible, unmarked; it has no racial identity, but is equated with a normative subjectivity and humanity from which 'race' is a visible deviation" (162, emphasis in the original). We will see later how precisely the speaking out of Jack's normative and unmarked racial identity marks the culminating point of the narrative. At the same time, the society of the novel is evidently established as a society of consumers. Consequently, the system's others are considered in the first place in respect to their capability to successfully inhabit such social context. While the economically privileged class is often the object of Jack's gaze, the producing/working and racial others are nearly invisible – they are subjected to Jack's exclusive look.

Exclusion is often recognized as the formative act of both subject and community formation. Stallybrass and White claim that in the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century the formation of the modern (capitalist) bourgeois subject has been based on the repression of various "low" others in class, racial or cultural terms. However, the act of repression can never result in the formation of a harmonious, self-same or "pure" subject:

Thus whilst the 'free' democratic individual appeared to be contentless, a point of judgment and rational evaluation which was purely formal and perspectival, in fact it was constituted through and through by the clamour of particular voices to which it tried to be universally superior. It is on this account that the very blandness and transparency of bourgeois reason in fact nothing other than the critical negation of a social 'colorfulness', of a heterogeneous diversity of specific contents, upon which it is, nonetheless, completely dependent. (Stallybrass and White, 199)

The repression of the (Bakhtinian) carnivalesque that Stallybrass and White find essential for the constitution of the bourgeois subject/community is also frequently evoked in the postmodern consumerist context. Extending a similar argument to the analysis of community in the age of "liquid modernity," Bauman concludes that "[a]n 'inclusive community' would be a contradiction in terms" (2000: 172), and relates community to subject formation by adding that "the dream of the 'community of similarity' is, essentially, a projection of *l'amour de soi*" (2000: 181). *White Noise* dramatizes the principles of construction of such a community which is brought about by the assimilatory power of the exclusive look. When Jack observes the spectacle of station-wagons at the beginning of the academic year, he notes that the students' parents are "seeing images of themselves in every direction. The conscientious suntans. The well-made faces and wry looks. They feel a sense of renewal, of communal recognition" (3). They form, Jack remarks, "a people, a nation" (4). This kind of



specular identification of similar subjects happens at another point in the novel, when the Gladneys are family-shopping: "I was one of them, shopping, at last. [...] I kept seeing myself unexpectedly in some reflection surface" (83); "Our images appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome, on TV monitors in security rooms" (84). While in the first scene Jack seems to stand outside the harmonious community of consumers, in the second he is happily integrated. What strikes as significant in these passages is that the sense of community is achieved through the reflection of one's image. A community achieved through a mirroring of the self is indeed, and by necessity, a "community of similarity." Moreover, in both scenes identification occurs in social environments which secure the presence of economically similar subjects. In other words, these spaces, the campus and the shopping-mall, appear to be safeguarded from alterity. Significantly, these are virtually the only public places in which the protagonists of the novel actualize social contact. Richard Sennett remarks on "the myth of community solidarity as a purification ritual" (100) in the shopping-mall, the "temple of consumption":

For the few minutes or the few hours it lasts, one can rub one's shoulders with 'others like him (or her)', co-religionists, fellow church-goers; others whose otherness may be, in this place at least, here and now safely left out of sight, out of mind and out of account. To all intents and purposes, that place is pure, as pure as only the sites of religious cult and the imagined (or postulated) community may be. (Quoted in

Bauman 2000: 101)

Otherness is indeed left out of sight, particularly in the shopping-mall. In another shopping scene Jack can hear "languages [he] could not identify much less understand" (40). The exclusive look is at work again: Jack's inability to recognize the others and deal with difference is an attempt to consolidate pure community and pure subjectivity through repression of alien others. It is no accident that Jack does not perceive security cameras as a controlling device, but merely one of the "reflecting surfaces" surrounding him. The controlling video screen is implicitly valued positively, as a point of pleasant identification (similar to his pleasant interaction with the bank machine). In other words, the subject is willfully accepting the normative effects of the cultural screen and through his own look repeating the exclusive logic of the repressive gaze.

The fear of contamination in a consumerist context has been classically dramatized in George Romero's *The Dawn of the Dead* (1978). Significantly for the present discussion, the movie begins with a scene of panic at a TV-station: the media, normally the warrant of an ordered image of reality, are in a state of chaos because of the unexplained arrival of the zombies. The main protagonists, who have to destroy the brains of the living dead, are representatives of the police force (Stephen and Peter) and the television industry (Francine and Roger). These are, Romero seems to suggest, the shaken pillars of American society; but whether these are meant to be interpreted as agents of order and public

information or repression and manipulation, is one of the film's many unresolved ambiguities.

The most prominent of these is so obvious that it might go overlooked: who are the zombies?

They are first introduced as tenants of a ghetto, clearly marked in racial and class terms.

However, as they co-habit the shopping mall with the main protagonists, they are made into an image of brain-dead consumers. On the other hand, the protagonists are also showing persistent traces of interminable consumer instincts: the zombies are likened to the shopping-mall mannequins, but so is Francine when putting on her heavy make-up. In other words, the difference between zombies and humans is permanently rebuilt (by the scientists appearing on TV, for example) and blurred (by Romero's narrative techniques). Rogin offers an explanation of the source of this ambiguity when claiming that "[d]emonology begins as a rigid insistence on difference. That insistence has strategic propaganda purposes, but it also derives from fears and forbidden desires for identity with the excluded object" (1987: 3). This statement is analogous to the argument put forth by Stallybrass and White, who claim that there is a constitutive dependence between the bourgeois desire for the other which is embodied in the act of watching and the fear of contamination, embodied in the other's touch. They express this relation formulaically: "The gaze/the touch : desire/contamination. [...] [T]hese contradictory concepts underlie the symbolic significance of the balcony in nineteenth-century literature and painting. From the balcony, one could gaze, but not be touched." (136)

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois imaginary, the helicopter, the gun and the shopping-mall window take up the place of the balcony.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in *The Dawn of the Dead* the protagonists

can have fun watching the undead, usually through a sighting device or a window-pane, but they can not afford to come too close. In a scene when Roger is attacked and eventually manages to kill a monster, the dead zombie does not let go of the sweater that Roger stole from the department store just minutes earlier. Romero constantly suggests that the stakes in this fictional struggle for survival are not (only) human lives, but private property, commodity and consuming-power. Thus, the zombies are not only headless victims of a rampaging consumer culture; they are also agents of the consumerist system, spreading the epidemic, the hunger, assimilating "normal people" into "monster" consumers. The vicious circle of the shopping-mall – the attempt to keep it pure – offers the protagonists only two possibilities: repression (an armed/violent domination of the few over the many) or assimilation (turning into zombies).<sup>24</sup>

As my reading of *White Noise* suggests, the same mechanisms are at work in Jack Gladney's attempts to manage otherness, though there is a revealing difference. Unlike Romero's zombies, the others of the novel do not have the power to assimilate, but are themselves either assimilated into the picture (by way of exclusion from view), or become victims of violence, as Jack's shooting of Willie Mink illustrates. Whatever the option, the power is in both cases in the hands of a presumably harmless college professor, and, more importantly, his power depends on the use/mediation of deadly (or deadening) technologies. One of these is the gun, a technological device with a rather straightforward purpose, whose distancing quality is critically important for the present discussion. As Shapiro argues in

*Violent Cartographies*, the gun is historically "one of the first distancing technologies of warfare" (77), a step in the line of "remote killing" devices (78) which eliminated the "primitive" face-to-face violent encounters with the other. The sight of the gun thus becomes a specific technological extension of the human sight, the most extreme material instance of the exclusive act of looking. It efficiently eliminates the second part of the gaze/touch opposition. Distancing is also a characteristic effect of the visual media. After a medical check, Jack observes that when "death [...] is televised [it] makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying" (142). Similarly, Babette's appearance on TV elicits the following questions: "Was she dead, missing, disembodied?" (104). Strangers and the dead are common figures for all the distanced others whose images (and deaths) the Gladneys normally see televised. Jack's exclusive look is equally dependent on mediating technology. The nature of this look, however, needs a more detailed account.

### **I See My Self on CCTV**

DeLillo seems to suggest that the subject's look is conditioned by visual technologies. Visual media interfere between the self and the other both in the process of community construction and subject formation. In the novel's most often cited scene, Jack and Murray go to see the most photographed barn in America, which has, as Murray argues echoing Baudrillard, lost

its reality due to the replication of its image. Here too, a collective look is a guarantee of a harmonious community. However, this look is not bare. The human eye in this scene, as elsewhere in the text, completely depends on the camera eye. It is the act of photographing, not mere viewing of the barn that, in Murray's words, "reinforces the aura" (12). DeLillo's use of Walter Benjamin's term "aura" is not coincidental. Replying to the question about the "omnipresence of the media" in the American society in a 1992 interview, DeLillo refers to "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction":

[Benjamin] suggested that the more a picture is being reproduced, by photography for instance, the more the 'aura' of the work of art withers. That was a long time ago. Today, I believe, we are at a point where reality itself is being consumed, used up, and the aura is all we are left with. We are living in some kind of aura, and reality is disappearing in a curious way. [...] We have become unable to grasp something unmediated. (Desalm 1992)

For the moment, I would like to put aside the question of accuracy or authority of DeLillo's reading of Benjamin and focus further on the problem of community. DeLillo's stress on a collective "we" underlines the fact that the aura in the analyzed scene is related to "collective perception" (12) out of which, Murray suggests, there is no way out ("We can't get outside the aura. We're part of the aura," 13). The closed collectivity to which the observers belong is

thus visually mediated. It is the mass-production and collective viewing of media images that serves as social glue connecting the individuals in the consumer community of *White Noise*.

However, as Stallybrass and White as well as Bauman point out, the process of including is at the same time the process of excluding. The role of the visual media in this process is obvious in Jack's reaction to the fact that he and his family have to evacuate because of the approaching toxic cloud. He explains his confusion by saying: "I'm not just a college professor. I'm the head of a department. I don't see myself fleeing an airborne toxic event. That's for people who live in mobile homes out in the scrubby parts of the county, where the fish hatcheries are" (117). Jack's dependence on the media for his access to unmediated reality is obvious: he *cannot see himself* experiencing a disaster because he has been seeing only televised disasters happening to others. In fact, Japan, India and California are identified as the sites of TV disasters, and the protagonist's misfortune is, surprisingly, avoided by the media. The media representations have such *normative* power that the immediate materiality of the real event fades in comparison with the image on TV. The constant emphasis *White Noise* puts on different forms of interfaces that are (willingly) imposed on the human eye – Jack wears sunglasses while teaching, his daughter wears a green visor, the Iron City killer uses "telescopic sight" (44) – also signifies the inability to deal with the unmediated reality. This inability is clearly a function of the distancing (visual) technologies that dominate the world of the novel. By virtually equating technological mediation with distancing DeLillo stresses the responsibility of the media for his

protagonists' inability to deal with otherness. Otherness is in *White Noise* generally accessed exclusively through media representations: "If our complaints have a focal point, it would have to be the TV set, where the *outer* torment lurks, causing fears and secret desires." (85, my emphasis) Here the TV set that assumes the symbolic and, I would add, *regulatory* function of the balcony that Stallybrass and White analyze in the quoted passage.

As the above example illustrates, when the order of simulacrum established by TV is disrupted, the eye, conditioned to submit to the televised image, can not apprehend the rupture. As Jack's example shows, his position in the system is normally/normatively represented as different from the others not only in terms of safety, but also in terms of class. These two elements are in Jack's statement merged into one: the unreal others (visible only on TV) are a guarantee of both his economic status and personal safety: as long as the disaster happens to them, it does not happen to him. By implying a necessary causal relation between economic status and personal safety, media representations construct and enforce specific subject positions by guiding the subject how to look.

For DeLillo, such media conditioning of the human eye results in an even more radical connection between the subject's look and the camera-eye. The eye is literally *assimilated* to the camera (by another cynical and acute observer, Jack's son Heinrich) in the following dialogue:

Through his mask Heinrich said, "Did you ever really look at your eye?"



"What do you mean?" Denise said, showing immediate interest, as though we were lazing away a midsummer day on the front porch.

"Your own eye. Do you know which part is which?"

"You mean like the iris, the pupil?"

"Those are the publicized parts. What about the vitreous body? What about the lens?"

The lens is tricky. How many people even know they have a lens? They think 'lens' must be 'camera.'" (158)

Such assimilation is responsible for a completely televisual view of the world. In a highly aestheticized description, a car crash that Jack perceives assumes "the eloquence of the formal composition" (122) and, in another, the toxic cloud seems to him "part of a sound-and-light show" (128). Interestingly, what makes the toxic cloud visible are the lights of the army helicopters. Clearly, what people see relies completely on the agents of the system: the media (TV-camera) and the figures of legal force (military helicopters). While in the bank machine scene the violent act of expulsion rested on a tacit confirmation by the exclusive look, here the act of looking shows its absolute dependence on the agencies of the system's power.

