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MODELS OF COMPLEXITY IN ROBERT COOVER'S *JOHN'S  
WIFE AND THE ADVENTURES OF LUCKY PIERRE*

Tese apresentada ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da  
Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul para obtenção do  
título de Doutor em Letras.

Professora Orientadora: Dra. Eloína Prati dos Santos

Porto Alegre, Março de 2005

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"The saints are the sinners who keep on trying."

Robert Louis Stevenson

"I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march, to fight, to create a sense of hunger for life that gnaws in us all."

Richard Wright

## RESUMO

Esta tese de doutorado analisa dois romances do escritor contemporâneo Norte-Americano Robert Lowell Coover como exemplos de escrita hipertextual no suporte do livro de papel. A complexidade exibida nos romances *John's Wife* e *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* integra os elementos culturais que caracterizam a atual fase do capitalismo e as práticas tecnologizadas que vêm forjando uma subjetividade diferente que pode ser evidenciada na escrita e leitura hipertextual. Os modelos que dão conta da complexidade de cada um dos romances são derivados do conceito de atratores estranhos da Teoria do Caos e do conceito de rizoma da Nomadologia. O tipo de subjetividade emergente é associada à condição pós-humana. Os personagens-título em cada romance passam por transformações nos seus graus de corporeidade, estabelecendo o plano no qual se discute a turbulência e a pós-humanidade. A caracterização do momento hipertextual é trazida junto com a discussão de suas expressões textuais e de gênero literário no final do século vinte como elementos que configuram o sujeito pós-humano. Além disso, há a elaboração das noções de padrões dinâmicos e de atratores estranhos e uma explicação dos conceitos do Corpo sem Órgãos e do Rizoma. Esses conceitos são interpretados com o propósito de obter categorias de análise apropriadas ao estudo dos romances. A seguir, a escrita de Coover é caracterizada como um exemplar de hiperficção. As implicações que essa mudança na tecnologia da escrita trouxe para a narratologia são levantadas, especialmente no que dizem respeito à condição do leitor e ao processo de leitura da narrativa. A leitura exercitada no desenvolvimento desta tese coloca em prática a proposta de uma leitura corpórea, elaborada por Daniel Punday. A revisão da recepção de *John's Wife* e das ferramentas

críticas aplicadas nos seu estudo estabelecem as bases para o exercício da leitura corpórea localizada. Ademais, esse levantamento e apreciação demonstram que as mudanças nos graus de materialidade dos personagens correspondem às fases de ordem, turbulência e caos que estão em ação na estória, impactando diretamente sobre a constituição da subjetividade que ocorre na leitura e no decorrer desse processo. A apresentação do enquadramento crítico de *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* explica a inscrição que o autor faz de planos de consistência para contrapor-se à linearidade e acomodar as feições da escrita hipertextual às narrativas em suporte papel, além de descrever a trajetória do herói como uma viagem rizomática. O presente estudo permitiu concluir que a narrativa hoje se constitui antes como um regime numa relação rizomática com outros regimes em outras esferas da prática cultural do que como forma e gênero predominantemente literários. Também se conclui que a subjetividade pós-humana emerge alinhada à uma identidade de classe que tem nos romances hipertextuais a sua forma literária predileta.

Palavras-chave: Robert Coover, complexidade, rizoma, teoria do caos, sujeito pós-humano

## ABSTRACT

This doctoral dissertation analyzes two novels by the American contemporary writer Robert Lowell Coover as examples of hypertextual writing on the book bound page. The complexity displayed in the novels, *John's Wife* and *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*, integrates the cultural elements that characterize the contemporary condition of capitalism and technologized practices that have fostered a different subjectivity evidenced in hypertextual writing and reading. The models that account for the complexity of each novel are drawn from the concept of strange attractors in Chaos Theory and from the concept of rhizome in Nomadology. The kind of emergent subjectivity is aligned with the posthuman condition. The eponymous characters in each novel undergo transformations in the degree of their corporeality, setting the plane on which to discuss turbulence and posthumanity. The characterization of the hypertextual moment is brought together with the discussion of its textual and novelistic expressions in the late twentieth century as elements that foster the posthuman subject. In addition to this, there is an elaboration of the notions of dynamic patterns and strange attractors and an explanation of the concept of the Body without Organs and Rhizome. These concepts are interpreted for the purpose of drawing analytical categories appropriate to the study of the novels. Next, Coover's writing is characterized as a token of hyperfiction. The implications this shift in the technology of writing has brought to narratology are raised, especially concerning the stance of the reader and the process of reading narrative. The reading exercised throughout the dissertation enacts Daniel Punday's proposal for a corporeal reading. The revision of the reception of *John's Wife* and the critical tools applied in its study establish the basis for located corporeal reading. In addition to this, the survey and appreciation



demonstrate that the changes in the characters' degree of materiality correspond to the stages of order, turbulence and chaos that are at play in the story, bearing directly on the constitution of subjectivity within and along the reading process. The presentation of the critical framing of *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* explains Coover's inscription of planes of consistency to counter linearity and accommodate hypertextual features to the paper supported narratives, and describes the hero's trajectory as a rhizomatic voyage. The study led to the conclusion that narrative today stands more as a regime in a rhizomatic relation with other regimes in other spheres of cultural practice than as an exclusively literary form and genre. Besides this, posthuman subjectivity emerges as aligned with class identity that holds hypertextual novels as their literary form of choice.

Keywords: Robert Coover, complexity, rhizome, chaos theory, posthuman subject

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It was an extremely lazy Saturday afternoon in the summer of 1965 when, as I was playing in my room with the double door wide open to the living room, I heard my mother call out my father in a tune that struck me as a siren, warning the children to give way and stay put. I saw my father leave his room and walk on to join my mother, who stared at the floor and fingerpointed at something black. They exchanged worries and shoulds and shouldn'ts until they decided to take action. The sounds, the words, the images, the action.

My parents gathered the children and produced their hostage in a matchbox, half-open, putting an end to the procedure that could be described as drill-like - after all, the Brazilian military coup was barely a year old and my father's re-admittance and permanence in the country as a free citizen had too recently and painfully been accomplished. The tiny black thing thus framed, we all squeezed to gaze at a bug helplessly moving its antennae, apparently dangerous, most probably poisonous, obviously doomed, I thought then.

What followed the exhibition of the captured bug to the family is a very dear image from my childhood: sitting on one

end of his bed, with his hairy bare chest soaking wet - my father carefully examined a huge olive green leather-bound volume of his Gallachi Encyclopedia of Natural History, in Spanish. I stood at his bedroom door long enough to watch the leather cover practically melt at the firmness of his hands and arms. At the contact with his heavily perspired hands the leather coating detached from its cardboard structured cover so that, to my eyes, the book and my father seemed to have turned into a continuum. As I watched the transformation, I knew something was definitely happening.

After a while I asked to see what was *in* the book, and I was mesmerized at the colorful glossy pages, like a Playboy centerfold, which displayed an array of bugs of different sizes, shapes and colors, winged and wingless, long and short, flat and round. Then my father carefully opened the matchbox again and made me examine the bug's mouthpiece, which looked like tweezers, and challenged me to spot something similar among the pictured specimens. I succeeded in failing to find a match, and he rejoiced at my failure. I wondered whether that bug had once belonged to that page and I fancied in how many ways he had managed to escape it. As for the tweezers, I learned many bugs were equipped with pincers.

A little later I was really taken by the idea of adding that bug to the page - for there was where it belonged, not

our living room - while my father explained that that species could be still unknown to the European world - the encyclopedia was Spanish, and that he would see that it was sent to the local Public Health authorities, if not to check its (potential) hazardous viciousness, at least to sooth my mother's qualms.

The concrete materiality of the bug I looked at and listened to at the same time defied and legitimized the virtual materiality of the bugs on the page and I could not help wishing that one day books would be amenable to timely, real-time interventions, on both ends. That is, I entertained the chance of inscriptions fleeing the pages as well as the pages being penetrated by whatever existed physically off or outside them.

The scene of the man-book continuum I had just experienced as I watched the physical transformation of the book cover at my father's touch would haunt, assault and inspire me from then on. On one hand, the wish to effectively integrate that token of my new knowledge to the previously catalogued rendition of the natural world in that codex, to eventually participate in that collective endeavor of mankind's intellect and adventure, has continually fed my voracity for books in all formats and resiliently stirred my pursuit of science, humanities, and literature especially. On the other, the suspicion that the bug had leaped into life

out of the glossy pages has irrevocably charmed and contaminated my reasoning, fueling my critical spirit with the scent of imagination.

It was in 1965 that I remember having experienced the insight of the man-book continuum, the same year, interestingly, Ted Nelson coined the term hypertext, in *Literary Machines*, to refer to nonsequential writing - "text that branches and allows choice to the reader, best read at an interactive screen"(NELSON, 1990, p.0/2-0/3).

It was not before the mid-seventies, though, that we were handed down my grandmother's old B&W TV set, as she had just bought herself a new Color TV. Nothing else was ever the same, though my father faithfully clang to his radio receiver continually remarking to us that while what was on TV was either staged or taped, the radio was swifter and more real, whatever that meant to him at the time.

Before that, the (disembodied) moving images were real to me only in my cortex and spirit, as they bloomed out of the air in the voice of my parents' storytelling or praying, or out of the static drawings, photos and illustrations in book pages. By then I was in high school, when we were introduced to the notions of the theories of information and of communication, and to the names of Isaac Epstein, Marshall McLuhan and Roland Barthes in Portuguese classes, while in

literature we were plunging into the questions of national identity and aesthetic innovations in the works of the Brazilian Modernists. If the resulting text in that class - was there really one? - was not hypertext as we conceive of it nowadays, it can well be deemed as such in retrospect.

When, in the mid-nineties, I was following my Master's program, I was already a cinephile, not to mention a PC user and Internet surfer. The massive reading of postmodernist American literature and theory I plunged into at that time helped me shape and channel my earnings for coherence and sense making. At the same time it fueled the critic spirit perhaps too precociously awakened by the experience of chaos in my early childhood, just so interestingly synchronizing with the year I was first sent to school. Somehow, like that bug in our living room, I was leaping out of the page, away from the company of my peers, and entering the "real" world.

These recollections emerge to me first in the form of sounds and images, just as if someone had started the play switch on a DVD or VCR, though I can better feel than see it, that then triggers an endless sequence of associations carrying me back and forth in time and in every direction in space. It feels just as when you let yourself be carried away by the story when watching a movie - but this time, strange as it may be, you are the character on the screen and outside it, at the same time shooting the scene and being shot,



narrating the story and being narrated. Somehow, sooner or later the movie - or the scene - stops: either the *pause* or the *stop* key has been pressed or the reel has run through to its end. Or maybe the system is experiencing a halt.

In any case, you have been returned to the starting point, that is, you are still facing the screen, though it seems it is not there anymore, as the film is no longer running. You are back in control, back to the real world, back to here and now. And the necessary next step - it sounds even natural to me - is criticism and analysis, ordering, in a word, your response, your inevitable ethical understanding of story. This process of ordering is bound to be founded as well as constructed according to a specific kind of subjectivity which is at the same time founded and developed precisely within the material constraints - the body and embodiment - of information being narrated.

Such a critical move entails an effort to respond to instead of critiquing these forms and to speak *with* instead of *about* them. As embodied critics, upholding the contingencies of the singularity of our subjectivity, we need to apply our critical tools to explore both the concreteness of the artistic material that render sensuous and sensible responses and the more abstract(ional) dimensions of contemporary literary art(ifacts). There is also the need to

reckon with a critical environment itself partaking of transformative aspects that incorporate visuality.

As critics in an age that has been dubbed "a visual age", we cannot shun the sensations that exist outside of language. Furthermore, within a cultural universe that has witnessed the widely diffused replacement of the paper page by the screen page, it is visual tokens, links, ruptures, and gaps that constitute the very elements deployed by the writer/artist to tap readers' emotional veins, more than ever before. (Not doing away with words, quite the contrary, exploring the material potentialities of the word, of language as a human, anatomic and biologic asset.)

Inasmuch as readers of literature have long been coached by the very works to recognize the leaps and loops in plot design, in the itinerary and development of character, and in the experience of time and space, technical, scientific, aesthetic and cultural innovations have played their part in the process of forging and reinforcing the emergence and sustenance of the correspondent kind of subjectivity. These readers have more or less successfully managed to make these elements the anchoring spots from which to exercise their "willing suspension of disbelief", from which to draw familiarity with or alienation from their worldview (*Weltanschauung*).

If a reader and TV viewer of the 60s, like myself, could entertain the teletransportation imaged on *Star Trek*, it is owed to the fact that it certainly underwrote and matched the desire and fantasy stirring the earnings for a life supplied with hope, order and, hopefully, some beauty. Likewise, in my parents' and before that in my grandparents' generation, that must have been the case with the fantastic contraptions that peopled H.G. Wells and Jules Vernes stories - stories which I was fortunate enough to have been summoned to share with them.

These stories (fictional forms) lay on a system of meaning, a system through which we perceive **and** organize our experience so that we can deal with the world, and understand life. This system, founded on both human nature and the nature of the universe - as we describe it - displays a complex dynamics; permanency and order stand as its "natural" condition and as its elaborated rendition. Again, in a world in which human perceptual apparatus has been enhanced by technological and bio-technological means, human nature itself has eventually been redefined to encompass such additions, leading us to reckon with a "new" stance of subjectivity.

This is the point at which the theories of chaos and the emergence of post-human subjectivity can be brought to the scene and to the forum of literary studies. This is also the

moment to recall Aristotle's definition of narrative as composed by recognition and reversal. The mimetic aspect attributed to postmodern writing by Brian McHale(1987), among others, is contrived not so much at content level; it is at the level of form rather than regarding the realism of themes and topics that the theories (chaos theory, for one) that explain our (experience of) reality are reflected in the structure of contemporary fiction, narrative or non-narrative.

Likewise, the calling into question of the Aristotelian categories of plot and story in the context of hypertext by George Landow(1992) precludes the alternative of ergodics, formulated by Espen J. Aarseth, as a form of writing beyond narrative, not its re-configuration, and certainly not its dismissal. For Aarseth, ergodics is a dialogic literary form "of improvisation [...] between the cyborgs that today's literate computer users [...] have become"(1997, p.141). They are different from narrative media, and though some forms of hypertext narrative claim to have ruled out the Aristotelian ideals, they strongly depend on the traditional model that portrays the relationship between author, narrator, narratee, and reader as one of its basic features.

Walter Benjamin's positioning about information in *The Storyteller* has been brought into the discussion of the continual charge against the validity of narrative that

characterizes the postmodern nausea concerning metanarratives as its triggering spark. Arran Gare(1996)<sup>1</sup> explains that for Benjamin, information understood as content in itself was displacing story telling. That is, the whole process was giving way to a specific product.

No less interestingly, at the point of their demise, narratives have become objects of interest to be studied in different areas of expertise. Jerome Bruner(1986) posits narrative alongside the domains of logic and science as a mode of organizing experience, of knowing the world and of reality construction. With an interesting characteristic, that they can be schematized or filled out indefinitely.

Gare brings together the reflections of two major figures in theorizing postmodernity regarding the status of narratives, Jean François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson. A central issue to the discussion of postmodernity for Lyotard(1993) is the incredulity especially toward the metanarrative of progress as derivative of the Enlightenment's logic of instrumentality. Jameson's diagnosis of such a depreciation, in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, is translated as a symptom of something fundamentally straying in human culture: the

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<sup>1</sup> For a fuller version of this argument, see Arran Gare, *Nihilism Inc. Environmental Destruction and the Metaphysics of Sustainability*, Sydney: Ecological Press, 1996.

subject's lost capacity "to organize its past and future into coherent experience" and that explains the "heaps of fragments"(1992, p.25) typical of the cultural productions of such a subject.

Mark Poster in *The Second Media Age*<sup>2</sup> points out that the new communications systems that impacted the general conditions of life on the eve of the twenty-first century encouraged a specific type of subject whose relation to the new technologies in the age of the mode of information can be articulated with postmodern culture concerning the ways identities are structured. He draws a contrast between the age of mode of production - modernity with its patterned practices that engender identities as autonomous and rational, and the age of mode of information - postmodernity with unstable, multiple and diffuse identities constituted in communication practices(1995, p.25-28).

Poster compares the forging of new identities within the emergent urban culture shaped by the new practices required by the dynamics of commodities exchange in the feudal society of the Middle Ages to the transformation of cultural identities supported by electronic media in the twentieth

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<sup>2</sup> Poster characterizes the first media age, as marked by the hegemony of image transmission exploited by the capitalist or nation state as determined by the technical impossibility to send real time moving images over the phone until the late 1980s.(POSTER, 1995, p.28.)

century. In both cases we can witness the emergence of the sense of individuality on different grounds.

In the Middle Ages the new identity counted on print media for the dissemination of written documents. Besides materializing the spoken promises of merchant practice, those documents inscribed the physical distance and proximity, the space within which negotiations of self-interest were preserved. This reaffirmed the bodily dimension of individuals, understood as the site of a coherent and stable consciousness grounded in independent cognitive abilities to act and speak in distinctively new ways of establishing interaction.

The electronic media integration - multimedia - operates a complete reconfiguration of words, sounds and images, not to mention the exponential increase in the possibilities of combinations and arrangements of the experience of interaction. The sense of individuality thus shaped inevitably departs from the idea of a centered, stable, and autonomous cognizant consciousness as its forebearer.

Lyotard's alignment of technology with modern narrativity betrays his nostalgia of the fading presence of the autonomy of the modern subject. Inasmuch as he claims that the "computerization of society" (1993, p.47) jeopardizes the availability of knowledge that the instances of the

performativity of utterances trigger, he claims that the information technologies, to a certain degree, comply with the impulse towards totalitarian control.

The point to be made here is that he cannot admit of an alternative role to these technologies in terms of empowering the "little story", the "little narrativity" he aligns with postmodern culture. Though outlining the trajectory of the legitimization of narrative structures along premodern, modern and postmodern times, Lyotard fails to engage his own narrative into the radical transformation of postmodern subjectivity.

Still, he casts the postmodern little (as opposed to grand) narrative as a kind of loop back into the functions of premodern<sup>3</sup> language, like the tribal myth - regarding the playfulness and validation of the differential aspect of each re-telling (utterance). Interestingly, his "paralogy", the production of the unknown, is central to the communication on the Internet and is also put into practice in virtual reality.

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<sup>3</sup>The stories in premodern society function to legitimate institutions, contain several forms of language, construct a nonlinear temporality in which past and present are represented and repetition of the story is synchronal. In these stories listeners are possible senders integrated in the always previously heard narrative, and everyone can be a legitimate narrator. Diversely, modern society stories are firmly established in the narratives about science, characterized by the notion that language - only denotative - does not legitimate institutions, temporality is linear and diachronic, and validation is not achieved by repetition of the story. Besides, listeners are not validated senders or narrators. (POSTER, 1995, p.25)



Nonetheless, in the late sixties, as today, most of the literature being produced matches the technical conventions of the nineteenth century, as John Barth contended in his controversial essay *The Literature of Exhaustion*. In his analysis of Jorge Luis Borges's *Pierre Menard, author of the Quixote*, Barth points out the ingenious treatment Borges contrives to "the theme [...] of the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessary, of writing original works of literature" by formulating an aesthetic solution to "an intellectual dead end" (BARTH, 1997, p.69-70).

The issue at stake was that of the death of the author, especially, and in a playful way Borges turns into a trickster, for he carves new venues for human invention in an apparent theoretical stalemate. By assigning Pierre Menard the status of author of full chapters of the emblematic innovative novel by Cervantes, he not only mirrors/jolts back at the reader's face the potential fallacy of the notion of textual authority, but he also problematizes the issue of originality while at the same time making an artistic, if not political, statement about the vitality of his condition as "author".

Borges rejects the dominant ideology of ultimacies of the time and reminds us of the mutual constitution of language and subjectivity, which does not seem to be amenable to exhaustion. Medium or message, whatever the author's

choice to conceive of language, we can trust Marshall McLuhan's motto that the medium is the message.

By changing the medium we may come up with new messages or with new ways of re-appropriating old ones. In the second age of media, in the mode of communication in electronic environments, Borges illuminates the task facing the authors of hypertext fiction: the necessity of putting language and its outdated technical modes into ever new and original uses. Yet, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, warn us that we can easily be trapped into technonarcissism, and that "no typographical cleverness, no lexical agility, no blending or creation of words, no syntactical boldness" can substitute for the multiple, for multiplicity instead of unity (DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.22).

Concerning the association of the technological advancements with the subjectivity at play, we have watched two main positions being held in theory and criticism. They differ basically as to how they conceive of the interplay between the notion of subjectivity and the role of technology in its constitution.

One chooses to stick to the notion of individuality shaped by/within print culture - understood as one form of the cultural basis of modern society that fostered the

rational, autonomous, centered individual. This view regards electronic media as enhancements to be deployed by this same form of identity. George Steiner(1991), for example, prescribes an ecological therapy in a form of a diet from all media - this is the only way for the body, not only the human body, but the artistic body as well, to be saved from becoming wetware, a biological analogy of hardware and software.

The other position entertains the dynamics of constitution of multiple forms of identity precisely enhanced by technology and not necessarily already modeled forms of individuality. The latter corresponds to the postmodern possibilities of fragmented, fractured, mobile and volatile identities being nurtured by/within postmodern culture.

The information superhighways of the nineties with their capabilities of encoding sound, text and image digitally, and the ability to compress this information, among other innovations, have dramatically enlarged the quantity and types of information that can be transmitted as well as increased the flow of communications. They, too, can be assimilated within the rhetoric of a potent tool that, despite bringing new efficiencies to communication, by itself changes nothing.

In this way, the media is only an updating of previous technologies, and the Internet an upgrading of the telephone, for example. Grounded on that same notion of the modern subjectivity, it does not implicate the re-conception of institutions such as the family, the community or the state. No new cultural formations of the (modern) self are imagined.

The relatively effortless reproduction and distribution of information poses a problem for capitalism and its modern ideas of property: how to contain the word and the image, to bind them to proper names and logos when they flit about at the speed of light and procreate so rapidly. What is more, this reproduction and distribution bear a rhizomatic fashion, taking place at any decentered location - a configuration that challenges the power structure typical of bureaucracy.

The notion of rhizome, as opposed to the notion of the tree or arborescent structure is developed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2003). They discuss the process of subjectification in an effort to not only go beyond but also eventually depart from the Freudian framework within which we have modeled our agency as both readers and writers. They put forward schizoanalysis to counter Freud's psychoanalysis.

According to their model, the rendition of subjectivity in the representative model of a tree, which can also be

found in Noam Chomsky's generative linguistics model, rests on a logic of tracing and reproduction of something that comes always already-made. The object of linguistics (the language system) and the object of psychoanalysis (the unconscious), understood and envisioned as a tree, are themselves representative, their elements can be traced by following a genetic axis and a syntagmatic structure. The genetic axis gives the tree its unity, the basis upon which stages are laid on in a succession; the structure, hierarchically displaying ordered levels that reproduce patterns of constituents, ensures that the unity will remain traceable in another dimension. The botanic model of the arborescent structure "articulates and hierarchizes tracings; tracings are like the leaves of a tree"(DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.12). In this way, subjectification, within the constraints of the arborescent model, is not amenable to analysis as a process, open to unpredictable developments, entertaining all sorts of variables, because the premise is that there is always a de facto state kept in a state of *equilibrium*, displaying symmetry, ready to be rescued by the analyst.

Unlike the tree, the rhizome is configured as a "map and **not** a tracing"<sup>4</sup>(DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.12). Unlike tracing, the map does not *reproduce* a system "already there".

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<sup>4</sup>My emphasis.

Rather, the map *constructs* its object in contact with the real, in experimentation, it is "open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. [...]. A map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back to 'the same'"(DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.12).

The opposition between tracing and map is further explored to avoid falling prey to an all too obvious binary, symmetrical, revertible and consequently often moralizing dualism, which would reinstate the map as made up of necessary previous tracing maneuvers. Of course, the rhizome **can** and still most often **is** translated into a tree to fit the description of analytic rational thought as advancing from simple to complex arrangements.

However, what the tracing eventually does to the map is to apply its own skeleton, its organizational configuration composed of axes of signification and levels of depth (subjectification, hierarchy) to stabilize and neutralize multiplicities (to unify divergence). In so being, tracing can only reproduce the points of structuration of the map, not the map (the tree can only display the rhizome's incipient taproots, not the full rhizome). It ends up by reproducing itself "when it thinks it is reproducing something else"(DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.13). Therefore, it is the tracing that should be read against the map in a

methodological procedure, as long as we keep in mind that this does not correspond to a symmetrical operation to reading the map as a resultant of the reading of its constitutive tracings.

Tracings cannot be the exclusive constituents of map. The rhizome is an acentered, non-hierarchical and non-signifying system defined not by a de facto state but instead by a circulation of states that is not regulated by pre-established paths according to modes of communication that reproduce an overarching and all-encompassing regime. The rhizome is a stance of becoming, it has no beginning or end, it is always in the middle - understood not as an average, not a location between things to localize a relation going from one point to the other and back again. The rhizome stands as a point where to start proceeding, a space through which to move, coming and going rather than starting and finishing.

Deleuze and Guattari close their introductory chapter to *A Thousand Plateaus* with a remark about contemporary American literature, in comparison to other instances of literature works that also challenge conceptions of voyage and movement as initiatory and therefore mystifying.

American literature, and already English literature, manifest this rhizomatic direction to an even greater extent; they know how to move between things, establish a logic of the AND,

overthrow ontology, do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings. [...]. *Between things* does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle (DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.25).

The rhizome, thus, serves as an instance of model of complexity drawn from philosophy and psychoanalysis, to be paired up with other models of complexity described within the field of physics. The imagery of the stream, a course of water flow, Deleuze and Guattari deploy to characterize the rhizomatic feature of American literature fortuitously coincides with the natural phenomenon of the flow of water interrupted by a rock, which is conceptualized in physics, in the study of far-from-equilibrium systems, as bifurcation.

In the preface to *Beautiful Chaos, Chaos Theory and Metachaotics in Recent American Fiction* (2000), Gordon E. Slethaug presents the reader with a very didactical introduction to two kinds of systems, orderly (in equilibrium) and disorderly (complex, far-from-equilibrium). The former is the object of general system theory; the latter, the object of stochastics and chaos theory.

The fundamental concept in the study of disorderly systems, which involves the reckoning with uncontrollable and unpredictable randomness, is understood as one of the basic



forms of natural (nature's) behavior. The example of the water flow is thus described and explained,

[w]hen, for example, the flow of water is interrupted by a rock, the water separates and flows around it, but instead of joining and providing an even flow after circling the rock, the water goes into a turbulent spin, creating at least two vortices and sometimes endless eddies within eddies. The larger vortices break into ever-smaller ones, the actual number and intensity depending upon the velocity of the water (SLETHAUG, 2000, p.xxi).

Worth of noticing is the pairing up of the notions of transversality and speed of movement in the two previous quotations. For Deleuze and Guattari, the perpendicular direction, featured in the flow in between, which disables the stream borders, "nullifying beginnings and ends", gathers its speed from/at "the middle", like a vector. For Slethaug, the rock as a perpendicular vector to the water flow starts a continual branching of vortices that will bear the speed resulting from the dynamic process of bifurcation, opening the space between continuously, and may well be indefinitely.

Slethaug, still drawing on the natural phenomenon, introduces the concept of bifurcation,

[h]owever random, these vortices and eddies will distribute themselves over time and space, potentially creating choppy, swirling water, in which the flow will never be as it was: a new, much more complex pattern replaces the old in subtle and often dramatic ways. Turbulence and its effects are, then, parts of complexity. [...]. Bifurcation is the term used to describe the sudden change from a stable system to an

unstable/stable one, the change from equilibrium to nonequilibrium, to far-from-equilibrium, or to a very different state of equilibrium. At some point [...] the stable point [...] disintegrates or breaks down and forks, simultaneously creating both stability and instability (SLETHAUG, 2000, p.xxi).

The new behavior, the behavior emerged in between, after bifurcation, is understood as part of the system's self-organization, and it may follow either a repeatable, recursive pattern or follow a pattern only in retrospect, as something initially utterly unpredictable. Later in *Beautiful Chaos*, these two instances of complex behavior are illustrated as informing the structural choice in the recent works of fiction by John Barth, Toni Morrison, and Thomas Pynchon, among others.

The paths I will be constructing in the process of presenting the readings of Robert Coover's novels *John's Wife* (1996) and *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* (2002) will refer to these models of complexity - the rhizome and chaos - concerning the hypertextual mode attributed to his works by theoreticians such as Stuart Moulthrop, Espen Aarseth, and Rainee Koskimaa, and their mythopoetic and metafictional feature explored by scholars such as Jean-François Chassay, Marc Chenétier, and Larry McCaffery. At the same time, I will examine the problematization these two novels pose to narratological categories of literary analysis, what should serve the purpose of characterizing this sample of Coover's

work as innovations in terms of the form of the novel as narrative genre and as tokens of literature as an expressive form of a culture founded on the notion of post-humanity forwarded by N. Katherine Hayles.

The second chapter offers a characterization of what David Miall(2003) called "the hypertextual moment", and weaves together the concepts of hypertext, the novel as form and the posthuman subject. This should serve as a contextualization and explanation of the rationale that presents the models of complexity of chaos theory and of rhizome as they refer to the structural elements that shape the novels *John's Wife* and *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*, respectively. Though both models can be derived from the reading of any one novel, for illustrative and didactic purposes I will associate the dynamic models of recursivity and reversibility (chaos) to the former and the rhizome to the latter. The characters John's wife and Pauline illustrate the notion of strange attractors as described in physics, whereas Lucky Pierre stands as an instance of the body without organs of schizoanalysis (or nomadology).

Chapter three characterizes Coover's writing as hyperfiction and draws some narratological implications to the literary analysis of this instance of narrative form. I especially address the idea of character as an embodied existence to be reckoned with as an essential element in the

organization of plot and with an impact on the dynamics of the reading process, on the level of the reader as constitutive of the work. This is based on Daniel Punday's revision of the narratological models as a historically specific formation grounded on the modern view of the world and of the subject. Punday argues that narrative, after deconstruction, yields different outlines, and as such escape the constraints imposed by those models.

Chapter four presents the revision of the critical corpus on *John's Wife*, which shows that, though the issue of complexity has been continually raised as a distinctive feature of the novel, it has not been actually described. The analysis of the novel here faces the challenge of accounting for one possibility of a deeper examination of where and how complexity is approached in Coover's "enigmatic" novel. *John's Wife* has been compared to William Gass's *Willie Master's Lonesome Wife* and Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, among others. Respectively, the analogies concerned the association of the relationship between the reader and the text as a physical experience likening that of a sexual intercourse, and the character of the vanishing woman who is only recalled within the narration.

Coover's latest novel, *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*. *Director's Cut*, published in October 2002, is examined in the fifth chapter. Coover borrowed the title of the novel from a

B-movie from the sixties, whose eponymous hero wandered from clip to clip facing naked women without ever getting sexually aroused by any, as a matter of fact, without even touching them. So far, the novel has received few and disparate reviews, which range from claims to the return of the Hays Code<sup>5</sup>, only this time applying to print literature, to acknowledgments of Coover's geniality and inventiveness as an unyielding innovator. Here, it is approached as a serious work of literary art at a time in which, as Coover himself puts it, art has been migrating to digital environments and formats. And it is his plight to make sure there is a place for literature (in) there.

Rhizome is the model of complexity that seemed most appropriate to deal with the abundance of forkings and reforkings, lines of flight and resisting consistency that I identified as I faced the challenge of "becoming" a reader of the novel. Besides, the glaring musical model that surfaced at my very first dabbling with the book (physical artifact in print form) presented itself as amenable to such interpretation.

Be it by reading its opening lines aloud - one cannot easily resist Coover's artful in-scription of the summoning of the muses, be it in jumping from section to section (reel

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<sup>5</sup> A self-regulatory code of ethics created in 1930 by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (M.P.P.D.A.), under Will H. Hays.

to reel), whose opening words reproduce Johan Sebastian Bach's ciphering of the octave, as borrowed from the alphabetic ordering multiplicity is enacted and asserted. The multiple levels of the story intertwine and still configure a story.

Eventually, the final remarks will not stand precisely as conclusions but rather as a *plateau*, a provisional vantage point, in the middle, with the text in the process of its composition and as configurations of lines of flight being drawn along the rhizome that Coover's works, fictional and nonfictional, metafictional or metachaotic, enact. The subjectivities that evolve at the present stage of development of our mediatized, digitally enhanced and contained civilization no longer subject to the blockage of flow instantiated by monolinear, unproblematic plots and characters. Though one cannot escape their shaping force, there is always the alternative of actively engaging them so as to allow for the new, for the constant flow of desire on becoming one with the map - the man-book continuum being one among the many possibilities.

## **2. MODELS OF COMPLEXITY: CHAOS THEORY AND RHIZOME**

Complexity can be defined in as many ways as there are attempts to come to terms with experiences that escape the restraining framework of ordinary, highly conventionalized renditions of some totalized ordered unity resulting from a unidirectional process. The first idea that comes to mind is that complexity refers primarily to the opposite of order - chaos, in a word. However, as the sciences of complexity have elaborated, chaos and order are best understood as not mutually excluding. Rather, these conditions are mutually dependent and organize a necessary relation in some systems. Chaos can be rendered as a stage leading to levels of order in dynamic systems.

Secondly, the putative chrono-logical sequence of events triggered by some cause inevitably leading to one end - a notion subsumed by such (unidirectional) processes - precludes the acknowledgment of synchronous (coexistent) and asynchronous (emergent) lines of flight along their development. Understanding processes as multilinear, in the sense that every point along the line of expansion or growth of the initial conditions establishes other potential beginnings, compels us to grasp an alternative to the arboreal model of a solid kernel giving off branches that give off leaves on their turn. Rhizome is one of the alternatives encompassing multiple offsprings at any point of

the line of development, not submitted to a strictly layered hierarchy determining the function of each part or component of the system. Unlike (tree) structure, the rhizome stands as one among many models of complexity.

Peter Stoicheff, in *The Chaos of Metafiction*(1991) characterizes metafictional texts as complex systems, inasmuch as they display the features that have been scientifically described as chaos, as part of a movement in contemporary thought that rallies the play of narrative in our understanding of the phenomenal reality of the world. His study presents metafictional texts as displaying four of the main characteristics of chaotic systems: "nonlinearity, self-reflexivity, irreversibility, and self-organization" (STOICHEFF, 1991, p.85).

Whether described within mathematical theory or within physics (thermodynamics' negentropy), chaos is invariably framed within scientific discourse that ends up "by appealing to foundational myths present within Western tradition or to myths generated by the history of science"<sup>6</sup>(KNOESPEL, 1991, p.106).

As we can see, though advancing a departure from more deterministic and totalizing elaborations of the world as

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<sup>6</sup> Knoespel exemplifies this embedding of scientific descriptions of chaos in narratives by drawing on Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and on the Genesis, among others.(Knoespel, 1991, p.105-106.)



system, chaos theory, or the sciences of complexity, remains grounded in logocentric thought. Thus, it undeniably turns visible and representable different orders of organization of elements within systems, but it still provides a *priori* maps for the subject to peruse and decipher a *posteriori*. Rhizome, on the other hand, is at one with emergence as a constitutive element of both, map and subject, engendering temporality in flows of intensities.

In *Rhizome and Resistance*, Stuart Moulthrop claims that Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome provides the basis for a commentary on hypertext and culture. Moulthrop considers their enterprise "a vivid conceived alternative" to the old order - the order of the signified, the order of *logos* (MOULTHROP, 1994, p.301). He brings up the contrast between striated space and smooth space, as accounting for different discourse systems and cultural and social spaces, in order to place hypertext systems side by side with smooth space,

[s]mooth space is defined dynamically, in terms of transformation instead of essence [...] one's momentary location is less important than one's continuing movement of line of flight; this space is by definition a structure for what does not yet exist (MOULTHROP, 1994, p.303)

What does not yet exist is what may emerge, an experience of novelty, not necessarily pre-defined (forecasted) or acknowledged as fitting any previously conceived model - a feature consistent with our mundane

understanding of complexity. The novel as novelty, as an alternative and possible world, a world that does not yet exist, may well bear the elements of smooth space.