The evacuation example demonstrates how the visual media are responsible for the exclusive logic of Jack's look. This look, most clearly exemplified in Jack's act of overlooking the insane person being thrown out of the bank, is a variant of the gaze of the TV

camera in the analyzed CNN Pynchon coverage. Performed by the camera-eluding Pynchon, the veiling was meant to be an oppositional act of an individual aimed against the commodifying power of the media industry. On the other hand, in his inability to adequately represent the seen, Jack is aligned with the position of the camera eye, which corresponds to the position of the dominant gaze. Logically, a precondition for such configuration is the alignment of camera with the gaze. According to Silverman,

[d]ue to its association with a 'true' and 'objective vision,' the camera has been installed ever since the early nineteenth century as the primary trope through which the Western subject apprehends the gaze. [...] Not only does the camera work to define the contemporary gaze in certain decisive ways, but the camera derives most of its psychic significance through its alignment with the gaze. When we feel the social gaze focused upon us, we feel photographically 'framed.' However, the converse is also true: when a real camera is trained upon us, we feel ourselves subjectively constituted, as if the resulting photograph could somehow determine 'who' we are.

(135)

Jack's alignment with the camera eye is an attempt at mimicking a power that is able to determine positions for subjects. This power in *White Noise* belongs exclusively to the visual media. As Murray tells Jack, TV "welcomes us into the grid" (51). This role of TV as the first

mediator between the self and the world is once again emphasized by the fact that it is TV that introduces/assimilates Willie Mink into US culture.

By the act of visual exclusion in the bank machine scene, Jack consolidates his feeling of safe incorporation in the system and, by assimilating the anomalous other, achieves a sense of harmonious integration in the social circuits for himself. Thus, instead of being a possible strategy for resistance (as the intentional act of seclusion in *Vineland*), invisibility is in *White Noise* reversed and reserved for the others that are rejected, thus *excluded by* the system. As we will see, this deliberate attempt at cancellation of the others from the subject's field of vision remains always only partly successful (in fact, the other stubbornly inhabits Jack's field of vision, but is not duly articulated in his discourse).

### **A View to (a) Kill**

The dominating logic of DeLillo's novel has often been identified as the logic of what Baudrillard termed simulacrum, or representation that has lost its referent. (A thoroughly Baudrillardian reading of *White Noise* can be found in Wilcox.) In *White Noise* this logic accounts not only for epistemological and ontological problems of confusing reality and representation, but also effects a disciplinary social and psychological regime enforced by the visual media. While in Pynchon's case staying out of the reach of the visual media (being

invisible) meant being out of control, in DeLillo's novel remaining in sight of the visual media means confirming no less than the reality of one's own existence. When the survivors of an airplane accident gather around a fellow-passenger (who is carrying a small TV set), he is lamenting the fact that they are being ignored by television networks: "Do they think this is just television? [...] Don't they know it's real?" (162). Paradoxically, this logic seeks confirmation of reality in what it deems less than real ("only television"). Obviously, the subjects of the system relying on simulacral logic do not perceive this paradox. It is through this mechanism, however, that the system works to distance its subjects from various others (the eternal subjects of televised disasters) and make them dependent on the system's media representations as the ultimate warrant of reality.

Since the actual elimination of the others seems improbable (although not entirely impossible), the exclusive look operates by making the others inaccessible or/and incomprehensible. Apart from the languages he can hear but can not understand, Jack and his daughter are not able to say or willing to find out whether the people significantly positioned at a distance, "behind the counter in the back" (179), are Indians or Pakistanis. When he finally meets Willie Mink, the seller of the drug against fear of death seems to Jack obviously to be a foreigner, but of an uncertain identity. However, he is entirely an American product – he learned English from TV, the prime mechanism that fostered his assimilation into the US society. Accordingly, a TV set is at the moment of the encounter ominously, like a weapon, "pointing down at him" (305). Leonard Wilcox notes that Mink, who has been working for a

multinational pharmaceutical company, is "associated both with the informational flow and transnational monopoly, a new world of multinational capitalism" (207). The close association of Mink and TV suggests that the agent introducing the subject to such a networked configuration of the (American, Wilcox forgets to add) consumer society is the visual media.

Under the influence of Dylar, Mink can not distinguish between things and words, and his language is randomly scattered with phrases from TV. This is, however, only a more pronounced variant of the same logic operating throughout the whole novel and has its counterpart in Jack's inability to deal with the reality different from TV coverage. Mink actually represents the main point of convergence for the relevant aspects of the novel that were up to the encounter scene dispersed throughout the text. Consumerism, assimilation of difference, simulacral logic of the visual media leading to the inability to access reality are all brought together and intensified in the character of Willie Mink. Thus, apart from being faced for the first time with the cause of his discomfort (his wounded masculinity), Jack is also faced with the embodiment of the forces shaping his reality, an incorporation – indeed a symptom – of the white noise that he always feels circulating around him, but is never able fully to identify.

Jack states his purpose by saying: "What was I here for if not to define, fix in my sights, take aim at? I heard a noise, faint, monotonous, white" (306). The correspondence between the white noise of Mink and the white noise of the novel is reinforced in the fact that

TV/consumer phrases persistently infiltrate in the discourses of both. However, if Mink is represented as an image, it is because Jack perceives him as such: "[t]he image [of Mink] was hazy, unfinished [...] a visual buzz" (214); "staticky figure" (230); "the picture wobbled and rolled" (241); "his body distorted, rippling, unfinished" (296). Thus, his simulacral quality is a product both of the assimilatory power of the gaze of the visual media (Mink as subject of TV) *and* its confirmation by Jack's look (Mink as object of focalization). In Silverman's terms, here "the look is a 'functionary' of the camera/gaze" which "depends upon the [eye] for its operation" (222). Moreover, apart from being media-conditioned, Jack's look is mediated by the killing device in his hand; he is "taking aim at" the "image" in front of him. Thus, the two systemic forces that mediate between self and the other, visual media and violence, collapse into one in what could be called a *terminal* act of looking.

The identification of Jack with the gaze of the camera is most prominent in the encounter scene: he is "watching" himself, seeing "things new" (304), seeing "beyond words" (312). He is also seen by Mink, and in a way that does not necessarily fit his own perception of himself: "I see you as a heavysset white man about fifty," Mink says to Jack, "Does this describe your anguish" (308). For the first time the unspoken whiteness of Jack's identity is cast back at him from the viewpoint of the other who is not only seen, but is able to see. Put another way, the seeing other is seen as a speaking image.

It is interesting to consider this scene of encounter between the verbal (Jack, who verbalizes the narrative) and the visual (Mink, the other who is the image-like object of

the narrative) in terms put forward by W. J. T. Mitchell. According to him, "there is, *semantically* speaking [...] no *essential* difference between texts and images" (although "there are important differences between visual and verbal media at the level of sign-types, forms, materials of representation, and institutional traditions," 161). Mitchell argues that the insistence on the essential difference between image and text can be derived from the

basic relationship of the self (as a speaking and seeing subject) and the other (a seen and silent object). It isn't just that the text/image difference 'resembles' the relation of self and other, but that the most basic pictures of epistemological and ethical encounters (knowledge of objects, acknowledgment of subjects) involve optical/discursive figures of knowledge and power that are embedded in essentialized categories like "the visual" and "the verbal." (161-162)

What Mitchell calls the "basic relationship" between a seeing/speaking self and seen/silent other is, in terms of my reading of DeLillo, the normal configuration of power. In the moment when Mink manages (or is given an opportunity) to refer to Jack in a meaningful sentence, this order is disrupted. The attribution of the seeing other/speaking image works to remove Jack from the "objective," "universal" position of the powerful (systemic) gaze, since it discloses the historical specificity of his identity. To remain in his pleasant position of the subject in accord with the system, Jack has to eliminate the source of this unpleasant

identification. Accordingly, before actually shooting him, Jack repeats the act the gaze performed on him and colonizes Mink's look: "I loomed in the doorway, conscious of looming, seeing myself from Mink's viewpoint, magnified, threatening" (311). These attributes are obviously the ones Jack wants to attach to himself, not the ones mirrored to him by the other. After the shooting and saving of Mink, which is eventually perceived by Jack as a "redemptive" act (314), the problem of unpleasant mirroring seems to be solved, and Jack is left to define his own self. This resolution is dramatized in the final exchange between the counterparts. To Mink's question, "Who are you literally?" Jack replies, "A passerby. A friend. It doesn't matter." (315).

As already suggested, Jack's violent act is prefigured in the analyzed bank-machine scene. This act is in fact the forcible analogue of the media-conditioned exclusive look. The connection between the act of force and the act of looking is also to be found in Walter Benjamin's essay which, DeLillo's interview makes it obvious, had an impact on DeLillo's work. In a passage on the consequences of the change in human perception caused by reproduction technologies, Benjamin writes: "Unmistakably, reproduction as offered by picture magazines and newsreels differs from the image seen by the unarmed eye." (1988: 223) Paraphrasing Benjamin, we could indeed speak of an *armed eye* in *White Noise*. Although never explicitly used in the essay, the figure is implied in the quotation as a negative, mechanical form of the unmediated act of looking. There is more in Benjamin's metaphor than the mere opposition between a mediated (armed) and unmediated (unarmed)



look. What is striking in his phrasing is that the act of arming of the look depends on the mass-media representations. However, the arming and the violence implied in the metaphor are not only figurative. In other words, in this passage Benjamin only suggests what he explicitly claims in the concluding remarks of his text: that mass-reproduction of images which leads to aestheticization of politics is necessarily related to a totalitarian and ultimately violent political order. As John Duvall observes, it is highly significant that Jack teaches a course about the "continuing mass appeal of fascist tyranny" (25) and remains unaware of the tyranny around him:

Jack's failure to recognize proto-fascist urges in an aestheticized American consumer culture is all the more striking since he emphasizes in his course Hitler's manipulation of mass cultural aesthetics (uniforms, parades, rallies). This failure underscores the key difference between Hitler's fascism and American proto-fascism: ideology ceases to be a conscious choice, as it was for the National Socialists, and instead becomes in contemporary America more like the Althusserian notion of ideology as unconscious system of representation. (1998: 433)

The subject's "failure to recognize" the workings of ideology accounts for ideology's efficacy. In the shooting scene, Jack becomes the repressive agency the system relies on for the expulsion of alien bodies. While in the bank-machine scene Jack could count on the

efficiency of his exclusive look for the reestablishing of a harmonious image, the irritating intrusion of the alien Mink into his field of vision and his life (Mink has an affair with Babette) demands action similar to the one of the armed guards. Once again, the system seems to offer two technologically mediated ways of dealing with otherness: (violent/armed) repression or (visual/media) assimilation.

Mink is not only a symptom of the white noise, but also a specific other Jack has to efficiently deal with. The normative construction of a white middle-class identity thus seems to finally rest on an act of psychical and physical violence against the remains of otherness that are, at the same time, symptomatic of the assimilation of difference in a total consumerist environment. Jack's attempt to deal with the other is an attempt to confirm his desired subject position. This is achieved through a complex act: in order to reconstruct a pleasant identity for himself, the subject reiterates the colonizing act of the dominant gaze (figuring in the camera eye/the visual media) which normally/normatively secures his position. However, as the final scene illustrates, this assimilatory act of looking is inseparable from an equally repressive act of violence.

### **Return of the Outsourced**

Although *White Noise* has often been described as a book about a lost modernist individual in

a postmodern world, I consider it primarily as a novel about the principles of the construction of community in the media-saturated consumerist context of the American 1980s.

Significantly, the novel both begins and ends with mass scenes which could be adequately described as communal acts of watching. The first scene, in which Jack is somewhat uneasily positioned in economic terms, has already been discussed. In a scene near the end of the novel, Jack is participating in a community ritual that is entirely made possible by the interference of industrial pollution. People from the area are observing the sunsets which have since the toxic event become a collective fascination. This time, assuming a collective narrative voice, Jack is seemingly pleasantly integrated in the community: "we don't know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don't know what we are watching or what it means" (324). This collective act of looking is the inverse of the oppositional collective act of remembering that occurs at the end of *Vineland*. Contrary to Pynchon's novel, where the collectivity becomes a guarantee of individual's meaning – of knowledge of the past, history, memory – DeLillo represents collectivity as a mass of ultimately "separate [...] selves" (325). The novel closes with the image of consumers in a shopping mall in which the shelves have been rearranged and the lost consumers wander around unable to read the signs on the products. Thus, the end presents a triumph of the technological vision that is an essential part of the consumerist machinery: "But in the end it doesn't matter what they [consumers] see or think they see. The terminals are equipped with holographic scanners, which decode the binary secret of every item, infallibly." (326) In both cases there is a sense of unknowing, an

existential uncertainty that is, DeLillo suggests, related to the technological mediation between the human look and the object perceived: the sunset is seen through a polluted atmosphere, the writing on the products is seen only by help of scanners.

The same applies to the perception of other subjects: they are seen exclusively through media representations. Moreover, the novel's disaster rhetoric, inextricably coupled with interferences from the visual media, raises the novel's central motif of pollution to a metaphorical status. Disaster and pollution are thus related to a specifically constructed communal or national body that is symbolically injured/polluted by the otherness it represses in a constitutive act of exclusion. However, this national body, like the subjects struggling for self-affirmation in *White Noise*, is dialogically, though awkwardly related to its others. DeLillo suggests that the causes of the grim social reality have roots in the technologically dominated consumer society which, as I tried to show, rests on various acts of repression. However, the intrusion of others in this social reality allows us to read the novel in a wider ethical and political context.

In an analysis of "the reconstitution of U.S. cultural nationalism in a [...] new, 'postnational' form" (Buell 1998: 550) Frederick Buell puts the novel and its problems in a global context:

Don DeLillo's portrayal of postmodern environmental catastrophe in *White Noise* occurs in a typical American small town, the sort [that has been] long the repository

of American virtue and sentiment. These are not just casual losses, but traditions important to American nationalism since the eighteenth century. [...] The U.S. thus evoked is one that [...] has fallen immediately into "Third World" status, not from lack of power, but from having fouled its own nest and having become environmentally tyrannical on a global scale. (1998: 573-4)

Although the repressed other in Buell's analysis is nature, the mention of the Third World is relevant for the present discussion, since the novel shows acute interest for racial and economic aspects of the construction of American white middle-class identity. Although the community of the novel is apparently a closed and secured one, the intrusions of others do occur. The "Third World" countries and peoples can be comprehended, however, only as televised spectacle; as protagonists of disasters or as "tribal people" who are "fun to watch" (95). The metaphorical aspect of disaster/pollution in suburban America thus refers to the destabilization of the structures supporting the existing power relations. The intrusion of otherness comes about as an ironic inversion in visually conceptualized subject positions: the spectators of disasters become the victims, the ones safely watching become the watched. A look at the historical background is necessary in order to see how *White Noise* functions in the wider context that the passage cited above evokes.

As Ann Larabee states in her analysis of the Challenger accident, the 1980s "witnessed an unprecedented number of [...] media-fed disasters" (1994: par.4). The major

among these took place after *White Noise* was published (Challenger space shuttle explosion 1986, Chernobyl 1986, Exxon Valdez oil spill 1989). The first such serious event, however, was without doubt the accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1979. The authoritative Viking Critical edition of *White Noise* (DeLillo 1998), however, suggests that DeLillo's descriptions of the ecological accident in fictional Blacksmith might have been inspired by the world's worst industrial disaster so far, the leakage of poisonous gas (methyl isocyanite) in a pesticide factory in Bhopal, India, which happened in 1983. The factory in question was owned by Union Carbide, a US company. The said edition cites extensively the *Newsweek* coverage of the event, and there are indeed some similarities to DeLillo's depiction of the suburban American toxic event. However, the *Newsweek* articles seem to function also as a good model for the discursive logic dramatized in DeLillo's novel. Consider the following passage:

For million of Americans, the Bhopal catastrophe raised a frightening question: could it happen here? So far the worst industrial accidents have tended to occur in the Third World, where population density is higher and safety measures often fail to keep up with the spread of technology. By contrast, the U. S. chemical industry can boast of a strong safety record. (Whitaker 353)

This coverage, however, does not point out the fact that the US corporation in whose factory

the catastrophic event took place was responsible for poor security conditions.<sup>25</sup> Instead, it persistently suggests the necessary connection between economic status and personal safety without questioning the existing power structures on which the global economy – of which the Bhopal situation is exemplary – relies: "Those wealthy enough to own cars gathered their families and tried to escape." (Whitaker 355) As shown earlier, the same discursive strategy found in this media coverage is the one Jack Gladney employs when dealing with imminent disaster which his media-conditioned look attributes exclusively to (economic) others. Read in this context, *White Noise* is a novel that realizes (or imagines) the fears of "millions of Americans" by transferring the suffering of others from the TV screen to the viewers' and readers' neighborhood. By thus displacing his readers' everyday experience, DeLillo puts the normally viewing American audience in the position of the image on TV that, in *White Noise*, corresponds to the position of alien others. One scene is particularly illustrative of this mechanism. After being evacuated to Iron City because of the approaching toxic cloud, the Gladneys find themselves in the unimaginable position of quarantined victims of uncontrollable disaster:

By nine a.m. we had a supply of air mattresses, some food and coffee. Through the dusty windows we saw a group of turbaned schoolchildren, members of the local Sikh community, standing in the street with a hand-lettered sign: IRON CITY WELCOMES AREA EVACUEES. We were not allowed to leave the building. (160)

Once again, the narrator does not reflect on the significance of the event. However, the ironic inversion that occurs here parallels the one present in Zoyd's transfenestration scene in *Vineland*. The window here functions as the TV screen through which the subject's look establishes its relation to others. However, now the Gladneys take the position of the image, they become the others whose suffering is normally seen televised. They are being watched by those others, here represented by a Sikh family. In other words, Gladneys, by being exposed to the view of the others, come to occupy the unimaginable subject positions that Jack normally "doesn't see" (117) precisely because, as argued earlier, they are not offered to him by the official media. The act of absolute separation (or distancing) that the screen performs between the self and the other is emphasized by the fact that the Gladneys, just like the victims of televised disasters, are now economically deprived, territorially fixed and spatially confined. Sikhs, the ones observing from a safe distance, are metonymically related to India, the country that is in the novel represented as the place with "tremendous potential" for televised disaster that remains "largely untapped" (66). The Bhopal case – as a tragic moment in the history of US economic outsourcing – shows that what *is* "tapped", but not mentioned and thus excluded from view, are India's economic resources and their status in relation to American economic interests. By shifting the site of disaster to the US, DeLillo's novel indeed enacts the (potential) fall of the country into "Third World status" as described by Buell. The fact that the disaster experienced by the main protagonist is not televised, adds



support to the argument that the media spectacle in *White Noise* is always reserved for a controlled access to others.

As I indicated at the beginning of this chapter, a specific regard for otherness and a critical questioning of the sufficiency of its media representations are an essential mark of DeLillo's non-fictional response to the 9/11 disaster. This novel's relation to the media coverage of a historical disaster (*Newsweek* on the Bhopal accident) shows that DeLillo's fiction is involved in an implied debate with the media representations too. The mentioned insistence on the responsibility of the look thus implies a critical distancing from the media images that, DeLillo's fiction and non-fiction suggest, effect an exclusion of otherness with violent, or even disastrous consequences. The visual media treated in *White Noise* seem to guide a collective look that is basically reinforcing the already-seen, the gaze. In that respect, they are responsible for what has been termed here an exclusive act of looking. This look is the inverse of the oppositional collective look imagined by Silverman and dramatized in Pynchon's novel. While *Vineland* provided a glance at the possibility of opposition to a repressive system by identification with its various others, *White Noise* offers a possibility of distancing from the everyday consumer world by an ironic othering of the familiar: by dislocating the familiar grounds of everydayness and illustrating how the apparently monolithic and closed subjectivity/community rest on a hierarchical and exclusive relation to its others. In this formative process, the novel suggests, visual media are deeply implicated as the system's agency through which the subject is aligned with the dominant gaze. The irony

that is so characteristic of the narrator of this DeLillo's novel seems to be a somewhat desperate counterbalance to the grimly represented inevitability of such alignment.

## ALL IS PRETTY

Man, you come right out of a comic book.

-- *Enter the Dragon* (1973)

### Slack Attack

It is unusual for a small book of fiction, which is also a young writer's first novel, to generate as much polemic as Douglas Coupland's *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* did in 1991: not the least because the politics of the novel seem to rest more on evasive than polemical strategies. Or, to put it another way: the only polemic that is implied in the novel is a polemic *against* polemical attitude in general. This escape from conflict that constitutes the foundation of the novel's fictional world is represented in Coupland's fictional and historical counterpoising of two age groups: the generation of ex-hippies, the political radicals from the 1960s who turned into the backbone of mainstream culture in the 1980s, and the "generation X," the politically indifferent youth of 1980s that seeks alternative ways of transcending what they, not unlike the generation they defy, perceive as an absolutely dehumanizing and

overwhelming corporate/consumer culture. This preliminary summary of the novel, however, does not provide us with an accurate picture of the real state of cultural affairs that generated the whole "generation X" discourse. In my opinion, the generational conflict – a cliché historical phenomenon in itself – that appears to be the basis of the Gen X discourse, is little more than camouflage for the actual divergence of critical cultural practice(s) in the wake of the 1990s. In other words, I consider "generation X" more useful in denoting not a generational, but rather a political and economic phenomenon. I will touch upon the Gen X debate only as much as it can help us read the novel that started it. What the novel effectively represents is a conflict of different historical oppositional discourses: the commodified avant-gardist discourse of the sixties revolution and the emergent (or, perhaps, in the late 1980s an already well-established) dissident strategy of post-revolutionary withdrawal. However, although the novel performs a withdrawal from conflict as an oppositional strategy, the conflict that it dwells upon significantly becomes its narrative point of departure. In other words, the conflict-less "X" identity that the novel stands for is constituted in the act of rejection of what it depicts as an inflated historical model of resistance to the late capitalist society. What the novel represents then is both a specific identity (what it terms "generation X"), and its constitutive processes. I want to argue that the specific oppositional strategy of withdrawal from the consumerist system and the related process of subject formation are fundamentally linked to the informing power of the contemporary visual media (or popular visuality). Both subjects and subject matters of *Generation X* are significantly marked by

their relation to seeing and images.

The preeminence of visuality and the central role of seeing in the constitution of the subject are established in the novel's first scene. The significance of this episode for the formation of the main character makes it not only the first, but the *primal* scene. In the 1970s, a 15 year old Andy takes all the money he had in the bank and goes alone on a plane trip to Brandon, Manitoba ("Deep in the Canadian prairies", 3), "to witness a total eclipse of the sun" (3). As he walks through a farmer's cereal field Andy gets "small paper burns" (3) on his skin from the blades of the plants around him. This seemingly irrelevant detail, the immediate contact with nature that inflicts physical wounds, will be relevant for further discussion. Andy experiences "a mood of darkness and inevitability and fascination" (4). Fifteen years later, in the narrative present of the novel, he describes his feelings at that time as "ambivalent" (4). The seventies repeatedly represent a time of nostalgia in *Generation X*. This nostalgic desire for an original past is finally realized at the end of the novel, when we find Andy returning to the 1970s through a movement across an imaginary geopolitical landscape.

At the beginning, however, the narrating subject's story is triggered by his impossible desire for a forever missing and formative past. The primal scene is marked by the literal and figurative presence of the *eclipse*. To say "presence of eclipse" is paradoxical, because eclipse implies absence. Etymologically, the word is related to the Greek verb "eklepein" – "to abandon", "to leave," or "literally to forsake [an] accustomed place, fail to appear." The OED further gives two distinctive meanings: the astronomical one, which refers

to "an interception or obscuration of the light of the sun, moon, or other luminous body, by the intervention of some other body, either between it and the eye, or between the luminous body and that illuminated by it;" and the figurative one, which refers to "loss of brilliance or splendor". The first meaning implies an act of mediation between the eye and the perceived object, whereas the second refers to loss. This is relevant for my reading of *Generation X*: the novel's primal scene is centered on an act of mediated looking; and the looking/watching is marked by loss or absence of the sun that cannot be seen. As I will argue later, the primal eclipse figures for the absence that is central for the Gen X identity in several respects: what Coupland perceives as the group's absence from history, their willing withdrawal from dominant social order and the apparent loss of critical positions in the American 1980s.

As my analysis will show, the consumerist system that the protagonists of the novel are trying to withdraw from is in the first place a system of images. What makes this non-conflictual withdrawal impossible is the fact that it is performed by subjects constituted by an incorporation of these images and a total rejection of available historical models of opposition.

### **Is it a plane? Is it a bird?**

The extensive media-debate that followed the publication of Coupland's first novel always

precedes the reading of the text itself. A Google search on "douglas coupland"+"generation x" will return around 38,500 results, the MLA International Bibliography search on the same keywords – exactly seven. Even a most superficial inquiry like this one makes it obvious that Coupland's novel is much more a pop-cultural than a literary phenomenon. To recognize this fact is important: it is only reasonable to consider *Generation X* in its wider cultural context. However, putting the emphasis exclusively on the popular aspect of the "Gen X" phenomenon can result in reducing the text merely to its status in a large number of media representations. In such a media-directed reading, the discussion of the novel more often than not turns into a discussion of the appropriation of the imagined (generational) subculture that *Generation X* gave the name to. In other words, once the novel – or, more precisely, what it is believed to represent – enters the circuits of the culture industry, it becomes an object of contention between the forces involved in the contradictory processes that inform contemporary popular culture. As John Fiske puts it, "[p]opular culture in industrial societies is contradictory to the core. On the one hand it is industrialized – its commodities produced and distributed by a profit-motivated industry that follows only its own economic interests. But on the other hand, it is of the people [...] To be made into popular culture, a commodity must also bear the interests of the people" (1989: 23) The tension between the interests of the (media) industry and "the people" marks all typical debates about "generation X" and *Generation X*. The usual argument underlying these polemics is that a true "generation X" that was given an authentic, although not exclusive voice in Coupland's novel was

subsequently successfully commercialized and turned into a mere target market by the media industry. Or, as Martine Delvaux observes, in a confessional article on the subject, "[t]he creation of the category of X is symptomatic of a commercial need to delimit target audiences, to define them by setting borders for their understanding" (Delvaux 1999). What remains unquestioned in these debates is the fact that Coupland intentionally plays with his novel's commodity status from the start. In my view, the novel stretches this discursive strategy of an ambiguously ironic self-commodification so far that it ultimately becomes unclear who is responsible for the commodification that was presumably *later imposed* by the marketing forces on both the "generation" and the novel.