### **2.1 The hypertextual moment: hypertext writing and the novel**

I will borrow David Miall's title, *The Hypertext Moment*(1998) because it sets the ground - or better, stands as a plane of consistency - upon which to take a line of flight, in a paratactical and nonhierarchical flow, in Deleuze and Guattari's terms(2003), towards the articulation of the concept of posthumanity within the context of postmodernity at the current stage of development of the technologies of writing. Miall's essay reviews representative versions of the medium of hypertext as an oppositional category to that of print, in order to claim that the so-called linear literary texts - print texts - better engender the nomadic dimension attributed to electronic literary texts by Deleuze and Guattari. He stresses that most of hypertext theorizing and criticism has failed to distinguish knowledge from information and, in so doing, has bracketed the discussion of the linguistic component of texts to "the informational propensities of language"(MIALL, 1998).

The summons, then, is for us to reckon with the complexity of dealing with the poetic, literary dimension of language as actualized in these new media, inasmuch as

subjectivities are engendered in the process of reading - and writing - hyperfiction, or as Coover(1999b) puts it, the genre of novel for the computer. If the novel is deemed as the emblematic narrative form of the liberal subject, it is just correspondingly credible that once the conception of what it means to be human lies on different bases, in terms of "the cyborg", for example, the narrative forms that emerge as its expression have a different shape. Even if in the end it can be reducible to a different arrangement of the same fundamental elements - such as time, space, unity and coherence - only this time put to different ends.

Among the institutions, laws, and habits developed in the context of modernity, there is the form of the novel as established in the nineteenth century as a token of the human activity of narrative in literature<sup>7</sup>. Despite John Barth's statement, in 1967, that the novel was no longer relevant as a form of artistic expression, nearly four decades later it is still seen as the predominant literary form.

On the same topic, Robert Coover, in *The End of Books*(1992), makes his claims on the novel as convention, and presents hypertext as a potentiality-rich medium for fiction

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Punday(2003b, p.19-20) mentions Catherine Gallagher's admonishing remark that, when studying modern narrative, instead of asking why the novel became the form of fiction of choice we should worry why fiction became a preferred form of narrative. He does that to bring into the discussion of narratology the theory of possible worlds, which he claims to have been the cornerstone of the emergence of the concept of "fictional worlds", narrative worlds - which, on its turn, enables us to deem a narrative's ability to construct a world its most basic textual act.

writing. He explains that his unmerciful commitment to "fictions that challenge linearity" and his allegiance to the defiance and "subversion of the traditional bourgeois novel" were the factors that have driven him to teach - for him, the best way to learn - a course in hypertext.

Coover contextualizes the eventual overcoming of "the tyranny of the line"<sup>8</sup>(1992) now, as texts are written and read on the computer, within the advent of hypertext, "where the line in fact does not exist unless one invents and implants it in the text". In his characterization, the line - "that compulsory author-directed movement from the beginning of a sentence to its period, from the top of the page to the bottom, from the first page to the last" - stands as the repository of "much of the novel's alleged power". Acknowledging the premise that in hypertext "the traditional narrative time line vanishes into a geographical landscape or exitless maze, with beginnings, middles and ends being no longer part of the immediate display", advocated by hypertext enthusiasts to counterpoint texts in an obsolescent print technology, he feels comfortable to prophesize that,

the novel, too, as we know it, has come to its end. Not that those announcing its demise are grieving. For all its passing charm, the traditional novel, which took center stage at the same time that industrial mercantile democracies arose -- and which Hegel called "the epic of the middle-class world" -- is perceived by its would-

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<sup>8</sup> All the quotations of this essay are from "The End of Books" in the New York Time Book Reviews(1992).

be executioners as the virulent carrier of the patriarchal, colonial, canonical, proprietary, hierarchical and authoritarian values of a past that is no longer with us(COOVER, 1992).

On describing the process of hypertext writing, Coover brings to the fore the sudden realization of "the shapes of narratives that are often hidden in print stories" and his astonishment at "how much of the reading and writing experience occurs in the interstices and trajectories between text fragments". And he explains: "That is to say, the text fragments are like stepping stones, there for our safety, but the real current of the narratives runs between them"(COOVER, 1992).

Once again there is the recurrent imagery of water flow engaging the notion of complexity. This time, worded by a novel writer - and not any, to say the least about his reputation. Deleuze and Guattari, Slethaug, and Coover all share the seductive summoning of complexity and express their appeal in the same symbolic, if not poetic form.

As to narrative flow, Coover states that, the fictions developed in his hypertext workshop they have put "venerable novelistic values like unity, integrity, coherence, vision, voice" in jeopardy. These fictions explore as diverse forms and genres as choose-your-own-adventure stories, parodies of the classics, "nested narratives, spatial poems, interactive

comedy, metamorphic dreams, irresolvable murder mysteries, moving comic books and Chinese sex manuals" and often many of them simultaneously. Besides, cradled in the dimensionless infinity of hyperspace - as oxymoronic as the phrase might sound - the notion of movement essential to narrative becomes closer to that of "endless expansion", like the one we experience in lyrical genres.

Though he admits that the issue of closure - a major theme for narrative artists throughout times - and continuity have not emerged with hyperspace, he makes it a point that the on-line experience has granted him the consciousness of,

a technology that both absorbs and totally displaces. Print documents may be read in hyperspace, but hypertext does not translate into print. It is not like film, which is really just the dead end of linear narrative, just as 12-tone music is the dead end of music by the stave(COOVER, 1992).

This collection of insights is echoed in *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*, as we shall see in Chapter Five.

## **2.2 The second age of media and the posthuman subject**

The fundamental questions raised by Internet communications for cultural formations have helped issue the field of Science and Technology Studies, a unique *locus* of exploration of the interface between the human subject, art, and science. Among the gurus of the field, there is Katherine

Hayles, who, in a recent article, stresses that literary criticism and theory have remained grounded with the culture of print. By linking hypertext to the tradition of books, she highlights the materiality of the texts and claims the importance of the medium in the transformation of narrative.

Besides, the notion of reality has gradually and irreversibly been accommodating simulation as one of its constitutive dimensions in what Poster(1995) characterizes as the second age of media. Whatever comes to being treated by media is often altered, and this process of mediation ends up by altering the identity of originals and referentialities.

The fact that computer generated (virtual) environments provide individuals with the experience of interaction without the need to be in the same physical location (communicating through a modem, for example) configures a *locus* of presence in absence, in the void, a *locus* of virtuality. This is an experiential dimension that corresponds to dabbling with reality, inasmuch as the individual is immersed in an "alternative" world.

In so being, the identity of the self can be formed in simulation practice as well as in hard reality. These experiences thus multiply the kinds of realities an individual faces in society. The imaginary that the word or the film triggers in the "original world" is not only

transported as simulation but also transformed, due to the fact that the constraints posed by the materiality of walls, or by the laws of physics, need not apply.

Also among the forms of simulation in use on the Internet typically in the early nineties were the Multi User Domains (MUDs) and Multi Oriented Objects (MOOs), the environments Coover deployed in his first Hypertext Writing Workshops at Brown University. The former works as a game whose moves are operated by sentences that are typed to configure a context filled with locations, characters, and objects interacting continuously endowing it with a visual feature, simulating movement and dynamics beyond textuality. The latter adds to the MUD concept by allowing users to adopt a fictional role and to integrate objects of their own formulation (creation) to improve the reality effect. The choice of gender being one of the options of the user-contrived fictionality, during the game the players engage in assuming imaginary subject positions as they communicate with others. Still another form of experiencing reality, of shaping the self.

As of today, the blogs stand as the format of choice to engage in multimedia based interactive practices by a host of PC users - typically, posthuman subjects as described by Hayles(1999). There are blogs teaming up several "tribes",



communities of elected affinities that confer a distinctive hue to the anthropological concept, as long as they mime it.

In the second media age, according to Poster, interactivity is the machinery of subject constitution. Whoever is acquainted with the routine of sending and receiving e-mails, digitally encoded messages, has submitted one way or another to this machinery.

This process is also addressed by Hayles(1999), who equates the disembodiment of information with an analogous disembodiment of human content, once consciousness, treated as information, can be downloaded onto/into a silicon supporting surface. For her, whoever has engaged in this subjectifying practice has become a cyborg and can thus be tagged posthuman.

The term interface reaffirms that for interaction to take place on an electronic medium the fear and hostility toward machines or even the recognition of a change in our (human) relation toward them in terms of space and (inter)dependence has to be reckoned with. The very term "interface", the face between faces, inscribes a reminder of human corporeality, of embodiment.

Therefore, interface design must disguise its own opacity, it must vanish, melt in the air, so that it belies its technologic nature and that the users at every end fail

to spot the boundary between the human and the machinic. As the body gets erased in discussions of technology, so do technological interfaces by users. It is precisely this contraption what draws the human into the technology and renders technology into equipment and the human into a cyborg, or into a continuum of intensities and flows, in Deleuze and Guattari's words.

Interestingly, concerning the issue of interface, *face* is the term Deleuze and Guattari(2003, p.179-182) use to refer to the mechanism situated at the very intersection of signifiante and subjectification, the two semiotic systems, axes, or strata, of language - the "white wall/black hole system". They characterize the axis of signifiante as the white wall upon which the subjectification axis cuts black holes so as to resemble black eyes on a white face. The resulting configuration defines a delimited field that turns every expression or connection into a variation of the pre-assigned signification, and dispose of them as inappropriate significations within that field.

Like proper names or like the form of subjectivity, the face constitutes *loci* of resonance that select the flow of reality and make it conform in advance, by the very act of selection, to a dominant reality. Just like a screen,

[t]he face digs the hole that subjectification needs in order to break through; it constitutes

the black hole of subjectivity as consciousness of passion, the camera, the third eye (DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.168).

In language, the (speaker's) face is donned by the potential listener to guide his choices. In film, the face subjected to a close-up shot may reflect light or engulf it in its shadows; either way resonates the white wall/black hole system.

The authors themselves admit their failure in attaining the multiple and their compliance, though reluctant, to remaining trapped within the dominant significations, as all signifying desire is associated with dominated subjects. Nonetheless, they assert that they have successfully moved beyond the contraption that has set the tripartite division between the world as a field of reality and the book as a field of representation, and the author as a field of subjectivity by describing an assemblage connecting the three fields.

The connection Deleuze and Guattari refer to can be paralleled to the issue of interaction,

[a] book has no sequel nor the world as its object nor one or several authors as its subject. [...]. The book as assemblage **with** the outside, against the book as image of the world<sup>9</sup> (DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.23).

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<sup>9</sup> My emphasis.

The question of whether interaction is a novelty or an artistic category can be approached by tracing the novelty of the term itself, for a start. In the theories of intersubjectivity and intertextuality, interaction indicated different relationships between the subject and the object, in the former, or between the elements of a work with a different origin, in the latter.

The borderlines between the text and the reader in interactive artistic models rest on a hypothetical pre-set narration encompassing plots that unfold in time. Whatever the level of control that the reader may assume over the work, it is constrained by a limited spectrum of time-restricted possibilities (not so much regarding duration, but the unfolding at the previously set moment).

In narratology, the teleological principle that directs all narrative lines towards a single end can be avoided in the interactive model. As the spacious model of the art work alters with the temporal, the space borderlines no longer limit it, what turns its narrativity, its intertextuality, potentially open *ad infinitum*, "to be continued...". In this case, the desire for an end and the closure of the narrative stream fail to be satisfied.

Our interpretations are tested against the resulting physical ends and closures. The narrative fragments are not

united spaciouly in one single unit by the computer. As a result, the computer works as a machine for interweaving simultaneous multiplication of the **rhizomatous narration**. As opposed to the tree, which imposes the verb "to be" and keeps at bay the potential "becomings", the rhizome's fabric is,

the conjunction, "and...and...and..." This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb "to be." Where are you going? Where are you coming from: What are you heading for "These are totally useless questions. Making a clean slate, starting or beginning again from ground zero, seeking a beginning or a foundation - all imply a false conception of voyage and movement (a conception that is methodical, pedagogical, initiatory, symbolic...)(DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.25).

The cultural logic that underlies the postmodern condition can be characterized by the technological advancements and the reconfiguration of capitalism into a planetary scale - globalization, in a word. This reconfigured capitalism holds human life, biodiversity, and the environment as its currency in a postindustrial, infotainment<sup>10</sup>, and biotechnically dominated world.

The digitized and networked global economy and society of the Third Millenium rekindles the post-World War II nausea of the twentieth century. That was a time when we believed the technology we had developed would reduce inequality and

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<sup>10</sup> Infotainment can be defined as the integration of information, education and entertainment services.

insecurity, but, having been irrevocably put to use in the stirring of more conflicts, crises and even catastrophe, turned us all bitter and appalled at our own sense of belonging to the human race.

Such a predicament, easily recognized as pertaining to the postmodern scene, rests on the mutual interdependence of scientific and technological revolutions and the world-ranging capitalist structure that has produced fundamental changes from warfare to education and reshaped modes of communication, entertainment, everyday life, identities and even bodily existence and life-forms. As our modes of perception are altered by technology, so are the ways we experience life reconstructed, producing new, innovative, and original realms of interaction and agency that have altered our existing notions of space, time, reality, embodiment, and identity.

Fredric Jameson, in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*(1992), relates the organization of contemporary art forms, literature included, as formal analogies of postmodern hyperspace. This is a space within which the individual becomes disoriented and loses his sense of physical placement, a disjointed and incoherent space.

The subject's sense of disturbance concerning his positioning in a comprehensible space, an architectural

notion of orientation, finds expression in formal strategies employed in literature, for example. A narrative structure can move from incident to incident, from one set of characters to another, without necessarily providing the reader with the sense of an overall or all-encompassing organization on which to cling to. Such a structure, however, supplies the reader with continuities and recurrences that allow for some sense of organization, though not in linear fashion. Likewise, in film a camera can move in complex ways, or close-ups produce juxtapositions suggesting relationships that are confusing to the viewer, who assumes there is a reason for the organization of images.

For Jameson, this kind of formal structure is an analogue of the decentered, high-tech, multinational world dominated by the late phase of capitalism. Hyperspace, in his discussion, is so ubiquitous that it cannot be escaped, and consequently the critical distancing that enables political judgment and action cannot be achieved. Nonetheless, Jameson maintains that these postmodern forms, on one hand mystifications and distractions that disguise reality and keep us apart from it, do hold the possibility for a new political art, a new kind of realism, capable of, by representing this sense of confusion and disorientation, producing a map, configuring coordinates that position us at some spot that buys us critical perspective on the world.

The map Jameson longs for here must not be confused with the map as rhizome Deleuze and Guattari(2003) propose. For Jameson, the map should serve as a representation, or image, of the world, whereas for the French authors the map is composed by an assemblage with the world, and therefore it is part of the world itself. For Jameson, the subject inhabits the world, not the map; for Deleuze and Guattari, there is no map without a subject.

The postmodern turn, in its complex arrangement of ruptures, continuities and commonalties with previous paradigms, understood as an awareness-raising of the intense sights and crisis in many realms of life after the end of World War II, has been unfolding and relaying bewildering forms of existence and adding dimensions (technological and spatio-temporal) to our understanding of what it means to be human in the current era. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*(1999), investigates the sources and implications of posthumanism in what she calls the virtual age of information.

According to Hayles's view, the posthuman condition needs not to be seen as a stage initiated by the end of humanity in apocalyptic terms. She defines posthumanity as resulting from a cultural configuration and a condition still leading to new cultural configurations in the sense that the



posthuman subject challenges the assumption of humans as autonomous individuals - the liberal subject whose fundamentals rest on the notion of property of the body that is governed by rationality, by the enlightenment *cogito*. In this way, she questions human control and mastery, thereby creating new metaphors for the human identity by discussing three interrelated stories of how information loses its body, how the cyborg is created as a technological artifact and cultural icon after World War II, and how the human became the posthuman.

Silvio Gaggi's *From Text to Hypertext: Decentering the Subject in Fiction, Film, the Visual Arts, and Electronic Media*(1998) contains the discussion of the kinds of subjectivity engendered in different categories of text, as indicated in the title. Gaggi explores the concept of the unstable, fragmentary and decentered self in postmodernist writings by tracing the development of the representation of the subject in the history of visual arts, fiction, and film.

According to Gaggi(1998) the ubiquity of mass media representation in the postmodern world shifts the challenge of philosophy and linguistics to subjectivity from the level of theory to the level of lived experience, to the level of everyday life. The subject has been reduced to a surface, a mask, and a commodity.

Gaggi concludes his study with a discussion of the subject in hypertexts where the issue of the decentered self is particularly salient. He reviews the diverse forms according to which the construction of subjects occurs. First, as a temporal and spatial position - as in narratology; second, as an abstract point defined by a perspective grid - as in painting; third, as a *locus* that gathers light and organizes it presenting itself as stable - as in cinema. This subject, however, can be fractured and fragmented by addressers that speak to it and in so doing decenter the very subject they address, the visual vanishing points in painting can multiply and fragment both the viewer and the viewed, whereas in film the cinematic enlargement and empowerment of the subject can lead to its decentering and dispersion. The subject of hypertext, on its turn, in its playful multiplicity, is even more radically decentered. As it is in constant flow and dispersion as part of its process of constitution through interaction, it exhibits at the same time agency and constructedness, it constitutes and is constituted in discourse.

Another view of subject dispersion is presented by Jean Baudrillard(1983 and 1995), for whom the proliferation of images in mass, technological society has become so ubiquitous that they create their own hyperreality. Instead of representations of some referent, they should be thought

of as simulacra, pure similitudes that refer to nothing more than what they create themselves. Concerning this, Jameson(1992), on his turn, emphasizes the spatial disorientation, stressing the physical positioning of the subject's body within a space that has continually been dematerialized, virtualized.

The authority of simulacra is not based on their grounding in a world that lies outside the process of representation itself - and here lies Baudrillard's distinctive alternative to representation, if compared to Jameson's hope in art as representation. The conventional distinction between original and copy is thus rendered obsolete, and this has radical consequences for the subject as well, in the sense that, once replicated by the media, just as another kind of object, the subject becomes so powerless and so inscribed in the hyperreality that he is left without a possibility of positive action. The subject is objectified in a parodic emulation of his condition as a token among many media representations. For Jameson, the subject resists total inscription on the basis of his corporeality.

The discussion of the notion of reality and subjectivity in contemporary society and culture is also addressed by Joel Black in *The Reality Effect, Film Culture and the Graphic Imperative*(2002). He points out that nowadays we witness a

"skeptical attitude that many feel toward the documentary media today" given the fact that most have grown up "in the society of the spectacle of contemporary film culture"(BLACK, 2002, p.19).

Black's discussion draws a line between the traditional representational arts and the recording arts which was configured in the dictum popularized by Oscar Wilde that life not only imitates art but ought to aspire to become art, at the time cinema was invented. In the context of American culture, he gives many examples of the notion that,

reality is an artificial effect produced by and on film fictions. [...]Reality is mediated by artistic fictions in a looping effect. [...]. In the late twentieth century, it's become increasingly common to find examples of movies that uncannily anticipate actual events(BLACK, 2002, p.21-22).

Published in the same year of the tragic attack to the World Trade Center's twin towers on September 11, *The Reality Effect* briefly missed the chance to use the movie *Spider Man* as the most shocking and actual example of the complex intertwining of reality and its filmic (re)presentation. The original version of *Spider Man* (the movie) contained a scene- I maintain this - obviously the result of graphic computing techniques, that closely resembled the scenes on several pieces of amateur footage of the tragic events the world was presented with on worldwide TV broadcastings.

Although in the commercial final edited version released in that same year the scene was omitted, the computer game - part of the mix of media products which is a tactics of the entertainment business - that typically precedes<sup>11</sup> the commercial release of the movie included the infamous image. Thus, the attack to the World Trade Center had, in some way, been previously mediatized, *mise-en-media*, for lack of a better term. This could well have been the illustration of a typical event in the age of "instant preplay", which Black voices in the tone of a warning:

There's a fair chance that the next feature film you see may turn out to be a preview of an actual event - a newsreel of some real news story - that has yet to occur. And although there may be no discernible cause-and-effect relation between today's fictional film and tomorrow's real event, the latter, when it occurs, will somehow seem less real (contingent and spontaneous) and more like an effect (contrived and "special")(BLACK, 2002, p.23).

In the same year of Gaggi's publication, 1997, Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* introduces the notion of "ergodic" as being different from "interactive" texts and builds a taxonomy of computer literature that includes computer-generated texts, games and virtual spaces, such as the one picturing the bombing of the twin towers mentioned in the previous paragraph. The notion of ergodics brings into play the inescapable agency of the

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<sup>11</sup> A token of Baudrillard's simulacra, a precession of images(1995), images that have no previous actual referentialities precede reality.

reader, reinstating and reinforcing the corporeal, contingent dimension of subjectivity.

This realization that the paper-electronic dichotomy is not productive for his taxonomy of texts rests on the recognition of the flexibility a book printed on paper exhibit. Thus, digital text forms, new media, stand less as opponents to the old media than as "emulators of features and functions that are already invented. It is the development and evolution of codex and print forms, not their lack of flexibility, that make digital texts possible"(AARSETH, 1997, p.74). If on one hand this is reassuring, it can also be elusive and understood as nostalgic, because its economy does not address the impact of the strategies that have to be developed and or contrived by the reader on his subject constitution process.

Aarseth partakes the idea that hypertext is definitely a new way of writing, but he is not convinced that it is truly a new way of reading. Though he acknowledges the discontinuous, fragmentary process of reading demanded by hypertext as physically more dynamic, he questions its alignment with Barthes's notion of tmesis in *The Pleasure of the Text*(1975). Tmesis is beyond the author's control, it is the fragmentation of the linear text expression perpetrated by the reader by selecting passages to skip and skim. Thus, hypertext reading is obviously more dynamic in a mechanistic

sense, but precisely because it avoids linearity or unicursality and because its fragmentation is already laid down by the author, it invites hyperlinear reading. This expression by Aarseth dubs a process that rather reenacts homoliner reading on another level, on the level of the line that results from the forced, not spontaneous, not free, selection of links. Aarseth engages in this argument to counter the laudatory rhetoric of hypertext as "freeing the reader" from authorial control repeatedly avowed by George Landow(1992 and 1994).

### **2.3 Models of complexity in narrative**

Considering the contemporary scene in which narratives can be produced, assessed and experienced in a greater number of formats and supports than ever before, traditional narrative elements such as character and plot are inevitably transformed accordingly. The emphasis is shifted from the rather static notions of a unified character and a (mono)linear plot to bear on the dynamics of dialogue, indeterminacy, on the play of context, and on the "performative self".

Likewise, traditional theories of narrative, which have been concerned with structural elements which displayed an

internal coherence and cohesion<sup>12</sup>, have formulated the categories of plot and story - to give access to causality, character, action, and resolution - to provide identification and range, depth and point of view - to grant totality to the text as a world in itself. The advent of networked texts provides us with a further insight of text as network beyond that formerly elaborated by Mikhail Bakhtin:

Every element of the work can be compared to a thread joining human beings. The work as a whole is a set of these threads, that creates a complex, differentiated, social interaction, between the persons who are in contact with it(BAKHTIN, 1982, p.102).

The notion of text as network encompasses a complex dynamics that has been reshaping theories of language and causality, of narrative, for one. Though a literary text can be understood as a network of narratives, the very notion of context (the author's and reader's) that constrains and enables meaning production of a work issues radically different shapes.

The network is seen to connect readers to the author as well as to other texts, such as the archive of texts to which the work responds and which it more or less openly addresses.

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<sup>12</sup> Coherence and cohesion are categories drawn from textual linguistics, both in the Anglo-Saxon(Halliday and Hassan) school and in the French school(Van Dyk, Charolles). The former category establishes the principle of logical non-contradiction at the semantic level, whereas the latter attends to the morpho-syntactical processes that hold the text as a unity at macro (paragraph to paragraph) and microstructures - (phrase and sentence level). The fact that narratology derives some of its principles from the linguistic model is openly admitted, since one of the definitions of narratology is that of a grammar of narrative.



This echoes Bakhtin's dialogical dynamics of language, which escapes the notion of a prison-house, of an inert "thing". If essentially we can conceive of reading and writing as dialogical processes, today the issue of interaction (within interactive digital contexts, for example) sets forth a field of social interaction that has made the "active" nature of reading literal, physical, corporeal.

As new narrative forms and practices, such as the early text-based MUDs and MOOs or the most recent immersive Cave Writing Project<sup>13</sup>, combine the openness and indeterminacy physically experienced in contemporary social interaction with the ingenuity, intentionality, and imaginative dimensions typical of conventional narrative forms, narrative theories and strategies are bound to reflect or respond to these transformations. It is our task, thus, to resist imposing structures and assumptions from traditional narrative theory onto the types of narrative emerging today. Instead, we should attempt to discover the narrative structures, elements and processes that emerge as specific to the hypertextual, networked moment. Maybe this endeavor will lead us to postnarrative as resulting from the pressing and stretching of the structure - and art - of narrative.

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<sup>13</sup> This is Robert Coover's current hypertext writing project at Brown University, which is detailed on page 74.

### 2.3.1 Chaos theory: dynamic patterns and strange attractors

The emerging sciences of chaos and complexity deploy systems diagrams not only to trace the development of complex thinking in science, but also to apply their visual configuration to interpretive models in other areas. The diverse views of causality represented in these diagrams provide us with different(ial) approaches to the structure of narrative.

We have moved, in the history of physics, from a straightforward reductionist thinking of causality that did not concede to connecting the causes leading to different effects to a view of causality within complex thinking. The former view implies an anti-narrative, non-integrative view of causality, as still today it is the case of statistics.

The view of causality as necessity entertains the notion of the domino effect, in which one person's effect is another's cause, forming chains. This translates the conception of a clockwork universe. This view allows for the notion that, given the necessary amount and kind of information, time as a whole then could be plotted, and envisioned, even into the future. This view is based on linear-difference equation models that describe what comes out of a system as a logical trace of what goes in it. This

is at one with the narrative model prevailing in traditional narratology.

Causality within the Complex Systems View, on its turn, brings to the fore the feedback loops that make up the world - cause and effect chains loop back upon themselves. Held by patrons of non-linear dynamics and chaos such as James Gleick, Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, this description problematizes the accounts of the world as a largely predictable totality. The past does not stand as the grounds from which to extract the future in any accountable way. Nonlinear difference equation models bring up "causal loops" and strange attractors that force them to reckon with unpredictable phenomena, phenomena with many variables taken each as a system in itself.

As we have seen<sup>14</sup>, the study of stochastic processes, the study of uncontrollable and unpredictable randomness, is fundamental in dynamic systems. The sudden change from a stable system into a system that alternates stages of stability and instability, or vice versa, bifurcation, assumes that dynamics of the system as a whole can be radically transformed by some very small change of one of its parameters.

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<sup>14</sup> See pages 23 and 24.

Though casual, this small change may lead to disproportionate results, more or less predictable, considering the size and nature of initial conditions. This phase transition may reveal, in some cases, a higher order and pattern than was previously acknowledged; the new phase may follow either a repeatable, recursive pattern, or develop an utterly unpredictable trajectory that only in retrospect will eventually yield some pattern.

Whatever the case, the new behavior displayed by the system is part of its self-organization. According to Slethaug,

[r]andomness is unpredictable, and yet, once it occurs, an activity may organize itself into processes that, in a kind of deterministic fashion, take certain shapes or follow certain patterns(SLETHAUG, 2000, p.xxii).

These unpredictable initial conditions may turn out to be the indirect cause of a situation that lies in a remote region. Though initially breaking the predictable pattern at an infinitesimal degree, they account for a major catastrophe. This relationship between systems is the most frequently deployed example of the so-called butterfly effect, formulated by Edward Lorenz.

The butterfly effect exemplifies a sort of dynamic, nonlinear system, a system extremely sensitive to initial conditions. Each iteration of the system increases the

magnitude of the initial perturbation, but there is still a set of parameters (or boundaries) within which the phenomena exhibits the unpredictable alternation of the patterns.

This strange combination of unpredictability and determinism finds a lot of examples in biology, weather, and stock market economics, to name a few. However, the same complex relationship can be evidenced in language, between freedom and predisposition. It is worth of quoting at length Slethaug's presentation of Hermann Haken's suggestion that,

language itself is a strange attractor, which impels the human being toward it and which delineates a certain set of parameters and patterns. There are, of course, many languages, and individual usage within each one is original, idiosyncratic, and random, and no one knows for sure what motivates it, but at the same time that usage conforms to the broader structures and possibilities inherent in the language system, and actually maintains and furthers the language. Language, then, may seem to predispose or even determine the speakers(SLETHAUG, 2000, p.xxiv-xxv).

Thus, we are all at the same time agents and "sufferers" of language, at the same time in flow and breaking the very flow we participate in. There is no simple resolution to being a subject of and in language more than of and in other signifying systems we take part in. The fact that we all experience this paradoxical experience without actually deeming it chaotic, the fact that eventually we come up with an orderly rendition of this process sheds light on the

artistic potential of the ruptures innovative fiction perpetrate in our illusion of an orderly world.

Katherine Hayles, in the introduction to *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science*, explains that postmodernism and the science of chaos can be seen as component parts of the same cultural and technological milieu that, by coming together and mutually reinforcing each other ushered us into "an awareness of the constructive roles that disorder, nonlinearity, and noise play in complex systems"(HAYLES, 1991, p.5). She points out that, according to Chaos Theory, the randomness developed by complex systems display recognizable patterns (regularities) when submitted to mapping into time-series diagrams. These regularities, she maintains, bear implications that are not constrained to the field of scientific inquiry. One of the terms pertinent to the science of chaos, strange attractors, is especially useful to draw some implications to literature, for example.

According to Gordon Slethaug, strange attractors are "the shapes that chaos and nonlinearity take, and these are largely inexact"(SLETHAUG, 2000, p.148). Though physicists and mathematicians illustrate the nature and presence of attractors by graphing and charting many different kinds of phenomena, there is the recognition on the part of fiction writers and critics that "human motivation, social patterns, and cultural constructs cannot be turned into the physicist's

models or the mathematician's computer generated shapes"(idem).

However, this does not mean that the pattern or shape that turbulence assumes is altogether eschewed from their fiction or that no material rendering of turbulence is tackled, in the sense that whenever the issue of borders and boundaries are dealt with by (fictional) characters there is the affirmation that mapping is a possibility. In other words, if the issue of borders is at stake, mapping is possible - and a map as such can stand as an analogue to the chart or graph.

Slethaug adds that "these forms, strange attractors, can be used in fiction to interrogate the nature of reality and our assumptions about it"(SLETHAUG, 2000, p.149). He mentions that the issue of strange attractors is evident in the work of several authors and corresponds to a tactical move on their part to "tempt and tease the readers"(idem, p.161) to contrive a graph or chart of the dynamics of human relationships, societies and states of being textually inscribed in their (the writers') works.

As to the narratological implications of that move, Slethaug illustrates,

[t]his narrative enticement is in itself a metachaotic way of prodding the reader to think about strange attractors and to realize that

within the worlds of fiction the mappable can become a means of introducing the unmappable(SLETHAUG, 2000, p.161).

This statement can be associated to the notion of smooth space(DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.474) - a space defined dynamically that provides a structure for what does not yet exist<sup>15</sup>. The reader of texts that bear such reference to complexity, be it on the level of content or of form, has to reckon with the indeterminacy between stability and instability, the presence, blurring, and absence of borders, and eventually infer (unpredictable) patterns that emerge from turbulence. Instead of struggling for tracings in a previously completed map defined by orderly movement, following a stable unified flow, the reader is forced to entertain the enmeshing of order and disorder.

Novels that approach instances of chaotic behavior - order arising from chaos, order inherent in chaos, or chaos arising from order - either thematically or formally, have a distinctive play on the construction of identity and narrative. In Slethaug's words, "the notion of a transparent, essentialized, centered self or text surrenders to an indeterminate, nonlinear one of opacity, dispersion, gaps and boundaries"(SLETHAUG, 2000, p.170).

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<sup>15</sup> See page 32.



It is precisely to oppose the notion of subjectivity that relinquishes in narratives that exhibit the traits of complexity that Punday's corporeal narratology(2003) stands as an alternative to the disembodied reading contrived within narratives that are subsumed by predominantly orderly fictional worlds. In his review of the classic introductions to narratology and character theory by Mieke Bal, Seymour Chatman, and Wallace Martin, Punday makes it a point that,

a text that emphasizes directly the corporeal relationship between the reader and text without connecting this relationship to the interaction between character bodies will lack narrativity. Narrative characters, in other words, touch(PUNDAY, 2003b, p.82).

Building on Elizabeth Grosz's premise that narrative bodies touch, Punday explains that it encompasses a fundamentally different relationship between these bodies and the outside world than models that do away with embodiment.

What leads us, in the end, to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the body without organs, which is the result of the urge to create a plane on which to connect to the outside world that escapes the mechanics of production, a site across which desire can travel. Nevertheless, the French authors state that this plane can become the basis of a new series for mechanical connections. We can see here the dynamics of bifurcation, of order leading to disorder and within a system

that achieves temporary equilibrium recursively - an instance of dynamic pattern.

### 2.3.2 Rhizome: the Body without Organs

The Body without Organs is Deleuze and Guattari's articulation of the object of schizoanalysis, or nomadology. For the purpose of this study, the Body without Organs is approached as the site of inscription of lines, which can be defined as the components of rhizome, as opposed to points and positions within structure. It is my point to parallel structures to closed systems and rhizome to dynamic systems so that the issue of complexity is brought to discussion.

On the Body without Organs "everything is drawn and flees" (DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.203). As the analysis of desire, schizoanalysis brings out lines that "apply to a life, a work of literature or art, or a society" (idem, p.203-4). The difference between and among these lines should rest on the choice one makes of a specific system of coordinates.

In the above claims about the pervasiveness of the line there is a strong stress on the dynamic aspect of the lines as well as a reaffirmation of the subject's agency. The set of questions that shape schizoanalysis as a methodology is:

What is your body without organs? What are your lines? What map are you in the process of making or rearranging? What abstract line will you draw, and at what price, for yourself and others?

What is your line of flight? What is your BwO, merged with that line? Are you cracking up? Are you going to crack up? Are you deterritorializing? Which lines are you severing, and which are you extending or resuming?(DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.203).

We cannot miss the assumption that lines are severed but also extended or resumed, instantiating a multiplicity that does not reproduce the arboreal structure of stratified hierarchy. This brings about a picture of several points of departure at any given moment of the linear trajectory that nevertheless can be captured within a specific striated, hierarchized arborescent structure. The ordinary work of literary criticism, especially by narratological models, can be seen as the apprehension (imprisonment, containment) of the lines of flight to produce closure. The offering of a stabilized rendition of how "aspects" or "elements" of a narrative come together to function as a plausible world conforms to the notion of structure rather than to that of rhizome.

As opposed to the plane of organization and development typical of tree-like structures, the rhizome bears planes of consistency established in relations of speed and slowness, escaping principle or finality. Instead of subjectification, the plane of consistency inscribe "*continuums of intensities*

(desire) or continuous variations, which go beyond constants and variables"<sup>16</sup>(DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.507).

In order to stress the propriety of the Body without Organs not as a category of analysis, but as a stance at which to reckon with the complexity of Coover's literary works, I will once more deploy the resource of a lengthy quotation that illustrates one of the intricacies posed to us by the materiality of hypertext and the implications it brings to narratology:

Does the plane of consistency constitute the body without organs, or does the body without organs compose the plane? Are the Body without Organs and the Plane the same thing? In any event, composer and composed have the same power: the line does not have a dimension superior to that of the point, nor the surface to that of the line, nor the volume to that of the surface, but always an inexact, fractional number of dimensions that constantly increase or decrease with the number of its parts(DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.507).

The allusion to the constant increase or decrease of dimension as being determined by the number of its parts problematizes the issue of closure, inasmuch as each and every zone of the plane of consistency defines at the same time the dimension of the point and the line and the surface in rhizome. Rhizome does not operate with the search for origins or for closure. The middle is where both the flow and the rupture take place, and it can be anywhere.