One of the few critical texts on Coupland's novel stresses the fact that "[i]t just does not look like a novel" (Lainsbury), and relates the magazine-like appearance of the book – its unusual format, the leads, captions and cartoons – to Coupland's visual arts background. The fact that Douglas Coupland is a Pop art inspired visual artist is significant, but it is only a partial explanation of the novel's "pop" image. The whole "Generation X" discourse was since its beginning closely linked to the corporate media industry that was later accused of abusing it for its selfish interests. According to the informative *The Bogus Tribute to Douglas Coupland* website, Coupland's Generation X project started as a magazine article he wrote in 1988 for a Vancouver magazine.<sup>26</sup> Later the project continued with illustrator Paul Rivoche in the form of a regular feature comic strip "Generation X" (subtitled "The Young and Restless Workforce Following the Baby Boom") in Toronto's *Vista*, "a short-lived



magazine published by auto-parts magnate Frank Stronach" (Mortensen).<sup>27</sup> The magazine soon ceased to exist, but it gave Coupland an opportunity to be noticed by St. Martin's Press of New York. The publisher asked him to rewrite the comic that dealt with "the dispossessed, post-Boomer generation" (Tong) in the form of a guide to "generation X." Coupland, not unlike his fictional characters, then moves to Palm Springs and writes his first novel. This short sketch of the prehistory of *Generation X* shows that the novel's involvement with popular culture, and significantly one of its *visual* forms, far surpasses the formal similarities with commercial magazines enumerated by Lainsbury, although those are not to be underestimated. This involvement forms an essential part of the novel's contradictory representational politics. As I will argue later, the text attempts to resist the forces of the consumer society, but at the same time finds them irresistible.

Expanding his concern with the "workforce following the Baby Boom,"

Coupland writes *Generation X* as a critical take on the existing social order: the heroes of the novel attempt and apparently succeed in their escape from the routinized and dehumanizing living conventions imposed by the late capitalist society. In one way or another, the characters renounce the dominant work ethic and social norms. This escape is motivated by the recognition of what the novel posits as a fundamentally inauthentic existence under the conditions governing consumer society. The title of the novel and the fact that Coupland was commissioned to write a guide to a *generation* suggest that the three characters, Andy, Dag and Claire, are to be considered representative of an age group. Coupland himself, however,

straightforwardly disproved this in his "Eulogy: Generation X'd," a commentary on the novel and the Gen X media debate, that appeared in *Details* magazine in 1995. This article repeats some of the central issues that are relevant for my reading of *Generation X*.

According to Coupland, his novel did not aim at representing a generation, but "a way of looking at the world" that he "had never before seen documented" (Coupland 1995: 72). The title itself, Coupland claims, comes from "the final chapter of a funny sociological book on American class structure titled *Class*, by Paul Fussell. In his final chapter, Fussell named an "X" category of people who wanted to hop off the merry-go-round of status, money, and social climbing that so often frames modern existence" (1995: 72). Coupland uses his source to show how the presumably unproblematic story of three "socially disengaged characters" was appropriated by the media and distorted into the story about a generation: "The problems started when trendmeisters everywhere began isolating small elements of my characters' lives – their offhand way of handling problems or their questioning of the status quo – and blew them up to represent an entire generation" (1995: 72). The "problems" that Coupland mentions, and treats in more detail later in the text, refer to his contention that "generation X" is actually just a name the media gave to a newly discovered (or constructed) target market. However, he remains vague about the true nature of the communal ties that bound the "true" Xers together or, for that matter, their unproblematic pre-marketed identity. Although in the original context of Fussell's book the "X" denoted an economically conceptualized social category, Coupland dismisses the

economic aspect of the appropriated "X" identity by describing the sociological book as "funny." This depoliticizing move is symptomatic of the generally apolitical discourse that informs Coupland's novel. The article is further marked by contradiction: Coupland claims that his novel is about individuals, but then proposes that they are a "part of a larger whole" (1995: 72); he refuses the notion of "generation X" at the beginning only to directly address that generation at the end. Characteristically, Coupland both rejects the marketing exploitation of his novel and tries to capitalize on the media construction of "generation X." Jim Finnegan points out Coupland's contradictory act of both rejecting and claiming his authorship of Gen X:

What is debatable, however, is Coupland's specious attempt to maintain his status as "author" of the concept "Generation X" based on the fact that he has penned a decent, but hardly exceptional, first-novel by the same name—a novel which I personally see as the epitome of the Gen X cliché, in which Coupland's aestheticized middle-class male suburban angst and self-indulgent narrative posturing cancels out whatever 1990s social realism may be at work in the novel. *Generation X* is a novel that may arguably mark, not the beginning of the Gen X moment, but rather the beginning of the very corporate marketing appropriations he now only half-heartedly bemoans [...]. (1999)

Unable to draw the line between the marketing and the marketing appropriations of his book, Coupland is guilty of complicity with what Finnegan later terms "exploitative discourses." In other words, his critique and rejection of the consumerist system appear dubious, since he relies on the same mechanisms of the consumer society that he later accuses of abusing his original and inherently anti-consumerist concept.<sup>28</sup>

According to Coupland, the commercialization of the "generation X" concept can be explained by a sort of generational anxiety that he roughly theorizes in fuzzy psychoanalytic terms: "Part of this misrepresentation emanated from baby boomers, who, feeling pummeled by the recession and embarrassed by their own compromised '60s values, began transferring their collective darkness onto the group threatening to take their spotlight" (1995: 72). Thus, the misrepresentations of the "trendmeisters" that distorted and marketed, and effectively created "generation X" in its present form are the work of another generation, the "baby boomers." The mentioning of the "compromised '60s values" is significant: Coupland very generally accuses the ex-revolutionary generation of '68 not only of selling themselves, but trying to sell the contemporary alternative culture, the "X" generation. This could lead to the conclusion that the attack on the boomers is motivated by the fact that they are directly threatening the "authentic" existence of "generation X," to which Coupland now willingly lends his voice. However, I consider Coupland's polemical relationship to the '60s generation to have a different and more complex background. To argue this, I turn to the novel that started the whole Gen X discourse – "a pose, an aesthetic, a sensibility, a way of

looking at the world, but also the economic and cultural political realities of post-Fordist capitalism and cultural Reaganism" (Finnegan) – no matter how we decide to approach it.

### **The Generation That Lipo-Sucks**

Although Coupland supports his critical assault on the boomers by arguing that they are responsible for the marketing of the "generation X", his novel shows the polemical relationship to the 1960s generation and, more importantly, the politics it represented, to be a constitutive part of the "generation X" identity since its inception. By introducing the former hippies or the "boomers" in the novel exclusively as yuppies, Coupland suggests that the 1960s ideals have been completely absorbed by the system and the anti-establishment 1960s heritage necessarily commodified.

The representative yuppie of the novel is Dag's "embittered ex-hippie boss, Martin" (Coupland 2004: 24). He is wearing a "ponytail" (24), which categorizes him as "an elderly sold-out baby boomer who pines for hippie or pre-sellout days" (25). Or, more explicitly, "Martin, like most embittered ex-hippies, is a yuppie" (25). In short, the generation of baby boomers in the present of the novel (the 1980s) comprises the ex-hippies that sold out and became yuppies. This move is characteristic for the novel and symptomatic of Coupland's more general tendency towards something we might call a generational reductionism. A

scene at the beginning of the book, in which Andy cleans "yuppie liposuction fat" off his dog's snout, suggests a satirical dismissal of the contemporary capitalist work ethic (the yuppies) and an ironic distancing from the "compromised '60s values" (or the hippies-turned-yuppies). This simultaneous rejection of both the present system and a historical attempt at imagining its alternatives is one of the constitutive moves of the Gen X identity as voiced by Coupland.

It is obvious that the "boomers" that Coupland writes against – both in the novel that "creates" and the article that announces "the end" of Gen X – are the significant other on which the self-definition of the "generation X" is based both as proponents of the current dominant order and a (failed) historical oppositional strategy. It is important to note that this double aspect of the Gen X's other is incorporated in the generation's story from the first pages of its "founding text": the proclaimed animosity towards the boomers does not simply come after they supposedly sold out and used Gen X for their own marketing purposes. In other words, Gen X's relation to the 60s generation is one of constitutive exclusion. This fact is relevant because the politics of *Generation X* is also in constant/constitutive quarrel with the politics of the youth movements of the 1960s. Moreover, Coupland's novel and the Gen X discourse in general could be seen as a way of thinking cultural opposition to consumerism that the boomers yielded to in the post- or counter-revolutionary 1980s.

## Reworking & Working Out

It would be wrong to assume that the 1960s culture, that provides the focal point for the self-definition of *Generation X*, witnessed a uniform attitude towards consumer society. Coupland is aware of this fact when he approaches the '60s cultural heritage selectively. As a visual artist, Coupland is inspired by Pop art, whose influence or presence can be detected on several levels in the novel. Exemplified in the iconic figure of Andy Warhol, Pop art represents the cultural practice of the 1960s that countered the basically primitivist hippie ideology of returning to more "natural" social structures and radical political requests for a total rejection of the capitalist commodity society. However, the novel reworks the Pop heritage, and does not merely cite it.

As Andreas Huyssen argues in his study of Pop art, the basic tenet of the representational politics of the Pop art movement was "la[ying] bare the commodity character of all contemporary art production" (Huyssen 149). At the same time, Pop art did not resist the appeal of the advertisement industry and contributed to an "aesthetization of commodity" which in turn helped "totally subjugate [...] the aesthetic to the interest of capital" (158). Huyssen however refuses to "dogmatically reduce art to its exchange value," and argues that "[e]ven under the conditions set by the capitalist culture industry and its distribution apparatus, art ultimately can open up emancipatory avenues" (152). This view is closer to the one put forth in the quotation from Fiske than to the typical culturally pessimistic Frankfurt

school position. On the other hand, discussing Warhol in the context of Adorno's concept of "mimetic adaptation to the hardened and alienated," Peter Bürger claims that "the painting of 100 Campbell soup cans contains resistance to the commodity society only for the person who wants to see it there (see illustration)" (Bürger 1984: 61). Bürger assumes that seeing the illustration will necessarily lead the reader/viewer to the same conclusion he is exposing in his text. If he/she (erroneously) manages to locate resistance to capitalism in Warhol's art, it is merely a case of reading in of one's own desire. But how does exactly Bürger's statement differ from the statement of the Warhol painting? The critical activity is clearly transferred to the viewer by both Bürger and Warhol, although with unequal rhetorical force. We can assume that Warhol is claiming the same, but, characteristically, without drawing a final conclusion: the 100 soup cans can show either what is or what is not already there – they can represent either a critique of consumerism or an indifferent observation on the state of things – it is left to the reader/viewer to see and decide. This transference of the critical responsibility from the author and the work of art to the reader/viewer is characteristic of Pop art's representational politics. The artist and his art become willfully disengaged from the critical social processes, leaving the interpretative or critical work to the audience. That way, the position of the reader/viewer becomes analogous to that of the consumer: facing a variety of industrial products, he/she is defined by his/her responsibility to freely choose from the supermarket shelves. As the analogy suggests, Pop art seems to *intentionally* assume commodity form. This, however, does not imply a total disappearance of the possibility of



critique, but a transformation of the work of art into an artifact of popular culture, thus "Pop" art. The position of the reader/viewer reveals the structural analogy between the pop-artistic and the pop-cultural product: as with the reading of popular cultural texts, the mass-produced character of the text does not determine the popular uses which can span from totally hegemonic to subversive ones. This move towards popular culture is a consequence of the perceived loss of critical positions in the commodity society that ultimately *always* manages to turn every authentic cultural product into just another commodity. The strategy employed by Pop art is an attempt to withdraw from a situation in which critique is impossible by removing from art any trace of engagement (desire) and camouflaging the artwork as a popular cultural phenomenon. In this respect, Pop art is indeed an anti-critical practice. The disengagement is a terminal attempt at saving the "authenticity" (or autonomy) of art from the appropriating mechanisms of consumer society. Paradoxically, such art is trying to escape commodification by taking commodification as its constitutive principle. What is crucial for the present discussion is that Pop art dismisses the possibility of an art based on some alternative, non-consumerist principle. It seems that the representational politics of Coupland's novel shares this basic assumption of Pop art.

The interaction between an authentic culture ("generation X" or Coupland's novel) and its commodified forms is significant for the whole Gen X discourse, which makes it clear why Pop art plays such an essential role in Coupland's writing. The characteristic discursive strategy of *Generation X* can be explained by a constitutive relation to Pop art:

trying to avoid both his art being commodified *and* used as a model for a certain target market, Coupland resorts to a meta-critical procedure. Along the margins, Coupland introduces captions with definitions of terms that are used in the novel. The purpose of these self-definitions is to appropriate the "new" or "alternative" phenomena from the world of the novel the moment they are created. Since the work of labeling is the usual job of the "trendmeisters," that Coupland generally accuses of turning the Gen X concept into commodity, this pre-appropriating move is basically defensive. However, Coupland pre-appropriates the reality of his fictional world using the standard marketing procedures of the "exploitative discourses" that would eventually get their hands on the represented subculture and potential target market. In other words, Coupland is trying to precede the commodification of his art by giving it parodic commodity attributes himself and performs, paraphrasing Huysen, an "aesthetization of commodification of art". Basically, Coupland uses a consciously "uncritical" Pop art strategy and tries to invest it with critical power. What remains questionable is whether this process amounts to a subversive strategy or not. In my opinion, the novel only offers the marketers a set of ready-made slogans for the inescapable appropriation of Gen X phenomena. The problem might be in the deliberately apolitical character of Coupland's text. This conscious political abandon has its consequences: unable to ground the critical attempt of countering of the mechanisms of consumer culture in a political cultural practice, Coupland's attempt at subversion turns into pure formalism. This is not to read out some presumed authorial intention as much as to detect specific historical

conditions for the im/possibility of critique that are dramatized in Coupland's novel.

What Coupland's writing shares with the politics of Pop art is the basic assumption about the position of art in consumerist society that was briefly discussed above. However, the use of Pop strategies is grounded in Coupland's somewhat elitist belief that the *aesthetic* value of Pop *art* is able to rescue his artwork from its commodity fate. Coupland is counting on Pop art's *contemporary* status of an institutionalized, "high" aesthetic practice and not on its value of a *historical* artistic movement that threatened the status of art as an autonomous object by drawing on the motives and techniques of mass-culture industry. As Lainsbury points out, *Generation X* does indeed "address the economically emancipated private self of bourgeois individualism" (Lainsbury), but it is also important to add that it significantly focuses on subjects prone to aestheticize their everyday experience, mainly through numerous acts of storytelling. Artistic inclinations are most prominent in the discourse of the main character and narrator, who carries the name of the figure most readily associated with Pop art. Moreover, the body of the narrator is re-formed under the direct influence of Andy Warhol. After reading a passage from Warhol's diaries in which the artist complains about never having a body, Andy (Palmer) begins "a dreary exercise regimen": "Hence, I now have a body," he concludes (53). The presence of Warhol and, by extension, his art becomes a regulative point of reference: the reworking of the Pop art heritage is performed out of a specific kind of fear. What could be explained in Harold Bloom's terms as anxiety of influence, turns into anxiety of loss. In my opinion, this anxiety is the result of the

recognition of the impossible fate of an artistic endeavor inspired by the politics of Pop art. In other words, what fuels Andy's anxiety is the recognition of inevitable commodification of an artwork conceptualized solely in marketing or commodity terms. As the novel clearly states from the start, the search for an authentic existence implies an escape from commodity society. Thus, for Andy, Warhol's loss of body is related to Pop art's too close connections with the world of commercial mass-culture which threatens the existence of an authentic, non-commodified self.

The ambivalent attitude to the Pop art tradition is further exemplified in the most obviously Pop moment of the novel, the Roy Liechtenstein-like illustrations that accompany the narrative. The author of these illustrations is the cartoonist Paul Rivoche with whom Coupland worked on the original *Generation X* comic for *Vista* magazine in 1988. In this context, it is interesting to consider Rivoche's commentary on his illustrations for the novel. Answering a question about the influence of Roy Liechtenstein on his work, Rivoche replies: "As far as *Generation X* is concerned, the influence was not at all Roy Liechtenstein. Frankly, I hate his 'art,' because he is just badly copying real comics. My actual influences were and still are Yves Chaland, Alex Toth, Moebius" (Aragozzino).<sup>29</sup> The discrepancy between Rivoche's statement and his *Generation X* drawings is all too obvious: the illustrations do evoke Liechtenstein, although their author explicitly rejects the Pop art influence. Rivoche shuns away "bad copies of comics" for the sake of "real" and "authentic" comic art, and the fact that what is here considered "authentic" is a popular, mass-cultural product does not

seem to interfere with the quest for artistic authenticity. Putting Liechtenstein's art in quotation marks, Rivoche repeats Coupland's act of distancing from an "inauthentic" culture.

Coupland's relation to Pop art and its treatment of commodification is important for addressing one of the novel's central issues: the search for authentic existence (that *Generation X* opposes to the fake, "yuppie" one). This existential issue is, as the novel's first/primal scene announces, conceptualized visually as the quest for an authentic or immediate look.

### **The Shocking Miss Monroe**

*Generation X's* blending of text and pictures is due to the fact that the novel succeeded the eponymous comic. It is therefore misleading to read *Generation X* primarily as a text accompanied by additional comic-like drawings. In a way, the novel was created by a colonizing expansion of text on behalf of pictures, in which the text has taken most of the space on the page and pushed the illustrations to the margins. However, the repressed segment returns in another form and proves to be a constitutive element of the narrative.

Pictures are not only to be found on the margins of *Generation X*, they are central to the text: the narrative is saturated with ekphrasis, "verbal representation of visual representation" (Mitchell 152). The significance of this saturation lies in the fact that the protagonists of the

novel are constituted and positioned as subjects in relation to images.

The following episode is central in the sense that it sets the stage for the narrator's recognition of the condition of his subjectivity. It represents a kind of thematic knot that brings together several problems relevant for the discussion of the Gen X discourse as a whole: authenticity, commodification and involvement of images in a specific process of subject formation.

Moreover, the novel's central ekphrasis is an essential part of the encounter with another culture. In this respect, it is worth remembering Mitchell's contention that the "ambivalence about ekphrasis [...] is grounded in our ambivalence about other people, regarded as subjects and objects in the field of verbal and visual representation" (163). The different issues which intersect in the analyzed scene could indeed be subsumed under the term "otherness." The Marilyn Monroe paparazzi photograph stands for otherness in different respects: as an image of a woman (gender/sexual otherness), as a Japanese artifact (cultural otherness), as an image (representational otherness, image vs. text) and as a product of a consumerist culture that Andy rejects (ideological otherness).

All these moments revolve around the narrator's look at a photograph. The event takes place in Japan, where Andy had worked for a time as a photo researcher for a magazine (as "part of a half-year job exchange program with the university," 61). One day, Andy is singled out from the office crowd by the company boss, Mr. Takamichi, who looks like "a cartoon version of an American" (63), but only up to the point when he and Andy are alone in

a secluded room, where "he suddenly turned Japanese" (63). There, Takamichi shows Andy his most valuable possession, a photograph he had taken in his young days in the US:

"[H]e handed me the photo and I was, I'll admit, shocked at what it was. It was a photo of Marilyn Monroe getting into a Checker cab, lifting up her dress, no underwear, and smooching at the photographer, presumably Mr. Takamichi in his stringer days. It was an unabashedly sexual frontal photo (get your minds out of the gutter—black as the ace of spades if you must know) and very taunting.

Looking at it, I said to Mr. Takamichi, who was waiting expressionlessly for a reaction, "well, well," or some such drivel, but internally I was actually quite mortified that this photo, essentially only a cheesy paparazzi shot, unpublishable at that, was his most valued possession.

"And then I had an uncontrollable reaction. Blood rushed to my ears, and my heart went bang; I broke out into a sweat and the words of Rilke, the poet, entered my brain—his notion that we are all of us born with a letter inside us, and that only if we are true to ourselves, may we be allowed to read it before we die. The burning blood in my ears told me that Mr. Takamichi had somehow mistaken the Monroe photo in the safe for the letter inside of himself, and that I, myself, was in peril of making some sort of similar mistake. (65)

How do we account for Andy's "uncontrollable reaction"? Here I have in mind both the source of his horror and the defensive strategy it triggers. Although his own explanation seems to be utterly unsatisfying, it is nevertheless revealing. It is important to note that Andy is chosen by the powerful Mr. Takamichi because he is American and thus partly the object of Takamichi's idealization. In other words, his status of an American outsider in Japan guarantees him a privileged position. As the episode suggests, the privilege that the power gives to the American alien is precisely in the look at what remains hidden to the insider's eye. Of course, the mere fact that Andy can be given privileges by Takamichi is an obvious sign of the existing power relations. On the other hand, Mr. Takamichi's power is associated with his apparently promiscuous sexual history and Western or, more specifically, American culture: he is the "Americophile renowned for bragging about his golf scores in Parisian brothels and for jogging through Tasmanian gaming houses with an L. A. blonde on each arm." (62) Moreover, he is the paparazzi photographer who took the picture he is now showing to Andy. This fact of authorship, or origin, relates the photograph to Mr. Takamichi's past and his beginnings in the media business that ultimately led to his present position of power. The privileged look is thus a look at the past, the history. What is being revealed to Andy are then the foundations of a power that, by an ironic act of grace, takes him for its subject. The value of the Monroe photograph is in that it epitomizes these foundations both in terms of its content (an icon of popular culture), and the mode of its production (a photograph). In both respects the photograph shows for Andy a disturbing amount of



American-ness. It is obviously excessive and *unpublishable*. Andy's elliptic reference to female genitals – "black as the ace of spades" – and his transference of the responsibility for the look to the reader – "if you must know" – significantly miss its subject and thus reenact the visual excess in the narrative as *unspeakable*.<sup>30</sup> The unrepresentability of the image is both a consequence of Monroe's act ("no underwear") and the activity of the camera, the "paparazzi shot." It seems that the mode of production, too, signals the excessively commercial character of the photograph: the paparazzi figures as an extreme instance of a media industry that intrudes deeply in the personal, non-public life of its subjects. But Monroe is at the same time "smooching at the photographer," thus deliberately assuming a pose that allows a foreign, Japanese camera-eye to see what is normally hidden.

Takamichi repeats the act of unveiling when he allows Andy to take a look at what he was once allowed to take a look at himself. The image, through a circular set of circumstances, turns out to be a mirror: Andy is looking at the American culture assuming an excessive pose, ex-posing itself to the alien camera-eye. What follows is more than a misunderstanding. Instead of recognizing Takamichi's past, Andy is terrified by the recognition of his own American history. The withdrawal that the sight produces in the subject is a result of Andy's refusal to endorse the identity the photograph imposes on him. However, Andy's escape from the unpleasant point of identification is not without traumatic consequences. He is "shocked," "mortified," and leaves the building "making excuses, *blind*" (65, my emphasis). The fact that Andy is "mortified" makes his own position (both in terms

of bodily posture and subjectivity) similar to the posing of the subject of Takamichi's photograph. This "mortification" thus turns Andy into the posing object for the photograph he is looking at, or for the excessive gaze of M. Monroe. In this moment, Andy is faced with the power, or the gaze, that imposes on him an unpleasant, but nevertheless, *his* identity through the act of photographing. Speaking of photography, Kaja Silverman states that "[t]he still camera provides a more central metaphor for conceptualizing the gaze than does the film or video camera, particularly when it comes to constituting the subject-as-spectacle" (198). Her argument draws on Lacan: "At the moment the subject stops, suspending his gesture, he is mortified. This anti-life, anti-movement function of this terminal point is the *fascinum*, and it is precisely one of the dimensions in which the power of the gaze is exercised directly" (Silverman 198). Following this line of reasoning it could be said that the gaze that figures in Takamichi's photograph places Andy as a subject inside the existing social context. He is indeed "involuntarily 'photographed'" (Silverman 206) through Takamichi's image. Andy perceives this placement to be grounded in what he tries to avoid: a commodified, consumerist existence represented by the content and mode of production of the repulsive photograph.

The photograph produces horror because it shows too much similarity with the underlying technologically mass-produced and exploitative character of American culture and, in this case, an Americanized Japanese culture). The presence of Pop art is in this configuration through the appearance of Warhol's representative model, Marilyn Monroe, and

is symptomatic of the already described Andy's/Coupland's fear of commodification of an art regulated by the principles of consumer society. The fact that Andy leaves Takamichi "blind" signals the characteristically passive strategy of withdrawal. However, the domains to which he withdraws appear to be well defined. "Rilke" and the "letter inside us" clearly suggest Andy's attempt to counter mass-culture (M. Monroe's photograph) with high culture (Rilke's writing), and to retreat from the sphere of the visual (photograph) to literature and textuality in general (the letter). The passage which closes the chapter under discussion and in which Andy explains his motives for moving to the desert of Palm Springs further clarifies this situation:

"Two days later [after the encounter with Takamichi] I was back in Oregon, back in the New World, breathing less crowded airs, but I knew even then that there was still too much history there for me. That I needed less in life. Less past.