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<sup>16</sup> My parenthetical addition.

The new, the emergent, is thus conceived by the French analysts:

What is retained and preserved, therefore created, what consists, is only *that which increases the number of connections* at each level of division or composition, thus in descending as well as ascending order (that which is cannot be divided without changing in nature, or enter into a larger composition without requiring a new criterion of comparison (DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.508).

Therefore, to resist being captured within striated space, to become a body without organs, to align with the signifier rather than with the signified, does not demand any a prioristic survey of aspects and elements or their hierarchical arrangement. Rather, it is by entertaining emergence of order as well as disorder within a given system, its dynamic patterns, that the new can be perceived as such, even if only temporarily.

Just as the number of connections multiply at each level of composition, demanding a new criterion of comparison, so the works that display such complex arrangements engender a whole new set of practices of reading, writing and analysis. Hyperfictions are deemed as displaying more complex arrangements than their predecessor narrative genres, what entices us to devise analytical procedures that allows us to constitute lines on their planes of consistency - moves that prevent us from both being assimilated within pre-existent

signifying regimes and imposing them on the works under analysis.

### 3. COOVER'S HYPERFICTION AND NARRATOLOGY

#### 3.1 Reading Coover's hyperfiction

In the context of postmodern narrative theories the advent of electronic hyperfiction was greeted with excitement among both authors and critics. Electronic texts consist in a more interactive medium than print texts allowing for the infusion of more interaction and reader-centeredness in the experience of narrative fiction.

Among the enthusiasts of the potentialities of hypertext as Robert Coover, there is J. David Bolter, who wrote that hypertext "reifies the metaphor of reader response"(1991, p.158), pointing out that it liberates the text from the hierarchies within which "verbal ideas that are always prone to subvert [that] order"(idem) are submitted to in print texts.

Among those who opposed such claims more or less vehemently, it is important to mention Sven Birkerts, who, in his *The Gutenberg Elegies - The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, insists that the domination by the author is "the point of writing and reading"(BIRKERTS, 1991, p.163). On admitting that the transition from the culture of book to the culture of electronic communication has radically altered the ways in which language is used on every level of society, from the historical to the individual, Birkerts provides a

negative perspective to the fate of reading, and extols the virtue of the printed book.

There are also a host of other standpoints concerning the meshing of fiction and machine upheld by theorists, critics, and authors of print and hyperfiction alike. Despite the range of endorsement and rebuff of hyperfiction, there is a straight concern with the expansion of the role of the reader in the construction of fictional text from print to electronic modes.

Sérgio Luiz Prado Bellei offers a sound survey of the diverse responses to the impact of the new technologies of writing when he interprets them as shaping a trauma in culture - if not in civilization. Published in Portuguese, *O Livro, a Literatura e o Computador*(2002) highlights the complex relation that simultaneously fosters and is maintained by the reading public. In a reference to Coover, Bellei points out that the novelist's optimism and enthusiasm regarding the debunking of the book as the repository of textualized humanity cannot be easily dismissed as merely laudatory. Bellei traces the connections Coover weaves to embrace the dimensions of the book as an institution, an economic force, and a specific technology of writing.

These three dimensions together, attributed to the book by Bellei, help us understand why, once threatened with



extinction, the book and civilization are summoned to face their qualms. In so being, conceiving of the book as a humanizing artifact *per se* entails the examination of the subjectivities at play at its height as well as at its lowest. Coover has been a stern voice in this scrutiny.

One of the central features of Coover's fiction lays on the poetic in-scription of the impact of twenty-first century technology - digital, cybernetic and biomedical, for example - on what it means to be human, on the ideological and mythical dimensions of our representations of being human. Coover's works, the worlds engendered by his creative imagination are just as revealing of the ethical and political dimensions of the current age as are the material artifacts of humanity's technological endeavors. This can be evidenced in his myth making potential, linguistic craftsmanship, and verbal virtuose - all encoded within his unabashedly avowed realistic aesthetic project. So much so that ever since the early 90s he has continually advanced the research on hypertext writing.

In an interview to Susana Pajares Toska, Coover explains the play of reality and fantasy in his poetic project,

[A]s for fantasy, I am not the least bit interested except for the ways, in the real world, that it impinges upon my life (religion, jingoism, tribal myths, the managed news, etc.), and then I

often hate it. Only reality interests me and it is all that I write about, whether or not it can be said that I understand it. My forms are playful and so may conceal that from the inattentive reader, but it's true. I have said it from earliest days: I am, like Kafka, like Beckett, an intransigent realist(TOSKA, 1999).

Concerning the complexity of his much admired and critically acclaimed use of language, and the burden - "the added layer of complexity"<sup>17</sup> - it sometimes imposes on the reader, Coover replies by tying it again to his realist project,

[f]rom infancy on, we are entangled in vast webworks of layered meanings in our language. Fantasists may simplify all that to create a passing entertainment (most movies, for example), but realists cannot. In this, I suppose, I am the child of that great realist James Joyce(TOSKA, 1999).

Questioned about the feature of the mass media, escapist literature consumed by most people, Coover mentions the Internet, e-mail, and pornography side by side with religion, shopping, drugs and professional sports as kinds of escapist entertainment, adding a comment on the old-fashioned fictions they all draft,

only slightly more controversial is the notion that the managed news (TV, magazines, newspapers, radio) is also a kind of escapist entertainment.

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<sup>17</sup> The question reads as follows, "In relation to this, many critics admire your use of language, not merely as a medium to tell things, but as a message in itself. Your cycles, metaphores, double meanings... Why is it worth to add another layer of complexity to the act of reading?".

But any look at decade-old programming or articles will make it transparent that, though some of the data may retain some limited validity (if not itself faked), the stories that held the data together are all outdated fictions(TOSKA, 1999).

As we will see in Chapter four, all these entertainment forms are pivotal elements that configure the world of the town in *John's Wife* - they are the axes around which the characters experience their share of reality.

Nowadays the distances of time, space and place are shrunk, as computers enable us to reach resources on almost everywhere in the world in nearly real-time. Just as the boundaries between humans, animals and machines are eroded, so too are distinctions between the virtual and the real. New digital technologies will soon be capable of synthesizing an entire virtual environment, creating cyberspace into which a person can be sensorially if not physically assimilated.

As of the time of this writing, Robert Coover is involved in teaching students the new art of "Cave Writing"<sup>18</sup>, which moves the written word into a 3-D virtual-reality experience, already in its third workshop, started in 2002. Inside "the cave", a technologically enhanced environment at Brown University, viewers wear 3-D eyeglasses, which trick their brains into seeing flat pictures as three-dimensional

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<sup>18</sup> The Fourth Cave Writing Workshop started to be taught in the spring of 2004 by visiting artist John Cayley and veteran Caver Talan Memmott. The digital project can be accessed at < <http://www.cascv.brown.edu/cavewriting/workshop.html> >

objects, by means of computer servers, video projectors and stereo speakers behind and above a slate-colored, 8-foot square cube. The servers trace the viewer's x, y and z coordinates, and re-project images onto the cave's walls and floor up to 120 times per second.

In addition to the Cave Writing Workshop, Coover is teaching a creative writing workshop in experimental mixed media narrative, "Texts in Space", that includes the designing of textual works for the Cave. This is consistent with his pledge to assure literature is a choice in a highly digitalized and computer-based culture - an irreversible process in the long run.

Experiments like this raise the issue of the entwined condition of two of the discourses that have enjoyed considerable attention in postmodernist debates within the humanities: technoscience (the genome project, for one) and popular culture such as science fiction, themselves tokens of the implicit desires, anxieties and interests that have fueled humanity's continuing relationships with its tools and technologies.

Working with the notions of linearity and narratology, Rainee Koskimaa, in his impressive and successful endeavor to systematize the field of digital literature devotes a full section of his *Digital Literature: from Text to Hypertext and*

*Beyond*(2000) to examine Robert Coover's *Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl* and *The Babysitter*. The section belongs to "Replacement & Displacement: at the limits of print fiction", the third chapter of his doctoral dissertation. In the same section he also examines Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* as an instance of a "game", Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch*, Raymond Federman's *Take it or Leave it*, and Gilbert Sorrentino's *Mulligan Stew*. All these works fall into the category of proto-hypertexts, which Koskimaa engages in explaining by scrutinizing the specific ergodicity of each of these texts. In this move, Koskimaa deepens Espen Aarseth's original category of ergodic literature, and putting to the test Aarseth's claim that "cybertext is a perspective on all forms of textuality"(AARSETH, 1997, p.18). That is, Koskimaa discusses whether the knowledge of new digital literature affects the reception of the so-called proto-hypertexts. Besides this, he considers the contribution these proto-hypertexts bring to the understanding and production of digital ergodic texts in order to decide whether a totally new set of literary theories or just their remodeling is called for, or engendered, by ergodic literature.

In the introductory part of the chapter above mentioned, drawing on Gerard Genette's story-discourse concept(1983), Koskimaa brings together the notion of bits and pieces, of

fragments, as the structural components of ergodic texts as constitutive elements of both story and discourse, and the activity of reading - a temporal process - as a construction of a linear version of the/any text - a constructed object itself. This is how he escapes the all too easy statement that reading is linear *per se*; in his words, "the ergodic activity of the reader constructs the linear discourse as *discoursed* (the text as *actually* read)"<sup>19</sup>(KOSKIMAA, 2000).

As we can see, Koskimaa insists on the inscription of both the actual reader and the real author into a narratological model which purports to stand up to the recognition of *discourse*. On doing this, he lays bare the flagrant though apparently unnoticed erasure of the corporeal reader - to borrow Daniel Punday's category(2003) - altogether from the frame(work) of traditional narratology.

The section Koskimaa devotes to the analysis of Coover's fiction, "Variation in multicursality - Robert Coover's 'Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl' and 'The Babysitter'", draws on the description presented by Brian McHale(1987) of some of the possibilities of story to be read in the former, all leading in the end to two mutually exclusive resolutions, and on the added ontological role that television plays in fragmenting the *textual* actual world of

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<sup>19</sup> My emphasis. All the references to Koskimaa(2000) belong to the electronic publication.

the latter. Whereas *Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl* consists of short passages bearing the narrator's unspecified personal references and uncertainty from passage to passage - two strategies that subsume hyperfiction. In this short story the reader is faced with the need to choose one of the two alternatives that he has been presented with in the form of fragments as the text/story is cut off. The textual actual world is not resolved within the story, as the reader is continually (the temporal dimension considered) led to make a binary choice in the process of reading, conferring alternative linearities, continuity, to the fractured story/text. When the text finally **ends** (the text as a constructed object) it is eventually seen as discourse, whatever the choice. Discourse is thus understood as resulting from a dynamic and interactive process of contingencies, spatial, temporal and corporeal, and Coover's text, a perfect "literary machine"<sup>20</sup>.

Concerning *The Babysitter*, considered as another of Coover's experiments in the field of hyperfiction, Koskimaa stresses the four parallel storylines that spiral around each other, each of which meshing the perceptions and desires of the four different narrators/focalizers (notice the term linked to the epistemology of sight). Whatever is happening

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<sup>20</sup> Ted Nelson's *Literary Machines*(1965) presented hypertext as a literary machine, "non-sequential writing", and only later it started to be considered a medium limited to computers.

in the story is experienced simultaneously on many levels, in each of the storylines, and that will lead to many different possible endings, not necessarily amenable to being unified in a mere rendition of different individual perceptions of the *same* events. The sentence that ends the text, "Let's see what's on the late late movie"(COOVER, 2000, p.239), contains all the possible endings and potential sequels to the story, something akin to what TV viewers experience.

The multilinearity displayed in these two stories by Coover represents, for Koskimaa, a dead end for hypertext, inasmuch as one can entertain the transposition - or transmediation - of *Quenby and Ola, Swede and Carl* from print onto screen, wherein the reader/user would proceed clicking from yes/no to yes/no hyperlinked structure leading from fragment to fragment according to his choice, without actually, on doing that, expanding the number of alternative stories within the actual world of the text (as on print, so on screen). There are, after all, only two possible courses (trajectories) holding the sequentiality of fragments together as text.

It is a different situation with *The Babysitter*, as it seems to substantiate Coover's(1992) claim that it is in the movements through the spaces between text fragments (Barthes's *lexias*?) that the reading and writing experience effectively takes place, and also that if it were not for the



discontinuity, for the spacing and gaps holding the fragments apart, the reader would have little to do as a free agent and constitutive element of narrative form. Koskimaa stresses the fact that it is precisely the "leaks between the(se) fragments" that *The Babysitter* is a much more productive model for hyperfiction, which, after all, demands from the reader an array of distinctive and numerous functions so that text can yield story.

Later in his thesis Koskimaa formulates a taxonomy of reader functions that adjusts the classification proposed by Aarseth(1997) to accommodate the strategies demanded by literary hypertexts specially. This categorization goes beyond Aarseth's elaboration of cybertext as a perspective pertaining to all texts. This is, as I see it, Koskimaa's implied recognition and support to Coover's project of granting literature its place in virtualized human culture. Literariness, after all, must have an import on the complex dynamics the process of reading engenders.

In his forthcoming essay "From Intertextuality to Virtual Reality: Robert Coover's *A Night at the Movies* and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*"(2003)<sup>21</sup>, Joseph Raab contrasts the works in his title to examine the shift from postmodern

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<sup>21</sup> In Peter Freese, *Technology and the Humanities in Recent American Fiction*(Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 2003) pages will be supplied by the author as the book is released in 2005.

fiction to cyberpunk fiction in terms of intertextuality and narrative technique. By analyzing the inscription of "possible worlds"<sup>22</sup> in each work, he compares the authors' reworking of several texts and sources, especially film, of different levels of fictionality. This reworking, besides yielding the postmodern "fiction within the fiction" *mise-en-abîme* feature, anticipates the readers' engagement in a quest that demands from them specific procedures "to navigate through narrative mazes"(RAAB, 2003).

While Raab primarily agrees with Larry McCaffery(1982) that Coover is one of the mainstream innovators of the 60s and that Stephenson is one step ahead - cyberpunk - incorporating the ways technology has transformed and redefined our lives, he remarks that both novelists display their affiliation with the idea of "possible worlds". In Stephenson this is overtly contrived as a Science Fiction approach - constituting what he calls a Metaverse, whereas in Coover the possible worlds spring out of existing myths, plots and narratives - or Multiverse - which echoes John Barth's(1997) characterization of the literature of

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<sup>22</sup> In the theory of possible worlds we entertain the idea that there is another world that departs in particular ways from our world; this logic rests on the idea that all conditions other than the departing ones remain the same, and it depends on the belief in a trans-world identity of the remaining conditions - objects, places and people alike. Possible-world theory assumes that the facts of the real world, from which the fictional world departs, are left unaltered. That is, it assumes that human thought and action are unlimited. For more about the narratological implications of possible-world theory see "Conceiving modern narrative", Chapter 1 of *Narrative Bodies: toward a corporeal narratology*. Daniel Punday. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, p.17-51. Jerome Bruner, in *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*(1986) also draws on the theory of possible worlds to envision the transformation of society by means of educational processes.

replenishment. This is also akin to the movement toward the multiple forwarded by Deleuze and Guattari(2003).

He demonstrates, in the end, that though Stephenson has definitely textualized the reality of the diverse scientific and technological advancements in our life, it is in Coover that narrative technique, character and plot have been radically transformed. Whereas the former draws on conventional genres, mainly filmic, such as action, detective, and science fiction, without effectively transforming the way the stories are relayed in them, the latter literally implodes these conventions, developing a fundamentally new mode of narrative that likens the typical devices of hyperfiction.

Concerning these innovations, Coover(1993) states that he is in search of a "relevant" language, one that relies on the familiarity of the audience with the fictions and myths that the language evokes, alters and puts into new contexts. The world itself being a construct of fictions, better fictions should reform our notions of things, he says.

By writing stories that stress their own constructedness, his intertexts engender perspectives that, while drawing on an anticipated familiarity with myths, deconstruct their ideological content and disclose their alignment with convention by contriving what Raab calls a

Multiverse, distinctively mixing and rearranging fragments. He combines film narrative with literary narrative. What we get as a result of his combination of film and literary narrative is "new modes of perception and fictional forms".

Raab also refers to Coover's text as "a new *kind* of writing that relies on the *dissolution* of boundaries between different media and their levels of reality-fictionality"(RAAB, 2003). In Raab's view, Coover makes fun of our desire to pindown meaning - in a series of self-referential statements - and textualizes this in passages like,

no matter how randomly he's thrown the clips together, to be caught up in some terrible enchantment of continuity as though meaning itself were pursuing them (and him! and him!), lunging and snorting at the edge of the frame, fangs, bared and dripping gore(COOVER, 1997, p.18).

The passage above, an excerpt of the short story *The Phantom of the Opera House*, clearly illustrates the merging of seer and seen/scene and the levels of boundaries that merges: fictions within a film. The world of a film is constituted by the reality of a fictional movie audience watching it. Likewise, the reality of readers of a story is constitutive of the story.

In Coover's stories, characters are allowed to move from myth or story or reality level or medium in which they were

originally placed and enter another. This is analogous to tokens of our contemporary scene as technologically enhanced humans - posthumans, as such. It is also an instance of textualization of the experience of on-line hypertext writing in MOO environments, such as the one Coover has championed at Brown University in the early 90s. As we can see, Coover is living up to his words.

In these mergings, the fiction and the real collide to the point that they become indistinguishable, filmic and literary creations get out of control - in some turning violent and grotesque. All this assures readers and viewers that there is no stability in the fiction-making process, a bold attitude that confronts the theory of possible worlds.

Raab remarks that Coover's collection forces readers into a reexamination of the concept of intertextuality so that it encompasses non-written texts, like film. The technological innovations that feed into the writer's imagination widen the scope of the postmodern trademark of offering possible worlds or interconnected and tentative levels of fictionality.

### **3.2 Some narratological implications**

David Jay Bolter(1991) acknowledges Wolfgang Iser's description of the experience of reading print in order to characterize the movement that the reader of electronic texts

performs to traverse the topographic organization of the text. For Iser the fiction reader's viewpoint wanders **between** moments and sites constituted by what has been read and what is yet to be read, as in a journey from one point to another. In hyperfiction the metaphor of the journey is ratified along with the notion of topography, but the space is conceived of as multidimensional.

The reader of print text, for Bolter, is faced with a territory laid out as bearing a single route, a single direction as an essential structural device to sustain the text as such; a hypertext, on its turn, corresponds to a multiple-layered, multiple-path territory signaling to the reader the several directions, possibilities to be explored so that the reading passage may hold structurally as "text".

As to the issue of the ensuing interpretation of such reading, Iser employs the notion of gap-filling on the part of the reader - a response to the structural withholding of information, a structural feature that should lead to aesthetic pleasure - as a necessary move in the process of "consistency-building" of a coherent whole. In hypertext, according to Bolter, the reader faces links at any point in a hypertext as actual repositories of Iser's gaps, markers that engage the reader in an exploratory journey at a more physical level than in traditional print narratives. In reading a linked text the reader is explicitly provided with,

if not constrained to, choices not offered in linear (unlinked) texts<sup>23</sup>. This freedom/constraint eventually forces the reader to organize his reading of the text in new ways. The process of consistency building is still there, active and fundamental to the experience of reading - especially fiction, as Iser puts it - but with a difference, the principles of consistency have been indelibly altered.

In the same spirit, that is, working with the notions of linearity and narratology, Rainee Koskimaa, as we have seen, states that: "with ergodic literature there is no discourse before the reader has made it". Analogous demands can be found in Katherine Hayles's model of posthuman subjectivity(1999) and in Daniel Punday's model of corporeal narrativity(2003).

Evidence of the clamoring for embodiment is echoed in Hayles's call for a strategy of resisting the temptation to dispensing with the body - meat, as it is often referred to in much of cyberpunk fiction works - when considering posthuman subjectivity. Hayles points out that,

whether or not interventions have been made on the body, new models of subjectivity emerging from such fields as cognitive science and artificial life imply that even a biologically unaltered *Homo sapiens* counts as posthuman. The defining characteristics involve the construction of

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<sup>23</sup> Espen Aarseth presents a detailed examination of the level of constraint the diverse genres of electronic text impose on the reader(1997, p.76-90). He engages in a rich dialog with George Landow on the issue in "Nonlinearity and Literary Theory", in *HYPertext/THEORY*(1994).

subjectivity, not the presence of nonbiological components(HAYLES, 1999, p.4).

To contend that the liberatory view of a dispersed subjectivity hosted by an array of desiring machines professed by postmodern theorists such as Deleuze and Guattari(2003) - the body without organs - and Jameson(1992) - the purest form of capitalism, for example, Hayles takes on the painstaking task of clarifying that the role of cybernetics in the process of deconstruction of the liberal humanist subject - an enfranchisement in which other (feminist, postcolonial) perspectives also participated - was not to downplay or erase embodiment. That would have been a warped maneuver of contributing, in the end, to identifying the human with the rational mind only, a defining feature of the liberal humanist subject who possessed a body. Though possessing a body, he (the subject) was not identified with it or usually represented as being one, what earned him the grounds on which to claim his universality.

Hayles does not easily depart altogether from the notion of the liberal subject, as she grants agency and choice - two of the characteristics associated to this subject - can be articulated within the posthuman context(HAYLES, 1999, p.5). She sees the contemporary scene as critical. This is the scene of the restless attack on an understanding of what it



means to be "human" which is closely-knit within projects of domination, of oppression, as critical. This is her concern:

[I]f my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for our continued survival(HAYLES, 1999, p.5).

Daniel Punday, for whom "the issue of embodiment reflects particular narrative concerns"(PUNDAY, 2003b, p.66), including the establishment of narrative authority, organizes a grid that frames different "degrees of embodiment" of characters. As the narrative situation in which the characters are placed depends on their more or less heavy embodiment, readers are encouraged to think about embodiment itself. This entails thinking about the perspective that one specific represented degree of embodiment of a certain character relays onto us and considering the transcendence of our bodily dimension in a given circumstance.

In a tactical approach to the in-scription of the materiality of the human body within the discussion of narratology, Punday emphasizes that the referential identity of characters is often unimportant in the theories of character he reviewed. His concern can be paralleled to that

asserted by Hayles(1999), that the posthuman subject (character?) must be accounted for as an embodied being.

Character identity is associated to semantic or thematic meaning rather than to time-elapsing, historical development, in these models. In such paradigms, the character is a textual object, and his corporeality is comparable to the materiality of inanimate objects, thus eliciting spatial language. Characters are seen as "spatially discrete - we could say, even, spatially alienated - [...] the result of a very particular cultural and historical moment"(PUNDAY, 2003b, p.71). Punday later identifies this specific point in history with early modern culture, reflecting a particularly modern way of thinking about the body.

The alienated modern body, Punday adds, has served as the base of narratological theory. According to recent theories of corporeality, he continues, the prevalence of sight as *the* model of perception has reduced the complexity of the relationship between world and body; it is the mind/body dualism notion that makes the (concrete, contingent) body amenable to being invested with (abstract, universal) meaning.

Contemporary postmodernist fiction has been consistently challenging this oversimplification, and Punday(2003b) uses Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as an example. I will examine the

problematization that the characters John's wife and Pauline, in *John's Wife*, and Lucky Pierre, in *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*, bring to narratology in an effort to recuperate corporeality as a fundamental aspect in the analysis of posthuman characters in literature.

#### 4. JOHN'S WIFE: A THERENESS THAT IS NOT THERE

Linguistic verve and textured syntax, mixing realism with the fantastic are some of Coover's "stylistic signatures", according to Brian Evenson(2003, p.2). From the very beginning of his literary career, in his first novel, *The Origin of the Brunists*(1966), Coover already made it a point that reading a plot, a text, or an event, is a meaning-making process, and he set out to explore how people make things mean something by reading it in a specific way and ignoring other possible readings. This concern has been present in a stronger or lesser degree in all his fictions. This habit, which was put to the test in *John's Wife*(1996), is eventually substantiated in *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre, Director's Cut*(2002), which stands as Coover's *pièce de résistance* to the form of the novel genre, to my best judgment.

It is a truism today to assert that new technologies, more than simply having introduced new patterns of work, leisure and social interaction, have called into question the immutability of boundaries between humans, animals and machines, artificial and natural, "born" and "made". In challenging the fixidity of "human nature" in this way, the digital and biotechnological age engenders renewed scrutiny of the basic assumptions on which matters such as personal

identity, the constitution of community. These are matters that stand as the grounds on which human uniqueness and the relationship between body and mind are founded.

The book as a technological endeavor itself is, according to Coover(1992), threatened with debunking as the repository of the textualized version of the encyclopedia of human rationality in the arts and sciences alike, giving way to another artifact. The book was the result of an effort to replicate, reproduce and distribute the collected information to a specific public or audience, and relied on information structured and shaped as text in-scribed on the page.

As the desires, anxieties and interests change and are transformed, suppressed or evolve, so do the artifacts that emerge as their privileged form(at)s. The book is not as efficient a format as it once was. The demand for flow rather than for permanence, stasis, is at one with the change in human rationality and subjectivity.

In order to introduce the analysis I have exercised as a reader that avidly gives in to the siren's song effect Coover's writing yields, I will first refer to the reviews *John's Wife* received at the time it was released and more recently. Next, I will move on to the very few pieces of academic criticism the novel has received so far.

#### 4.1 *John's Wife*: what's in a name?

Presenting the state-of-the-art concerning the reception of *John's Wife* is a move meant to sketch the context within which I will put myself on the line as a reader that struggles to impose some ordering, while aware that the resulting order is as much a construct produced by my materially constrained subjectivity as an aspect of the information being processed as narrative/narration. In so doing, I expect to stand equal to the task of speaking **with** instead of **about** the textual artifact shaped as novel in a bound book.

It is high time *John's Wife* was fully reviewed, were it not for its continual reference as an enigmatic, even hermetic, piece of the novel genre. The first time I thought about discussing this novel what came to mind was Shakespeare's wording of the bewilderment the lovers of Verona experienced when confronted with the acknowledgment of the power of their unannounced, unexpected, and uncontrollable love, harbored within their hearts and souls which, however, bore a different name each. In so being, "what's in a name" seems appropriate as an inspirational concern for the examination of both the novel, whose title includes the appositive "a novel", and of its eponymous hero(ine), whose name is never mentioned, leaving the reader

to question what's in a name, or to consider the circumstance of its unrepresentability.

The first review to follow *John's Wife* publication was Brad Leithauser's account in The New York Times on the Web, *Capturer of Hearts*(1996). Admittedly emphasizing style and method over content and plot, he justifies his choice on the grounds of the lack of "fineness" of Coover's prose throughout the novel's over 400 pages. A second reason to underplaying plot, the narratological category of choice in the review of novels, is precisely its coarseness and vulgarity,

the plot is a rambling, reiterated and squalid affair. A not atypical paragraph opens with a flatulence contest, moves on to a forcible injection of hallucinogens administered by a mosquito spray gun and concludes with group sex with a 14-year-old 'guttersnipe'(LEITHAUSER, 1996).

As we can see, plot is equated with theme and language use, not to mention plot is judged rather than described and analyzed. This testifies for his limited tether as to the degree at which he engages as a materially constrained subject in a process (of reading) that exacts from the reader that he speaks with the text rather than about it.

Though he refers to John's town as "a small town whose ties of romance, business and ancestral rivalry bind all the characters in a narrow yet complex web"(LEITHAUSER, 1996),

the complexity of Coover's text is ignored and disposed of as sordid material which can only be rescued by "brilliant handling"(idem). And this is something Leithauser refuses to accept that Coover has accomplished.

*Happily Ever What?* is the second review of *John's Wife* to be published. In his title Chad Galts puns on Coover's teasing of the reader, of the conventions, of the ordering of narration by using the long-established closing of narration "...and they lived happily ever after" in the very first paragraph of his novel. He starts his appreciation by appealing to narratological categories, such as plot, reader, time, space, character and reader, all in one paragraph,

[i]t's a safe bet that any novel using the phrase "happily ever after" in its first paragraph, as *John's Wife* does, won't offer up a straightforward, simple **plot**. The book travels inward through the minds of some fifty Gothic **characters**, rather than forward through **time**. The opening passages are a nearly indecipherable blur of people - fair warning of the burden you will bear as **reader** and of how little Coover intends to guide you through some challenging narrative **terrain**(GALTS, 1996)<sup>24</sup>.

His review highlights that opening the novel with a conventional closing sentence works as a warning to the reader - more like a breadcrumb to me - about the plot. It also emphasizes the fact that characters are presented to the reader to "the depths of (their) depravity [...] into their

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<sup>24</sup> My emphasis.



web of cartoonish villainy"<sup>25</sup>. This is a rather oxymoronic configuration, as long as psychological or behavioral depth does not seem to easily conform to whatever work displaying features typically associated with those of cartoons. Nonetheless, it is a precise elaboration of the sort of literary invention that abound in Coover's fictionmaking.

There is one passage in Galts's(1996) review that strikes me as an unacknowledged intuition on his part about the model of complexity that I identified in the novel. When he states that "[t]he musings of one character lead into those of another, driving the book in tight circles around two main events - a stag party and a Pioneer's Day picnic", two elements of Chaos Theory spring up: dynamic systems and strange attractors<sup>26</sup>.

The statement that one character's musings lead into another's is at one with the description of individual systems affecting one another. What is more, the reference to "tight circles" to which the book is driven "around two main events", and later in the review to the fact that Pauline plays a central role in both events, strongly suggests the description of the shape of the Lorenz attractor provided by Slethaug in the following passage:

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<sup>25</sup> My parentetical additon.

<sup>26</sup> See section 3.2.1.

[A]s the system gets farther and farther removed from stability, the iterations begin to take on different characteristics and shapes. [...]. Lorenz's description of this effect is reinforced by the shape of one strange attractor or basin of attraction, [...] the so-called Lorenz attractor, which, when mapped onto a computer screen, resembles the shape of a butterfly with its wings spread, a peacock with its tail fanned, or a dramatic mask(SLETHAUG, 2000, p.xxvii).

As I see it, and wish to demonstrate later in this dissertation, the characters John's wife and Pauline act as strange attractors, as the shape the turbulence of the system - the town - takes. Still according to Slethaug this butterfly attractor combines stretching and folding,

[i]nstead of having the single governing point of an attractor in a stable system, this [...] has several points that are 'stretched' [...] but are also 'folded' into two distinct, but related domains(SLETHAUG, 2000, p.xxviii).

Later in his review, Galts offers more elements to support the parallel I draw between his appraisal and strange attractors, with stretching and folding, in, "[a]t the same time Pauline's body inflates, John's wife begins, literally, to disappear"(GALTS, 1996). Despite all these apparently obvious realizations of the topic of complexity animating Coover's fictional world, Galts closes his review with a complimentary comment on Coover's "brilliancy and lucidity".

In the end, Galt chooses to credit "the book's finest accomplishment" to driving the reader to abide strain. The

quality of the book resides in the fact that it forces the reader "to confront moral questions normally kept under lock and key", as if Coover's novel, after all, deserved to be excused for its outrageousness and praised for its didactical and edifying role. For Galts, *John's Wife, a Novel* is a novel, and as such it must be tackled: give the reader the key to it, the map of the maze, and he will work his way out of it a wiser man, ready to live happily ever after.

Following the two appraisals released within a month's time from each other, Coover's audience was met with still another text on *John's Wife*, though not exactly a review. Interestingly enough, this sounds just as if they had been programmed to come out on a monthly basis. This time, under the illustrative title *Author Casts Some Light on his Mysterious Novel*, the mystery of the novel is partially brought to light. Mel Gussow presents some of Coover's own clarification of his method, which includes palindromes, multilinearity, nearly as many perspectives as there are characters, and shifting time frames.

Among the clues released by Coover there is the novelist's "litmus test for reviewers"(GUSSOW, 1996). In this interview Coover categorically asserts that, "[i]f a reviewer praising or rejecting the book fails to mention that she disappears, then he has not read the book"(idem).

Once having declared some of his magic, which can easily be associated with most of the characteristics of hypertexts, Coover is confronted with the inevitable question by Gussow: whether *John's Wife* "with its labyrinthine accretions and nonsequential story line, is a hypertext"(GUSSOW, 1996). To this, Coover conceded that he might be practicing what he teaches. Nonetheless, what should be pointed out is that he confesses he had only admitted to doing it after having been forced to by Michael Joyce, the author of *Afternoon, a Story*, the first (digital) hypertext novel, to consider whether anyone would ever realize that it was Coover, not Joyce (Michael, not James) the one to write the first real hypertext novel.

A later review of *John's Wife* appeared in The New York Review of Books in October of 1996, signed by Michael Wood. This can be read as a quite commendatory presentation of the novel, as it crowns the novel with the adjective "different" - a predication that only disingenuous readers would overlook in these postmodern times.

Ever since Jacques Derrida's coining of the term *différance*, in *Writing and Difference*(1967), and Gilles Deleuze's forewarning critique of representation, in *Difference & Repetition*(1994) especially, we have been forced to consider the question of difference on manifold grounds. On stating that "*John's Wife* is different, although at first

sight it looks the same"(WOOD, 1996), Wood brings to mind the notions of difference and repetition together as well as the relationship between writing and difference, a teaser of sorts to the literature-conscious wondering mind.

After praising the novel for its "verve and endless fluency, [...] the pleasure of a furious narrative energy"(WOOD, 1996), he takes the pains of focusing on the aspects of style and narrative mode, describing the novel's structural layout and providing a synopsis of its story. He ventures an analogy with Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* while stressing his (Wood's) sensitive perception of the atmosphere of how stories circulate in a small town shaping the story itself as circular, in the following passage:

Its mode might be described as hearsay soap opera, or *Our Town* scored as a scabrous fairy tale. "...Once," it begins, "there was a man named John..." "Once..." it ends, inviting us to start again(WOOD, 1996).

What stands out in his review is the reference he makes to how Coover manages to convey a nightmarish atmosphere to story. His statement joins Coover's artistic deployment of the narratological categories of character and point of view leading to a conundrum-like structure. He claims Coover achieves this effect "by giving his characters first names but no second names, and by telling all the town's stories in a breathless, thinly punctuated prose almost imperceptibly

divided into nineteen unnamed, unnumbered sections"(WOOD, 1996). And he goes on to include Coover's allegedly contrived burden on his readers on remarking that, though the text is not hard to read,

it requires a readjustment of reading habits. Instead of trying to remember individual characters and backgrounds, or looking them up in the kind of chart you are often given at the beginning of Russian novels, **you learn to wait** for them to come round again, with their attendant reminders of who they are, **and you come to know them** the way you know gossip, fragmentary, repetitive, familiar, hazy, going blank, suddenly returning to sharp focus(idem)<sup>27</sup>.

It is a point to be made that the reading I exercise in the analysis of Coover's novels are meant to contribute to and endorse to some extent the implications of Wood's remark on the dialogical, interactive and even immersive dimension that Coover's writing enacts and with which it entices the reader. Wood hints, though apparently unaware or at least unintentionally, at the process of subject constitution in the process of reading the novel.

The French translation of *John's Wife*, was published in 2001 and was reviewed by Béatrice Pire under the title *La Fêlure*, which can be translated into English as "The Crack". The opening lines of her review draw on Coover's devastating criticism of American ideology, "by transforming the patrons of the Cold War in burlesque actors of a chaotic and vulgar

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<sup>27</sup> My emphasis.

spectacle<sup>28</sup>" (PIRE, 2001), known to the French public after the publication of *Le Bûcher de Times Square (The Public Burning)* in 1977.

The title, *La Fêlure*, refers to the novel's portrayal of the American dream, which she describes as its cracked inverse in a flat mirror. This, she adds, is revealed in the text by means of "a grotesque archeology" of the American collective consciousness. Coover instates it when he presents "an unforgettable character and his celebratory fabulation"<sup>29</sup> (PIRE, 2001) at every ten pages or so. Among these memorable characters, John's wife is referred to by the reviewer as,

[t]he novel's ghostly axis, she is also the invisible point (no name or voice) around which the other town dwellers gravitate: each one alternates thus a permanent rotation of points of view to describe their relationship with this ideal figure and deliver a fragment of their own story (PIRE, 2001).<sup>30</sup>

There are two important associations to Chaos Theory that can be derived from Pire's assessment of *John's Wife*: the reference to John's wife as a gravitational center of

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<sup>28</sup> My free translation of the original in French, "une critique décapante de l'idéologie américaine en transformant les chantres de la guerre froide en acteurs bouffons d'un spectacle chaotique et vulgaire".

<sup>29</sup> My free translation of the original, "un personnage inoubliable et sa fabulation jubilatoire".

<sup>30</sup> My free translation of the following passage in the original: "Axe fantasmagorique du roman, elle est aussi le point invisible (sans nom ni voix) autour duquel gravitent les autres habitants: chacun alterne ainsi dans une rotation permanente des points de vue pour décrire sa relation à cette figure idéale et livrer un fragment de son histoire".

town life and as a point around which dynamic alternations take place. These insights have proved very useful in my task of acknowledging the role of strange attractors, and of basins of attraction, performed by John's wife and Pauline, according to Chaos Theory.

Her insights stand as evidences to how character relationships with one another can correspond to what Daniel Punday(2003b) presents as an alternative to the visual model of corporeality that characterizes the modern thinking about the body to be explored when analyzing narratives. This applies to the novel - once in *John's Wife* most of these relationships involve physical, not to mention carnal, contact.

Following Elizabeth Grosz's(1994) proposal that we should take touch instead of sight as the sense on which the body's place in the world is based, Punday insists that, in order to engage in a different way of thinking about bodies within narrative, "rather than thinking about bodies as spatially separated and distinct, we should consider the ways in which individual bodies engage in an ongoing exchange"(PUNDAY, 2003b, p.76). Thus, the pattern that arises in the novel as John's wife gradual fading from view coincides with Pauline's uncontrollable bodily growth suggests a complex and dynamic interaction between those two bodies especially. While John's wife's body eventually melts



in the air, literally, Pauline turns into a giantess, and she keeps growing to the end of the novel. Likewise, the interactions the other characters establish with each one of these two women display the same complex dynamics. This pattern will be presented as illustrative of the two characters' play as strange attractors.

Marc Chénétier, the renowned French Americanist scholar on Coover's work presented a review of the novel right after the French translation was published. The title of his article, *Vos désirs font désordre* (*Your desires made disorder*) is itself a beautiful pun teasing the reader to entertain the similarity between the words and concepts of desire and disorder, both in English and in French.

In the article the novel's thematic official focus is identified as the town's suffocating atmosphere and hysteria at first dissimulated but gradually revealed within and through the enmeshing of the characters' speeches and lives (CHÉNETIER, 2001, p.5)<sup>31</sup>. It is a point to be made that he aims to find a sight, as if brandishing a firearm, or a camera, with which to shoot. Once again, here it is the visual epistemology that underlies his treatment of narrative.

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<sup>31</sup> My free translation of the original that reads, "Dissimulés, puis progressivement révélés par l'entrelacs savant des récits et des vies, l'étouffement et l'hystérie de la petite ville sont la cible thématique officielle du roman".

The reference to Pauline as the literally monstrous shape that the town's permanently repressed desires and nuisances progressively take on *en tour de force* lays the floor for still another association of the character with strange attractors, inasmuch as the character John's wife is referred to, in the same article, as the surface onto which every other character in the novel's ghosts are projected. John's wife stands, thus, as a void, as a center of attraction of "a variety of aspirations and images of desire"<sup>32</sup>(CHÉNETIER, 2001, p.5) to be filled.

There is another aspect in Chénetier's review that is worth bringing to the fore, his remark on Coover's integration of cinematic elements in his narrative technique. This focalization technique, akin to the "the seventh art"(CHÉNETIER, 2001, p.5), the scholar adds, endows Coover's work with an outstanding complexity and refinement<sup>33</sup>(idem).

Taking heed to the fact that,

[t]he proximity to [the characters'] minds is compensated by the fact that the characters are continually seen through camera lenses, two-way *mirrors*, mirrors, ready-made ideas, old photos,

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<sup>32</sup>The original reads, "Sur elle se projettent les fantasmes, autour de la fascination qu'elle exerce se décline et tente vainement de s'articuler toute la variété des aspirations et des figures du désir".

<sup>33</sup> The quoted reference to cinema appears in the original as, "mais à laquelle Coover, dont l'œuvre entière entretient une singulière parenté avec le septième art, donne une complexité et un raffinement remarquables".

vile metaphors, wilted myths"<sup>34</sup>(CHÉNETIER, 2001, p.5),

the reader is forced to deal with the problematic mind/body dualism, or, in Elizabeth Grosz's view, dissociation, only made possible after the epistemological valuing of sight. Punday expands her lesson to the literary field to advance his critique of the narratology theories that seem,

unable to account for important elements of the text [...], to theorize moments when character corporeality will exceed individual bodies and provide a general hermeneutic atmosphere for the reader's contact with the narrative"(PUNDAY, 2003b, p.77).

In *John's Wife*, the bodily transformations both characters, John's wife and Pauline, undergo along the narrative mark a different level of interaction between reader and text in narration. This aspect of the novel seems an applicable and appropriate demonstration of Punday's point in the following passage,

I am suggesting that we attend to the ongoing contact between reader and character. There are certain character bodies that represent points of contact between the reader and the text. This point of contact provides the hermeneutic atmosphere of the text(PUNDAY, 2003b, p.77).

The fact that there are theories that rely on visual models, and in so doing underscore the importance of touch in

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<sup>34</sup> My free translation of the original, "La proximité aux consciences se compense du fait que les personnages ne cessent d'être vus au travers d'objectifs, de vitres sans tain, de miroirs, d'idées faites, de photos anciennes, de métaphores torves, de mythes atrophiés".

our everyday experience of the world, suggest that once the reader's engagement with narrative is established on a summoning of the sense of touch primarily, the visual experience of the world and other bodies must be contextualized within it. That is, touch instead of sight may as well define the context in which all other relations between the body and the world are eventually conceived - including that of reading a page in a bound book or on the screen of a digital device.

In The United States of America, already incorporating the concern with and awareness of the impact of theories of hypertext processing on literary texts, Cindy Schnebly(2001) offered an illuminating analysis of *John's Wife* pointing out that the subject of the novel is the transmission of information in a small community, John's prairie town being just an instance of the plot-fabula formalistic code. In *Transmitting Narrative Information: Textual Links in John's Wife*, Schnebly points out that the nonlinearity displayed in the arrangement of the textual events in the novel subjects the reader to invest in a "search for information links" - a humongous task, given the number of characters (over fifty) and shifting plot lines enmeshed.

Though she must be praised for her minute survey of these textual elements, I cannot help to acknowledge her overtly revealed conqueror-like attitude towards the

enigmatic novel, in lines such as "[o]ne of the keys to understanding the text is being able to discern how characters are linked to each other and to the narrative"(SCHNEBLY, 2001). And she goes on to offer a framework, which resembles Umberto Eco's semiotic Q-square model(1976), with which the reader will succeed in linking characters despite having been "denied the layers of background information"(SCHNEBLY, 2001) by an omniscient third person narrator. By welding such a tool - her model, a weapon, one should say - the reader is empowered to face the task of piecing together "a family tree of community members by comparing information from narrative to narrative"(idem).

Though she attributes to "reader disorientation" the status of a norm in postmodern fiction, she prefers to treat this feature as amenable to be tamed by the properly equipped reader, for "inching his or her way through the maze of narrative blanks, [the reader] ultimately supplies the code that will provide coherence to the text"(SCHNEBLY, 2001). In other words, she endows the plot with a perfectly representable map or chart in the figure of a complex, though not dynamic, space - that of a maze.

According to Schnebly, complexity is complex just until one is made familiar with it. As I see it, this reading fails to tap the dynamics of subject constitution that inevitably goes on in a negotiation process that leads to meaning making

in reading fiction. It is a fact that Coover's novel can be stripped in layers of information, but it is also a fact that this stripping does not correspond to meaning making by the reader. It can be deemed, to the best of chances, as a deciphering, a translation, a rendering visible of whatever pre-inscribed information the style of the writer may have conceived of. Whatever the dimension of subjectivity is bound to be considered as part of a reading process, it is denied in this model.

More recently, Kathryn Hume responds to some book reviewers who have deemed Coover's less acclaimed works (than *The Universal Baseball Association* and *The Public Burning*, for example) as "cold, obsessional, and unpleasant" (HUME, 2003, p.827), in her academic article *The Metaphysics of Bondage*. She prefers to reckon with the alternative that perhaps his later works, *John's Wife* included, have posed a puzzle that has not yet been solved. She hails Coover's taste for the grotesque and interprets it in terms of a metaphysics of bonds of all sorts that need to be broken, either by the author or by the characters. Concerning the grotesque in Coover's writings, she remarks,

[t]hese events defy easy analysis because their comic or serious value is not intrinsic, but is determined by each reader's mental make-up, which in turn rests on ideologies and beliefs outside any author's control. [...]. This prevents critical consensus forming about the nature of a work, and indeed makes difficult the assertion of

any singleminded, unambiguous interpretation. The instability of values also interferes with most readers' satisfaction, because they tend to like works they feel they have conquered and Coover's permit no such self-congratulation(HUME, 2003, p.829).

A point to be made here is also her reference to how dependent the value of textual events is on the reader's "mental make-up", on the play of his subjectivity in this process. The allusion to self-congratulation owed to a conquest maneuver remarks to us that this is not exactly the kind of fulfillment one should be after when reading Coover's work. This stands as an undeniable acknowledgment of Coover's aesthetic and poetic project - to provide the reader with an interactive rather than a reactive experience.

In the quotation above, the reference to the deployment of the grotesque is linked to Hume's appreciation of Pauline, in *John's Wife*, as an example of "polyvalent grotesque". Hume says that Pauline's basic grotesquerie lies on her uncontrollable growth, "elaborated by the urgency of her needing mountains of food, by her inability to clothe her expanding frame, and by the huge faeces that she leaves in her wake"(HUME, 2003, p.830-831).

Hume also characterizes Coover's vision as demonic (after Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism*) on the basis of such scenes as confrontation with a mob, the demonic erotic,

a demonic site, demonic fire, ironized myths, and bondage, which compose the seven novels<sup>35</sup> she examined for the article. Besides, Hume states that "[e]very novel shows the confrontation between victim and mob, in which the victim may be merely threatened or actually injured, may be expelled from society, or may be killed – even torn apart.[...] Situations of bondage and absurdity are practically Coover's trademark"(HUME, 2003, p.835). Concerning *John's Wife*, Pauline is demonically abused by her stepfather, Daddy Duwayne, and her suffering only ends as she is destroyed in a demonic fire set up by a mob.

Demonic is also the adjective Hume attributes to the kind of bondage, both literal and metaphoric, Coover's protagonists endure in their often-absurd world. As to *John's Wife*, "the molecule-like bonds of small-town personalities" can be seen as portraying bonds within society and psychology, in the shape of "monstrous oppressions and vitiating burdens"(HUME, 2003, p.836). These bonds, these links, in Coover's works are deployed as primarily and originally bound, unless the mind can break [them]. Hume remarks that,

[f]or Coover, [...] bonds are sought, questioned, and broken when possible, even if only temporarily. An individual cannot hope for grand success, but must cultivate an attitude, a drive

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<sup>35</sup> Her article includes the review of the following novels: *The Origin of the Brunists*, *The Universal Baseball Association*, *The Public Burning*, *Gerald's Party*, *John's Wife*, *Ghost Town*, and *Pinnocchio in Venice*.



towards freedom, and maintain that even when the overall nature of the world suggests that no final victory is possible(HUME, 2003, p.840).

This is undoubtedly a piece of advice and also an admonishing remark that serves as a beacon to the aspiring critic, as a plateau from which to take flight. Hers is a piece of criticism that eventually engages with the complexity of subject constitution that Coover's work enact.

In an era that holds hypertext and the active role of the reader in the construction of story as features of contemporary literature forms, Hume's article is a token of the kind of criticism that selects the bonds to be preserved - as she draws on Frye's critical path - and those to be dropped when the literary work urges from the critic/reader that he, on his turn, breaks some links as well - as she admits the impossibility of (the reader's) final victory (over the work).

To my knowledge, the latest piece reviewing *John's wife*, a novel is Brian Evenson's. Chapter Four, Later Works, of *Understanding Robert Coover* presents *John's Wife* as Coover's second most ambitious work since *The Public Burning* and that only Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* can be compared to it, given its style and scope - two highly appreciative comments, to say the least. After exposing a commented synopsis of the story, he points out the shift in

the narrative style from realism into a magical space and the metafictional element that reveals Coover's reflection on fictionmaking during the course of the novel.

Concerning the first remark, we can watch the parallel dissolution of the realistic anchoring of realistic conventions yielding to magic realism when we focus on the degrees of materiality the characters John's wife and Pauline experience. The gradual fading of John's wife and Pauline's monstrous growth take place simultaneously in the narrative, and are presented in narration precisely by means of this shift.

As to the reference to metafiction, Evenson brings to the fore the fact that one of the characters, Ellsworth, is composing a story about an Artist and his Model. In this story within the story the Stalker, an intruding character, invades Ellsworth's prose,

he had intruded upon the text unbidden...he already posed a profound menace not merely to the other characters in the novel [...] but to the original plot as well, threatening it now with a total restructuring(COOVER, 1996, p.106).

Evenson points out that what happens to the Model in Ellsworth's writing helps us think about John's wife disappearing from the text. At a certain point, Ellsworth confuses himself with the Artist and, looking at his

manuscript, he discovers that his Model has vanished from it. Evenson explains,

[b]y becoming absent, she (John's wife) continues as a center nonetheless, maintains a mystery which, had she been less in flux, would have eventually collapsed. It is her "not seen" quality that makes her important to the town (EVENSON, 2003, p.229).

Evenson, thus, reinforces the problematization of the play of the reader - which can be associated to the Stalker, the critic - in this specific type of fiction. This is fiction that displays a radically interactive, immersive dimension of reading exacted within contemporary works that in-scribe more complex processes of subject constitution presently made possible through new technologies.

The provisional conclusion to this review of the reception of *John's Wife* so far is the blinding concerning the (w)reading at play these renditions of *John's Wife* betray can be attributed to two situations - with the exception of Hume's and maybe of Evenson's. This blinding is either owing to the incapacity of entertaining the issue of interactivity in more physical and material terms, as it is the case in posthuman times, or to the misunderstanding of the fact that hypertext, as a new stance of writing, tends to dispersion in the first place and as such may extend resistance to closure to the edge of interpretation as we have been taught with and by(non-hyper)texts.

The former hypothesis granted, the point that interactivity is a constitutive element of narration as well as a fundamental aspect of reading in posthuman times, enacted by hyper or proto-hypertexts as Coover's, must be acknowledged. Granted the latter, the issue of an emerging class of readers (and writers) more akin to and familiar with an ever-growing and encroaching globalized culture, only made possible and mostly supported by means of computer technology, has got to be reckoned with.

In any case, they signal to us that *John's Wife* stands as a new form of the novel genre, which entices its (w)readers into new practices of interaction through (by means of) verbal constructions. Besides, they also play the role of a beacon, suggesting where we should scrutinize in order to move beyond their limits.

The reviews and essays mentioned in this section, with the exception of Hume's, should stand as a token of a critical procedure that insists on speaking about the text, after the text, not while processing it, without eventually submitting to the summoning of the reader's active involvement perpetrated by the narration. As we can see, these reviews either offer a finished and totalized version of the work (sometimes even of the book rather than of the work, in Barthesian terms, or provide the reader with a gear which he must brandish to harness one narrative element or

another, and sometimes one after another, so as to overcome the author's artfully conceived entrapments and decoys, and eventually outdo them.

If on one hand they most often celebrate the author's geniality, on the other there is in some a feeble admittance of the process of subject constitution triggered in the process of reading, as if this dimension were not even there. Nevertheless, it is, just like Coover defines his elusive character, "a thereness that was not there"(COOVER, 1996, p.73), a virtual thereness.

#### **4.2 The pleasures of reading *John's Wife*: For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.**

Robert Coover is very aware of the demands his writing relays on his readers and he sees it as a contingency of the art form, of a form under the process of dynamic transformation. Questioned about whether he meant to deliver such a burden on readers, he replied,

[i]t's just that the art form made certain demands on me, and I tried to live up to those demands. And when I did that, it made it hard for many readers, including reviewers, who are not, on the whole, any better prepared than the average reader. Their perspective just isn't large enough to allow them to perceive all that's thrown at them when a form is undergoing transformation(DONAHUE, 1996).

In that same interview his then latest novel, *John's Wife*, is referred to by Ane Marie Donahue as reading "a lot

like hyperfiction imprisoned in book form", followed by Coover's insistence on the fact that the novel did not start out as a hypertext, and he refused to accept the categorization of hyperfiction as applicable to his works. Five years past his debut in hypertext creative writing courses at Brown University, he still had not acknowledge his hand at that - a position he eventually reconsidered, though still indirectly, as the following passage of his interview to *Revista Espéculo* shows,

E- You are considered "the evangelist of hypertext" in the literary community, but for the hypertext "tribe"<sup>36</sup>, you are still a "classic" writer, that is, your books are printed. Do you feel like an outsider in both fields?

RC- Well, not just in those two fields...

E- Why haven't you written a hypertext?(This is suspicious)

RC- Are you certain that I haven't?(TOSKA, 1999).

Though in the form of a rhetorical - and ironic - question, one must take it as a compromising gesture on his part, as an acknowledgement that his writings stand today as more than precursors to hypertext, contrarily to his wondering in *Literary hypertext: the passing of the golden age*:

But then, maybe this is where I am stuck in the past and becoming dated, for one might well ask,

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<sup>36</sup> Notice the use of the term "tribe", a notion that matches the hypothesis that Coover's writings at the same time configures an art form and is configured as one form that emerges at the crossing of a change in culture and in sensibilities, an art form that expresses the desires that feed the life form of a new class.

are not these golden age narrative webworks mere extensions of the dying book culture, as retrotech in their way as eBooks?(COOVER, 1999).

*John's Wife, a Novel*, as the title reads on the cover of its first edition copy, was greeted with disparate reviews. This is not exactly surprising, given the ingeniousness of Coover's literary craftsmanship. The continuous playful reworking of familiar myths, fairy tales, biblical stories, and political systems in the rather iconoclastic character of most of Coover's novels also attest to this manifold reception and reaction. Among his 12 other novels, *The Public Burning*<sup>37</sup> stands as an emblem of this.

As an apprentice in arts Cooverian, I now undertake the task of demonstrating why I believe reading *John's wife* is a pleasurable task. This is a task that I poetically align with heartily acceptance, as Matthew's verse in the Bible runs, to an easy yoke and a light burden.

The question of how reading consists in engaging in an immersive experience within (space) and along (time) which the process of subjectivity construction of this reader is activated by the challenges the text imposes on me (in terms of constraints that affect).

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<sup>37</sup> *The Public Burning* is a parody of the Rosenbergs' execution in which Richard Nixon plays a leading role. *John's Wife* also invites the parallel with JFK's wife, as long as John in the novel can be associated to JFK in many instances, not to mention the character's family structure, John, his wife, an older daughter and a son, to say the least.

This exercise of talking with the book, with the text, instead of keeping a pre-established distance from the narration should yield story as discourse, as dispersion, rather than a (stabilized) text. This is my point, that we cannot approach reading as if this were not a process that takes place in time and between a contingent reader and the *locus* of constitution of an idealized projected reader subjectivity pre-inscribed in it.

In order to approach the model of complexity at play in *John's wife*, the notion of strange attractors in dynamics systems will be attributed to the characters of John's wife and Pauline in three instances throughout the novel's plot. First, when the system enjoys a relative stability and the town is portrayed as perfectly ordered. In this phase John's wife stands at the center while Pauline is at the edge, at the veritable frames of town life. Second, when there is a slight disturbance in the stability of the system; this will assume disparate proportions, plunging the town into a state of chaos and even havoc. This is in accord with the description of strange attractors as dependent on initial conditions, no matter how infinitesimal (stochastic value) they may be. Last but not least, chaos is the condition of the system as Pauline's gigantic body is destroyed in a fire at the frames of the town, and of the novel, and John's wife's reappearance in town is hinted at.



Throughout these three phases in the story the different degrees of materiality of the characters' corporeality are rendered according to specific conjunctions of time frames and landscapes. To exercise my station as a corporeal reader I will submit to negotiating the construction of my subjectivity as I face patterns of recursion and iteration configured in the process of (my) imposing order onto the narrative.

Starting from the assumption that strange attractors are the shapes that chaos and nonlinearity take, no matter how inexact, due to the presence of basins of attraction within systems, we should take heed of the fact that turbulence, as a constant in human experience, though not easily graphically modeled, is still amenable to being grasped in terms of shape and patterns. Not surprisingly, the pattern I draw is three-fold, luckily conforming the Aristotelian unity leading to closure, though not easily reduced to it.

As we have already stated, John's wife and Pauline can be grasped as strange attractors because in fiction the notion borrowed from physics, that energy and states of matter have borders and boundaries, lead us to entertain the possibility of mapping them (energy and materiality alike). The fact that both characters are the target (providing evidence of the presence of basins of attraction) of the town's people's desires, men and women, seniors, adults,

teenagers and children alike, and that they undergo material changes, support this association.

John's wife and Pauline are eventually stalked throughout the novel; the former the target of camera shots; the latter, of guns. Interestingly, none is ever fully apprehended by whatever the device or gadget deployed: both Gordon's cameras and Otis's guns shoot at their targets unsuccessfully.

#### 4.2.1 Order

In the first phase of the novel, which is tentatively and roughly organized in 19 different sections according to the degree of order exhibited by the town as a dynamic system, John's wife and Pauline fill their clear-cut stations as town queen and town harlot respectively. Narrative and town display linearity and stability, which is instated by the opening lines of the novel, "... Once, there was a man named John" (COOVER, 1996, p.7).

As we can see, a story is beginning to be told according to the conventions proper to oral storytelling and fairy tales, but with a difference. The reticence marks stand as both a reversal of the convention and as material (physical, printed, visual) signal to the reader. Reticence marks are conventionally used at the end of an utterance instead of at the beginning to indicate that the idea, the phrase, the

sentence, the paragraph, the text, the story goes on. Being a printed story, these marks stand even more relevant because they cannot be read orally, unless the storyteller uses metalanguage.

In some sense, we can say that these marks are a hint of what will be later stated as a feature of John's wife, "a thereness that was not there"(COOVER, 1996, p.73). The reticences **are** there, on the page, as an integral part of the work and of the book; yet, they are **not** there as a constitutive part of the utterance on the part of the enunciated. It takes a reader to integrate these elements inscribed by the author.

The distinction between the notions of author and narrator in this specific instance, two heartily cherished conceptions of narratology and literary theory as a whole, are put to the test on the grounds of the corporeal dimension of the (w)reading and writing processes they convene. On (w)reading those marks, there is much more than a processing of information, than a compliance with conventions, than a "willing suspension of disbelief" involved. What is at stake is the genuine in-scription on the part of the reader of his whole self within the apparently ordered layout of the text, so that it can yield discourse. Without such initial embrace of the author's teaser by the reader, a completely different

pattern may emerge. Sensitivity to the initial conditions is also a feature of dynamic systems.

The opening 12-line-long paragraph closes with the following sentence, "In spite of all that happened to his wife and friends, John lived happily ever after, as though this were somehow his destiny and his due"(COOVER, 1996, p.7). And the story goes on, the story of what happened to his wife and friends, the story that awaits to be activated by the reader, the story that will unfold in the following pages in the book, but which is enclosed between "...Once there was a man named John" and "John lived happily ever after"(idem), as every (conventional) tale, no matter how modernized, should.

What follows this opening paragraph is a succession of presentations of characters that orbit around John, according to the degree of dependence on him to earn their livings, and around John's wife according to the degree of fascination with her they more or less openly profess. These characters are listed - and this series construction also establishes hierarchies of influence in town life - so as to form concentric circles, just like in an eddy - a recurrent image in Chaos Theory discursive formation.

Thus, the first one to follow John's presentation is Floyd - an obvious sonorous relative of "flawed" - the

manager of John's Main Street hardware business, who envied John's power and coveted John's wife. This paragraph is a little longer than John's, and contains more detailed information as to his (Floyd's) family life, likes and dislikes, background, wife - Edna - and friends, but only one reference to John's wife.

The next character to be presented is Gordon, "also **attracted** to John's wife"<sup>38</sup>(COOVER, 1996, p.8). In Gordon's 35-line-long paragraph, John's wife is referred to, for the first time in the novel, as a capturer of town's people's attention. Gordon, the town photographer, is defined in this paragraph in terms of his obsession with doing a complete photographic study of her "in all her public and private aspects [...] - until there was nothing left to see"(COOVER, 1996, p.8-9), something that eventually happens as she effectively undergoes a process of dematerialization. As a photographer, Gordon shares the privacy of the town's families, as he makes traditional studio family portraits.

We can notice that, as each character is being introduced in the narration, we are gradually and increasingly informed about the two spheres of influence each one holds in town life. Besides, in this process, John's wife is made increasingly and progressively more visible to us.

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<sup>38</sup> My emphasis, to make the point of a literal reference John's wife as an attractor.

Following Gordon there is Otis, who,

saw [the community] as a closed system, no less fixed by custom and routine than by its boundaries on the map, a clocklike mechanism [...]. Nothing upset him more than disruptions to the pattern of the daily round(COOVER, 1996, p.9).

In Otis's presentation paragraph there is more information about the disorderly behavior of the town's kids - an in-scription of the margins, in terms of space and of time - with a reference to other settings where the no less unruly events of the story will take place: the humpback bridge out by Settler's Woods and the malls, for example. Otis sees himself as "a kind of guardian warrior, one eye on the periphery, one eye on the center"(idem). Otis loved John's wife, and she lived at the center.

It sounds just fair to me to infer that once Otis is such a lover of stability, and of John's wife, he believes there is stability, order, at the center. The farther one gets from the center, the closer to disorder is the spacing configuration laid down to us, readers.

In the following paragraph in the sequence of character presentations we find this affirmation of John's wife's attracting power based on the sexual arousing she triggers in them, old and young alike: "what male in town was *not*, one way or another, fascinated by John's wife?"(COOVER, 1996,

p.10)<sup>39</sup>. The answer is John, who "thought of his wife and children [...] mainly as political and social assets"(idem).

And it is only two paragraphs later that we learn that Pauline is Gordon's wife, as she comes in his photo shop "with her blouse half-buttoned and her hair uncombed, [...] the little frump" to be of no help to Gordon's search of his schedule-book. As we can see, we moved from the center to the margins, from grand scale to micro scale perspective on town life, from John's wife subtleness to Pauline's obviousness.

The presentation of other characters is made with less individualization on the part of the narrator, who voices the assessments the numerous characters hold of one another, making it a point to the reader how tightly the absence of love and the abundance of a plethora of less edifying or noble feelings tie the community together, holding John's wife at the center. The following passage illustrates my point,

[t]his view of love [...] would have been shared by many in town - by Veronica, for example, another schoolchum of John's wife and much chastised by that emotion to which she nevertheless wistfully clung - or by Otis, upholder of order, for whom love was more or less the same thing as grace, though one could sometimes make you hot and foolish, while the other usually did not - or by Beatrice, the preacher's wife, who believed that all love came from the Creator, like her husband Lennox said on Sunday mornings, but that the Lord sometimes moved

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<sup>39</sup> The italicized "not" in the original is to be minded by the reader as signaling the total indifference, invulnerability of John to his wife's mysterious power over the town.

in mysteriously distressing ways(COOVER, 1996, p.13-14).

The second layer of informational content laid down on the reader is made to inform the degree at which each of the male characters, previously introduced in terms of their attraction to John's wife, emulated some aspect of John's life. At this point in the reading, I am faced with some coincidences that strike me as elements to be put together so as to endow the burden of informational content and the complexity of characters' relationships with pattern. In this effort, recursion and iteration come to the surface, emerge as appropriate trajectories to grant that mapping can be initiated.

According to Slethaug, "recursion and iteration are [...] related to attractors, for patterns that are recursive tend to retrace their main features over time"(SLETHAUG, 2000, p.148). Apparently, this repetition beckons to us the presence of order, but as we will see, there is a pattern of turbulence from order to chaos (second phase) that is again configured as a newly constituted order (third phase).

Otis, order upholder, for instance, emulates John's quiet force and has been in love with unaware John's wife since high school, and "whenever [he] thought of the Virgin Mary, he thought of John's wife"(COOVER, 1996, p.17). The



following sentence in the novel contrasts the sublime with the menial - a token of Coover's taste for the grotesque; the narrator reports to us Pauline's perspective on several characters in the story. In so doing, we learn something about her memories, and about her play in town life, as in, "[w]henever Pauline the photographer's wife thought of Otis, she thought of the way he cried the first time she sucked him off"(COOVER, 1996, p.18). This shows the extreme poles each character holds. John's wife, the archetype of saintly womanhood, idealization; Pauline, the debased, vilified dispenser of sexual services, "the sweetest cocksucker in high school, maybe the best the town had ever had"(idem). In either case and category, they were each the one of choice in town.

After a succession of parallel statements nested in the wording "whenever Pauline thought of" - different characters' names and nicknames filling in the gap, another instance of iteration - we eventually have Pauline's view of John and his wife,

[w]henever she thought of John, she thought of a young magician (though he was no longer young)[...]. Whenever she thought of John's wife, she thought of her dead sister coming to her in a nightmare: she was taller than the doorframe, ten years old, wore a ragged white nightdress, and her breasts were dripping blood(COOVER, 1996, p.18).

As we can notice, the two members of the couple are envisioned as unreal, as imagined, as out of reach. The

allusion to her sister's size lays the ground on which to measure the terror Pauline later associates with the bodily transformations she turns out to undergo as the story unfolds.

The other women in town, though not competing for the attention of John's wife, "however momentary and enigmatic"(COOVER, 1996, p.19), often felt threatened while at the same time protected by her. John's wife is referred to as a strange force, one that sucks people's energies, yet not easily defined or apprehended - a strange attractor - as we can see in,

Lorraine [...] sometimes felt she hated her, yet had to admit she needed her as she needed Waldo's idiocy: one had to live with these **strange forces**. John's wife often called forth these ambivalent responses from the women around her. Trevor's wife Marge envied John's wife, pitied her. Little Clarissa felt a kind of sentimental rage toward her, Opal a jealous affection, Lumby an erotic disgust. Old Stu's wife Daphne loved her [...]. Floyd's wife Edna watched her as one watched a cloud: perhaps it would rain; it didn't matter"(COOVER, 1996, p.19)<sup>40</sup>.

The paragraph that follows this passage opens as an echo - as it is often the case throughout the novel - "Daphne watched everything these days as one watched a cloud. Seeing and not seeing"(COOVER, 1996, p.19). This is the first time framing that occurs in the novel, inasmuch as "these days" is the time of narration, so that we can then be plunged into

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<sup>40</sup> My emphasis.

Daphne's recollection of John's wedding, "[a] remarkable event [...], the best the town had seen in years and nothing like it in the nearly two decades since"(COOVER, 1996, p.20).

In the old people's opinion, the narrator delivers this information as the librarian Kate's omen,

great ingatherings of this kind did indeed confirm the community's traditional view of itself, but confirmation was also a kind of transformation: this town, unchanging, would never be the same again(COOVER, 1996, p.21).

But the narrator remarks right after that "few would have read any but auspicious omens in such an oracle"(idem), signaling that change has assumed, "these days" a gloomy face for some more than for others.

Change was bound to impact on the town life at a time in which,

[t]he entire area [...] was in something of a recession, lying dormant, waiting for something to come along and wake it up, and the wedding was like a fresh breath of life, a real pickup for everyone. Literally, as it turned out: for it was announced at the reception [...] that the state highway commission had decided to route its four-lane north-south link to the new cross-country interstate highway [...] past the edge of town, ensuring its continued prosperity(COOVER, 1996, p.23).

The reference to the edge of town about to be put on the map only adds to the notion that change begins at the margins but is bound to affect the center in unexpected ways, as we

shall see. The relationship between the changes that take place at the center affecting the edges and vice versa configure a pattern of reversibility in the system.

Thus, the narration delivers the events in town around four major occasions taking place at the center and at the margins of town. To explain this phase of order in the novel it suffices to mention John's wedding party at the center, whereas at the margins it is his stag party that takes place, granted that there are characters that perform at both sites, and some others belong to one of them exclusively. That is the case of John's wife - always at the center, never anywhere else; as to Pauline, the reverse applies.

The pattern applies not only to events, to what is happening **in** the story, at the time of narration or through flashbacks, but also to the reading process. The flow of the presentation of the story provides linearity by making use of an echoing technique despite the abrupt "cuts" - cinematic style - as I strive to engage in it, to keep tuned on it. Though there is an amassing number of characters more or less involved in the narrated events, sometimes providing multiple focalizations, the poles are always made visible, providing pattern.

As to the echoing technique, the transition between paragraphs is granted, as the last sentence in one paragraph

is resumed in the opening sentence of the following paragraph. In this way, even when the focalization changes, the time frame changes, the setting changes, or the character changes, the reader is provided with the flow of narration more in terms of a re-lay (recursion, iteration) than of putative linearity. Nonetheless, linearity can still be recuperated at the level of the multiple focalizations of individual events. Every time one certain event is presented, no matter under whose perspective, the reader is supplied with some piece of contextual information that allows him to organize the sequence of the actions chronologically.

The poles must be understood rather as the basins of attractions than as the two extremes that work as the origin and the destination of narrative flow. When I mention poles I mean the center and the margins taking the circle or the ellipsis as an image, though each of them on their turn may behave as centers, as basins of attraction, as it is the case in a dynamic, far-from-equilibrium system.

Consequently, sometimes it is Pauline's circumstantial experience that is narrated first until we get to learn what the equivalent experience was like with John's wife; other times, we first learn about John's wife and only later about Pauline. For example, on page 41(COOVER, 1996) there is the reference to Pauline as a seven-year-old child, the earliest ever to be mentioned in the novel, being raped by her

stepfather Daddy Duwayne, as part of a long paragraph that focuses on the town's people "first time [...], not easily forgotten, nor easily retold"(COOVER, 1996, p.40). And it is only on page 46 that we find a reference to John's wife's childhood, in a paragraph that describes one of the old Pioneers Day pageants,

at one of which, a child still, princesslike in white organdy and lace, John's wife starred as The Spirit of Enterprise. [...] [T]he pretty child, angelically aglow in the dappled light moved by the tears in her father's eyes(COOVER, 1996, p.46).

Later, references to the two women's nakedness are presented first concerning John's wife, and then Pauline. Gordon, of course, is the character that brings the two images together in the novel. John's wife, his subject of choice but never at hand; Pauline, his wife, the subject at hand, not exactly a choice, not exactly his. Actually, none of them his for that matter.

The paragraph about the kids' fight on Sunday school over Turtle's finding his aunt (John's wife) just out of the bath, naked, "[s]tark naked"(COOVER, 1996, p.60), provides the transition to the paragraph on Gordon, which opens like this, in that echoing technique, "[n]aked flesh: ever a sight to see, [...] and especially when generally withheld from view"(idem). The possibility of making her naked photo is a

new one for Gordon, who has envisioned her in less fleshy dimensions, such as,

dressed in a gauzy stuff like mist, gently pivoting on one foot, glancing around, her hair caught by a breeze, her far hip lifting slightly, her trailing hand waist-high, a mysterious shadow between her thighs: "John's Wife Turning Through Diaphanous Wisps"(COOVER, 1996, p.60).

The boy's report of her nakedness prompts Gordon to envision her,

standing naked ("John's Wife...") in the rain, face uplifted, arms outstretched, feet together, her body streaming and glistening in the downpour, diamonds of light in her pubic hair(COOVER, 1996, p.60).

However, he has eventually done this photo with his wife, Pauline, the blowups of the diamonds of light included, and he deems it as lacking radiance. This is the first instance in the novel that the reader is confronted with an actual juxtaposition of the two characters, this is a point at which I understand turbulence begins. What happens here is the movement of folding and stretching that characterizes the Lorenz attractor, the folding enabling the juxtaposition of the women's bodies' images and the stretching of the distance between them: John's wife is all radiance; Pauline, all flesh.