"So I came down here, to breathe dust and walk with the dogs— to look at a rock or a cactus and know that I am the first person to see that cactus and that rock.

And to try and read the letter inside me." (66)

Andy retreats from the identity that the paparazzi photograph imposes on him into the domains that guarantee different kinds of "authenticity": traditional literary culture (Rilke's "letter inside me") and non-mediated nature. The fact that Andy wants to be "the first person

*to see that cactus and that rock*" (my emphasis) suggests that the problem with the Monroe photograph is in its status of a technologically reproduced item of visual mass-culture (to which it is related metonymically through its paparazzi character). Obviously, his attempt at rejecting the photograph and its complex implications is carried out in visual terms: Andy moves from the look at a vulgar, mass-produced photo to a look at pure, non-mediated nature. The two different looks establish two types of subject positions: a mass/consumerist one that Andy is trying to escape; and an individualist/autonomous, authentic one that he imagines and seeks to achieve. However, as the same movement shows, the constitution of Andy's subjectivity remains firmly grounded in the act of looking. As I argue below, the withdrawal from the image – that characterizes both the organization of the novel (pushing of illustrations to the margins) and the focus of its narrative (turning away from the Monroe photo and trying to "read the letter inside me") – will prove unsuccessful.

### **Photo Safari**

The Takamichi/Monroe episode is introduced in the narrative as a flashback. Chronologically, it precedes Andy's arrival to Palm Springs and the action taking place in the novel. Moreover, Andy's description of his withdrawal suggests that the relocation to the desert, the place where he wants to look at a non-mediated "cactus and the rock," is also part of the reaction to

the problematic photograph. That means that the story we are reading is told by a narrator who is significantly constituted by this traumatic photographic event. However, the fact that the narrative nevertheless shows a persistent interest in different kinds of images and often focuses on acts of looking proves that this withdrawal is either unsuccessful or entirely impossible.

Unlike *Vineland* and *White Noise*, *Generation X* centers more on photography than on film or TV. This fact can be related to Andy's search for an authentic identity outside the sphere of influence of commercial images of TV and cinema. Silverman notes that "[w]hereas the moving image consigns what it depicts to oblivion, the still photograph gives us access to a stable and durable image of self" (199). Of course, as the Takamichi/Monroe episode suggests, the photographic access to the "image of self" does not necessarily provide the subject with pleasant identificatory coordinates. Andy is already significantly marked by the logic of images and, telling his story as a reaction to the traumatic act of looking, constantly captures his experience of the world in photographic terms. Consider the following example:

To watch [Dag] smoke a filter-tipped cigarette out in the desert, the sweat on his face evaporating as quickly as it forms, while Claire teases the dogs with bits of chicken at the back of the Saab's hatch gate, you can't help but be helplessly reminded of the sort of bleached Kodak snapshots taken decades ago and found in

shoe boxes in attics everywhere. (20)

"*Helplessly* reminded," Andy acknowledges the fact that he is not in control of the logic of images that informs his subjectivity. Whatever he looks at turns into a photograph and, consequently, whatever he wants to narrate turns into ekphrasis, the figure that, through tension between image and text, marks an encounter with otherness. In other words, the impossibility of Andy's escape from the force that constitutes him as a subject is displayed exactly in the way this escape is narrated. The depiction of moments in which the narrator attempts to elude this logic of perception and cast an immediate look further stresses the unavailability of a radically alternative subject position. The object of such look is nature, which the novel constructs as the privileged domain of "authentic" experience: "There is so little pollution that perspective is warped; the mountains want to smash themselves into my face. [...] I want to slit open my stomach and rip out my eyes and cram these sights inside me. Earth." (132) The figurative violence pervading these descriptions signals Andy's inability to access a non-mediated reality. (This is prefigured in the "small paper burns" (3) on his skin in the novel's primal scene.) The absence of pollution, a technologically induced screen or *medium* that normally interferes between the narrator's eye and the landscape, is what makes this access impossible. These textual images suggest that the integrity and stability of the body and the self are endangered in such unmediated encounters with the world. Thus, Andy's photographic interventions in the narrative (exemplified in the above "Kodak

snapshots") provide for precisely the "stable and durable image of self" that is normally provided by the medium of the photograph. The ekphrastic return of images in Andy's narrative is a necessary compensation for his attempt to reject the logic of images as the foundation of his subjectivity. Unsurprisingly so, since he is *already* constituted by the same logic he is trying to evade.

### **TV-History and Subject-as-Spectator**

The argument exposed so far seems to be in need of historicization. As the psychoanalytic accounts of visuality on which I have been relying show, the visual field is central for the specular foundation of subject formation. In that respect, there is an trans-historical value to the human relation to images. However, even though subjectivity is always spec(tac)ular, the historical conditions underlying the governing "logic of images" are changing. It is thus both possible and necessary to relate the process of subject formation represented in Coupland's novel to its historical context. This will also bring us back to the discussion of the more general aspects of the Gen X discourse mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

Considered in the context of my reading of the novel, Coupland's claim in *Eulogy* that "[generation] X is a term that defines not a chronological age but a *way of looking at the world*" (1995: 72, my emphasis) gains new significance. I find it easy to agree with Coupland

that the characters of his novel, despite the title, do *not* represent a generation (although the author also claims the opposite when performing the GenXicide), but that they represent more general subject positions determined by the historical context. As we have seen, the central agency in the process of subject formation in *Generation X*, and, as Coupland's remark suggests, for the "generation X" is the act of looking.

In an interesting analysis of the role of the media in the constitution of the Gen X subculture, Jonathon Oake argues that the formation of "generation X" has been particularly dependent on the subculture's representations in the visual media, especially film. Oake uses the example of Generation X to support the thesis that "in case of contemporary subcultural formations, the media can just as easily act as a 'productive' mechanism," and not merely a "repressive' mechanism that aims to nullify the [subculture's] radical potential" (83). This view is interesting in the light of Coupland's outright dismissal of corporate media as the main culprits for the commodification of Gen X. Coupland's attack on the media "trendmeisters" in the *Details* article shows that he does not want to recognize media as a productive force in the constitution of the subculture in question, reserving the "authentic" voice of the emergent subculture exclusively for his first novel. Coupland also mentions Richard Linklater's film *Slacker* that gave the generation its nickname. As Lynnea Chapman King writes, the novel's characters "served as life patterns for many baby busters [or Xers] and provided a convenient stereotype for the generation in the eyes of the world" (53-54). In other words, the novel's influence on the real attitudes and norms of the contemporary US



youth shows that the novel was ultimately productive of a subcultural identity (cf. Chapman King 140 pp). However, the productive force of Coupland's novel significantly relied on the adoption of discursive strategies of the media industry: the magazine-like format, captions, definitions and pictures. The media, in turn, adopted the ready-made set of stereotypes that the novel offered in a media-friendly form and used them in its own construction of the Gen X subculture. This fact suggests that the novel's attempt to construct an authentic Gen X identity *is* after all based on the recognition of the centrality of the informing power of the same media it nominally rejects. This logic of both rejecting and incorporating the principles of an informing power is crucial for Gen X identity as represented in Coupland's text. In other words, Oake's contention that Generation X "designates [...] an identity that is always already performed within mediated space" (85) is highly relevant for my reading of the novel.

Oake's analysis centers on *Reality Bites*, but it includes extensive references to *Slacker* and *Clerks*. In these films, that in one way or another form an important part of the Gen X discourse, the characters "are perpetually watching and talking about film, TV, and advertising" (86). Following Simon Frith's contention that "the category of 'youth' may have come to designate not a collection of actually existing subjects but a set of (viewing) practices" (Oake 90), Oake regards "generation X" "as a performative subjectivity, that is, a category of historically enabled behavioral norms, linked in this case to visual culture" (90). Terming "generation X" a "spectatorial subculture," Oake concludes: "I define Generation X as a spectatorship - that is, as the point of contact between subjects and texts. Gen X

spectatorship, I would argue, marks the historical reification of spectatorship to the level of subjectivity" (90-91). It is important that the 'spectator(ship)' is in this case not a trans-historical theoretical construct, but a material, historical phenomenon brought about by a particular influence of the visual media. The activity of the visual media relevant for the emergence of this type of subjectivity is not figurative – it is inscribed in the subject, constitutive of the cultural phenomenon called "Generation X."

According to Oake, "being Gen X has something fundamentally to do with being a spectator" (86). He opposes the "viewing" character of Gen X to the active, "doing" identity of the boomers and rightly observes that "boomer identity is correlated more with participation in historical events (such as Woodstock and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations) than with standing back and watching. [...] While boomers supposedly identify with the 'actual historical event' signified by the image, Xers recall only the appropriation of this image by throwaway entertainment media" (86-87). In *Generation X*, the same logic is illustrated by the fact that the only significant historical event Andy remembers is a televised recollection of another, this time national, traumatic event – the Vietnam war: "[...] I do remember a bit of it. Faint stuff; black-and-white TV stuff. Growing up, Vietnam was a background color in life, like red or blue or gold – it tinted everything." (174) Andy's memories are constituted by television; what he remembers is "TV stuff." However, the TV is not at all perceived as an agent in the process of remembering and the construction of history – it functions as an invisible, interiorized background. Andy's juxtaposing of "black-and-

white TV stuff" and Vietnam as "a background color in life" suggests that the historical event and its media representation are for him of identical value. Thus, the fact that Andy, in the literal and figurative desert of Palm Springs, does not want to have a TV set proves to be highly ironic. Television is actively forming his memories – his history – and is, so to speak, always already with(in) him. The active role of the visual media in the working of Andy's consciousness that is itself imperceptible to the subject shows how Oake's concept of "reification of spectatorship to the level of subjectivity" finds evidence in Coupland's novel. As it has by now become obvious, I consider *Generation X* to be a text that enacts this "historical reification" of subject-as-spectator.

### **Desert Fantasies & The Andy Ad**

Television has often been recognized as important in relation to Gen X identity. G. P. Lainsbury thus claims that "[t]elevision becomes the medium in which members of Gen X see their situation reflected most clearly, complete with regular breaks for consumerist fantasy or attendance to the needs of the body." This formulation functions on a general level, but it fails to account for the regulating role of the visual media in the formation of Gen X subjects. Moreover, the medium of television is significantly defined by its commercial character and that way closely related to the commercial nature of the Marilyn Monroe

paparazzi photograph. What the two visual media crucial for the Gen X identity share is a common regulating function and their active involvement in the economy of the (US) consumerist society. As I argued above, Andy's storytelling is based on an anxious reaction to an offensive image through which the narrator recognizes the unspeakable foundations of his subjectivity. The rejected image, however, reappears in the narrative in different forms. For example, it seems that the "fragmentary, anecdotal method of television" (Lainsbury) is analogous to the novel's fragmentary and anecdotal narrative procedures. As the flow of the narrative itself, the diegetic universe of the novel is subjected to the same mediatic logic governing narrator's subjectivity (what has been termed subject-as-spectator).

In a way, what causes Andy's anxiety in relation to the Monroe image and image in general is the disturbing fact of its absolute precedence. Spatially always before his eyes, the photograph is also temporally always before him. Andy's American identity, that is the key to Mr. Takamichi's inclination, is already present to Takamichi in the form of the photograph before Andy arrives. Thus, the terms of definition of his own identity are out of Andy's control, they are, the Japanese setting suggests, firmly in the possession of the other.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Andy is frustrated by the family photograph that, once taken, is forever removed from sight, "to a never-sat-in portion of his [father's] den" (153). However, the family continues "to live up to that bloody photo and the shimmering but untrue promise it made to us" (154). The family photograph thus sets the standard for the family's social behavior. This shows how the image's precedence over reality has a socially productive or regulative

function.

Another Japanese episode from *Generation X* further illuminates this strategy.

While having a picnic in the middle of the desert, Andy, Claire and Dag encounter a group of young Japanese tourists who seem to have lost their way to the local tourist attraction. Andy, who speaks Japanese, approaches the tourists and gives them directions – in English, explaining, "why ruin their desert USA fantasy?" (60) Andy is annoyed by the tourists' defensive attitude towards him and his friends and relates their behavior to a preconceived image of the American identity: "God only knows what they made of our motley quintet [...] A blue jeans ad come to life." (60) Thus, according to Andy, the Japanese knowledge of America is mediated through a commercial advertisement which precedes their actual experience of the foreign culture. Although he finds this fact disturbing, their attitude makes him "angry" (60), Andy consciously acts so as *not* to disrupt this logic of precedence of images over event: although speaking Japanese, he speaks to the tourists in English. Although this is presented as a matter of free choice, the whole action exemplifies the mechanism of precedence of image that is persistently regulating Andy's subjectivity. This is further stressed when the Japanese point a camera at them and "snap [their] photo" (60), thus effectually turning Andy and his friends into images. That way, "the USA desert fantasy", based itself on an image – represented by the synecdoche of the jeans ad – turns into an image of the USA, a material evidence of historical reality. Andy's friends are puzzled by his behavior and, instead of giving them an explanation, he tells them the story of Mr.

Takamichi's Monroe photograph. Although this episode chronologically follows the Takamichi/Monroe episode, it motivates it in the narrative. In terms of narrative logic, the Takamichi/Monroe episode functions as an explanation of Andy's apparently unusual behavior. In other words, the story about Takamichi/Monroe is a story of origin: how Andy became the conforming subject to preconceived or preceding image that he is now. The fact that, years after the traumatic event, he consciously refuses to speak Japanese and thus willingly submits to the logic of preconceived images shows that Andy has already undergone efficient subjection: in the desert scene, he acts in accord with the logic of images that he formerly tried to reject.

The fact that the image that constitutes the grounds for representation of reality is a commercial advertisement – the jeans ad – is highly significant: it signals both the origin of the governing logic of images and its purpose. Although Andy & co. want to escape the world of corporate capitalism whose overflow of images they find repressive, they are unable to do so because they are already constituted as subjects by the same logic they are trying to elude. In other words, the escapist oppositional strategy they employ does not allow them to escape the constitutive principle of their subjection. As the desert encounter with the Japanese tourists shows, subjection occurs through regulation by commercial image: advertisement becomes the foundation of the self.

## Terminal Ease

I have suggested earlier that *Generation X* is a deliberately apolitical text. In a sense, it is the lack of an active representational politics that turns Coupland's narrative appropriation of mediatic techniques merely into food for subsequent media exploitative discourses of Gen X. Similarly, the escape from the capitalist society that the characters of the novel perform is totally depoliticized. Examples abound, but the story of Dag's escape is perhaps the most telling one.

As Andy reports, Dag left his job in a typical 80s corporate environment and moved to Palm Springs. The immediate motif that triggers his decision to leave the place is an ecological concern for the "quality of the working environment" (24). His workplace is in the reported scene referred to as "that toxic waste dump" (25) and "a Bhopal" (emphasis in original). In the context of DeLillo's *White Noise*, the ecological disaster was directly related to the US economic practice of outsourcing that often takes exploitative forms and is based on an ethical disregard for the other. As Coupland's text suggests, the memory of this event is obviously still productive. Dag is actually trying to escape the fate of the Third World worker which was victimized by the same logic that now governs Dag's daily life. After (or apart from) using the resources of the real Third World, the corporate capital turns upon the domestic underclass.<sup>32</sup> The relation to the Other World is not merely implied: Dag describes his ex-job as one of "performing abstract tasks that indirectly enslave the Third World" (22).

However, this realization does not lead him to connect his position to the position of the similarly ecologically and economically underprivileged others. The resulting action is then not one of solidarity/empathy but of withdrawal/escape.

One reason for this is the elimination of collectivity from the existential and political horizon of *Generation X*. In my view, this is due to Coupland's construction of collectivity exclusively as a "mass" of consumers or an equally unacceptable "mass" of workers. This is typically exemplified in one of Coupland's favorite terms, the "veal-fattening pen." It refers to "[s]mall, cramped office workstations built of fabric-covered disassemblable wall partitions and inhabited by junior staff members. Named after the small preslaughter cubicles used by the cattle industry." (24) The phrase "cattle industry" does not only illustrate the inhumanity of working conditions but also captures Coupland's distaste for the collective. The two novels that I have earlier discussed also offer particular conceptualizations of collectivity. In Pynchon's *Vineland*, it was the ending collective scene that, far surpassing its familial origin, offered the possibility of an alternative reality. In *White Noise*, the closed collectivity of the lost consumers looming through the shopping-mall has utterly negative connotations. *Generation X*, by totally refusing the notion of a productive collective, dismisses both options. However, the individualism that it offers as an alternative does not prove to be satisfying with regard to the dominant system. Moreover, this individualist ideology is not absolute. What *Generation X* actually offers is a reconstruction of the family. Andy, Claire and Dag, although concerned with their individual self-definitions, are together



unconsciously rebuilding the existing basic social unit. The Xers' attempts at eluding the governing principles of the dominant system always seem to end in acts of repetition.

The unwilling repetition of the dominant logic that is constitutive of the Gen X subjectivity is dramatized in the two important episodes analyzed earlier. In his encounters with images, Andy, the representative Gen X subject, enacts two defensive strategies that adequately encapsulate the main aspects of Coupland's ambivalent attitude towards popularity of his fiction *and* the status of visuality in his novel. I tried to look into this ambivalence at the beginning of this chapter. After the visually focused reading of the novel, these strategies can be summarized in terms of the subject's relation to the camera. As the two central episodes suggest, the camera, that in Lacanian terms corresponds to the activity of the gaze, occupies the central place in the process of identification. However, as Silverman points out, subject can adopt different roles in his/her relation to the camera-eye, and thus assume a more or less productive position in relation to the imposed identificatory ideal:

The subject adopts an active role vis-a-vis the camera/gaze only insofar as he or she resists imaginary capture by the images through which he or she is involuntarily "photographed" and is consequently in a position to work transformatively with and upon them. However, remaining at a productive distance from the mirror is almost impossible when one simultaneously offers oneself to the camera/gaze in the guise of an ideal image, and has that self-

identification "photographically" ratified. (206)

The "transformative work" and "productive distance" in relation to the camera/gaze – in the novel figuring in the Monroe photograph and the Japanese tourists' camera – is in *Generation X* significantly absent. What these subjects do instead is either to withdraw from the disturbing gaze (as in the Monroe photograph scene) or to pose before the camera that is centered on them so as to fit the "ideal image" (as in the Japanese tourist episode). These two strategies are respectively referred to as "marginalization" and "camouflage": "We live small lives on the periphery; we are marginalized and there's a great deal in which we choose not to participate" (14). "I dress to be obscure, to be hidden - to be generic. Camouflaged" (18). However, the "marginalization" in question is obviously voluntary, or, as Andy's phrasing suggests, a matter of choice. The "camouflage," that is in the novel preformed exclusively in the gaze-friendly posing, represents perhaps the only textual element that, through its weak military association, retains a trace of the lost will to agency.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

### **The Star and the Dictator**

Concluding this text, I would like to emphasize some general points concerning the privileged position of visuality in the three analyzed novels, that, in the light of my readings, emerge as significant.

In their depiction of contemporary US society, these novels extensively rely on the field of visual culture (what I termed "popular visuality"). In that, they show an interest in the consequences of the domination of the visual media in the American 1980s. Moreover, the novels under discussion relate critically, although in different ways, to the contemporary configuration of power. This fact, in my opinion, logically precedes the rather readily observable fact of the visual saturation of these texts. Put another way, popular visuality pervades these novels because they represent power as being related to and critically informed by popular visuality.

This position, the reappearing motif of Ronald Reagan in these texts suggests, reflects the deep impact of the spectacular Reagan presidency that marked the US eighties. David Harvey efficiently sums up the problems of "a mediatized politics" when stating that,

[t]he election of an ex-movie actor, Ronald Reagan, to one of the most powerful positions in the world put a new gloss on the possibilities of a mediatized politics shaped by images alone. [...] [Reagan's] *image* could be deployed, unfailingly and instantaneously, to demolish any *narrative* of criticism that anyone cared to construct. (330, my emphasis)

Harvey goes on to support this statement with numerous examples that show how this image was used to "conceal a coherent politics" (330). However, it is significant in the context of the present discussion that Harvey uses the terms "image" and "narrative" to signal the conflict between a hegemonic power and its oppositional discourses. As I tried to show in preceding chapters, the critique of the dominant order in the three novels rests precisely on a narrative manipulation of the visual. It is through the narrative's centering on the visual media and the positions of the viewing subject that the critique is achieved. *Vineland* and *White Noise* effect changes in their readers' subject positions through using and dislocating their everyday TV-viewing experience. On the other hand, *Generation X* unsuccessfully attempts to deny the dominant logic of images and remains reluctantly but nevertheless firmly rooted in the visual. At the same time, *Generation X* is most successful in representing the emergent spectatorial subjectivity which is fundamentally informed by the power of the visual.

## **Discorporate, and we will begin...**

The specific politics of visuality that these novels advance register the centrality of *visuality of politics* in the contemporary social context. Of course, as Harvey too observes, "[i]mage-building in politics is nothing new." However, he adds, "something has changed qualitatively about that in recent times" (329). According to him, this new quality of a visually governed US politics that reached its peak during Reagan's rule can be traced back to the Kennedy-Nixon television debate and the fact that "the latter's loss of a presidential election was attributed by many to the untrustworthy look of his five o'clock shadow" (330). Central to this observation is the problem of representation in politics, or, in Walter Benjamin's terms, "the conditions which determine the public presentation of the rulers" (1988: 247). In that respect, Harvey echoes Benjamin's analysis of the impact of the new dominant mode of artistic production (film) on German politics of 1930s. Both authors stress the importance of the dominant medium for the (re)production of political power, but also for the constitution of specific (political) subjects. In Benjamin, "the [film-viewing] public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one" (240-241). In the late capitalist context that Harvey is discussing, the function of images is more significantly related to the dominant consumerist ideology:

[A]dvertising and media images [...] have come to play a very much more integrative role in cultural practices and now assume a much greater importance

in the growth dynamics of capitalism. Advertising, moreover, is no longer built around the idea of informing or promoting in the ordinary sense, but is increasingly geared to manipulating desires and tastes through images that may or may not have anything to do with the product to be sold [...] Furthermore, images have, in a sense, themselves become commodities." (287)

In other words, "media images" are put to the specific use of shaping desires and tastes of the people according to the interests of the advertising industry. The fact that Harvey emphasizes here, that the visual media are actually active in imposing all kinds of standards, physical and psychical, does not need particular elaboration. The media constructed beauty ideals that effectively shape the bodies of people are just the most visible example of such tendency. What follows from this recognition is that particular processes of regulation of subject positions are directly related to the social and economic power of the visual media that are importantly profit-driven. This fact, although quite obvious, is highly relevant for the treatment of visuality in the analyzed texts. The critique of popular visuality in the three novels thus encompasses both a critique of an aestheticized politics and a culture of commodity that is representative of an increasingly image-supported economy.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the "power" these novels relate to is not quite abstract: these texts provide ample evidence for the claim that the target of the criticism is the dominant (imperceptible because naturalized) social actuality: the excessive late capitalist ideology of consumerism.

Since the visual aspect of politics and the entanglement of images in economy is ubiquitous, the novels use visuality (or the experience of popular visuality of their readers) and attempt to subvert it through their textual strategies, with different consequences. While Pynchon and DeLillo take into account the fact that their readership is already constituted by popular visual forms and that it is only through a manipulation of visuality that alternative subject positions can be provided, Coupland makes an apparently more radical claim and assumes the possibility of a total escape from the power of the visual. However, he ultimately fails in the attempt to enact it – the unsuccessfully exorcised hegemony of the visual always returns to shape the flow of the narrative and the subjectivity of the narrator.

In the introduction I have suggested that the critical impulse present in the three novels takes as its target the manipulating character of the visual media whose representations of reality (or their "informative function") are central for the contemporary human experience. However, my readings of these novels show that popular visuality plays an active role not only in the construction of social reality, but *primarily* in the process of subject formation (subjection). The visually mediated power effectively constitutes its subjects and these novels dramatize such process of subject formation. "Visuality" is in this respect central for an explanatory model of that process (indeed for picturing or visualizing it), but the domination of the visual in these texts further suggests that the visual forms of popular culture play a central role in the constitution of contemporary subjectivity. In terms of my reading of these three novels, the activity of contemporary US visual media is directed

more towards *forming* than *informing* specific subjects. In other words, popular visuality (film, TV, visual ads & commercials) is represented in these novels as performing in the first place a regulative function. Since the regulation in case seems to be inevitably linked to the production of consumerist subjects, the second important aspect of popular visuality is its commodity status, especially in the more directly commercial images<sup>34</sup>. Other aspects of the popular visual media, such as the assumed informative function (most notably in case of TV), seem to be in these texts radically questioned, marginalized to the point of irrelevance, or even total disappearance.

The fascination with the visual that these novels display does not merely register the culturally dominant mode of representation. By intensively looking into the field of popular visuality and by focusing on its position in contemporary US society, these narratives illuminate the pervasive and complex implications of the cultural domination of images. The variety of novelistic responses to this domination reflects its complexity. This critical contribution, in which I analyzed various novelistic strategies of incorporation of the visual, is a tentative endeavor to grasp the complexity of the field of popular visuality and to delimit its sphere of influence.



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## SUMMARY

The text treats the complex relations between popular visuality and the postmodern American novel. 'Popular visuality' is a shorthand term for 'visual forms of popular culture,' the cultural sphere constituted by visual technologies, primarily television and film (not excluding photography and other contemporary visual media). The basic assumption of the thesis is the domination of the visual mode of representation in American culture. This text analyzes the entanglement of visuality in the narrative structures of three postmodern novels: Thomas Pynchon's *Vineland*, Don DeLillo's *White Noise* and Douglas Coupland's *Generation X*.