So much so that the paragraph following this juxtaposition starts elaborating on the meaning of radiance,

so often used when speaking of John's wife, and plunges into recollections of her by Ellsworth, journalist and poet at the town's newspaper, and Gordon's buddy, who used to baby-sit her. In these recollections, Ellsworth played make-believe games like "Sleeping Beauty", "Alice Through the Looking-Glass" and "Narcissus and Echo", a particular favorite of both of them, usually followed by a kind of hide-and-seek. I will quote the description of this game at length and later elaborate on how this is already part of the shape of the turbulence initiated in the paragraph before that, both in the story and in the reading process.

Ellsworth would hunch over his own reflection [...] while she "vanished", leaving her clothes behind, the playacting ones she wore on top. While she was looking for a hiding place, Ellsworth [...] would call out to her in phrases stolen from *Ancient Mythologies* and she would shout back at him the last words that he said [...] "Why can't I see you?" "See you!" "Don't be such a nincompoop!" "Poop!" "Where have you gone?" "Gone!" - until she had finally hidden, and then she would be silent and he would go looking for her [...]. After that, they'd get dressed up and do it again, though sometimes, just to be fair, he'd be Echo(COOVER, 1996, p.61).

This game passage, which appropriates the myth of Echo and Narcissus, provides the reader with many elements that will account for recursion. In the story, we have John's wife as a kid "vanishing" and being chased, what adds to the already introduced notion of a thereness that was not there and of her station as an object of the town's people desires



from an early age - which means nothing has changed much concerning this.

In the reading process, the experience of the echoing technique is "made flesh", in content as well as in form. Echo is the voice, always incomplete, never thoroughly apprehended, only traces of the original utterance, which is irretrievable though partially repeatable - iteration of content. As we have seen, the closing line of one paragraph provides the opening line of the paragraph to come, though often performing a cut, a shift of topic, focalization, time frame, or tone. Sometimes the echo is accomplished much farther in the story, as for example, the turn taking mentioned at the end of the previous quotation is played out by Pauline and Cornell, a.k.a. Corny, some years later. Corny and two of his little friends went to the trailer park where Pauline lived asking her merely "to see":

So she took them around behind the trailer and dropped her jeans and underpants, raised her tee shirt. [...]. She chased them off finally [...] but they were back almost every week after that [...]. They made her bend over and touch her toes, squat, lie down and spread her legs, roll over, get up on her knees and elbows, lie on her side with one knee in the air press up on her shoulders with her knee by her ears, as they squeezed and patted and dipped their fingers in wherever they could. Then one evening, just for fun, she told them it was their turn, they had to take their clothes off now and show her (COOVER, 1996, p.66).

John's wife's partner in the game was her babysitter, Ellsworth, whereas Pauline's partner was more like a baby himself, though he was only a little younger. Nevertheless, the turn taking on clothes dropping did take place in the narration for Pauline, in the narrative for John's wife. Once again we can watch the movements of folding and stretching take place.

A further level of recursion could still be explored, considering the fact that Ellsworth is himself writing a novel, for which he considers the titles "Echo and Narcissus", "The Artist's Ordeal" and "The Artist and His Model", among others.

#### 4.2.2 The shape of turbulence

In the movement of stretching and folding we watch the shape of turbulence, of the Lorenz attractor, take form. As turbulence starts, we watch John's wife's materiality fade and Pauline's thrive. The first testimony of these changes in their materiality we read in the story is provided by one of the characters, it is Trevor's disconcert about John's wife's inclination to "go adrift"(COOVER, 1996, p.76).

The nature of the attachment Trevor, John's accountant, held to John's wife is linked to the nature of his professional activity. Thus, though John's wife's age is disputed within town's folk, he "could tell it to the day,

knew too her social and medical history, as well as that of most of the people related to her"(COOVER, 1996, p.75). Despite all this detailed, broad, and deep knowledge, "the rest [was] more unknowable, when he tried to think of her, all he could see was an abstract point on the abstract graph of his insurance actuarial tables"(COOVER, 1996, p.75-76). At the gatherings at the country club, no matter how hard he concentrated upon some particular feature of her person that he might recall later,

stare as he might her image would not stick, [...] this indeterminacy made no sense. John's wife was unknowable perhaps, but she was also unchanging, the very image of constancy, at least in this town. She was, abidingly, what she was. So what did it mean that he could not fix the fixed?(COOVER, 1996, p.76).

As we have seen, the town's order, as well as the stability of the town as a closed system, rests on the presence of John's wife at the center as well as that of Pauline not at the center, so much so that they never share the same spot. Pauline is not invited to John's wedding party or Pioneers Day Barbecue, and John's wife does not go, obviously, to John's stag party, to the sessions at the Pioneer Motel or to the orgies at Settler's Wood cabin. In these, Pauline is often a party fellow.

However, one afternoon a committee of town ladies, John's wife among them, expand a trip to the trailer park as

part of a town beautification program, Daddy Duwayne's trailer - in jail at the time - being an eyesore in town. At the moment Otis is leaving the trailer after one of his periodic sexual encounters with Pauline he stands face to face with John's wife. Caught almost in the act, he gets one of the ladies skeptical gaze at his face, "seeming to peer straight through him and on into the trailer behind"(COOVER, 1996, p.92). We are told next that "[o]ne night later she was dead. Grotesquely. Upside-down, blood leaking from her ears. But still staring. And the day after that, Otis arranged for a long weekend"(idem).

In this passage we can see that John's wife and Pauline could have stood face to face, but did not. This would have been quite a change both at the story level and in town life, if we consider Otis's perspective on order. The fact that murder is implied here is a hint at the turbulence that has emerged in the system.

One night at the Country Club the city's car dealer, Old Stu, drunk as often he was, ended up dropping his drink down John's wife's bosom, fell off his stool and had to be dragged out. Among the descriptions of the reaction of the people at the club there are two references to John's wife feeble corporeality; one by Maynard, John's cousin, the other by Kevin, the golf pro in charge of the club.

Maynard, with eyes watered, watching John's wife try to get composed, the narrator tells us, sees that "for a moment John's wife was just a formless blur, not quite there. He blinked and brought her back"(COOVER, 1996, p.146).

Kevin, who was "keeping a close eye on events that night, after what had happened earlier in the day"(COOVER, 1996, p.148), watching "John's wife the center of attention as she always was"(COOVER, 1996, p.149), wondered, "[d]id she seem to dim slightly, to slip from view as the gin splashed down her front?"(idem). Only to be reassured the next second as he noticed her breast "boobed like anyone else's"(id. ibidem) while being wiped. The weird event he had witnessed earlier that day was that, while helping her hold her club on a swing,

he was overtaken suddenly by a delicious sensation [...] not exactly sexual [...]. Then, just as suddenly, how could he explain it, she didn't seem to be there. He was holding only the club. He let go of it in alarm: and there she was, going into her swing(COOVER, 1996, p.149).

These two apprehensions of John's wife's physical presence as flickering, that is, as alternating visibility and invisibility within seconds, disquiet several of the town's people besides Gordon, in his steadfast pursuit of his subject, disturb the town's stability, and mark turbulence within the system. Correspondingly, Pauline's clothes "didn't seem to last her a week [...] in the last couple of weeks,

when, suddenly nothing seemed to fit anymore"(COOVER, 1996, p.162).

Gordon, sent to the mall to run an errand on account of Pauline's "peculiar condition", could not help noticing Clarissa, John's teenage daughter, with her friend Jennifer, reverend Lennox's daughter, at a table in the food court. In his unwavering quest of his subject, John's wife, Gordon decides that it could only be her who has driven them there, as, for no other reason, the Lincoln was parked outside and her chauffer was not in sight.

Thus, not quite believing his luck, the photographer, then,

patrolled the corridors [...] but as usual of late, he must have missed her. Even when their paths crossed [...], for some reason they didn't cross. [...] Meanwhile Pauline was outgrowing all her clothes, even the newest that fit (the day before)<sup>41</sup>(idem).

This is another instance to be heeded as an index of the stretching and folding movement I have been mentioning; John's wife and Pauline determining the basins of attraction around which the whole town, once a closed system, starts experiencing turbulence. The series of accidents, murders suicides, abductions, abuse, and all kinds of riotous occurrences that the town is going to face from then on

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<sup>41</sup> My parenthetical addition.

evidence the dynamic behavior of far-from equilibrium systems.

Likewise, in the narration, we start reading a sequence of reports on John's wife increasing vanishing-like behavior being explicitly and directly delivered from one character to the other, overheard by some, confided by others, no longer only presented as some kind of musing which could be attributed to something resulting from lunacy, alcohol or some hallucinogenic substance, nor even as an indiscretion on the part of the all-knowing narrator into a character's mind's eye. The narrative itself acquires a distinct and distinctive "behavior", so to speak.

Some examples of these reports are Trevor's - John's accountant - to his wife Marge at the country club, Lorraine's overhearing at the drugstore, the concern Alf - the doctor - voices, Otis's, John's wife's hairdresser, the schoolteacher's, and the reverend's wife's testimonies of John's wife glowing condition, among others, "[a]nd so on around town, Veronica, Daphne, even John's mother, a pattern emerging, fading, reassembling itself, much like the subject of that pattern herself"(COOVER, 1996, p.208).

Notice the sequence of descriptions of John's wife flashing, starting with Marge's account of Trevor's testimony,

watching John's wife walk her clubs to the first tee a while ago, Trevor had been able to see only isolated bodily parts shifting along, never the whole person, [...] her point on his "action aerialgraphs" [...] had vanished altogether, whatever that meant(COOVER, 1996, p.207).

This is immediately followed, in the narration, by Lorraine (a.k.a. Lollie)'s coming to learn, while at the drugstore, that,

Someone (had to be John's wife from what she could "see" of her) came in earlier, stepped up onto the old penny weighing machine [...], and then, more or less abruptly, wasn't there anymore - but the machine still registered her weight as though she were there. This was supposedly similar to something that had happened when she "lumbered into the doctor's office" (?) a few days ago. [...] (there was a squishy tactile image that meant nothing to Lollie, though it made her shudder when she flashed on it or it on her(COOVER, 1996, p.208).

What the reader has to judge sooner or later in the story - provided that closure is to be performed - is whether he will choose to decide if John's wife was or was not there or if he will entertain Coover's elaboration of "a thereness that was not there" all the time. The feeling that the reader may experience, the feeling of dealing with scattered pieces of the story can be paralleled, just as if John's wife's body, the novel's body (story), were developing in a stretching and folding movement.

In any case, there is still Pauline's ordeal to deal with. When Gordon gets home back from the mall,



[h]e wished he was dreaming but he was not [...], the terrible discovery, [...] the impossible truth: he had somehow reused film on which he had taken pictures of Pauline standing in the tub. [...] Pauline's vast expanses of flesh, that flesh itself washed out and spectral, now bore spectral double impressions of another person who, so faint were the features, could be any person, the subject's legendary radiance contributing to the evaporation of her image(COOVER, 1996, p.215-216).

As he cries inside his darkroom, Pauline cried outside, hungrier and hungrier, and with extra-large men's clothes barely covering her body up to her hips. Pauline's uncontrollable hunger was a consequence of her body's inexplicable and relentless volume expansion. We can watch that John's wife "evaporation" coincides with Pauline's expansion. John's wife and Pauline inscrutable association in the narrative indicate the movement of stretching and folding. The juxtaposition of their images on the same film strip is one instance of the textualization and enactment of the Lorenz strange attractor as the shape turbulence takes on, as, in the story, it starts to draw into it other characters that, like Gordon, inevitably have to face the unaccountable.

Once again, the parallel would apply, as the reader experiences the same muddy and fuzzy apprehension of both the character's body and the novel's. Interestingly, the reader, like Gordon, could be trying to apprehend this novel using the same support form as the traditional and conventional

novel, no matter how magnified or enhanced the up-to-date materiality of the subjects and culture.

The next character to be pulled at is Otis, and as we read the narrator's account of Pauline's phone call to him, it is impossible not to be dragged along because the narration itself exhibits the very stretching and folding dynamics. I will quote the passage at length in an effort to demonstrate my point.

It was the phone that made Otis sit up that morning. [...]. It was Pauline. He stood and did a couple of quick knee-bends, [...] telling Pauline, yeah, yeah, speak slower. He hadn't been sleeping well at night lately, too many worries [...]. There were a lot of things about the town that weren't sitting just right with Otis these days, but what was worrying him most was John's wife. More than once now, he'd found her car, unlocked and the keys inside, parked far from home [...]. It was unusual and just the sort of irregularity that made Otis nervous, more so because it had to do with her. When John got back later today, he'd try to talk to him about it. Otis couldn't understand what Pauline was saying, he was too groggy and she was very agitated [...]. But he could hear her crying on the other end so he said okay, hang in, he'd be over in a jiff. "And bring a bag of doughnuts, she begged" (COOVER, 1996, p.246-247).

In the passage quoted above we can watch again how bringing the two characters closer in the events of the story and in the life of the town's people bears on the whole organization of the writing and, consequently, on our reading of it. Interestingly, Gordon is the photographer who longed for stasis, form, permanence, and Otis, the police officer

whose utmost quest was to keep order, even if by twisted means. Gordon, according to his friend Ellsworth, who loved movement instead, was a man who,

loved less flesh than form, more pattern of light and dark than what tales or implied excitements those patterns might bespeak, one who sought to penetrate the visible contours of the restless world, ceaselessly dissolved by time, to capture the hidden image beyond, the elusive mystery masked by surface flux, and the name he gave that which he pursued was Beauty(COOVER, 1996, p.249).

The parallel we can formulate with the reading process concerns the protocols of reading for form, for stasis, for order, or for flux. However, not one only of these protocols can exclusively be deemed as accounting for the story as discourse.

There is an interesting instance of echoing in the narrative that can also be understood as effecting one more character to be slurped within the stretching and folding that brings together John's wife and Pauline. When Gordon goes to see Pauline she asks, "'What's happening to me?' He didn't know. He had the idea, though, that those blown-up photos of her private parts might have something to do with it"(COOVER, 1996, p.248). Trevor, the narrator focalizes his musing, troubled with John's wife disappearance from his actuarial graphs, starts wondering,

[h]ad anyone besides himself noticed that she seemed to be vanishing, not as when someone leaves

town, but as an image might fade from a photographic print? [...]. {A}nd he began to wonder if perhaps her disappearance might not have to do with Gordon's photographs of her, as though he might, so to speak, be stealing her image. Or was he, aware as Trevor was of her vanishing, trying to preserve it?(COOVER, 1996, p.257).

Though only these two, Otis and Trevor, realize Gordon is implicated somehow with the phenomenon taking place, the whole town seems to plunge into the vortex of an eddy, experiencing chaos. In the following passage the narrator gives us a glance into the mind of Gretchen, the pharmacist married to Cornell, one of Alf's sons, who seems to have totally lost his wits,

this whole town was going around the bend and dragging her (Gretchen) with it [...]. The waiting room had been filling up all morning and the phone ringing itself off the wall with people suffering from nothing worse than apparitions or odd premonitions, with itchy children who wouldn't keep their clothes on and tired parents needing pep pills and people who just couldn't remember what day it was and wondered if they'd come down with Alzheimer's(COOVER, 1996, p.270)<sup>42</sup>.

One of the calls was from Columbia, Alf's daughter, to tell Gretchen that her brother had stolen the van. Later we are informed that Otis starts getting calls complaining about food and sheets robberies, possibly committed by Corny driving the pharmacy van.

After raiding the golf-club for more towels and food, Cornell takes a delivery truck from Old Stu, the car-dealer,

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<sup>42</sup>My parenthetical addition.

pretending to go on a test-drive, and heads to the Church, the only building in town with a double doorway through which Pauline could walk. Gretchen, Cornell's wife, barely misses them but hits Reverend Lennox down and leaves.

When Lennox comes to his senses he is in John's wife's arms. The two of them get into a conversation that starts about religion and sanctuary, moves on to life in general and, on their way to her house, about his life story. He helps her to her room with her packages and the conversation turns again to Christian faith. Almost as *en tour de force*, "they were in the master bedroom and she was taking off her linen jacket and her shoes"(COOVER, 1996, p.303). As he sets her packages down, "unbuttoning his shirt", never quite dropping the original topic of their conversation,

he went on, kicking free of the entanglement at his feet and peeling off his socks [...]. He'd tried to catch a glimpse of her legs when the pantyhose came off, but there had seemed to be nothing underneath them. Nothing at all(idem).

To this glance at her ungraspable body, as he speaks, what follows is her disappearance and John's arrival,

[w]e don't matter as individuals, as a community or a nation, or even as a life form [...]. We are meaningful, he said gently, only in our oneness and to each other. Her face flushed with admiration and surrender and she lifted her dress up over her head and she was gone. John came in then and asked him what he was doing in his bedroom with his clothes off(COOVER, 1996, p.303).

At this point in the narrative, the reader is confronted with the narration of John's wife's vanishing witnessed by Lennox, the reverend, supposedly the one expert in mysterious or miraculous phenomena. At this point in the narration, the reader has got to face and perform either a rearrangements or redirection of the narrative flow, as the characters John's wife and Pauline seem to have reached the maximum point of reversibility. On one hand, John's wife's maximum contraction to the point of disintegrating; on the other, Pauline's overwhelming ongoing expansion - the shape of turbulence.

In order to get ahead with the rendering of story as discourse, the reader cannot easily or merely "go with the flow" as this would mean the reduction of his play as an active subjectivity striving to impose order to the load of information being relayed to him in a seemingly unstructured fashion, though still linearly laid out on the page. In order to compose discourse from story, the reader is led to reckon with the data and acknowledge dispersion as a constitutive feature of the story it integrates.

In so being, the subjectivity that Coover's writing draws on, enacts, and projects, which either emerges or is configured within and along the reading process, can be approached taking heed of Silvio Gaggi's analysis of the subject of discourse as the outcome of the process of reading novels especially. Starting from the recognition of the

destabilization that the reader's position is systematically submitted to by specific features of novels whose narration leads to no center, he characterizes the subject enacted in this trajectory as "fluid, freely changing roles and shifting positions as if effortlessly, as if there is **no essential locus** to hamper such movements and metamorphoses" (GAGGI, 1998, p.50)<sup>43</sup>. Thus, the work of such writings is that of mining the reader's ballast, and the subject that is engendered in this process holds instability, dispersion, and maybe indeterminacy as its basic trait.

What Gaggi then describes is a centerless subject, unlike the classical *cogito*<sup>44</sup>. Whether the center, once acknowledged, is the consciousness of a character or that of the author, Gaggi maintains that when readers identify a potential unified center of consciousness in a novel, it is not a result of characteristics of the novel itself but of theoretical positions held and imposed on the novel by the readers themselves.

Following this, it is easy to understand, in this way, why, how, and what for Coover's novel is reputed difficult to read. To understand the way the subject manifests itself in such works - though hard to grasp at first - is a task that encompasses going beyond the level of story, of text. It is

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<sup>43</sup> My emphasis.

<sup>44</sup> See page 48.

at the discourse level that we can find the "trace of that which eludes discourse"(GAGGI, 1998, p.66), the "trace" of the subject.

Here we find one more applicability to the scene of the man-book continuum. Gaggi(1998, p.66) states that in order to free up reading for the reader and make the real reader (man) the protagonist of a novel (book), agency must be at play on both ends.

The problem of reference implied by Gaggi's formulation of a centerless subject is at one with what happens to the characters John's wife and Pauline. Coover textualizes what Baudrillard construes about the consequences of mass replication of representations for the subject of contemporary hyperreality, "disappearance (of the object - the individual no longer a subject) is also its strategy; it is its way of response to this device of capture, for networking, and for forced identification"(BAUDRILLARD, 1998, p.213).

John's wife, always at the center, always visible to some extent, exerts the only possibility for action left - "a negative one - a parodic emulation of the condition of objectness"(GAGGI, 1998, p.60) - invisibility. Pauline, on her turn, never at the center, "never been a great thinker [...] now (as if her head were imitating her bowels) she was



becoming less of one"(COOVER, 1996, p.325), assumes an unstoppable agency though unaware.

If Punday is right to assert that "narratives dramatize the corporeality implicit within all interaction between text and reader in the bodies of characters"(PUNDAY, 2003b, p.82), we are led to accept the idea that the way our ideas and expectations change during the process - developed in the time consumed in this process - is an essential component of narrative itself.

This "change" that characters' bodies as well as the novel's undergo demands an analogous move from the reader. Once this move is not accomplished, the reader may be led to consider reading the text a burden.

In fact, this is something to which most of the novel's reviewers have referred, and very few have wittingly attributed to complexity and to the process of subject constitution enacted in reading. This is still another point at which the scene of the man-book continuum<sup>45</sup> turns applicable to what this novel specially, among many of Coover's works, has been attaining in terms of enacting complexity at various levels in literary production.

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<sup>45</sup> See p.4, 5, and 29.

### 4.2.3 Chaos

As the condition of far-from equilibrium systems, chaos suggests, according to Slethaug, four different circumstances. In any of the cases, it is always a paradoxical state: irregular motion possibly leading to pattern; disorder and order linked; order implicit in disorder; order arising from disorder in some unpredictable but determined way(SLETHAUG, 2000, p.62). In *John's Wife*, the town as a system undergoes change in the shape of turbulence leading to chaos.

The most explicit reference to the town as a closed system is presented to us in the narrator's focalization of Veronica's thinking about the way she felt in that town,

haunted, like in that old expression about being haunted by your past. She was. How could one not be in a town like this, everyone's lives so intertwined, no way to get rid of anything, it all just kept looping round again, casting shadows on top of shadows, giving hidden meanings to everything that happened by day, turning dreams into nightmares at night(COOVER, 1996, p.178).

As we have seen, turbulence is started in this system, leading to its plunging into chaos, transforming the system from a closed one into a far-from-equilibrium one. The very narrowly missed encounter of John's wife and Pauline stands as the initial condition of turbulence. As sensitivity to initial conditions, no matter how feeble (stochastic value),

may lead to disproportionate consequences, the turbulence thus initiated will spread and in time eventually exhibit a patterned, reversible or iterative and recursive behavior.

Simultaneously, there is at this point a series of situations in which the several different characters realize that they have been had, such as, Clarissa by Jennifer, Waldo and Lorraine by John, Kevin by Sweet Abandon, Nevada by Bruce and John, and the Artist by the Stalker. It is a point of a twisted sort of *anagnorisis* for most of these characters, a point of revelation of their full-fledged vulnerability. As a matter of fact, the entire town is thoroughly vulnerable to Pauline's peculiar condition.

While, at the center, most of the town people are at John's enjoying his Pioneer Day barbecue, at the fringes of town, in the woods, Pauline keeps growing. Otis breaks in at the barbecue to announce the critical situation and to summon volunteers to put up a posse to chase Pauline. He even has Daddy Duwayne, the only one "who knew how to track and handle her"(COOVER, 1996, p.377), brought back into town from upstate penitentiary, to no avail. Pauline, who has Daddy Duwayne squeezed in her hand,

pitched her old man out into the night like a football, all hell broke loose inside Settler's Woods. [...]. {T}he entire posse [...] opened fire, shooting wildly but probably hitting more often than not a target hard to miss(COOVER, 1996, p.387).

Among the wrecks caused by Pauline and Cornell in their fleeing, power and phone lines were down. Darkness takes over town and the only means of communication still available is the police radio. Darkness is experienced at a more individual level by some characters that literally go blind as they get hit, stoned, or drunk. Likewise, in Ellsworth's novel the Stalker goes blind.

The only thing that remains visible despite all this, is Pauline's body. At the confrontation of the posse with Pauline,

[m]ost of the flashlights had been abandoned [...], but even in the darkness Big Pauline was easy to see, a huge lowering silhouette, bigger than the trees, faintly illuminated from time to time by distant sheet lightning(COOVER, 1996, p.387).

John, trying to get rid of evidence of having been schemed by Bruce, sets the Country Tavern, the site of his stag party, on fire. At Settler's Woods Pauline, driving Kevin to her mouth, hunger killing her and no food at hand, when lifting her nose to open her mouth to better swallow, sniffs woodsmoke in the air. Clarissa, who "in the grip of blinding panic"(COOVER, 1996, p.389) crashed her father's car at the Humpback Bridge,

rose and spun, while the forest burst into flames below as though ignited by her own wild fury's folly [...] landing at last in the little creek

below the bridge [...] as pain engulfed her and her breath left her and her eyes went dark(idem).

The description of Settler's Woods burning with Pauline in it takes four pages and what follows it are the last six sections of the novel. Next to the fire, there is a storm raging. It is worth quoting some of the description because it contains Pauline's disappearance from town life and presents a vivid portray of things running amok, from the edges toward the center.

Settler's Woods was burning. The fire, roaring its hollow inanimate roar as it licked at the black sky, seemed to stroke the lightning out of the night as it stormed inward from all sides **toward the center, where a deep darkness also reigned**. A great conflagration, unlike any this place had known since Barnaby's lumberyard went up just after the war.<sup>46</sup> The glow of it could be seen all the way across town [...]. Indeed, on a night so dark and overcast, with the power out, the whole town seemed gilded by it(COOVER, 1996, p.391).<sup>47</sup>

The posse was there, but many of the town's people were also drawn there, "these gathering sightseers"(idem) waiting to see Big Pauline. "That big thing was in there somewhere" and she might "come raging out through the billowing smoke and flames"(id. ibidem). Soon, the storm begins, and

the gales whipped up the forest flames, and sparks flew in all directions, [...] and indeed little wildfires were starting up everywhere, [...] as

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<sup>46</sup> Arson is implied in several occasions in the novel to clear the lot for John's project of modernizing the town.

<sup>47</sup> My emphasis.

they tried to escape the burning shower and there were fears the sudden violent winds might drive the fire into town(COOVER, 1996, p.394).

Plunged into chaos, the edge this time hitting the center (the poles of order and disorder shifting places), fire followed by a storm, John's prairie town is bound to undergo a re-configuration. The section following the description of the fire presents the storm outside the saloon at John's place as "echoing the turbulence within", where Veronica is assisted by John's wife in changing her baby's diapers.

As we can see, John's wife is again visible. And for the first time in the entire novel her speech is directly relayed on to readers, in between quotation marks. This is followed by the first dialogue between husband and wife, during which they have sex while catching up with each other's news about the day - Clarissa's accident included.

Interspersed within their speeches, the narrator gives us John's signification of the whole disaster. Earlier in the evening, during the barbecue, John had been surprised by Bruce's crossing of their mutual dealings and took his plane to catch up with him at the Cabin to prevent him from succeeding in abducting Jennifer. Though he fails, he manages to destroy all evidence of the deed, with fire. This is the closure he brings to the whole affair:

Watching his town seem to sink away and vanish into the shadowy earth as he lifted away on his wild Bruce chase, he'd felt that something was being taken away from him, something valuable he could not afford to lose, though he could not quite name it, and the feeling had stayed with him all through the night, [...] until his return at dawn when once again his town had risen up out of the misty soil below him, its resurrection signaled by the dying flames and smoke from Settler's Woods, sent up like a beacon in the disintegrating night as the violent storm which he'd had to skirt sheathed its weapons and withdrew(COOVER, 1996, p.400).

The passage that includes John's wife's sexual intercourse - an evidence of her full materiality at play - marks another change in the narration, too, as the multiple voices, though not receding, start to be channeled, either within quotation marks, in conventional direct-speech fashion, or in reported speech by the narrator, who organizes the information straightforward, orderly, one voice at a time. The text takes on a realistic tone again, in a realistic space and time configuration, which the reader can follow as another phase in the dynamics of the town as a system, and the novel as well. As life in town piecemeal reacquires its orderly pace, though with a difference, the narration also gradually exhibits its more conventional features. The narrator's voice takes on the main authorial tone again, as at the beginning, and shifts of space in scenes are clearly marked. In a word, turbulence seems to have receded.

Thus, the four last sections are mainly composed of reports on how John's town resumes its routine after the momentous Pioneer's Day. Within a week's time from the fire and storm,

Gretchen [...] resumed her oversight of the downtown drugstore, the broken hardware store window around the corner had been replaced, the power had been restored out by Settler's Woods and the phonedlines repaired, most of the storm and fire damage had been assessed and insurance claims submitted(COOVER, 1996, p.407).

Though John's wife reappears in all kinds of town life campaigns, such as a blood draft for victims and articles to the *Town Crier*, it is not certain that Pauline has disappeared,

there were those who insisted that Big Pauline was still alive and running around wild and naked somewhere, that Otis's claim to have trapped and killed her in the fire and then buried her remains [...] was just a police cover-up of a failed operation, [...] that more likely she'd just snuck off in the storm with her infamous father (there'd been any number of sightings)(COOVER, 1996, p.408-409).

The feeling of a "cover-up of a failed operation" is later textualized, and cannot be missed as its narration, at the end of the novel. The last section is composed of the narrator's report of a woman's - only referred to as "she" - longing for the forest which framed the rock at the edge of a flowing river where she would kneel and pose for her friend and teacher, and wondering, "[c]ould she find it and resume



her place, it might restore him to his and to his famous ordeal [...]. A fire? She seemed to remember one"(COOVER, 1996, p.428).

The contrived cover-up fire of Settler's Wood that would have granted Pauline an escape is paralleled with the fire that has consumed the forest in the novel Ellsworth was writing, "The Artist and His Ordeal", which he cannot clearly remember if he himself has put to fire. But if he eventually has, it was also a cover-up for a failed operation, his pursuit of beauty that was being sabotaged by an intruder, The Stalker, a character that emerged within his process of writing.

Like Pauline, who is thought by some to have been destroyed in the fire and believed alive by others, Ellsworth's character, The Model, Echo (just "she" in the last section) roams a changed landscape. Pauline, while still within the boundaries of John's town, given her monstrosity, increasingly fails to recognize the landscape; Ellsworth's character, on her turn, searched for the forest, "but the landscape had changed [...] as though it were dying from within"(COOVER, 1996, p.427).

This mingling of a resolution of sorts with the fire that had Pauline either driven out of town or destroyed as John's wife full-blown corporeality blooms - both consistent

with the overcoming of turbulence and with the fire in Ellsworth's novel - stands as a cover-up for a very successful operation. By doing that, Coover manages to sow the seeds of patterns within patterns exhibiting iteration, recursion and reversibility. This brings the novel to an end, without doubt, while at the same time feeding the story with elements with which to take this end - the sense of an ending at least, as Frank Kermode has it (KERMODE, 2000, p.6), when the end resumes the whole structure - as iteration (ongoing repetition, echo), as recursion (it is happening again, self-similarity across scale over time), and as reversibility (the opening lines and the closing lines of the novel appear as mirrorings of each other).

All these patterns stand as a realization that may as well describe the feeling of some readers trying to reach closure having failed to engage in the subject constitution process enacted by the complexity of Coover's writing, doomed to retrace their steps, and eventually led to start again,

astray and abandoned, she persisted in her search in spite of all that had happened, tracing and retracing her steps, for she was sure of it: there was a forest and she was there and a man was there. Once... (COOVER, 1996, p.428).

The scene of the man-book continuum, the metaphor embodying corporeal reading (PUNDAY, 2003b) which brings to play a whole process of subject constitution, entails, among

other aspects, the entertaining of complexity in human experience, of the intricacies between, for example, reality and fiction, reading and writing, story and discourse. This also encompasses highlighting the fact that once we align one of the elements in the pair with order and the other with disorder (lack of order, dispersion, chaos). Whatever the tag one may choose to attach to it, we must reckon with the fact that there is not such a clear-cut distinction, be it in terms of space or time. As contemporary readers, we have got to take into account the scientific findings and descriptions of order as one temporary phase within the overall dynamics that keeps a system "running", much more so when we inescapably face "change".

The issue of closure is also a point to be tackled here. If one chooses to consider reading at the orderly pole and writing - Coover's texts are often reputed as chaotic, along with much of contemporary literature - at the disorderly one (I initially do so) we are bound to experience turbulence when confronted with complex texts, and the fact that this emerges as such can only be attributed *a posteriori*, once order has been previously anticipated, taken for granted, acknowledged, or eventually imposed. The alternation between the experience of order and disorder in reading, in a text, in life itself, is a constant that must be conceded and greeted as the very fabric of our stage of humanity, of

humanness, of existence on material as well as on immaterial grounds.

Coover is widely acclaimed by the critics as a master of myth reworking, a conspicuous admittance of the play of rites and traditions in the fabric of societies, of the incorporeal element in life. His attack on convention, while at the same time relying on the reader's compliance with them, is a token of his sound poetic project, always capable of in-scribing complexity in his work, always challenging the reader to still another change.

One point to keep in mind is that a strange attractor in a novel's plot, in *John's Wife* in this case, generates turbulence - inevitably leading to change - and provides pattern - affording some sense of stability. Nevertheless, it takes the reader's compliance to the work's overarching conventions as to what his burden consists of so that the patterns can be reconstructed into shapes, graphs, or maps, for example. This means that once a text is being read, some sort of pattern, of order is being imposed, regardless the fact that the reader may experience order leading to chaos and chaos into order once more, or merely a rearrangement of elements that display turbulence into a different level of order - a continuum in any case.

## 5. *THE ADVENTURES OF LUCKY PIERRE: THE RHIZOMATIC VOYAGE OF A POSTHUMAN HERO*

The history of the novel and the history of this novel display a number of assemblages that resemble each other, not to mention the fact that *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* itself allows the literary savant to recognize a series of intertextual in-scriptions of several epic poems, proto-novelistic works, as well as acclaimed novels that trace the historical development of the novel as an established genre.

A book awaited for 30 years, *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* has raised a mystique of its own, as Brian Evenson(2003) remarked. In a very recent interview to Matilde Sánchez, Coover explains that the novel started in the late 1960s, with a story whose title was "A Man who walked in winter". To write the story, Coover imagined the man opening his fly, without knowing what this action could trigger.

In the scenery of the Vietnam years, Coover decided to attend the first porno festival of Amsterdam, the famous Wet Dreams Festival, where he was exposed to a plethora of pornography pieces. The response to this experience was an essay, *The High Church of Hardcore*, in which he severely criticizes the industry - "less an industry than a movement at the time similar to what the consumption of alcohol represented in the United States, something clandestine,

initiatic"(SÁNCHEZ, 2005)<sup>48</sup>. After that, he adds, he abandoned *Lucky Pierre* and delved into writing *The Public Burning*, in 1971, but every time he traveled he carried the work in progress. Along the years the working title conceived for the story that was shaping into a novel was shortened to *Winter*, then about a pornographic film hero called Lucky Pierre<sup>49</sup>.

The choice of the character's name can be attributed to the potential associations it carries within western literature. To say the least, we can associate Pierre to the eponymous character in Molière's *Don Juan ou Le Festin de Pierre*, an incorrigible womanizer.

The novel eventually turned out as a sequence of nine reels - the equivalent of a section or long chapter. Interestingly, a nine-reeler is the longest a finally edited film - in the pre-digitalized movie era - would get. The first reel was finished in 1970, the second and most of the third in 1971. Since that time portions of this novel have been published in literary journals and glossy magazines ranging from *Post Modern Culture* to *Playboy*.

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<sup>48</sup> My free translation of the original passage: "menos una industria que un movimiento en ese entonces similar a lo que en EE. UU. representaba el consumo de alcohol, algo clandestino, iniciático".

<sup>49</sup> In porn jargon, Lucky Pierre is the name of a specific configuration in a *ménage-a-trois*. Lucky Pierre is the element in the middle of the threesome. Besides, the expression "to get lucky" is also a colloquial term, almost an euphemism, to the experience of eventually engaging in casual and fortuitous sexual intercourse.

An examination on the nature of myth as processed through American pop erotic culture, the novel is about a porno film hero who enjoys wild popularity within an institutionalized city film system *Cinecity* - playing on the connection to cinema and on the connection to SIN, or alternatively scene-city, syn(c)-city. The novel's preliminary title, *Winter*<sup>50</sup>, is explained in the atmosphere of the story - a city apparently stuck in perpetual winter. The economy of the city is centered on the production of pornographic film, whose primary male star is Lucky Pierre. There is rumor that reels have been continually burnt as fuel to make face to the piercing cold weather.