These texts incorporate visuality in an attempt to criticize the contemporary configuration of power in the US society. Apart from representing visuality as the central aspect of American culture, these novels register its fundamental impact on the process of formation of contemporary subjectivity.

**Keywords:** novel, postmodernism, visuality, popular culture, visual media, power, capitalism, subjectivity.

## SAŽETAK

Rad se bavi složenim odnosom popularne vizualnosti i postmodernog američkog romana.

Termin "popularna vizualnost" odnosi se na vizualne forme popularne kulture, sferu koju

konstituiraju vizualne tehnologije (prvenstveno televizija i film), te složena i raznolika kulturna problematika koja se teorijski promišlja kroz vizualnost. Polaze i od pretpostavke o dominaciji vizualnosti u američkoj kulturi, ovaj rad se usredotočuje na upletenost vizualnoga u narativnu strukturu tri američka postmoderna romana: *Vineland* Thomasa Pynchona, *White Noise* Dona DeLilla i *Generation X* Douglasa Couplanda. Ovi tekstovi vizualnost inkorporiraju u svom pokušaju da se kritički postave prema postojećim odnosima moći u suvremenom američkom društvu. Osim što vizualnost postavljaju kao središnji aspekt američke kulture, tri analizirana romana bilježe njezin presudni utjecaj na oblikovanju suvremene subjektivnosti.

**Ključne riječi** : roman, postmodernizam, vizualnost, popularna kultura, vizualni mediji, moć, kapitalizam, subjekt.

## ŽIVOTOPIS

Rođen sam u Puli 1975. Na Filozofskom fakultetu u Zagrebu diplomirao sam anglistiku i kroatistiku. Od 1998. urednik sam u književnom časopisu *Libra/Libera* u izdanju Autonomne tvornice kulture. Od druge polovice devedesetih sudjelovao sam u različitim projektima na nezavisnoj kulturnoj sceni (Literarni konzorcij, strip webzine Komikaze, Festival alternativnog kazališnog izričaja), te objavljivao prijevode i kritiku u kulturnim časopisima (Vijenac, Quorum, Treći program Hrvatskoga radija, Zarez, Književna smotra). Od 2000.

radim kao znanstveni novak na Katedri za američku književnost Odsjeka za anglistiku  
Filozofskog fakulteta u Zagrebu.

- 1 "Dubious" is perhaps not the right word, since the economic policy of the Reagan administration (or Reaganomics) did do a lot for the material advancement of the well-off parts of the US society: "In Reagan's first administration, welfare cutbacks and regressive tax policies [...] cost US low-income families \$23 billion, while high-income families gained more than \$35 billion. Families with annual incomes over \$200,000 profited by \$60,000, while those receiving below \$10,000 lost an average of \$1,100." (James 1996: 2) For a critical evaluation of the Reagan presidency also see Harvey 1990, chapter 20, *Economics with Mirrors*.
- 2 Useful discussion on this topic is provided in Ross' *Universal Abandon? The Politics of Postmodernism* (cf. Ross 1988).
- 3 Examples for this abound in *Vineland*. Consider the description of Dr. Larry Elasmu, the video dentist: "(...) there at some nearby table would be the silent, staring Dr. Larry Elasmu, or a person wearing, like a coverall and veil, his ubiquitous screen image, grainy, flickering at the edges (...)" (227). Another example are the Thanatoids, whose death-like state is intensified by their obsessive watching of TV.
- 4 In one scene at the idyllic beginning of the movie, the father of the family is smoking a joint and reading the book "Reagan: the Man, the President." Incidentally, *Poltergeist* was one of the first movies that Ronald and Nancy Reagan saw at Camp David (on June 25 1982, according to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, <http://www.reagan.utexas.edu/resource/handout/Films.htm>).
- 5 For a "negative" view see Kellner 1990. For a completely optimistic, "positive" view of television see Docker 1987 and 1994.
- 6 Although *Vineland* seems to show an inimical attitude to history, which it equates with institutional, repressive fictions of the past, I would like to retain the term in the analysis of the novel. The novel's activity is perhaps best described in the text itself, as recollecting not of history, but memory: "spinning and catching strands of memory, perilously reconnecting" (368). However, in my opinion it is exactly this activity that makes *Vineland's* alternative historical project possible.
- 7 For more information on the "radical uses of media technologies" in the late sixties cf. Ross 1989: 121.
- 8 It is in this post-hippie nomadic collective that *Vineland* registers a subversive "New Hope" (Lucas 1977). The names 'Prairie' and 'Isiah Two Four' are obvious links to the age and the tradition of their mothers and fathers. Isiah Two Four is named after a verse in the Bible, Prairie informs us, "about converting from war to peace, beating spears into pruning hooks, other idiot peacnik stuff?." The band is responsible for perhaps the novel's most carnivalesque scene, the mob wedding on which they perform disguised as Gino Baglione and the Paisans (93-97). The post-revolutionary DIY ideology of punk ("anyone can get on the stage," as the Spermbirds put it in 1986) is in *Vineland* an active answer to the manipulating power of corporate media in the Reagan era, which are exclusively portrayed as "blending revolution into commerce" (308).
- 9 Silverman elsewhere defines "dominant fiction" as "what passes for reality in a given society" (178).
- 10 In referring to the intention in *Vineland* I have in mind "the text's intention," or *intentio operis*, as elaborated by Eco: "it is possible to speak of the text's intention only as the result of a conjecture on the part of the reader. The initiative of the reader basically consists in making a conjecture about the text's intention." (1992: 64)
- 11 The distribution of characters in the novel follows the serious/carnavalesque (official/unofficial) opposition. Brock and Hector, Frenesi and Zoyd, represent such pairs associated with forces of the system and resistance, respectively.
- 12 Brock is in this scene obviously established as a "good subject for photography." He is "photographic" in yet another sense: his first visual appearance in the text is in the form of "a Fresson-process studio photograph" (130).
- 13 Bal further clarifies the concept: "Lacanian 'gaze' is [...] the visual order (equivalent to the symbolic order, or the

visual part of that order) in which the subject is 'caught'. In this sense it is an indispensable concept through which to understand all cultural domains, including text-based ones. The 'gaze' is the world looking (back) at the subject" (2002: 36).

- 14 This scene, or, more precisely, Frenesi's uncovering of her face, is in its effects similar to Zoyd's jump through the window/screen, and is similarly embedded into a wider supporting framework. Her subjection to Brock is backed by her fascination with "images of authority" in general (83). This fascination is always enacted in visual terms: she masturbates while watching a cop-show on TV, and is interrupted by a policeman whom she sees "through the screen, broken up into little dots like pixels of a video image" (84). Johnston rightly observes that "like most of the characters in *Vineland*, not only Frenesi's politics but her very identity is predicated on a response to media (film in particular)" (212).
- 15 This carnivalesque event, in which Brock's mysterious transition to death runs through the underground, is significantly related to folk elements. As he drives Brock away, Vato relates the event that is about to happen by way of a Yurok myth. Yuroks are the area's Native American tribe.
- 16 In this they resemble the 24fps films, which are literally hidden, stored in a "cul-de-sac," "in back" (194), "someplace safe" (195).
- 17 Concluding her essay on "[t]elevision and its analogs, the freeway and the mall" (Morse 193), Margaret Morse puts forward the apparently radical claim that "inclusion in representation per se is not enough to open the television apparatus out into the public world – the privileged sites of subjectivity on television are those allotted first to the enunciation of televisual utterances and the interests those utterances serve; and second to those subjects in passage represented in the utterance [...] [T]he very formats and conventions which have evolved in US televisual representation work against dialogue with the 'other,' the excluded outsiders." (213)
- 18 In her article about the "Assault on the Constitution" by the Bush administration, Alisa Solomon writes: "Polls have shown that at least 40 percent of Americans are willing to give up some civil liberties for the sake of security, but [...] so far it's not our own freedom we've been sacrificing." For more information on "preventive detentions" of "non-citizens" on the grounds of the infamous USA Patriot Act cf. Solomon 2002.
- 19 Hakim Bey, a contemporary philosophical proponent of secrecy, in his essay *Millenium* describes "veiling" as a "powerful strategic realization": "that which is veiled is not absent or invisible, since the veil is a sign of its presence, its imaginal reality, its power. That which is veiled is unseen."
- 20 As Wilcox notes, "Gladney attempts to 'shore up the ruins' of an older order, ironically by chanting advertising slogans as if they were sacred formulas" (197). While the novel is pervaded with mystical vocabulary, the actual religious experience is always someone else's and never Jack's: Babette visits the Sikh holy man in Iron City, Murray interprets the shopping mall phenomenon using the Tibetan Book of the Dead. Jack's eventual encounter with religion through the German nuns who pretend to believe in God is an absolute ironic anticlimax.
- 21 All subsequent references are to this edition of *White Noise*.
- 22 Significantly, apart from reading to the blind, Babette also reads to Jack.
- 23 Raymond Williams' essential study *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* historicizes the development of the communications media. According to him, the "new 'consumer' technology" of broadcasting which "reached its decisive stage in the 1920s" (2003: 21), was a social product of the tendency towards a new, "at-once mobile and home-centered way of living: a form of mobile privatization" (2003: 19). It is interesting to read the following lengthy passage from Williams in the light of his own statement that all the communications systems were foreseen ("not in utopian but in technical ways", 2003: 12): "The new homes might appear private and 'self-sufficient' but could be maintained only by regular funding and supply from external sources, and these, over a range from

employment and prices to depression and wars, had a decisive and often a disrupting influence on what was nevertheless seen as a separable 'family' project. This relationship created both the need and the form of a new kind of 'communication': news from 'outside', from otherwise inaccessible sources. Already in the drama of the 1880s and 1890s (Ibsen, Chekhov) this structure had appeared: the centre of dramatic interest was now for the first time the family home, but men and women stared from its windows, or waited anxiously for messages, to learn about forces, 'out there', which would determine the conditions of their lives." (2003: 21) The structure appearing in the literary works Williams is mentioning is the same contradictory bourgeois desire for otherness that, in the texts analyzed here, finds its fulfillment in the appearance of television technology.

- 24 Alternatives are also possible: death or, as the actual ending proposes, an unwilling act of renouncing the "temple of consumption": survivors leave the shopping-mall in a helicopter.
- 25 As recent analyses have shown, Union Carbide was indeed in control of the design and running of the plant, despite its attempts to put the blame on its Indian subsidiary (cf. MacKenzie 2004).
- 26 The fact that *Generation X* existed in some form before appearing in *Vista* magazine is also referred to in Tong.
- 27 Useful information on Coupland's and Rivoche's comic was provided courtesy of Erik Mortensen, maintainer of *The Bogus Tribute to Douglas Coupland* website.
- 28 Finnegan's distaste for the novel's "aestheticized" narrative and its lack of "social realism" is certainly a matter of his critical perspective. However, the imbalance between the two aspects of Coupland's novel does make itself obvious in the fact that the book ends with three pages of statistical data on the social and economic situation in the contemporary US: whatever "social realism" there is in the novel, it is definitely pushed to the margins.
- 29 This is my translation from the original Italian interview: "Per quanto riguarda Generazione X l'influenza non fu affatto Roy Liechtenstein. Francamente, detesto la sua 'arte', perché non fa altro che copiare malamente i fumetti veri. In realtà le mie influenze furono, e sono tuttora: Yves Chaland, Alex Toth, Moebius." (Aragozzino)
- 30 It could also be convincingly argued that the withdrawal is symptomatic of a repressed homosexual desire that is realized (along with other Andy's desires) in Dag's kiss near the end of the novel.
- 31 This situation is quite similar to the absolute precedence of media representations of Gen X to the actual reading of the novel, to which I referred to at the beginning of this chapter.
- 32 Here the fact that "X" originally denominated a class gains new significance. Coupland did retain this notion in the subtitle of the original *Generation X* comic ("The Young and Restless *Workforce* Following the Baby Boom," my emphasis), but he removed it from the the new and much less specific subtitle of the novel ("Tales for an Accelerated Culture"). However, this episode shows that Coupland ultimately does not manage to eliminate every trace of the appropriated meaning of "X".
- 33 According to Harvey, this development is due to capitalism's tendency towards reducing the turnover time: "The consumer turnover time of certain images can be very short indeed [...] Many images can be mass-marketed instantaneously over space. Given the pressure to accelerate turnover time (and to overcome spatial barriers), the commodification of images of the most ephemeral sort would seem to be a godsend from the standpoint of capital accumulation [...]" (288). By extending its influence on the field of cultural production, capitalism increases profit by decreasing turnover time.
- 34 However, commercial aspect or commodity status is virtually impossible to disentangle or remove from any contemporary visual form – the only alternative in the analyzed texts, Pynchon's radical 24fps, is located in the unreachable past *and* is rendered dubious in terms of efficacy.