But it is not just a contemplation, much more than that, it is an aesthetic actualization of the interplay between film as a dominant expressive form of culture, in Raymond William's(1997) definition, responsible for the shaping of subjectivity, side by side with other expressive forms, such as literature - and reality. Each of the nine reels is a different film directed by a different woman, a woman who serves as Lucky Pierre's sexual partner on and off screen as well as his muse - as nine were the Greek muses presiding over the arts. Each reel is an occasion for Lucky Pierre to

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<sup>50</sup> In *Pricksong & Descants* there is a short story, "Sentient Lens", structured in three different sections. The first section, entitled "Scene for 'Winter'" is clearly reworked and reappropriated into the opening section of *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*, "Cecilia". Besides this, "The Elevator" and "A Pedestrian Accident", two other stories in the same collection, have certainly been developed and transformed to compose other episodes in the same novel.

perform, each is a different genre of film, and Coover artfully brings to the fore the distinctive traits of each art being focused - or presided over - by each one of the Muses. Despite the fact that this formal arrangement parodies the epic poem procedure and formal convention of summoning one Muse, they do not correspond only or exactly to the nine Greek Muses.

Coover makes his own catalog alternating a Christian saint, blessed or martyr and occasionally a character in American pop culture with a Greek muse, or mythic character or archetype. He refers to mythology and or hagiography just to invert and subvert the conventions shaped by these ideological sets in our reading habits connected with our notion of genre and, in this way, he produces radically innovative fiction.

I believe he does that to achieve an aesthetic resolution that allows him to displace the idealized purity (virginity) associated to these icons exposing them as fictions or fictionalities taken for real. This allows him also to lists nine names starting with the letter C, a resource that also accounts for a structural device and an ordering principle.

Order is granted linearly according to musical notation. C is also the letter that corresponds to the first note in



the octave in music notation, as follows, C(do) D(re) E(mi) F(fa) G(sol) A(la) B(si) C(do). From the start, Coover sows the seeds of the association between cinema and music. As there are nine reels, still another connection with music notation is applicable - the stave.

The staff consists of five parallel horizontal lines that configure four interstitial spaces; five plus four makes nine. A hint that the story does not develop or lie on or by the line only, but is also written and developed within the spaces. This can be related to Deleuze and Guattari's Musical Model of Complexity, which stresses the diagonal, a line running through the lines and spaces of the stave as a constituent of musicality.

Still, concerning the musical model, every reel is directed by a different woman whose name starts with letter C, that is, once the reel is over, you are back to C, C to C, the octave. C, the beginning and the end, see? It is a rational summoning to the music code and by means of the phonemic dimension of the letter - symbol C, a summoning of the reader to see - the film on the screen, but also and mainly the line on the page. Also a restatement of the visual epistemology that characterizes modern rationality to be put on the line.

Furthermore, the first word in the first reel is *Cantus*, the first word in the second reel is *Documentary*, *Exit* in the third, *Focus* in the fourth, *Green fields* in the fifth, *Adventures* in the sixth, *Bum* in the seventh. The putative sequence of these reels as they are structured in the novel is mimetic in relation to the octave notation.

As for the last two reels Coover presents the ordinary stretch of human voice, that is, C to C in the eighth reel, and the virtuoso of the human voice, F to F in the ninth. In this way, Coover manages to tie the extension of the novel and the limit of the number of reels to the bodily limits the human voice bears to produce music. The human - not technologically enhanced - body is the limit.

We should keep in mind that the first movies were silent, and only later they were projected together with the performance of musicians to add to its expressive dimension. Coover manages to provoke a commentary on the historical process of movie-making and projection by opening each reel with a word starting with letters that, when read sequentially, correspond to the arrangement of the musical scale: *Cantus*, *Documentary*, *Exit*, *Focus*, *Green fields*, *Adventure*, *Bum* - the seven musical notes, the first seven reels - followed by C to C, *Cold Cocked* (do to do) and F to F, *Film Festival* (fa to fa) - the broadest range human voice can cover.

Besides, language embodies the aesthetic dimension of each art being presided over by the muse at play, as well as it corresponds to, fits, or matches the film genre in which Lucky Pierre stars, as I wish to demonstrate. Language is stretched, imploded, invested with several dimensions and perspectives as any other raw material in the hands of a visual artist. Coover's linguistic and artistic craftsmanship is nowhere else more evident than in this novel.

Another line of flight from the hierarchical arborescent model inscribed by the coding of music notation lies on the connection of the opening word - which starts with the letter corresponding to the note in the series - with the genre of film that the director muse makes and the manipulation of language to fit the respective art. This endows the narrative with several levels of complexity.

The first reel, a silent classic, is directed by Cissy, alias Euterpe, the muse presiding over Music. Interestingly, Cissy is short for Cecilia, the Christian Patron Saint of Music. There is also a concern with ordering in Coover's choice of the first reel as a silent movie, a kind of tactics acknowledging the historicity and historiography of the medium.

As to the choice of Cantus for the opening word of the narrative, it can be read in the same fashion, as the

recognition of the invocation of the muse, the Cantus as the opening section of the epic poem, the epic poem as the original narrative form that evolved into the novel genre. It is in-scribed within parentheses, as if that were not a novel but a play, to resemble the convention of textualized stage directions.

There is still more concerning the complexity of the formal arrangement Coover conceives of in this novel, there is the intricacy of the plastic use of language to convey its musical dimension at various levels. To fabricate the atmosphere of winter, of the wind - air in movement - Coover contrives a consistent alliteration of plosives and fricatives, that is, you have to make wind and listen to it as you read the lines, you have to engage your full body in the process of reading. In addition, the alliterations thus produced are put to the service not only of the perceptive apparatus of the materiality of language as sound - to force the reader to experience wind - but also to draw the reader's attention to this contraption - as a postmodern writer is keen at - by explicitly elaborating on these sonorous qualities as they are performed in lexical items pertaining to music jargon.

Thus, music, the art being presided by Cecilia, alias Cissy, a.k.a. Euterpe, composes at the same time the substance and the form of both content and expression of the

reel(real), here understood as in Hjemslev's intricate model of stratification of language. Out of the notions of matter, content and expression, form and substance, which he categorized as strata, Hjemslev wove a net that broke with the form-content duality. In his formula, there is a form of content and a form of expression. For Deleuze and Guattari, who heavily draw on his model, the scope and origin of the net are not constrained within language only. The authors equate Hjemslev's term "matter" with their "plane of consistency", or "body without organs", and "content" with "formed matters". Content (formed matters) is thus considered from the point of view of substance (selected, chosen matters) and of form (ordered, sequenced matters). As to "expression", understood as functional structures, the same stratification applies: the organization (order, sequence) of specific forms, and substances to the extent that they form compounds - the form and content of expression (DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.43-45). This is one instance of the complexity Coover endows his latest novel with.

The chart that follows displays the ordering principle in-scribed by the music notation and a linear distribution of the correspondence established among the muse/saint/pop-culture icon/character, associated art, director, and film genre. Beyond this linearity, the narrative displays at several points different lines of flight that draw other

strata while remaining associated to this primary disposition. As we will see, none of the directors work alone, they are always implicated in one another's enterprise, what accounts for one of the views of multiplicity Coover instantiates in the novel.

MUSICAL SCALE/OPENING WORD	MUSE/mythology character/saint/pop-culture/character	ASSOCIATED ART	DIRECTOR/Lucky Pierre's sexual partner	LUCKY PIERRE'S FILM CHARACTER	FILM GENRE
<b>C - Cantus</b>	Euterpe/St Cecily	Music	Cecilia/Cissy/His personal assistant	L. P.	Silent classic
<b>D - Documentary</b>	Clio/Cleo	History	Cleo/Cinecity's journalist	Lucky	Documentary
<b>E - Exits(flights)</b>	Urania/St Claire	Astronomy and heavens /TV-aviation	Clara/doctor	Mr P./Cineman	Scientific
<b>F - Focus</b>	Polyhymnia/Cassandra	Singing	Cassandra/Cassie	Mr Pierre	Fantastic
<b>G - Green</b>	Erato/St Constance	Love poetry/Charity	Constance/Connie/the girl nextdoor	Peter	Home videos
<b>A - Adventure</b>	Melpomene/Charlotte	Tragedy (the fall)	Carlotta/Lottie Extars'leader	Crazy Leg Pierna Loca	Epic
<b>B - Bum</b>	Terpsichore/Pers ephone	Dance	Cora/Cinecity's Mayor, queen of the underworld	Badboy	Adventure
<b>C to C - Cold Cocked</b>	Thalia/St Catherine	Comedy	Catherine/Kate	Pete the Beast	Animation, Cartoon
<b>F to F - Film Festival</b>	Calliope	Epic poetry and writing	Calliope/Cally	Willie	Revivals

Chart 1 - Sequential structuring of the nine reels in *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*

Another view of multiplicity is the one realized in and by the hero, Lucky Pierre, who is always the only hero in all movies, and yet never the same. Contrarily, the muses are nine, but they display common features, common goals, and even refer to themselves as "pierrez" (COOVER, 2003, p.29), obviously a pun on parodies.

His journey is presented in rhizomatic fashion, that is, each piece of footage, each shot can and does lead to further bifurcations, endlessly, repeating the move and reinstating it. In so being, at various instances Lucky Pierre wonders how he ended up in a certain situation of place of film and is incapable of retracing his journey, of recollecting the process that led him to that point - obviously a trick of the muses.

Besides this, when there is the feeble chance available for him to move backwards, as in a "rewind" of the reel, Lucky Pierre finds out that a complete reconfiguration of space and settings has taken place.

Lucky Pierre is continually coming - in both senses - in the scripted scenes, and when he is not, that is, the episodes in which he is *going* somewhere, he cannot get there. He is caught up in one of the muses' scripts. Only to be made to come again.



Lucky Pierre's existence is constrained within the roles he plays in films and his physical existence, his materiality undergoes shifts of consistence - flesh and visibility - he literally freezes, gets blue out in Cinecity perpetual winter, into episodes of insubstantiality, of invisibility - which corresponds to death sentence to a film hero who literally exists precisely as he is written/scripted/imaged. By one muse, of course. It is also a commentary on the present drawback concerning the uncertainty about the availability of these media artifacts to the future generations, given their (material) unstable nature.

As Black remarks,

[i]t used to be that only movies were on film, now the whole world is. More than ever, visual technologies seem intent on striving for what Kracauer<sup>51</sup> called "the status of total record." And not only does it seem at the start of the new century that everything is on film or video (although it is unclear, given the unstable nature of videotape and other recording media that began replacing film at the century's end, how long this recorded material will *remain* viewable)(BLACK, 2000, p.4).

In addition to this, Black mentions that digitalization technology in film-making industry has enabled postproduction to use increasingly a higher number

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<sup>51</sup> Siegfried Kracauer(1889-1966) was an influential German-Jewish film historian and theoretician best known for his championship of realism as the truest function of cinema. His most important work, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*(1960), argues for a cinema devoted to the presentation of real-life people in real-life situations in a style from which all theatrical or aesthetically formal elements would be excluded.

of digitally generated shots instead of non-digital footage of "actual" recorded elements, so that "(t)here is now little to keep George Lucas<sup>52</sup> [...] from doing away with actors altogether, and replacing them with animatronic robots and fully digitalized characters"(BLACK, 2000, p.11). This may be discarded as a bad omen issued by extreme technophiles in a non-fictional world, as we tend to conceive of our concrete everyday experience, but it is certainly the sort of presage that Lucky Pierre, the porn hero, seems to be ridden by in the novel.

There is a clear awareness and concern about the stability and endurance of the electronically supported works on the part of writers and analysts of hypertext. This can be seen in Scott Rettberg's evaluation of the shortcomings of electronic literature,

[t]he media and software involved in making electronic literature are changing so quickly that many early experiments in electronic literature have already been lost, as the platforms they were authored in have become obsolete(RETTBERG, 2003, p.118-119).

All these statements about the non-permanent aspect of the new media cultural and artistic products seem to provide a commentary on the conflicting feelings about the

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<sup>52</sup> George Lucas wrote and directed *Star Wars*, an intergalactic tale combining cutting-edge technology with old-fashioned storytelling. The Star War saga includes *The Empire Strikes Back*, *Return of the Jedi*, *The Phantom Menace*, *Attack of the Clones*, and *Revenge of the Sith* - to be premiered this year. His works stand as a landmark concerning the apparent unbalance between the importance of technology and of acting in the making of his films.

way humanity deploys the technology it creates. If on one side we are faced with the actual possibility of the extinction of some forms of life on the planet as a more or less direct result of a highly technologically enhanced human culture, on the other there is the admission that we have overcome much of the instability and vulnerability of life on earth, and the extension of life span on a global level stands as an emblem of this feat.

Humanity as a whole, as race, has contrived the means to its perpetuation, and our narratives stand as one among them. The issue to be raised here is whether humanity will be able to become one with the map it draws with the world it inhabits or it will choose to submit to an always pre-described territory in which to be fitted. Like Lucky Pierre, who among us will long to have a life outside the frames? Who will not shiver at the possibility of falling onto the black leader<sup>53</sup>?

### **5.1 The critical framing of *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre***

As far as frames are concerned, I will present the reviews that *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* has received so far. With the exception of Brian Evenson's subsection of "Later Works" devoted to the novel in his *Understanding Robert Coover*(2003), I could not find any academic article

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<sup>53</sup> The black leader is the opaque portion of the film roll that lets no light through and therefore is not sensitive to image recording.

dedicated to it until the time of this writing. There are, as it should, the usual appraisal and presentation of the book in literary sections of several magazines and newspapers.

Richard Bernstein chooses to present the novel as the depiction of "a lewd world in which sex is so routinely accepted as the be-all and end-all of life that it is no longer very sexy"(BERNSTEIN, 2003), immediately adding to this judgment a parenthetical comment that sets him apart from the novel's, let us say, mundane readers, "(though readers may require some time to get used to that fact)"(idem). And this only to avow, a few lines ahead, that "Coover's work, in other words, is not for everybody; it is frankly not for me"(id. ibidem).

After stating the ubiquity of sex in the novel, Bernstein makes a complimentary remark on the approach Coover develops to the theme of the novel by comparing him to Freud and Sade. He writes,

Coover writes about sex as it's never been written about before, with a sly, detached precision that captures the unillusioned and undeterred Freudian id. Coover can be seen as the inverse of another writer about sex, the Marquis de Sade(BERNSTEIN, 2003).

Concerning the artistic and technical value of the novel, he acknowledges its experimental dimension - a typical trait of Coover's work as a rule - to the point of

still preserving content, plot, which is "capable of eliciting sympathy and interest"(idem). In this case, by devising the hero Lucky Pierre himself.

For the sake of conclusions, Bernstein ventures a rule of thumb on the best way to read the book, as he attributes the apparent lack of structure of the novel to Coover's writerly self-indulgence,

to take nonnarrative at face value and to skip around in it, read the middle before the beginning, go to the end and then slip back, finding those sequences that are full of ludic turns and witty commentary, skipping over those that bog down in relentless whimsy(BERNSTEIN, 2003).

Bernstein closes his article by aligning Lucky Pierre, the hero, with Ulysses - this time an epic hero for "generations weaned more on Homer Simpson than on Homer or James Joyce but that still share a collective memory of the Homeric beat"(idem). If he is as good as his words, he places himself as belonging to the former, one more prone to find comfort in the mythical grounding of narratives than in its creative aspects.

In her news article *Coover continues to innovate in "Lucky"* in The Brown Daily Herald Online, Rachel Aviv(2003) refers back to Bernstein's suggestion of how to best read the novel. She mentions Coover's guess that, rather than a compliment, the statement was more a confession on the

reviewer and critic's part that he had not read the novel from start to finish. Aviv does this in order to highlight the innovativeness of the novel that is missed by the critic as well as to hint that he had not only not read it linearly, sequentially, but also not fully read it - unfortunately, too often the case with reviewers of Coover's work, as we have already pointed out<sup>54</sup>.

There are also several brief reviews of the novel that concentrate on the outrageousness of the choice of pornography for a theme. Most of these, though not failing to acknowledge Coover's inventiveness, choose to characterize the novel's uniqueness as frailties, in passages such as "too plotlessly postmodern", "involuted, overwritten, and too-clever-by-half exercise in repetition", and even recommend reading *Roget's Thesaurus* instead of the novel, for "there are only so many ways one can describe a cock" (AUSPITZ, 2002).

As we can see, very little contribution to the examination of the novel concerning its complexity has been produced so far. Of course, this is partly due to its recentness, though this may signal also that Coover has once more tapped the wounds of American establishment and long cherished myths. So far, the novel has been translated into French and Italian, a clear reverential demonstration

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<sup>54</sup> See page 97.

of the appreciation of Sade's and Bocaccio's geniality and cultural heritage, respectively.

The following section presents the textual analysis of three of the nine reels that compose the novel, bringing to the fore the itinerary performed by the hero as describing a rhizome and his unique condition of posthuman as he becomes a body without organs to ensure the free circulation of desire, escaping production. It is also my point to exemplify the engendering of subjectivity in the exercise of corporeal reading.

## **5.2 Planes of consistency against the tyranny of the line**

The attribution of tyranny as an ontological asset of the line by Robert Coover(1992) helps explain why and how one may approach *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*. The novel, which shares the typical features of many of Coover's works that have already been deemed as proto-hypertexts, relies more on the notion of planes than on the notion of the line as constitutive of story.

Bearing this distinctive structural trait in mind, we can consider the correspondences that are implied concerning the equivalent distinction between the reader of essentially linear texts and the reader of texts that rely less on the line. The reader, under the spell of the line, understood as capable of exerting tyranny, is submitted to

a conjunction that entraps him into participating in a "temporal and centered experience"(BELLEI, 2002, p.122)<sup>55</sup> and thus into joining the play of a pre-inscribed teleology. Narratives that display an organization that rests less on the line (temporality) and more on the notion of the web or network (spatiality), not primarily conceived of as amenable to change in and with time unfolding, provide the reader with the challenge to constitute, to configure his own line of causation to yield story.

The subject constitution process that takes place in such an operation allows desire to circulate, to ensure the flow of intensities, and prevents desire from freezing and becoming a product. The subjectivity thus envisioned as intensity in flow, based on interactivity rather than on representation, corresponds to the experience that characterizes the posthuman condition.

This deployment of planes of consistency rather than of lines alone characterizes Coover's strategy to fight "the tyranny of the line" without, however, doing away with it altogether. The lines that are drawn within the reading process of a novel like *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*

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<sup>55</sup> My free translation of "uma experiência temporal e centrada". Bellei uses the expression to distinguish the traditional reader from the electronic reader. The full sentence reads: "Enquanto o leitor tradicional participa de uma experiência temporal e centrada, em uma narrativa que, ao começar e terminar, aponta alegoricamente para a irreversibilidade do tempo, o leitor eletrônico tem essencialmente uma experiência espacial que, desprovida de centros, ocorre no eterno presente de possibilidades combinatórias de uma topografia".



constitute lines of flight on the plane of consistency, demonstrating the potentiality to experience the body without organs at play.

As a geometrical category, differently from the line, the plane stands as the element that provides the reader with the chance to inhabit alternative spaces that restrain the unfolding of time, relying more on rhythm than on evolving speed. This kind of reading is described as topographical, as evading the notion of finality in-scribed by the line. Typical of hypertextual writings, this reading operates on a series of beginnings, of successive re-readings, of repetitions, of revisiting of spaces wherein the present is the dimension of time at play - reversibility being a constant.

Bellei characterizes this movement as allowing the reader to "get lost in the dispersion of multiple possibilities and forget time and history"(BELLEI, 2002, p.122)<sup>56</sup>, referring specifically to reading digital electronic hypertexts. Though this is not exactly the experience one has on reading Coover's (proto) hypertexts on the page (book bound), it can be paralleled with the experience the character Lucky Pierre undergoes in the novel.

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<sup>56</sup> My free translation of: "perder-se na dispersão de possibilidades múltiplas e esquecer o tempo e a história".

As Lucky Pierre inhabits different scripts and footages, film genres and strips, he misses continuity. His basic experience is that of discontinuities, until he is faced with the final discontinuity - his. Lucky Pierre, though a posthuman hero, and maybe precisely because of that, must find an end to his voyage.

Keeping in mind that each reel in the novel is structured as a distinctive plane of consistency, given the working Coover performs in shaping its elements according to the art/film genre being presided over by the muse/director, I will analyze three of the nine reels: Reel 1, Reel 7, and Reel 9. The first and last reels correspond to the opening and closing of the novel, and the linearity is affirmed to ensure that the piece falls into the categorical labeling of a novel, which describes the voyage of a hero, his aging or maturing, and eventual "discontinuance". The choice of Reel 7 is because its director is Cora - the powerful mayor of Cinecity, or Terpsichore - the muse of dance, the art that most outstandingly relies on the body. The body itself is a teaser to bring together the notions of the posthuman body and of the Body without Organs.

### 5.2.1 Cecilia: summoning the muse

**(Cantus.)** The gesture of opening his novel with a parenthetical in-scription of the classic entreaty to the muse is one of Coover's contrivances to frame story within a parodical mood on different levels. This works bothwise; as a reference to the initial section of the classic epic poem - to which we have learned to attribute the generic origin of the novel - and as an allusion to the conventional in-scription of stage directions in drama.

The former connotation is as much a traditional formal feature that accounts for the sober content of the writing to follow, a recognition of the poet's necessary plea to the divine order to get started, as an interpellation of the reader to comply with the conventions, with the rules of this genre. However, the writing that follows is a postmodern novel and the appeal is clearly to the (mortal) reader-in-the-world to help the writer set the story on. As visual marks, the parentheses work much like the reticence marks in the opening of *John's Wife*.

The graphic parentheses marks work as a tag of the author (function) and provide directions on how to read his piece, only that it is a novel instead of a play. In other words, reading is about to be staged, and the reader is definitely one of the players. This is in accord with the

notion of corporeal reading that Coover's novels at the same time trigger and rely on.

According to Punday, narrative in a post-deconstructive context can be defined as,

that form of discourse that both claims the authority to describe an object or event and yet also makes clear that it is the product of a certain person speaking or writing. [...] [N]arration, by implication, is that mode of discourse where the ordering of the text is represented within the text, where the text folds back and represents its own exterior (the act of constructing the text) within itself [...] par excellence(PUNDAY, 2003a, p.43).

The textual space that Coover lays out at the beginning of his novel entertains precisely the discursive element that provides an entrance to the play of corporeal reading. Next to the parenthetical in-scription, which asserts the physicality of the act of writing, we are presented with the affirmation of the absence of light and a tactile appeal, "[i]n the darkness, softly"(COOVER, 2002, p.1). This forestalls the sense of sight and furthers that of touch; a summoning of the senses for a start. The ensuing sentence starts a sequence of alliterations of voiceless and labialized phonemes in rhythmic pattern and in repetition of words that impress hearing forcefully and gradually encompasses the other senses.

A whisper becoming a tone, the echo of a tone.  
Doleful, a soft incipient lament flowing in the  
night like a wind, like the echo of a wind, a

plainsong wafting distantly through the windy chambers of the night, wafting unisonously through the spaced chambers of the bitter night, alas, the solitary city, she that was full of people, thus a distant and hollow epiodion laced with sibilants bewailing the solitary city(idem).

Besides, the tone is of mourning, solitude and desolation, of wasteland, in poetic diction. To say the least, a weird beginning to a novel whose title announces "adventures". As this reel is directed by Cecilia, a juxtaposition of Saint Cecily, the Catholic patron saint of music, to the Greek muse that presides over music and lyric poetry, of joy and pleasure and of flute playing, the musical quality of language is brought to the fore and expanded to encompass manifold associations. The tone, as we have noticed, is not at all of joy. Bearing in mind the fact that the films are all porn, flute-playing in the porn jargon is suggestive of one kind of action to take place and be performed.

The landscape that is described in the sequence is of barren hills which little by little define into a woman's naked body, and the snow falling in he city is frozen milk from her heavy breasts that sway in the wind "blown out of the ANUS and the VAGINAL CANAL"(p.2-3). It is in this setting that Lucky Pierre walks, the tyranny of the line implied here:

the shadow of a solitary man, like the figure in pedestrian-crossing signs, a photogram of a waling man, [...] walking alone in a lifelike parable of empty triads, between a pair of dotted lines, defined as it were by his own purpose: to forever walk between these lines(COOVER, 2002, p.3).

He walks with an erection, and loathes, "my god, it is cold, what the fuck am I doing out here?"(idem). Longing to be somewhere else, while waiting for the light to change from red to green at a curb, he conjures up a different setting,

No. Stop thinking about it. Change locations. Think warm, think green. [...] [T]hink nymphet. That's better. [...]. Through the wild flowers, into the sun-dappled forest - she takes off, her bright tail flashing like a doe's scut, what a sight! [...]. Some kind of music...[...]. [S]treet sounds diminishing to nothing more than a playful whisper in the fading forest - [...] distantly the returning sound of muted trumpets(COOVER, 2002, p.5-6).

This setting is alternated with the scene of the freezing city, until the light changes:

*BlaaaAAAAAATT!* He jumps back to the curb, but too late, a bus bearing down on him - *THWOCK!* - Whacks his boner as it goes roaring by [...].

He sits on the curb, snuffling, huddled miserably over his battered rod, wrapped now in crumpled newsprint, trying to coax green dreams out of his iced-up lobes [...]. Something seems to leave him, some spring released, a slipping away...(COOVER, 2002, p.6-7).

His attempt at retrieving some memory of "all the pleasant things he had from days of old"(p.6) is not without success. Overtaken by sudden panic, he cries and runs, "goal in view, central heating, hot tub, all that"(p.7), to his office. There he is greeted by his personal assistant, Cissy. At the same time that her greeting is sent forth, issued as a scream "at a high soprano squeal but suddenly plummet[ing] to a grinding basso profundo"(COOVER, 2002, p.12), a series of actions are presented in the form of a list describing the moves slowly performed by several different elements, as in a script.

Among these elements, there is the man's right knee, his calf muscle, his left toe, the silk tie, the fingers on his right hand, the jacket sleeve, the cufflink, the fileclerk, the operator, the receptionist's thighs, the man's rosy erection, and the elevator doors. To each of these and other elements a movement is assigned to be performed, as if each were an actor in the scene, which, all in all, is composed of Lucky Pierre's staged act, performing sex. Slow. Motion.

But Lucky Pierre's memory of a time when things were different assaults him once more,

[d]ays were all of a piece in that time, and there were fantastic adventures in every direction. Then suddenly it was over,

everything started closing in, running down, freezing up. Cleo. Yes, she spoiled it (COOVER, 2002, p.15).

The reference made to Cleo, the director of the next reel, Reel 2, is a variation of Clio, the muse of History. To add a further association and reversal of the myth within the novel, it is worth bringing to mind that the muse Clio fell in love with Pierius<sup>57</sup>.

Clio is regarded here as having spoiled the time of ever present. This implies the mastery of the discourse of History as a linear development of mankind from barbariousness to civilization, enforcing experience to be signified as a progressing and progressive trajectory in a series of causations.

The city, thus, can be seen as mourning this long lost temporality and its entering into chronological time - the city is in perpetual winter and night, darkness being the absence of light (enlightenment/History). This is already a hint that Lucky Pierre's adventures will encompass resisting to Cleo's direction.

In so doing, he will draw lines of flight and become a body without organs. His experience of a different

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<sup>57</sup> Clio the "Proclaimer" is the muse of History and is often represented holding a scroll. Credited with having introduced the Phoenician alphabet in Greece, Clio had teased Aphrodite's love of Adonis, and, suffering the goddess's wrath in revenge, she fell in love with Pierius, the son of Magnes and the king of Macedonia. By Pierus, she bore Hyacinth. For more on Clio, refer to the site <<http://www.eliki.com/portals/fantasy/circle/cliio.html>>.



temporality, one closer to spatiality, to abolition of determinative causations, is akin to the experience of subjectivity in technologically enhanced societies that modulate perception, for one, as fluidity in space.

While being assisted in his warm bath by Cissy and her team, the news report is on one of the television screens. The mayor of Cinecity, Cora, is being interviewed by Cleo, the reporter, about the crisis in the city,

a *thawnow* computer virus unleashed by anarchist hackers that is causing a citywide meltdown on the circuit [...] and about the use of old film archives to ease the fuel shortage [...] -City hall is indeed in the grip of a new fundamentalism, as some have argued?(COOVER, 2002, p.17-18).

Still while in his bath, Lucky Pierre confesses to Cissy how afraid he feels of going out into the frozen city again. To soothe his qualms, she soaps his back, and as an avatar of the muse of music,

Cissy runs nimble arpeggios up and down his spine, presses tonics, inversions, and augmented sevenths out of his tensed muscles. Carezzando, martellato, amorevole. She squeezes out the ice crystals, thumps away the bad news, strokes the discords down the drain with the ever-changing bathwater(COOVER, 2002, p.20-21).

The scene, which is being taped by Cissy, evolves into sexual intercourse underwater, in which, as he comes, he finds himself fighting to get to the surface, being beaten down by storm waves, swallowing seawater and "suddenly,

unexpectedly it's all over"(COOVER, 2002, p.22). Trying to make sense of what went wrong, wondering about the stuntman, who should have been there instead, "[h]e waits foundering inside the raging sea for his whole life to flash before his eyes, thinking: I might at least know at last, if too late, who I am!"(p.23).

In the passage mentioned above, Lucky Pierre is transported from one shooting location to another, without any cut from one scene to the other. Though there is discontinuity in the story being shot, there is continuity in the "medium" he is surrounded by. Though apparently fantastic, this transportation is not unfeasible, given the present state of the art of softwares and tools of image digitalization and manipulation. After all, it is a fact to be kept in mind that the hero is a film character whose existence is framed within filmstrips.

Lucky Pierre stands as an instance of a posthuman subject inasmuch as it is rather pattern and randomness what characterizes his existence than presence, or the illusion of presence. There is pattern - associated to rhythm in the musical model that underlies the novel as a whole - in his behavior and performance, which, on their turn, occur randomly - what prevents the anticipation of further developments based on identified causes.

The itinerary Lucky Pierre follows is associated with rhizome because it attends more closely to a series of randomic beginnings at any point in his trajectory, placing him always in the middle, not clearly or necessarily coming or going, always in flux. The fact that Lucky Pierre's memory constantly and increasingly fails him throughout the story is an index of the lines of flight to be drawn in his becoming a body without organs.

One example of this pattern and randomness is clear in the sequence of narration. The feeling of disorientation that beholds him when he is drowning, primarily in his bathtub and in a continuum at sea, is described as his wish that it is only a dream, "the dream of a drowning man, a man washed forever from the frame, lost at sea"(COOVER, 2002, p.23). The icon of a clapper board on the page separates this episode from the following, a clear deployment of a visual mark to invite the association with the sonorous impression triggered by the clapping that announces that footage is about to be shot.

Thus, the passage that comes immediately after cannot be missed as the verbal representation of the action developing on the film being produced. As such, what we read is the indication of setting, the description of camera movement, movements attributed to objects, and

dialogue, direct speech with no indication of characters or *dicendi* introductory pieces by the narrator, director.

The reader is left with the task of sorting out, little by little, how many voices there are, who speaks at which turn, and what sense their dialogue interspersed with some narrative script-like sections makes within the overall story in the film. There is information on what they look like physically, which will help the reader later recognize them when their names are not mentioned in other sections of the novel.

As we can see, Coover not only arrays elements, techniques, and languages from different media and arts, endowing his writing with complexity, but also problematizes the way these different realms are related. It is hard to establish the precedence of one over another, given the fact that they all produce narrative in our everyday experience.

The film that is being shot brings together the nine muses: Euterpe, Clio, Urania, Polyhymnia, Erato, Melpomene, Terpsichore, Thalia, and Calliope; each of which is played by the directors of the reels, respectively: Cecilia, Cleo, Clara, Cassandra, Constance, Carlotta, Cora, Catherine, and Calliope. This film, the first to be presented in the

novel, is also part of the last Reel - only then under Calliope's direction.

Here, it is the story of Lucky Pierre as a castaway who escapes from drowning and gets to an island inhabited by nine nymphs. As they find him unconscious ashore and pull him out of the water, they mean to take him to Calliope<sup>58</sup>. They marvel at the strangeness of his (male) body, and try to rid him of the deviant organs they find in that body they believe should be like theirs. They take turns in interpreting that body:

- Be careful, Polyhymnia! She's been stabbed by something between her legs. [...]

- Look! There, under that thing that's stabbing her!

- It's her breasts! They must have fallen! [...]

- Perhaps she's under an evil spell.

- That would explain the hair on her face(COOVER, 2002, p.24-26).

At this point, what starts as one of the directions between dialogues, informing that they are taking him to Calliope, turns into the speech in the voice of the narrator of the novel:

As the nymphs lift the unconscious castaway [...], making celestial music as they go, there is a commercial break, so he takes the occasion to order up another drink, sitting

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<sup>58</sup> Calliope, the eldest Muse, is the muse of epic poetry and is represented holding a writing tablet in hand, sometimes seen with a roll of paper or a book, and crowned in gold.

by himself there on a stool at the neighborhood bar where he often goes to escape the ceaseless hassles of office and studio, or so it says in the script(COOVER, 2002, p.26-27).

The effect of this shifting of framings of the hero as a character in a movie who is the character of the novel and of the continuity of narration despite the shift in voices is clearly a decentering of subjectivity, both of the reader and of the author - understood as a function of narrative. Coover manages to put to the test the reader's compliance with the conventions of narrative, of genre, and even of language, leading the reader to reassess the whole story he (reader) has been striving to cohere into discourse. In this way, the reader's authority and responsibility over the linearity that corresponds to the putative distribution of story is threatened, jeopardized. It is Coover's project to undermine every assumption we may perceive as reliable, as supportive of signification, concerning their dominance, especially if they are embedded within foundational metanarratives. To force still another reading, to claim for multiplicity and for active engagement of imagination, even if only for aesthetic purposes. This is one of the senses in which we can consider this novel his *pièce de resistance*.

By construing his hero as an actor of porn films, Coover stresses corporeality - as sex and all the bodily functions associated with pornography cannot be conceived

without conceiving of a body, flesh. Notwithstanding, by insisting that his body's materiality is but an effect of flickering light, an image, an imprint on filmstrip - taking into account the contemporary technological resources of simulation and virtual reality - Coover problematizes the very corporeality he insists on bringing to the fore. In this way, the realities the narration contrives constitute the planes of consistency of story to be yielded as discourse in the process of reading.

The reader must then entertain these instances of materiality and negotiate the body without organs with which to be one with the text, to be one with the map, as the map is one with the world. It is a strategy to be developed so that instead of binding to a process of subjectification - assimilation as the result of production - the reader becomes a subject (not an object, not production, a limit) of and with the text.

The process of subjectification, for Deleuze and Guattari(2003), is one of the three strata that bind us; namely, the (surface of the) organism, (the angle of) signifiante, and (the point of) subjectification. These three work together to produce the norm:

You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body - otherwise you're just depraved. You will be signifier and signified, interpreter and interpreted - otherwise you're just a deviant.

You will be a subject of the statement - otherwise you're just a tramp<sup>59</sup>(DELEUZE and GUATTARI, p.159).

To oppose this whole, "to unhook ourselves from the points of subjectification that secure us, nail us down to a dominant reality"(idem), and to allow for the flow of desire, for multiplicity, the body without organs develops a series of recantings to reverse articulation. The body without organs reverses articulation with disarticulation or with no matter how many articulations - multiplicity. It also chooses experimentation to resist interpretation and the signifier, and adopts nomadism to forego stasis - "keep moving, even in place, never stop moving, motionless voyage, desubjectification"(id. ibidem).

Though this series of repeals is put forth as an introduction to the methodological procedures of nomadology, or schizoanalysis, to be applied as an alternative to psychoanalysis, it sheds light on the process of subject constitution. Described as such in these terms, this process takes place in reading on a much more complex level than it has been described in other models. This opens up the spaces for a model of textual analysis and criticism capable of entertaining in more physical terms the relation between world and text which buys us a

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<sup>59</sup> And what is a tramp but "a man who walks", made even more miserable if "in winter"? Though not the focus of this dissertation, this association could be developed into an appreciation of Coover's stance as a follower and admirer of Dostoevsky, as he has repeatedly claimed to be.



way to think about the textual construction of knowledge, of reality, and its continuing power to shape action. This level of complexity developed in reading affords us the means to put the material objects and effects of texts to new uses, for new purposes, as Coover(1993) himself pledges to do.

### 5.2.2 Hard Cora: ruling the body

The seventh reel is directed by Cora, Cinecity's Mayor. The issue of power, germane to the nature of her position as film director, is enhanced here once she takes on the role of the ruler of the city too.

Keeping in mind Cora makes adventure porn films, s/m<sup>60</sup> easily springs to consideration and triggers a series of associations with our worldly experience of institutional power and the shape it bears when invested by the state. On bringing together this, Coover instantiates a very provocative *liaison* between power and pleasure and the notions of the play of myth in our making sense of everyday life, which we too often fail to examine or acknowledge.

The name Cora, besides echoing the ending of the name of the muse of dance, Terpsichore, hints at Koré. In *Timeus* Plato refers to Koré as the space in between, as the space for the emergence of a third form of political

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<sup>60</sup> The notaion s/m stands for sado-masochism.

organization. In Greek mythology Koré is also associated to the myth of the beginning of winter, which is attributed to the young Persephone<sup>61</sup>.

Thus Cora is at the same time director, mayor, dominatrix and "queen of the underworld", where the unconscious rules. In all these instances, Lucky Pierre is always submitted to coming. The choice of the title for this subsection associates the category of hardcore pornography - extremely explicit pornography, to bear on the overall tone of the reel directed by (hard) Cora.

The opening paragraph of the seventh reel still preserves the sonorous summoning of the first reel, though language is handled so as to project the image of submission from the start. A series of participle adjectives suggest the operation of passive voice, of the subject as the sufferer and bearer of actions being performed onto and against him by another.

The expectation of pain and pleasure on the part of the deviant subject, the paradox defining the play of power

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<sup>61</sup> Persephone means something like "she who destroys the light, and the myth is associated with the origin of winter. The daughter of Zeus and Demeter, goddess of the harvest. One day, when Persephone was collecting flowers, the earth suddenly opened and Hades rose up from the gap and abducted her. Demeter, learning from Helios, the all-knowing god, the only witness to the abduction, what had happened, took revenge by withdrawing herself in loneliness, and on doing that, cessating the earth's fertility. At Zeus's command to let go of Persephone, Hades gave her a pomegranate that bound her to the underworld forever. She had to spend one-third of the year there, the other months she stayed with her mother. When Persephone was in Hades, Demeter refused to let anything grow, and winter began.

in sado-masochistic doings, sets the tone of the reel at the outset and leaves no doubt about the explicitness with which the theme will be developed:

**Bum** bared and on high, horsed over the foam-rubber seat of a camera boom, wrists cuffed to his ankles, the former revolutionary hero, unmasked and stripped now of all but his fiberglass codpiece, understands that he is about to explore his tolerance for pain and the pleasures, if any, to be found in it(COOVER, 2002, p.270).

Next, the acting begins, and as Cora applies him a deserved and "most severe - whop! - chastisement", he gasps "I don't really like this"(p.271). The following line in this dialogue initiates the other directors' comments on the running footage. And what we have initially assumed as an intimate and private context, obviously granting us our share in a voyeuristic procedure, is presented as a spectacle being watched by the other directors/Lucky Pierre's sexual partners.

In order to identify who takes each turn in speaking, we have to rely on several hints that have been dispensed throughout the narration in the previous reels up to this point. Their slant, their style, the scope and length of their sentences and vocabulary choice, all these elements help shape the "voice" of each of the directors/muses. The chart on page 174 sketches the multiciplity of relationships that can be of help in this task.

In addition to this, occasionally the voices refer to the hero as they call him more intimately or by the name of the character he plays in the different genres of films. This is certainly not an easy task for the reader to face, but, interestingly, it is one that mixes pain and pleasure. The trouble to select the clues that build up the categories that allow us to assign each character her voice relays the gratification of becoming one with the map, of joining the peeping-like experience and dialogue. In other words, there is a line of flight being drawn to make the flow of desire possible.

Notice the dialogue with the sequence of comments by the other directors and the distinctiveness of each of their speeches:

- She's not giving him much time between strokes.  
(Cleo - a concern with time and intervals - history)[...]

- That ain't so much raw footage as raw acreage!  
(Lottie - colloquial, rebellious and evocative of fundiary issues)

- I mean that Cora as producer controls, in a word, the exosomatic instruments used to transform, exchange and discard energy. She's the boss. The soul of the machine. She can have what she wants. (Clara - the language of science and medicine describing bodily functions)

- Poor Willie! How he must be suffering! (Connie - compassion, *caritas*)

- Well, Peter *has* been naughty. It's not that he doesn't deserve what he's getting, you know.

(Cora - the pedagogic and disciplinary impulse)(COOVER, 2002, p.271-272)<sup>62</sup>

The sequence is corresponding on the basis of the distinctiveness of language use and by the association established by the echoing of the arts being presided by each of the muses, as the chart on page 174 demonstrates.

The reply Cleo offers to Cissy's repeated pitiful complaints about the excessiveness of the punishment being watched, delivered in a solemn tone which echoes the essentialist approach to the scene as a ritual, is immediately followed by a down-to-earth realization evocative of the contingency of the body, issued by Clara:

- [...] He's not being punished for some alleged crime, that's not the point. This is a ritual, a conventionalized and therefore extraordinary and transcendent ceremony, and as old as Cinecity itself! That's not a particular bum getting whipped. It's the celebration of an abstract social vision, a communal dream! Do you understand? You are witnessing an archetypal drama, stripped to its bare essentials, and he is privileged to participate in it!

- Humm. I wonder if he or his ass would say so...(COOVER, 2002, p.272).

As you can see, two dimensions are implied here and still complicated with the emotional content of the different degrees of loving attachment each one of them betrays in their reaction/reception and commentaries. When

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<sup>62</sup> My parenthetical additions.

Cora is finished, she delivers a speech that likens that of a priest:

But now I will leave you for a time to consider, Badboy, within the obscure and bitter enigma of yourself, your many wicked transgressions, and the penance you must willingly - indeed, eagerly - undertake to absolve yourself from them and earn our pardon and our love(COOVER, 2002, p.274).

Nonetheless, despite protestations, they are all compliant with the footage. Cissy even tries to reason with Cora that she has marked his body too badly, "[g]iven what happens next, aren't you vandalizing your own screen?"(COOVER, 2002, p.274), she says. This statement signals to the reader that a script is being followed and that his body serves as the screen. Cora's reply is left incomplete, ending with reticence marks, and the following paragraph introduces a commentary on Lucky Pierre's physical, emotional and psychological condition after the ritual.

In this passage the narrator manages to translate and share the character's misery, for he uses exclamation mark and italics to convey emphasis and feelings of outrage and indignation. The use of interjections helps disclose the feelings of pain while blurring the enunciative level of the text. At the same time, narrator, reader and character's dimensions are leveled, as Coover ends the

paragraph with a witty remark on the one-sidedness of the "dialogue". The lengthy quotation that follows is meant to illustrate my reading:

He has never felt so utterly forsaken. [...] [T]hough even now, blinded, shackled, tortured, humiliated, his brain ass-gripped, he feels an unrepentant longing for cool Lottie and her friends. *His* friends! How good it was! [...]. The orgasms! Indeed, he aches for all the women he has ever known [...]. [...]. All of them. Sequentially or all at once. Ow! Oh! And now so alone! He, once the idol of the masses, has been reduced to an audience of one, and that one has abandoned him, [...] his loneliness so extreme he almost wishes the ruthless tyrant were back lashing him with tongue and whip again, harrowingly onesided though such dialogue is.

But wait. He is not alone. Someone is spraying ointment on his wounds (COOVER, 2002, p.274-275).

The interpellation "But wait" situates the reader at a very complex positioning. At first, the reader was following the rendering of the character's situation being mediated by the narrator's perspective as a witness of the character's ordeal, implying a specific chronology. This chronology establishes firstly the event and secondly its "representation", or in-scription, in discourse by an observer. Third, the handing down of the "story" by the observer to still another observer, the reader. When the reader is faced with the warning on the part of the narrator to hold the flow, to "wait", he is forced to leap from the level of receiver of second-hand information to

that of first-hand witness, side by side with the narrator. Besides, from a receiver of information always already pre-  
verbalized in textual form, the reader is prompted to join the narrator's first "reading" of the event as a spectator, once he contrives his narration as if in real-time.

In this way, Coover arranges the narrative conventions and the narratological elements of point of view, focalization, and narrative mode to emulate a real-time experience that induces a displacement of the provisionally stabilized functioning of the reader within the structure of the text. As Katherine Hayles puts it, "when narrative functionalities change, a new kind of reader is produced by the text"(HAYLES, 1999, p.48).

Though I agree with her proposition, which forces us to entertain the dynamic play of narrative, I would like to argue that this emergent reader-spectator is not only produced by the text but also one of the circumstances that bring such texts into being, along with many others. The category of a reader-spectator corresponds, to a certain extent, to a whole new condition of cultural consumers of texts on their multimedia electronically supported technologies.

On having said that, I will quote the novel again to demonstrate how Coover uses the theme of s/m to provide a



commentary on the complexity of our posthuman condition regarding the fostering of subjectivities in different media. It is worth keeping in mind Deleuze and Guattari's(2003) proposition of the concept of the body without organs as composed by the strategy to escape subjectification within the always already there strata<sup>63</sup> that constitutes the subject. On the strata of the surface of the organism, they bring the example of the amputation of one breast by the Amazons to better become one with the spear.

This is only one of the several instances in the novel in which the continuum between man and its artifacts is explored. In her answer to Cissy's protestations, Cora justifies the harshness of her thrashing of Lucky Pierre's buttocks like this:

- If I didn't (hit him so hard), my child, I would be restraining the whip from performing its natural and necessary function. I am not cruel or merciless. I am the mere servant of the whip, not its master. The wielder has no more will than has her tool; she simply releases it to do what it must, to be what it is. I like to think of the whip as, in effect, the ablative absolute of the backside. [...]. Surface is only surface and infinitely restorable(COOVER, 2002, p.274).

As we can see, Cora, Cinecity's mayor, incorporates the institutionalized discourse of state order. Coover, in such instances, implies a parallel between the highly

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<sup>63</sup> See page 198.

rationalized elaboration of the cruelties perpetrated in the name of the maintenance of "order". Unfortunately, too many recent (worldly) events stand as material evidence of these operations in the history of the United States, one of the most powerful nations in the world. These events have born a profound impact on humanity as a whole, especially because today they are mediatized and instantly broadcast on a global level. Still, the essentializing tactics hold firm, and the deeds are eventually assimilated as (cleansing) rituals and as spectacle.

Ritual and myth provide, thus, the context for an inextricable association of the material and immaterial dimensions of human experience. Cissy, Lucky Pierre's personal assistant, but also Cora's production assistant and cameraperson, comes to his help with an apparently lenitive potion. However, instead of soothing his pain and healing his body, Cissy is in fact just preparing the screen - his buttocks skin, really - "coating it with a reflective surface" on which Cora will shoot her "grand epic [...] an X-pic, more like" (COOVER, 2002, p.276).

Cissy leaves L.P. wishing him luck and stirring him to be brave. As he calls for an explanation, it is Cora who answers. The description of her voice, which ends this section, evokes the musical quality of the opening of the novel. "Her voice surrounds him and sounds threateningly

cavernous in the dark, as if emerging from the depths of an ancient echo chamber"(COOVER, 2002, p.277), an echo that has already been in-scribed in Coover's indirect allusion to the origins of the narrative genre; also an echo to be in-scribed in the next section.

This narrative working endows reading with a performative dimension in the sense that rhizome can be experienced. The sense of a new beginning at any point of the trajectory is made evident here. This complicates the attribution of a determined position between two points - the defining element of striated space<sup>64</sup> - and helps us entertain smooth space as characterizing the context of Lucky Pierre's voyage.

The section that is begun in the sequence, in like manner, can be read as a reworking, as a refocussing, or a reterritorialization of Cecilia's reel<sup>65</sup>:

At first, in the absolute dark, it is hard to understand what is happening. There is a distant rattle, faintly familiar, and his backside feels as if it were being pricked by hundreds of dancing brush bristles, though the sensation may merely be the residue of his whipping and only imagined as something new. Then, slowly, the rattle evolves into a kind of drumroll, or several drumrolls, overlapping each other. [...]

And, suddenly, nothing. [...]. The blackness gives way to a faint dawning light(COOVER, 2002, p.277).

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<sup>64</sup> See pages 32 and 68.

<sup>65</sup> See page 187 and 188.

The rattle/drumrolls he hears correspond to the sonorous impression produced by hundreds of horses, which is later overlapped by that of an army's marching booted feet, which gives way to a "melancholic lament of an approaching train"(COOVER, 2002, p.278). Lucky Pierre finds himself tied to the railroad tracks, "in a ruthless parody of his own early Maid in Distress sex melo, except that there are no tracks"(p.279).

As Badboy, Lucky Pierre's character role in Coras's film, is made to come as a result of Cora's direction, putting an end to his pain, he feels again as if some ointment is being applied, "[o]r maybe she's kissing him"(COOVER, 2002, p.280). However, it is not the end yet. The relief he experiences is still part of the footage being shot and projected on a very specific part of his ailing body,

[f]or they seem to be gazing at each other's eyes, he, on one of his cheeks, she on the other. [...]. Their lips meet, reaching across the divide. [...]. Oh no. They are French kissing across the crack of his filthy ass. [...]. He is utterly disgusted. But it feels good. It eases the pain. He continues to lick. His humiliation is complete(COOVER, 2002, p.280).

The next disciplinary session he is subjected to corresponds to the emblematic quest with which every genuinely epic hero is invested with by the divine order. In this case, Cora, after providing him with the suitable

apparel - among them a ring her vagina delivers to his penis in a further s/m session, solemnly proffers the mission:

-I'm sending you out into the world upon a vital mission, she announces gravely, as she sucks a bowless pipe stem into his jacket pocket to add the casual touch. I am asking you, Badboy, to save Cinecity!(COOVER, 2002, p.283).

This means he is being sent back to the freezing cold streets, where the terrorist group PRICKS (Patriots for the Restoration of Inner City Kino-Services), led by Lottie, are attacking and destroying the city movie theaters. As Cora twists the magic ring he is wearing,

[h]e finds himself without transition standing on a raised platform in a swirling blizzard on a crowded roped-off street corner in front of a movie house, addressing the assembled Patriots of the Restoration of Inner City Kino-Services with a handled megaphone(COOVER, 2002, p.286).

As this passage is separated from its preceding paragraph by the icon of a clapper board, we understand that this is again the level of footage. In this script, Charlotte, a.k.a. Lottie, and Loco, or Pierna Loca, discuss their situations and Cora's power over them. Lottie cannot understand why he would leave them; Loco cannot understand why the Extars would attack even the film Lottie herself had directed. Her explanation is the following:

- It (the attacked film)'s not ours. We got co-opted. You were blowing servers all over the circuit, you were so hot, so the cunt pirated the sequences from our site and montaged them into smash box office hits for her own profit and purposes, turning us all into stars of a sort, the very thing we're fighting against<sup>66</sup>(COOVER, 2002, p.288).

This is an obvious reference to the Marxist concept of exploitation of the working masses by the capitalist state as well as an affirmation of the debasing of movie making as a form of art having been turned into a commodity to be consumed at the cost of its aesthetic and poetic purposes. We cannot fail to hear the criticism to the Hollywood industry of blockbusters as well as the affirmation of a resisting strand of opposing filmmakers. Lottie is the leader of the Extars (ex-stars/extras), the mass excluded from the privileges of consumer society and therefore made redundant.

The reference to the contemporary high technology deployed by this industry is continually reinstated. Lottie plays the role of the revolutionary who fights against the alienating process to which the hero is subjected:

- [...] She's hyped you into some kind of romantic larger-than-life antiestablishment hero who finally sees the light and comes home again. The mysterious stranger, the prodigal son, the legendary righter of wrongs, the heartbreaking dude with the big dick who lives hard and loves hard and dies young(COOVER, 2002, p.289).

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<sup>66</sup> My parenthetical addition.

As Loco learns from Lottie of Cora's having scripted his death several times, and lied to him about his resilient stardom, though still wavering between breaking his oath to her and being a "good boy", he finally chooses to join the Extars' flee. However, he does not make it even as far as to the stairs down to the Underground where he last saw them heading to, as he is already unwittingly playing by Kate's animation script, being sabotaged once again.

The whole street seems to tip, and suddenly he's climbing a very steep hill. His feet slip in the snow. He grabs a fire hydrant to keep from sliding backwards down the street... [...]. It's like some kind of action replay, slowed down now...(COOVER, 2002, p.292).

The replay is enacted on different levels, on the film being shot, as Lucky Pierre moves and is always sent back to a position he was previously holding when he started to move, and on the level of narration. As the narrator is presenting the scenes as they are watched by the beholder of Kate's cartoon flick, what the scenes show is a repetition, a replay of the initial action in which Lucky Pierre first appears in the novel, in Cecilia's reel and in the others as well. Again, the reader enjoys these blurrings and mixings in a continuum, "without transition", just like Lucky Pierre, thus joining him in his rhizomatic voyage:

There's the old lady's humped-over backside as she peers up at the light through frosted spectacles below him. She's bent with age, leaning without consequence into the street's tip. Icicles hang from her nose. There's his love-ringed boner driving into her backside. [...]. The plaint. The mess in the street. [...]. The hat. The humped-over backside. [...]. The plaint more like a low hum, the melancholic chorale, [...] the plaint, the slide, the impact, the pain, the slide, slower and slower, until finally, with one last collision, one last bending and straightening, he comes to a complete stop. Though nothing else does (COOVER, 2002, p.292-293).

Freezing, here, bears a two-fold dimension in the story. It is Lucky Pierre's body's response to winter in Cinecity - notice that the directors are unaffected by the weather condition. It is also a textual in-scription of the technical resource that allows us to put specific objects/elements in a visual frame reference to a complete stop digitally. Today this is an ordinary function available in even the most unsophisticated image processing software.

In the narration, Lucky Pierre is eventually rescued from the freezing process by Kate, self-defined as "nothing if not a animator", who "trying to locate his boundaries" finds out that the ring Cora made him wear was in fact a "planted tracking device, [...], hologram transmitter a some kind..." (COOVER, 2002, p.294), what would account for his repeated failure to escape the script.



After trying to rid Lucky Pierre of the ring in a number of ways to no avail, Kate cuts his penis off with a pair of oversized steel scissors - a rather unsophisticated tool. The ring drops into the gutter and he is made whole again. Though he momentarily feels "[h]e is once more who he is", there is something "missing from the restored badboy: his will"(COOVER, 2002, p.296). What is easy to explain, as he has been utterly humiliated by Cora.

So far in Cora's reel Lucky Pierre has played four roles in four different porn genres under the direction of different directors. Interspersed with Cissy's starting scene and occasional assistance, he performs as Badboy with Cora, as L.P with Cissy, as Pierna Loca with Lottie, and as Pete the Beast with Kate.

In each of the reels he can be seen as tentatively articulating some incipient resistance, a token of his continual struggle to become a Body without Organs. In each of the reels, however, he is denied this chance and is repeatedly brought back to the scripted lines.

Next he is subjected to Clara, who records his results on a handheld computer notebook, as he is treated by nurses who take turns in mounting him, carefully enough to prevent him from coming in the process. They wear gradated membranes of ever-higher toughness for him to break

through. After that, they start to inject steel into his penis, as part of his preparation to the role he is about to play in Cora's epic - the redeemer of Cinecity, the one to break "the intactness of the legendary (mayoral) maidenhead"(COOVER, 2002, p.309), which is blamed as responsible for the population's ordeals. "If he can rid them (the extars) of it, the oppression will lift. The weather will improve. They call him the liberator"<sup>67</sup>(idem).

Here lies one more example of Coover's amazing artistic elaboration of the complex arrangement that "pins us down" to the mechanism of production. The strictly controlled and minutely devised planning of probing Lucky Pierre's erection parodies the late twentieth century methodologies of quality control that have been sweeping and dismantling the previously functional models of production that entertained chance and disruption as integrative elements of the process.

The eventual accomplishment of Badboy's quest in the epic takes place in an arena downtown Cinecity, where he arrives in Clara's ambulance and is met by figures representing art and history - "as they rattle into the clearing of the arena, the film gives way to live action"(COOVER, 2002, p.308). Conforming to the narrative conventions of an epic,

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<sup>67</sup> My parenthetical additions.

Clara delivers the exordium, reporting on the tortuous journeys they have just made through the perilous fringes to reach this place, which, though flat as a board, she calls the summit and nadir or the mythological round(COOVER, 2002, p.309).

However, Lucky Pierre realizes that what he is facing is not the Virgin in flesh and bones but, instead, a mechanism devised by Clara, called a plot blot,

a strange contraption, which [...] is a kind of robot, computerized but not itself a computer, for his adventure must be actual, not virtual. A real hymen must be broken in real time. Only happens once. Supposedly(COOVER, 2002, p.310).

The adverbial remark that ends the quotation above problematizes the previous allusion to "live action", it suggests that it is a very feeble possibility to take place in Cinecity.

The description of the plot bot device is a remarkable in-scription of the MOO and MUD technology of multi-authored writing with which Coover inaugurated his Hypertext Writing programs at Brown in the early 90s. The device is described as a writing machine that incorporates multimedia features, as we can see in the following passage:

The robotic apparatus [...] has been programmed with all known epic plots, as well as elements from romance and other genres. One moves through this vast database by making choices, the results of which will be visible to

everyone up on the video wall. They are not rational choices but purely gestual; one moves or is moved and the story changes. Or, in this case, two move, and multiple instantaneous choices are made, which more often than not conflict with each other(COOVER, 2002, p.310).

The conflation of film and live action that eventually leads to the hero's success in his quest, the moment at which he meets his fate, depends on the merging of the two subjectivities at play in the writing/reading or shooting/viewing process, Clara explains as part of her prolegomena oration, "[o]nly an absolute concinnity of desire and motion [...] can bring the story to a happy conclusion"(idem).

Coover's parody of the reader's quest for the ultimate meaning of a text in this passage sheds light on the complexity with which even the most rudimentary experiments with hypertext can yield. Their impact on literary theory and their breaking with conventional linearity in narrative texts encompass a rearrangement of the field. Likewise, following this elaboration, when, in Cora's footage of her epic the hero convinces himself of his noble destiny, Coover provides another parodic in-scription of the text as that artifact awaiting to be rescued by the reader so that it can yield its hidden, ciphered meaning, "[h]e is he who will fuck, in effect, the city itself and thus the world and, so doing, will save it from itself"(COOVER, 2002, p.315).

However, given the new capabilities provided to him precisely because he is attached to the plot bot, he is not powerless, "[h]e could change the rules, disrupt the continuity, introduce a few avatars of his own"(COOVER, 2002, p.316). These are some of the functional commands available to a MUD user/scriber. Still, he is just an actor, not the director, just a character, not the writer, despite the additional apparently freeing resources he has incorporated - an index of his posthumanness.

This can be read as Coover's acknowledgement of the criticism to the technophile celebratory and even romantic claim that hypertexts free the reader from authorial control. As part of Coover's comment about the argument of hypertext's empowering features. Lucky Pierre understands that, "his hopes for success are greater if he stays within her (Cora's) dreamworld, riding his dick steadfastly to the end of her story. For it's his story too"<sup>68</sup>(idem).

Here we can say that Lucky Pierre eventually becomes what he is. He performs the role of Cinecity's liberator not as a result of his surrender to Cora's power. Instead, he performs precisely according to Baudrillard's suggestion that the subject becomes a parody of what the media presents as his "captured", represented self. On doing this Lucky Pierre composes his Body without Organs, for he

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<sup>68</sup> My parenthetical addition.

understands that his story (history?) and the end of her story are not necessarily the same story.

Badboy the All conquering's feat is staged as part of the plot of a knight's siege to a castle, "a familiar castle theme". A theme that, despite the familiarity it purports, plants some doubts in him, for, "[w]hen the gods' ends have been accomplished, the epics end, sometimes with the triumphant return of the hero, but often as not with his demise"(COOVER, 2002, p.318).

Notwithstanding, despite his acknowledgement of the possibility of his relative agency, he understands that "even if death awaits him, [...] turning back would be death of another kind"(idem). That is, if death is his destiny as scripted to be performed by the epic hero he plays, choosing not to bring the castle walls down, choosing not to "breach the unbreachable"(id. ibidem), would correspond to being discontinued as Cora's partner. The binary choice is an illusion. One way or another, he cannot escape story.

### 5.2.3 Calliope: discontinuing the hero

The story that Lucky Pierre cannot escape is reenacted in Calliope's reel. Unlike Reels 1 and 7, Reel 9 is opened with the phrase Film Festival centered on the page, in all caps bold font, likening a title. Like in the other reel,

however, the musical quality of language is granted. And again Coover chooses to summon the reader's attention by foregrounding the visual component of the words on the page.

### **FILM FESTIVAL**

announces the huge sign over the arched entrance to the midway, through which he is being led by Cally(COOVER, 2002, p.363).

Notice how Coover sets the subject of the sentence apart from the verb and complement by changing lines, using different font formats, and ignoring conventional indentation. In so doing, he makes a mimetic in-scription of the formal aspect of the experience of being caught by the visual appeal of a verbally structured street sign.

This artifice also works as a conventional procedure inherited from formalism, defamiliarization. However, what is being challenged here is not a literary theme, technique or function. The point here is to allow for lines of flight within the plane of consistency, the plane supported by the increasing number of connections at each composition.

By stressing the invariant aspect of language that consists besides the forced division between sentence subject and predicative, Coover thrusts the familiar configuration (subject-verb-complement, the structural lay out of the logic chain in English) into a different

composition. This subsequent assemblage cannot be grasped as consistent unless a new parameter emerges. This criterion must be capable of accounting for the compound resulting from the division as a new whole and of preventing it from being hierarchically categorized.

The resultant whole cannot be reduced or reinterpreted - caught within the mechanism of production - as either a development or an involution, lest it ends up as the rendering of a subsidiary or secondary partition of the familiar, always referring back to the "original" and hierarchized tree-like structure. The ensuing compound cannot be seen as a lacking or displaced variation. Instead, comparison should be established paratactically to the pre-existent whole, performing the logic of 'and..., and... and...' that defines rhizome.

Apparently a merely stylistic move on the part of the artist, but by no means less relevant as such, the treatment Coover gives to language on playing with its variant and invariant aspects and elements creates lines of flight that provide the means through which the reader can resist subjectification and exert his agency (becoming a body without organs). This move also serves to tackle the issue of continuity and discontinuity, concerning the fact that the division enacts discontinuity at the level of the



sentence, which, nonetheless, is acknowledged as continuity at the level of discourse.

The procedure is repeated twice more, building in continuity and discontinuity:

A LUCKY PIERRE REVIVAL!

the sign overhead goes on to say...

THE CINEMATIC EVENT OF THE CENTURY!

Well, revival, yes; he could use a little of that(COOVER, 2002, p.363).

The revival announced overhead and welcomed by Lucky Pierre establishes continuity in the sense that in the previous reels he has been physically abused to the point of, for example, "consummation" in Reel 7 and "dismantling" in Reel 8. Notice that Reel 8 is directed by Catherine, a.k.a. Thalia, the muse of Comedy, who makes cartoons, animations. Cartoons typically approach themes from a funny perspective, aiming to produce laughter, which has a powerful subversive and de-structuring effect.

In addition to this, continuity is also established vertically, to shape constitutive elements of story as patterns instead of progression only - characteristic of striated space. This is, however, smooth space.

Every reel opens with the suggestion of music and some ground on which Lucky Pierre walks (Reel 1, 2, 6, and 9), strides (Reel 3), falls (Reel 4), steps out (Reel 5),

mounts (Reel 7), and is reanimated (Reel 8). In Reel 9 there is the description of a fair-like ground where the festival takes place, with the music of "[a] calliope [...] playing somewhere"<sup>69</sup>(COOVER, 2002, p.363). Interestingly, the calliope, an American invention, is an instrument played from a keyboard that forces steam through a set of whistle pipes. Here we have two of the elements that compose the smooth space: the wind (steam) that blows relentlessly in Cinecity and the keyboard, which is an emblem of the current technology of writing, to say the least.

Thus, after suffering consummation and dismantling, Lucky Pierre, who in Cally's films goes by the name of Willie, greets the anticipation of a "revival" led by Calliope. His physical decadence at this point in his life is noticed and regretted by his fans, who crowd around to see him enter the theater with Cally by his side.

When Cally overhears some of them mention the chance that it is not the "real" Lucky Pierre, she asks them to shush, for the unlikeness of his looks was purposeful, "[w]e're hoping to get through to the studio without being recognized!"(COOVER, 2002, p.365), she says, inviting them to the later show at the (Lucky Pierre Memorial

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<sup>69</sup> Invented in the USA about 1850 by A.S. Denny, a calliope is a steam-whistle organ with a loud, shrill sound audible miles away, used to attract attention for circuses and fairs.

Multiscreen) Picturedrome, where Willie will be available for the photos, interviews and "the usual dick-prints"(idem) - Cinecity's correlate to autographs.

The suspicion raised by the fans on the genuineness of the man they watch walk entertains the contemporary conditions of dispersed, disseminated consciousness. It is worth recalling that the original working title of the story that developed into this novel was "*A man walking in winter*" and that the initial action to be performed by this character was to open his fly<sup>70</sup>. As to multi-faceted consciousness, capable of being lodged in several different pieces of material support, this is one of the attributes of the posthuman condition.

The following quotation is an example of one of the ways in which Coover more explicitly textualizes this experience, together with a characterization of smooth space and the issue of continuity/discontinuity:

She (Cally) steps along, seeing herself step along, sometimes even seeing herself see herself stepping along, an experience he also suffers, and no doubt would be suffering now were he not distracted by all the fun-fair booths and movie marquees. It's as though his whole life, or at least his life in movies (and what other life has he had?) has been laid out here on the fairground as a geographical cluster to be explored as memory might be, chronology merely one path among many between the parts of his life, sequence disrupted and spread out on a map, time's passing perceptible

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<sup>70</sup> See page 164.

only in the wrinkle count and program notes<sup>71</sup>(COOVER, 2002, p.366).

As you can see, Lucky Pierre's account of his life is made more in terms of spatial than in temporal chunks. Notice that chronology is assigned a definitely less important role in the process of making the elements cohere. Besides, chronology is exposed here as an *posteriori* configuration, not as a natural, ontological structuring element of life or consciousness. Whereas the wrinkles - the body - should be read as the marks of the time that has run, by pairing them with the program notes, Coover reminds us of the artificiality of both, "for neither are ever to be trusted"(idem) as evidences of the play of time to be organized by comparison and reference to an original starting point.

In the same passage in which Lucky Pierre's "distraction" is highlighted, Coover provides a comment on the ruling of time to erase the material contingency of objects, relaying an essentializing effect. In so doing Coover exposes the contradictory ways in which we relate to historical time, in story as in life:

**Yet** by reducing time to objects and places, space itself but disappears, for such is the power of time. In the souvenir booths they are selling costume relics, [...] his dried semen [...], unedited clips off the cutting room

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<sup>71</sup> My parenthetical addition of Cora's name. The other informatin in between parentheses corresponds to the original.

floor, stained sheets, used condoms, things that are largely valueless but for the invested time, in its performative guise as finality, that resides in them, and for what time has done to them since it took up residence<sup>72</sup> (COOVER, 2002, p.366).

Finality - the ultimacy of limit - is a notion that defines time as much as space. In this instance Lucky Pierre starts feeling harassed by the word finality. As for the reader, this is the final reel, the end of the book, and the story is expected to be driven to a conclusion.

In Reel 7, Lucky Pierre/Badboy has already been "assailed by doubt" (COOVER, 2002, p.318), wavering between performing his part to the end as an epic hero, and facing the possibility of death in the reel performance, and giving up the part - surrendering, then, to Cora in real life. "It's do or die. Or both" (idem), a different kind of finality.

In Reel 9 Lucky Pierre/Willie is again harried by the notion of finality. This time, interestingly, it is not his knowledge of the genre of the script that hovers over him with the possibility of death. Here it is the word finality,

[t]hat word, as if recently read or heard, has been nagging at him actually since they began this stroll: *finality*. Or *final*. Final something, he doesn't know what. Maybe he saw

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<sup>72</sup> My emphasis.

it on that sign over the entry arch. A final festival"(COOVER, 2002, p.366).

The use of the word "stroll" brings together into play the two levels of Lucky Pierre's trajectory in the story. It marks the beginning of his molestation by the idea of finality as he walks/strolls, led by Cally, to the Picturedrome - a reference to the story of a man walking, the original idea for the novel.

A stroll in movie making is a specific camera movement that shoots at the pace of two to three miles per hour. So, the beginning of his feeling of being haunted by finality (time scope implied) takes place as he walks in the city going to the studio where he is expected to play in another film, apparently before shooting begins (in real space, not in reel space).

Still, when we read "since they began this stroll", we are invited to accommodate the additional perspective of the shooting of the story of a man - who's a porn film star - walking in winter heading to the studio. The multiple perspective triggered here is more in the vertical, paratactical, axis than horizontally distributed.

All in all, this is the narration of a previously described experience, that of seeing something being seen as seeing. This puts the narrative technique of embedding, the story within the story at play in *One thousand and one*

*nights*, for example, to a new use. It is more like the story in a medium within another medium, *ad infinitum* - and film is a very fragile medium. For the (posthuman) character, Lucky Pierre, these levels are inextricably bound, as he learns there is no real(ity) outside the reel. The leader here refers to two things at the same time, to the conductor of the film, the director, and to the opaque bit of film used to produce dissolves between the end of one roll and the beginning of another in projection.

As Willie and Cally are about to enter the Picturedrome, he is already aware of the dimension to which their stroll - an index of *agnorisis* on the way:

- Cally, he asks, looking around, where are the cameras?

- Cameras? Whatever are you *talking* about? Look! There's the Picturedrome!

- You're not fooling me, Cally. We're in another film. What's going on?(COOVER, 2002, p.367).

Cally eventually relinquishes and gives in her act. She explains,

- Oh, Willie, if you must know, Cleo's doing a documentary about the making of our next film, that's all and this walk is part of it. I just didn't want you to be too self-conscious(*idem*).

However, Willie knows better at this point of his trajectory. Cleo makes documentaries, and like "[r]etrospectives, memorials, relics"(COOVER, 2002, p.367), they convey the sense of an ending, of things of the past. He says, "A historical itinerary is history. [...]. Those fans were probably hired extras. This documentary's my last film"(COOVER, 2002, p.368).

This realization on the part of Lucky Pierre is itself problematic, for if his last film is the documentary he finds himself in at the time he voices his concern, is the film that awaits to be shot at the studio not supposedly to be his last, regarding that it is not being shot yet? As we can see, the notion of (chronological) precedence is not valid here to account for historicity. If the documentary is his last film, what is about to happen in the studio may end up as Lucky Pierre's eventual discontinuance - as a porn film hero and as a character.

The sign over the doors of the Lucky Pierre Memorial Multiscreen Picturedrome reads, "*COMING SOON TO THIS THEATER! EXCLUSIVE NEW SPECIAL FEATURE FOR THE LUCKY PIERRE FILM FESTIVAL! WORKING TITLE: LEAVING THE ISLAND. WATCH FOR DETAILS!*"(COOVER, 2002, p.368). The expression "working title" is an index that it is not definitive, that it is not final. The "island" in the title works as a recall of the first section in the book to be introduced by the icon



of a clapper board, in which a castaway reaches an island after a storm and is reanimated by nymphs who take him to their leader, Calliope.

Besides this, currently every film is processed in an editing phase, more specifically at a central electronic complex known as the editing island. What leads us to consider that the departure is to take place in the film (story) and from the film (industry). The caption "*WATCH FOR DETAILS*" cannot be overlooked either by readers who are aware of Coover's reputation as a metafictionist.

In the studio at the back of the Picturedrome the directors/partners/muses are convened. The section that presents the action inside the studio, from the time they are expecting Lucky Pierre's arrival to the point when they find out he has managed to run away, is the first one in the book in which the directors address one another by their mythic names.

At the opening of this section they are mentioned according to the position they hold as members of the film production crew, and it is the reader's task to do the puzzle and sort them out<sup>73</sup>. Here, Coover enacts the game-

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<sup>73</sup> One of Coover's most recent experiments in the genre of puzzles, *The Chicago Cryptogram*, is a very short story that, interestingly, uses nicknames for characters that are named after pre-Socratic philosophers. At the end, the reader is challenged to undo the riddle by answering a question whose solution is encrypted within the story lines. *The Chicago Cryptogram* is available on the Internet at <<http://www.nplusonemag.com/coover.html>>.

like atmosphere that has developed as a feature of much of the first electronic literary texts of the late 1980s, until it was established as a unique hypertextual genre *per se*<sup>74</sup>. Notice how each of the reel directors identities are little by little hinted at:

The film's **associate producer and artistic director** wants a deeper crease in the bushy mount being built to represent the rise [...] whereon stands Calliope's temple. [...] The **animator and robot designer** has fashioned a new set for this sequel, each modeled after the revered membrum of the resident island deity [...]. The star has arrived, led [...] by the film's **director**, who is also its costar, or one of them. [...] The artistic director rushes over to receive him [...] happy to see him again as her affectionate kisses attest. The others, too, embrace him [...], including the **director of this documentary** about the film, who slaps his tired old ass [...] and reminds him of all the missed anniversaries<sup>75</sup> (COOVER, 2002, p.368-370).

The associate producer and artistic director's office is held by all-affectionate Cecilia; the animator and robot designer's, by Catherine; the film director's, by Calliope - this is Reel 9; the director of the documentary's, by Cleo. The other five members, who belong to the secondary rank in the film production hierarchy, are subsequently introduced,

- I'd like everyone to drop what they're doing and help the stage manager with the bath and

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<sup>74</sup> For more on the genre and on the theoretical and critical debate about its implications for the literary field see Marie-Laure Ryan's *The Text as World Versus the Text as Game: Possible Worlds Semantics and Postmodern Theory* and also *Digital Texts and Literature*, Chapter 2 in Raine Koskimaa's doctoral dissertation(2000).

<sup>75</sup> My emphasis.

massage, says the artistic director. [...] As soon as you've finished with his bath, she adds, you can dye his hair and put in curlers.

- The hair on his head as well, asks the **stage manager and director of research**, who is taking his pulse and blood pressure [...], while the **props and publicity person** cuts away the rags that were once a shirt<sup>76</sup> (COOVER, 2002, p.370).

The reference to the medical procedures aligns the stage manager and director of research with Clara, whereas the publicity sphere is an asset that corresponds to Carlotta/Lottie, the leader of the Extars, a biased association between publicity and its derivation, propaganda.

The other two directors, Constance and Cassandra hold the posts of property person and cameraperson, respectively. Constance is the only director among Lucky Pierre's partners that eventually ever marries him, an index of the association of the role of matrimony in the social practice of maintenance of property. Cassandra, on her turn, associated with the gift of fores**ight** and prophesy, is mute, and thus operates cameras. We can say that, in some sense, she speaks visually.

While Lucky Pierre is being prepared, he leaves through a ring binder he finds in the director's chair, and understands it must be the script. Surprised at what he reads, he confronts Cissy and asks for some explanation.

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<sup>76</sup> My emphasis.

The dialogue that follows is a remarkable play of successive associations and negotiations of meaning in which Cissy and L P engage, each trying to prove his own point. For Lucky Pierre, it is the confirmation of his anticipation of death; for Cissy, it is the challenge to keep him framed, "fresh and spontaneous" (COOVER, 2002, p.371) to play his part:

- I thought it was to be called *Leaving the Island*, he says. But here on the title page there's only a big double-F. What does it stand for?

- Ah... let's see, that can't be the title, she says, taking the script away from him. I think that's just the camera instruction for the first scene. Full frontal, probably. Yes, I'm sure -

- The script says you're opening with an overview of the island. How can that be full frontal? (COOVER, 2002, p.371)

This also rings back the experience of reading the opening of this novel, in which the overview of a barren land is gradually focused and eventually defined into a full frontal of a woman's body. The negotiation of the referent for the double-F goes on:

- That first F is for Final, isn't it? I've seen it somewhere. What's the other word?

- The other word? Ah, Frenzy? Feature onto Fantasy? She looks about for help, twisting the script in her hands.

- Fuck, says an off-camera voice. Fuck, hero. It's your Final Fuck.

He blanches and bends around to stare up at the camera, which is slowly zooming in to examine the face of a man turning to confront the onrush of history. His knees sag, his jaw drops (COOVER, 2002, p.371).

As the crew gets busy, each with her specific task, Lucky Pierre manages to furtively wrap himself around a tapestry at hand and gain the piercing cold streets again. Conscious that the directors are already tracking him, he comes to a bitter realization, announced by the narrator. As in, "[L]ured by a word and the promise it held. Not a four-letter word, though it contains one: him, in effect" (COOVER, 2002, p.373). Here the commingling of the verbal and filmic effects strikes the reader to consider that the film contains the word as a result of a cinematic/poetic effect.

To a certain extent, this establishes the primacy of the word over the image while at the same time stating their inextricability in respect to Lucky Pierre's condition. The six-letter word "studio" indeed contains the four-letter word "stud", which is a commonly used term to refer to a very active sexually young man and extremely virile, thought of as being good at satisfying women's sexual desires in informal language, after the association with a male animal specially kept for breeding purposes.

The same bitterness and despair is given visibility in the narrator's focalization of the character's own musings, in a continuum that characterizes the plane of consistency:

And, oh, how it warmed his heart to be back in one! How he has missed the buzz, the tension, the popping and dousing of lights, the sound of cameras cranking! Though they don't crank anymore. That's not the point. It was the feeling of coming home. He who is otherwise without. The studio. And now he can't go back, ever again. That's a film he cannot make, nor can he in consequence ever make another. He is a castaway now, in truth(COOVER, 2002, p.373).

Too wary of his extreme visibility, given his miserable condition and the studio tapestry he is wearing, Lucky Pierre deploys precisely the strategy Baudrillard suggests as the one possibility to resist the power of media: to give back the captured image that the medium has produced of the subject. Thus, he sees that the only way to escape from being spotted by the directors is to disguise himself as an image of himself, to go unperceived among the fans that dress up in his earlier heroic guise as a star. This can be described as Lucky Pierre's drawing a line of flight that allows him to become the body without organs.

He has of course, gone unrecognized by the tourists. Wouldn't recognize himself. They look more like him than he does with their false mustaches and foam-rubber donges. Maybe that would be the way to disguise himself: as himself. Lose himself among his epigones(COOVER, 2002, p.374).

He manages to trade the tapestry for "his old raggedy herringbone overcoat"(idem) and a festival pass good for three movies. The first cinema he goes into is showing "Pete the Beast and Old One-Eye", one of Kate's movies, which is already under way. The dialogue between Pete and One-Eye/Kate in the film is not the dialogue that Lucky Pierre remembers from the original. It is, in fact, a conversation between him and his own penis, "not Kate, but it talks like Kate, so one of her avatars after all"(COOVER, 2002, p.376). They discuss his state of utter distress and, when Pete makes his pass on One-Eye, she shuns him away.

The dialogue line that voices Kate/One-Eye/Lucky Pierre's penis's avoidance of Pete's advance is worth quoting for a number of reasons. First, in the story it presents a warped rendition of the modernistic technique of a character's interior monologue - an old conventional procedure put to new uses. Furthermore, there is the suggestion that Lucky Pierre's conscience or inner voice inhabits a "less noble" tissue of human biology - a reference to the posthuman challenge to the privileged residence and harborage of human consciousness. Second, the line displays Kate's speech as the characteristic quality of the art her corresponding muse, Thalia, presides over - Comedy. The genre of films Kate directs - animation and

cartoons - in also implied here as to the mode of composition of images through collage.

Third, the speech brings to the limit Coover's iconoclastic hand at the use of grotesquerie. It brings the cherished motto "the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" to lay bear to the American civilization, still heavily charged with the Puritan ideals, all the material dimensions involved in it, within such a taboo field as pornography. The pass Pete makes on One-Eye, and which is rejected by her, turns out to be masturbation.

Fourth, the dialogue line exhibits the remarkable play with the sonorous possibilities of English that Coover is well reputed for in creating puns out of his acute ear for spoken language. Each one of the reasons above listed demonstrates how Coover manages to install creative, artistic, critical and aesthetic possibilities in the interstices of otherwise understood as exhausted forms and sterile grounds for those purposes. In so doing, Coover carves the venues for becoming, for still another instance of the conjunction "and", for rhizome, in a word. The line that should be minded runs as follows:

- No! Hands off, Pete! I'm wearied a your knobby paw-paw tricks. I'm in need of a hot wet snuggle, the genuine ar-tickle. Or, minim, somebody to lick me into shape afore I dry out and lose my fresh complexion. We all got a



right to laughs, libido, and the pussy of happiness(COOVER, 2002, p.376).

Notice that at One-Eye's suggestion that they should go see a movie, in the film dialogue, Lucky Pierre, in the cinema, sitting down near the front, slips from the position of spectator of his previous acting on the screen into that of an actor that has the chance to "change locations"<sup>77</sup>(COOVER, 2002, p.377).

Once again the levels of reality Lucky Pierre experiences are placed in a continuum. This placement forces the reader to entertain the permeability of the different media into one another, blurring whatever attempted and provisional border he has established to account for the storyline.

At the Foxy it is showing *On the Wings of the Wind*, "a film that builds slowly: one of Cissy's tender adagios"(COOVER, 2002, p.379). Notice the recurrence of the reference to the wind, to the slowness, and to the beginning of the film - and of the novel, Reel 1, directed by Cecilia/Euterpe, the muse of music.

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<sup>77</sup> The term "location" refers to the place where footage occurs and to the extra-textual and theoretical space the critic may inhabit. Punday(2003a) draws on the political dimension of Jacques Derrida's initial notion of space in *Ousia and Gramme* and further developed in *Specters of Marx* as entertaining the notion of space as constantly being constructed, always gesturing beyond itself. The implications of this spatial multiplicity are radical for defining narrative as one form of spatial practice and for the language of the critic as a located narrator.

While he succeeds in merging with the scene, the screen tears open. It is an attack "by a gang of masked, heavily armed urban guerrillas" (COOVER, 2002, p.381) led by Lottie. The merging that takes place then is not only between the seer, Lucky Pierre, and the seen, *On the Wings of the Wind*. Lucky Pierre, the seer, is indeed the one being seen through the directors' high-technology tracking and surveillance equipment.

As we learn in the sequence, Lottie is carrying out the task of mischievously leading him back to Cleo's flat, while apparently heading to his penthouse. Lottie and Cleo, though hurt at his decision to leave, help him get back to the streets and keep on the run from "the power structure" (COOVER, 2002, p.384).

Lucky Pierre, then, goes to the third movies that his traded pass grants him, without knowing that he has already been spotted by the tracking apparatus being run by Clara at the studio. The film showing at the cinema is *Hard for Soft*, "one of Cassandra's digital uncertainty films" (COOVER, 2002, p.388).

He feels reassured, for,

Cassie's films have no stories. Stories have endings. He doesn't need endings. Ceaseless flow. That's the ticket. [...]. For Cassie, orgasm is not a final explosive objective but a constant beatific state to be achieved. [...]

[A] final fuck would not be so bad if it never ended(COOVER, 2002, p.390).

The realization that he does not need endings, is an evidence of the character's longing for becoming a body without organs at play, the condition that would allow for the free flow of desire. In this mood, he feels that he is starting to drift along, devising,

[m]ostly bodies, still or in motion, many recognizable; there are Cassie's tender little breasts, for example, Lottie's bold bones, Clara's perfect torso, Kate's armpit, Connie's pretty pubis, Cora's striped arse, Cissy's soft one, Cleo's slender white thighs(COOVER, 2002, p.392).

As he watches these images fold in and out, "creating the sense of a single composite figure [...] unstable at the edges and ever metamorphosing, [...] he closes his eyes and leans toward her"(idem). The only director that is not mentioned in the quotation above is Calliope, which throughout the novel has repeatedly been referred to as the sublime disguiser, capable of impersonating all the other muses.

Thus, it is toward Calliope that Lucky Pierre leans, and as he does that, he his violently shaken and awoken by the reaction of the screen to his drifting, "the screen a mere scrim with people and traffic on both sides of it. His filmed self's accusing eyes are fixed angrily on him"(COOVER, 2002, p.393).

This passage raises the issue of the need to characterize the challenges for the centered subjectivity that engages in highly immersive environments - the risk of feeling "captured" and of eventually becoming wetware. It offers the opportunity to counterpoint the seemingly safe experience of reading books on a less interactive medium as wood-paper support regarding the potential for fostering different kinds of subjectivity. As I see it, texts that exhibit models of complexity as their structuring principle, though on the paper page, such as *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*, stand as one among the many expressive forms of the culture of an eminently electronically enhanced society that are engendering posthuman subjectivity.

Rhizome being the model of complexity chosen to account for the complexity of the novel under scrutiny in this chapter, we watch the posthuman character, Lucky Pierre, becoming one with the map, inhabiting smooth space. Faced with the increasingly physical and sensuous interpellation of the scene he is watching, he eventually understands what is going on:

He has the pattern. Soft fleshy adagios interrupted by heart-stopping percussive bursts if he slips into a haze for a moment. A film that talks back. That won't tolerate inattention(COOVER, 2002, p.393).

This is a point at which Lucky Pierre effectively apprehends and accepts the idea of his inevitable finality, as he watches his whole life passing before his eyes, "[t]he one he has fled. Ending it not to end it"(COOVER, 2002, p.394). He deliberately heads back to the studio where the directors welcome him and prepare him for the shooting.

The Great Woowallah, his character role in the double-F script, is spread out on a temple altar, being massaged by eight nymphs, explored by their hands as well as by the cameras, an obvious retake of the castaway reanimation scene in Reel 1. This scene enacts the "preliminaries", the foreplay to the conclusion that is scripted to take place in the adytum.

At this juncture, he cannot as easily make the transition from the studio into the world of the film. He has the clear notion of the dissociation between the island in the film(s) and the island of the studio. The feeling that prevails is the latter, "no reel is infinite, and he feels no rancor, for he has lived the heroic life of the great artist, while enjoying sensual delight"(COOVER, 2002, p.401).

However, the film is changing, as Clara has observed, and "a deep melancholia has stolen into their play"(COOVER,

2002, p.402). The nymphs take great pains in preventing him to come, and consequently the shooting to come to a "premature conclusion"(idem) - the unthinkable: having to make still another Lucky Pierre film, this time without his coming.

The premature conclusion, at the same time the end of their fondling and of his life, is a reference to Lucky Pierre's orgasm taking place before the following take, in which it is scripted to happen accordingly. This conveys their concern with the fact that his final sexual performance, the one to mark his ultimate discontinuation, having happened in the wrong setting at the wrong time/timing, would have to be inserted into Calliope's film, made up of "reusable old footage"(COOVER, 2002, p.402). Not to mention their anxiety about what Cleo's documentary of the making of the double-F could turn into - sheer artifice.

The film is definitely changing, as all the nine nymphs/costars/film crew watch The Great Woowallah/Lucky Pierre/film star stand up off the altar and head to the director's office to discuss an idea he has just had for the finale. He goes into Calliope's office - Calliope, the chief Muse, being the director of Reel 9 and of the double-F title, tells her he loves her, and engages in intercourse

that eventually leads to the premature conclusion they have been warned to avoid.

For Lucky Pierre this seemed to have been the way to escape from having his double-F performance registered on tape, his idea for an alternative finale - his drawing a line of flight. However, "in the grip [...] of that explosive violence by which being became, he has a strong sensation of the presence of others gathering around though he can't see them"(COOVER, 2002, p.405).

The sentence with which Coover ends his novel suggests that the double-F script was led to a conclusion, if not as previously scripted - in the adytum setting, at least as expected - with Lucky Pierre performing it with Calliope in real time, keeping up with the tight timing. The reader is here reminded that the story must come to a conclusion, as "the book" (the novel, and the artifact) is about the end - another bright in-scription of Coover's sharp remark about "the end of books".

The cry "Now!" in the quotation to follow sounds both as Calliope's command for the crew not to miss shooting the ongoing scene and as Cally's beseeching demand on Willie to come. In both ways, an urge for the double-F to happen, a double performance of his discontinuation.

This is how the novel ends, the film ends - or rather, films end, the hero is discontinued, and how this linear reading of the book that construes story as discourse ends too: "somewhere he seems to hear distant applause, and *Now!* She cries and suddenly"(COOVER, 2002, p.405). The sounds, the images, the action (clapper board sound): Lucky Pierre/*The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*. To be discontinued...



## 6. FINAL COMMENTS

It has been forty years now since that lazy Saturday afternoon and I am playing in my room with I do not know exactly how many windows opened. I hear the unrelenting hiss of the processor chanting its siren tune that holds me online.

Now, instead of the menacing bug framed within that tiny matchbox, my gaze is aimed at several different images at the same time of whose dangerousness or helplessness I cannot be as sure about as I used to be at that time, though I can still capture and contain them. I can do more, I can manipulate them, dispose of them, and even retrieve them at will. Not unlike my father's books, my notebook displays colorful images representing whatever the human genius has managed to control, dominate, and invent. The transformation I once watched take place, the continuum of my father's body and the book, I experience today at an augmented level and dimension. Something has definitely happened.

In a recent interview, *Nuestra vida es hipertextual*(2005), Robert Coover mentions that one of the great changes in reading, considering his former view articulated in his article *The End of Books*(1992), is that the young generation is mainly constituted by online

readers, as a huge volume of all reading activity is carried out and made possible by the World Wide Web. However, there is a displacement of the social spaces in which reading takes place along with the change of medium or technological support of texts. As he puts it, research of all kinds used to take place in libraries and today it is done at people's homes - and mostly wherever they choose or happen to be, on a computer screen.

The kind of reading that I hold as part of a cherished image of my childhood is, according to Coover, being discontinued. And he offers as an evidence of this the fact that it was common for a family to have one encyclopedia in their living room bookshelf, adding that families even vied for the most adequate. As of today, collecting encyclopedias is no longer a family asset.

Notwithstanding, in the same interview Coover claims that the book is in the process of turning into an index of idleness, and that reading a book is now part of the activities that one has off work, for leisure. This resonates the longing for the experience of interiority, of self-identifying with stable coordinates that allow for localization as well as generalization.

Reading a paper-bound book, he adds, is a different kind of reading, one that triggers an experience that is

hardly achieved within the cumulative stacking of information laid down onto the reader of electronic texts. Texts that branch into links that fork into still more links engender a different kind of reading.

Though Coover is accused of doing precisely this, of overloading the reader with information, his writing relies heavily on the potentiality for engaging the reader into an exploratory journey. This tour requires from travelers as fundamental equipment their unrelenting drive to gain further territory instead of the thrust for a final achievement.

Following this analogy, as to the burden that voyagers accumulate along the way, in Coover's texts information is rather one more venue - a plane of consistency - to be traveled within the territory than actually some thing that must be carried as a weight to grant the voyager's safety and survival to the end of the journey. The territory to be primarily roamed - and maybe even traversed - extends in as many directions as there are travelers, though company is always to be preferred, as we have been taught by Chaucer, among many other storytellers.

So, just like the travelers in *The Canterbury Tales* who gather at the Tavern, each with their own assets and apparel, the readers of Coover's texts find solace and

cheer on the(ir) way every time the textual space they help to conjure up provides them with the opportunity to touch, to establish the basis for what Punday(2003b) calls corporeal reading. Only then the longed for coordinates that provide localization as well as generalization are set.

Coover's remark that the book enjoys today the status of an item of leisure convenience reminds me of my early wish to, one day, read books whose contents could be changed in real time. This has eventually come true and acquired most intriguing and unexpected shapes. Last generation cell phones, which conjugate multimedia capabilities for recording, storing and relaying information in a number of different (digital and analogic) formats should suffice as an example, the Cave Writing Project being its most daring realization so far.

The fact that narrative has proved to be an extremely successful and effective textual structuring and discursive strategy that helps us organize experience into a coherent whole invites a closer reflection on its critical potentialities. Narrative today, to the point that it has been appropriated by numerous fields of science and even religious doctrines - despite (or because of?) the massive poststructuralist attack on the so-called metanarratives or grand narratives, can be formulated as a spatial practice.

Narrative today can be equated to a literary regime better than to a literary genre, drawing on the concept of regime in contemporary studies of technological change in the field of social sciences as encompassing all the rules operating in and derived from the complex of knowledges, practices, procedures, institutions and infrastructures that make up a specific technology. According to *The Social Science Glossary*(2001) a regime guides technological development and its embedding in society, adjusting actions and perceptions. These are aspects of institutions that pattern innovation and adoption.

In a time when the whole civilization of the book - its main repository - is seen by some as threatened with discrediting, one may wonder whether narrative will, like Cleopatra, keep "marble stand" or be discontinued and eventually replaced by another form of writing/reading. If for Baudrillard, we are already moving into writing post-narratives inasmuch as historical time has been emptied of its function at the present condition enjoyed by capitalist societies, for Punday it is precisely narrative that endures and articulates the possibility of critical stances within social practices mediated by language.

As I see it, a narrative is always an unfettering regime, a regime that pushes one to break bondages that prevent one from establishing bondage at one's own will.

Though not totally anarchic, it bears anarchy as a condition for its own existence. In this way, Coover's narratives are indeed fostering alternative plateaus on which actions and perceptions alike can be adopted and hopefully determine adjustments into other regimes in different spheres of human activity.

The migration of the relatively stable information contained in the book to cyberspace that is made possible by electronic technology, one of the features of posthuman times, has carried along with data the desires that feed and undermine humanity's enterprises. Among them, the longing for the sense of self and of belonging. There is an inescapable redefinition to take place in the sphere of social practices so that belonging is made possible not only on idealistic but also and primarily on material terms. Belonging, for example, to the assemblage that is granted the right to food and safety on a regular basis.

The literary field, as a field of social activity, understood as a rather universal human activity and a token of civilization, cannot shy away from the challenges that the increasing complexity and diversity of assemblages has continually forced the planet to face. Most recently, the ecological condition of life on our planet itself, not only the resources for the maintenance of the several forms of life on it, is foregrounded as a result of human activity

to a great extent. Not to mention the masses of continental ranging populations who are alienated from the most basic and material practices and flows that support life and award survival.

The virtualization of everyday practices granted by means of digital and electronic technology may efface the political and economic basis that underlie and sustain them. Most of these practices, drawing on non-replaceable natural resources. If we can conceive of a life without the exact degree of materiality on which it stands, we can easily say that we rely on an illusory basis - a penchant most often laid down on fiction lovers and dabblers.

This is a penchant that Coover has continually defied through his literary praxis and as an intellectual. Presently Coover coordinates the "Freedom to Write" program, which was created in 1989 following the death order against writer Salman Rushdie and the massacre at Tianamen Square.

The program provides support for established creative fiction writers, playwrights and poets who, having had their right to free speech vilified in their home countries, face situations of repression, censorship, and threats to life and liberty. Besides the humanitarian service done in rescuing these writers, the program also

introduces not only their individual works, but also entire national literatures mostly unknown to the American academy - a move that may help develop better international understanding among students and faculty.

Despite the charges of the aforementioned penchant, the distinctiveness of a substantial amount of contemporary American literature has irrevocably played its part as providers of *loci* of critical - and hopefully political - praxis. The novels approached and analyzed in this dissertation stand as examples of artistic realizations of textual spaces wherein one is vitally summoned to take on an active role in the world they evoke.

Inasmuch as *John's Wife* and *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* present configurations of the complexity entertained in several dimensions of the work(s), they consist with the world and stand as fictional counterparts on the plane of consistency that describes reality, whatever the strata (that binds us together to produce the norm, to pin us down to reality) one chooses to initially approach.

Starting by the stratum of the (surface of the) organism, the characters analyzed in *John's Wife* develop throughout story the resistance to articulation. The materiality of their bodies does not display organization, it flickers, in *John's wife's* case, and expands, in



Pauline's. The novel is said to consist with the world inasmuch as, in both cases, their disarticulation provokes disorder, they do not produce the norm.

Still keeping in mind the first stratum, in *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* the hero has his degree of materiality altered and still always reaffirmed. As he walks in the piercing cold streets of Cinecity, he freezes to the point of having his limbs and gonads broken apart from his body, has them reinserted, and is reanimated to undergo severe thrashing. The fact that the material context of his existence is the film roll offers other alterations in his bodily dimension - which is mere simulacrum. He (the image of his body) falls off the film roll surface, slides onto the black leader and eventually collapses off the frames into a black hole. In these instances Lucky Pierre has to be rescued, to be made to comply with the medium - the regime, the norm.

Concerning the stratum of (the angle of) signifi-  
cance, the novels consist with the world taking into account the fact that the characters under scrutiny in this dissertation play as signifieds, as existences that are always already interpreted as holding the town folk's desires. John's wife and Pauline each hold their very specific roles in town, as assigned by the town people - the princess/saint and the pauper/whore, respectively. As

signifiers, however, they fail to consist and therefore provoke turbulence. Lucky Pierre, on his turn, also fails to behave as a signifier, though always bound to his condition as a signified no matter how many different significations he is made to uphold. Even at the final scene of the novel he is subjected to yielding to interpretation (**by** the director's script and **of** his role in the reel/real).

The third stratum, (the point of) subjectification, is evident in both novels. Neither John's wife nor Pauline can stand alone as products of subjectification, given the complex dynamics that constitutes the novel. Lucky Pierre's rhizomatic wandering, eventually in ragged clothes and bare feet, stands as the embodiment of a tramp, conforming to Deleuze and Guattari's description of the norm, "[y]ou will be a subject of the statement - otherwise you're just a tramp" (DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2002, p.159). Furthermore, his speech is mostly scripted, in-scribed by the muses/directors. When it is not, he is roaming Cinecity, like a bum.

Considering that John's wife's proper name is never mentioned, she can never be the subject of the statement but stands always as the trace of the subject, as under erasure. Without a name, her subjectivity is shapeless. Coover's formulation of her condition is "a thereness that

was not there". Pauline stands as the performative dimension of the white wall exposed to be pierced by the black hole to allow for subjectification to spring, in the white wall/black hole system. The pictures Gordon made of her, and that were later accidentally overexposed to have John's wife image captured, end up by eventually putting together the two elements in the system without, however, producing the subject. The process of subjectification, nevertheless, precisely as it fails to occur, is laid bare.

As to Lucky Pierre, subjectification never actually takes place on the grounds of his multiplicity. He takes on as many as 15 different (proper) names, sometimes being addressed to by three different ones simultaneously. Unlike John's wife, whose subjectivity is rendered as lacking "shape", his is multi-faceted. Besides this, he is bargained by the muse/directors as mere "surface" (white wall) and he is reduced to "surface" when, in one of Catherine/Kate, the animator's cartoons, he is flattened as he is run over by a bus.

All the instances explained above should support the claim that the novels consist with the world. In any case, we watch the parodical inscription of the strata that consist with/in the world in the novels. These novels suffice as evidences of Coover's self-attributed label of "an intransigent realist".

These works are built, construed, devised in such a way as to allow for the logic of and..., and..., and... instead of the logic of hierarchization (between, for example, the world and the text, reality and fiction), as described by Deleuze and Guattari(2003).

My exercise in dealing with the complexity of *John's Wife* and of *The Adventure of Lucky Pierre* was built within the (primal) scene of the man-book continuum, an attempt to engage in a visual as well as a corporeal experience. Attentive to Daniel Punday's proposal for a corporeal reading, I decided to approach the different degrees of materiality the characters John's wife and Pauline in *John's Wife*, and Lucky Pierre, in *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*, exhibited. This seemed feasible at first because John's wife, though coveted by men and women, adult and children in town, remained physically ungraspable and visually flickering to them throughout the novel. Accordingly, Pauline, who is continually and broadly fumbled, always at hand but not exactly the object of desire, has her bodily dimension increasingly expanded.

This conjunction does not configure an oppositional or compensatory dynamics to account for balance, in the sense that John's wife and Pauline complement each other - though it can be primarily reduced to that. This is rather the enactment of the shape of the turbulence installed in the

town life, understood as a system. Sensitive to initial conditions of disturbance, the system shifts and alternates order and disorder, configuring a far-from equilibrium system, often a self-adjusting system.

The disturbance initiated in the story describes a trajectory that can be equated with the model of the Lorenz strange attractor in Chaos Theory, leading to patterns or iteration, recursivity and reversibility that the reader watches develop and in whose inception he participates both in the story and in the reading process. The shape of the Lorenz attractor, besides resembling a butterfly, invites still another more corporeal analogy. As I hold a codex, just like my father held his volume of The Gallachi Encyclopedia, I realize that across time the movement of opening and closing it to stop and resume my reading likens that of the butterfly's wings flapping. A poetic but no less material practice in my everyday life.

Concerning the patterns in the novel, iteration is enacted in the repetition of the narration of one event in town through many different characters, each one leading to different stories that in the end echo one another. For example, the central events within the community, such as John's stag party, John's wedding, and the Pioneers Day barbecue are repeated (iterated) several times throughout narration. Each time the event is presented it is not only

another perspective that is added to the same event. As a matter of fact, what is presented is a different story every time, different stories that took place sometimes at the same setting, sometimes at the same time during the event.

If we understand that the capacity of conjuring a possible world is the most basic textual act of a narrative, place and time composing coordinates, each iteration is at the same time a re-issuing of one story and still not the same story. Take, for example, Veronica's rape by Mitch (John's father), Bean's (one of John's college pals) murder by Daddy Duwayne, Maynard's collapse by being abused - they all tell the story of the perversity that underlies the maintenance of community life. Yet, each of the stories show a different arrangement of the characters in them.

The pattern of recursivity is established in the similarity of the lives of the town people despite their social importance over time, many of the married couples have been previously married, many of them hide their skeletons in the cupboard on making up for their former misdemeanor by standing as the upholders of righteousness. For example, Otis, Lennox, and Floyd. Again, this manages to render a different aspect of the story as well as progression in storyline, not to mention the echoing of

scenes and speeches within apparently disparate scenes and speeches, such as Pauline's ordeal and Ellsworth's Model in "The Artist and his Model".

As to reversibility, the mirroring of the closing words of the novel, which are the exact reversal of its opening words, account for this pattern building. Another example is the hint, at the end of the novel that Clarissa, John's daughter "roams the world" on business travels, just like it is stated about her father at the beginning. At the same time that the form and substance of the novel is mirrored there is the innuendo that the story goes on and the patterns are bound to be reinstated.

The process that I developed while reading the two novels encompasses the facing of the story elements within the more dispersed level of discourse. On entertaining dispersion as constitutive of story, the reader conceives of textual spaces, and helps them emerge, wherein to exercise agency. That is to say, when the story displays change, bifurcation, it signals the potentiality for new arrangements, new practices in reading as in story. The fact that the characters alternate their degrees of physicality establishes the spatial reconfiguration of the reader's "touch" that enables corporeal reading.

Likewise, the compensatory logic that establishes balance should not apply to a mathematical resolution that relies on the numerical result of the arithmetical average. However, this is unfortunately too often used to justify, for example, the perverse unequal distribution of budget and assets within a given population, disregarding the discrepancies installed in between the edges. To rely on these calculations and ratify them is to preclude change. This is an analogy still to be explored with the kind of reading and criticism that arrests the constitution of subjectivity within the reading process in favor of a totalized account of what happens in between the beginning and the end of story, the kind of reading that does not encompass corporeality.

In *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*, the issue of corporeality is inescapable, as its eponymous hero is a porn film star. Along with the fact that his corporeality is what defines him, there is also the fact of his existence being contained within the film leader in pictograms, as "image" rather than as a physical referent.

The postmodern condition of the precession of images, of hyper-reality, which Baudrillard has characterized, shares some elements with Katherine Hayles's description of the posthuman subject. In these two formulations the contemporary scenario of our highly technologized and



mediatized society is both the context and the pre-condition for their articulation, and in both the current phase of capitalism is foregrounded.

The criticism of capitalism expressed in Deleuze and Guattari's work encompasses the devising of strategies that grant the subject the means to escape the process of production within capitalism and to allow for the flow of desire that preserves subjectivity. Their concept of rhizome stands as the model of complexity on which *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* is structured. Besides this, we should consider the concept of the Body without Organs, which reverses articulation with disarticulation or with no matter how many articulations - multiplicity. It also chooses experimentation to resist interpretation and the signifier, and adopts nomadism to forego stasis - "keep moving, even in place, never stop moving, motionless voyage, desubjectification"(id. ibidem). Lucky Pierre, after all, is a man who walks in winter, in a motionless voyage, as he trapped within the frames.

Coover manages to bring to the attention of the reader a spatial multiplicity engendered by all those aforementioned aspects of contemporary culture while pursuing his poetic and aesthetic project of ever putting the long-established conventions, values, and beliefs to the test, so that they yield still another space for

literary practice and invention. As a craftsman, he draws on tradition to advance the field of literature as a distinctive asset of humanity, not reduced to its humanistic cloak.

Well reputed as the guru of literary hypertext, he has continually reviewed his own position concerning the aesthetic potentialities of the electronic medium for literature. Though he has not published a novel for the computer (hypertextual), one that does not translate into paper (textual), he has performed the dynamics of hypertext mechanics and aesthetics in his book-bound novels. Coover has also allowed Robert Scholes, his fellow professor at Brown University, to publish a hypertextual version of his short novel *Briar Rose* for didactic and exploratory purposes.

In *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*, which I deem as his *pièce de résistance* within the novel form and genre, he even in-scribes the implications of the Marxist concept of class as shaping the changes in form to be assimilated first as innovation and eventually as the form of choice - the characterization of regime applying to his narrative distinctiveness. Coover manages to turn the novel into less a repository continent of the expressive form of the intellectual and artistical curiosity of a class to be consumed than into a spatial field of practice for a class

deemed by Fleischman, among others, *The New Class*. This New Class is characterized as,

educated and educating people [...] not totally weaned from the low or middling culture of their classes of origin, they hold up their mongrel taste as the model of cultural value generally: we like everything from Monteverdi to U2 and beyond, and see no reason to give any of it up (FLEISCHMAN, 2002, p.24).

Thus, the fact that Coover is considered a writer that writes for the academic circle can be interpreted as an affirmation of an emergent class of reader, with different perceptual framings and sensibilities. A class emerging in these digitalized and disembodied practices that, nevertheless, cannot do without the body.

However, one cannot overlook the fact that Coover's role in the academy has been multiple and that the label of "academicist" in the worst sense must be greeted rather than fought in his case, given the social and political impact that his work as writer and intellectual has produced. I do not agree that Coover writes for the academy, but I do believe that the academy indeed needs to undergo "change" as an institution. So, if it is true that he finds readers within the academic circle, we are lucky.

Among the changes that would be welcome in the academy, I include the revival of the pleasure principle in aesthetic experience, which I have been committed to

spreading in my own educational practice, together with a critical observance of institutional practices. The possibilities for the exercise of pleasure in reading put to the fore in Punday's model of corporeal reading have been explored in the composition of this dissertation.

The observance of institutional practices must be understood as the point of turbulence leading to bifurcation. Having faced the task of writing down the result of my research in academic and scientific English, I was led to devise the means to preserve the pleasure principle throughout the process.

The subjectification upon which all bodies, with or without organs, depend to exist within community was consistently challenged in this process. In the end, my effort to become one with the map, to talk **with** the books/texts/stories instead of about them only, from the very beginning stated in the deployment of the scene of the man-book continuum, has allowed me to offer a provisional conclusion that should work as one more plateau.

The lines crisscrossing and constituting this plateau appeal to me as possibilities to draw lines of flight leading us to consider the following issues, among many others: the ethical implications of our commitment to investing technology with humanistic values; the political

role of posthumanity in forging a community that encompasses multiplicity and difference as constitutive of humanity on a material basis; the practical consequences of reading and writing literature as processes that yield subjectification; the entertaining of complexity and change as liberating (cathartic) rather than destructive features of cultural and social processes.

These are issues that lead me to consider the chance of experiencing still another iteration of the man-book continuum, if only to be eventually discontinued. So much better if on a lazy Saturday afternoon.

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