“Desperate Fictions”: Space, Identity and Indeterminacy in William Gaddis and Don DeLillo

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Abstract

Don DeLillo has frequently acknowledged William Gaddis as a significant influence, particularly in his concern with the vagaries of self-identity. DeLillo's *The Body Artist* (2001) and Gaddis's *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985) both thematically explore the relationship between self and space, employing gothic motifs and metafictional devices which intersect with the dramatic content of the novel, in which characters experience disruption to the stability of the known and located. In both, even the most intimate knowledge of relationships and environments is portrayed as a contingent construction, open to radical revision.

As has been acknowledged by a number of critics, the transitory nature of postmodern spatiality is a central thematic preoccupation of both writers. The novels of both writers confront postmodern space by the way they complicate processes of identification and communication through a formalist evocation of indeterminacy. However differences become apparent in a careful comparison of their larger works. In Gaddis's *J R* (1975) Gaddis attempts to govern this indeterminacy in the service of cultural critique; rhetorically manipulating readerly identification in the service of an overall vision of decline. DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), on the other hand, destabilizes meaning, and as a result the reader is directed towards a more ambivalent relationship to postmodern existence.

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Introduction

A notable feature of the career of William Gaddis is the conspicuous absence of the author's own voice. Throughout his work, narration and physical description is significantly diminished, and the majority of his novels consist of largely unattributed dialogue. This reticence also extends to his public profile. In his acceptance speech for the National Book Award for *J R*, he declares his disdain for the increasing "tendency to put the person in the place of his or her work, to turn the creative artist into a performing one, to find what a writer says about writing somehow more valid, or more real, than the writing itself" (*The Rush for Second Place* 122). The speech was one of few occasions where the writer was willing to speak about his fiction, a continuation of his insistence throughout his career that literature should speak for itself. On winning the same award for *A Frolic of His Own* two decades later, Gaddis quotes from a character from his novel *J R*, who characterizes the artist as but "the dregs of his work" and "the human shambles that follows it around" (*The Rush for Second Place* 128).

Literary criticism has retained a degree of attachment to this human shambles however. The novels of Gaddis have frequently been treated as a kind of ventriloquism, with characters functioning as mere vehicles for an overarching master voice. Quoting Gaddis's description of the author above in an acceptance speech of his own, Don DeLillo declares a similar resistance to interviews and biographical detail as the basis for critical interpretation. In a 1982 interview with Tom LeClair, he states his preference to remain quiet about the ideas that inform his fiction, and his reluctance towards the idea of a 'moral centre' in his work, or the treatment of his characters as mouthpieces ("Interview" 20-2). He states:

My attitudes aren't directed towards characters at all. I don't feel sympathetic towards some characters, unsympathetic toward others. I don't love some characters, feel contempt for others. They have attitudes, I don't ("Interview" 22).

Frequently, critics of the two novelists have attempted to read the novel as a communication of a particular vision (and critique) of contemporary society. However the construction of such an implied authorial position is problematized by their fiction. It is the argument of this thesis that there is tension between the form and content of the novels that DeLillo and Gaddis produce, and the attempt to read their literature as a simple act of communication.

Both DeLillo and Gaddis have also followed a similar trajectory in the size and scope of their fiction. In his review of *The Body Artist*, Frank Kermode proposes that “if there are two traditions of great American writing it is proper to show up in both of them. One of them may be said to originate with Hawthorne, the other with Melville, one lean and self-absorbed, the other heavy, expansive, determined to contain a world” (Kermode 29). Both Gaddis and DeLillo follow major career-defining works with novels of a markedly different nature, and the two novels from each writer that I focus on in this thesis reflect a similar kind of transition in focus.

Published in 2001, DeLillo's *The Body Artist* enacted a shift away from much of the subject matter of his previous novels. The short novel, a careful portrayal of the fortunes and mental state of a woman in her home, followed his epic *Underworld*, an 800 page novel of considerable breadth. *Underworld* has been predominantly read as charting the fortune of the American nation over half a decade, as well as the fate of the individual in an age of pervasive technology, media saturation and late capitalist consumer culture. Approximately two decades earlier, William Gaddis also followed up a large expansive novel - *J R* - with the shorter, more localised *Carpenter's Gothic*. Whereas the earlier novel took as its focus “what America's all about” in the age of late 20th century capitalism (*J R* 19), in his next novel Gaddis also shifted his focus, producing a novel set almost entirely inside a single house.

Both *The Body Artist* and *Carpenter's Gothic* represent female characters who exhibit psychological insecurity, and in each case this is an insecurity that is shown to be exacerbated by social and environmental conditions. The gothic motifs of each novel are also directly related to

the insecurities experienced by these female protagonists. *J R* and *Underworld* each represent similar aspects of individual experience and social interaction in the context of a highly complex and interdependent collective social world.

While this thesis takes the form of a comparison between a selection of novels from each writer, I wish to resist speculation on matters of influence, and believe any interest in the issue may be implicitly addressed by the discussion as it stands. Specifically, I find the novels of both writers to be responsive to an investigation of issues that arise from each novel's relation to notions of space.

For an examination of writers so concerned with the social and cultural conditions of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the choice of 'space' as the basis of my enquiry may seem somewhat surprising, considering its traditional association with science and metaphysical philosophy. However my usage of space differs from its more common usage in popular discourse; as distinct from a conception of it as a neutral medium outside of mental operations, here I draw from theorists in a variety of academic disciplines who provide accounts of the spatial as socially constructed. Such theorists stress the importance of intersubjective dynamics in the constitution of the spatial, and in the theoretical overview I provide here, I follow Rob Shields in his usage of the term 'social spatialization', a formulation which places the spatial within social and cultural processes, and goes some way to avoid the semantic confusion that the usage of the word 'space' can generate (*Places on the Margin* 31).

A key aspect of social spatialization is the construction of 'places', physically and socially constructed locations which are the subject of cultural attachment for those who inhabit them. The novels I have chosen will be the basis for the exploration of the fictional portrayal of places of differing scales. In *The Body Artist* and *Carpenter's Gothic*, I will explore the construction of the 'home', distinguishing between the more isolated, intimate setting of *The Body Artist* and the setting of *Carpenter's Gothic* which is more clearly embedded in wider social and historical forces.

Set in New York, *J R* will be the basis for examining the experience of the city and urban space; and finally *Underworld* will be the basis for a discussion of the nation and national identification

Such an account of space also reintroduces the historical context which frames my examination of the novels of Gaddis and DeLillo. The work of both writers is particularly responsive to a reading that is attentive to the account of economic and cultural changes provided by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, in which he argues that a defining feature of 'postmodernity' is a reformulation of the social conditions within which such 'spatialization' occurs. Each of these novels portrays characters responding to changes in the spatial conditions around them, particularly the kinds of conditions which can be explained in terms of the economic changes that Harvey describes.

These features of contemporary culture are also central to DeLillo's own reading of Gaddis. In the "William Gaddis Tribute" section of the Fall 2003 issue of *Conjunctions*, DeLillo dedicates a brief piece to Gaddis's memory. DeLillo considers Gaddis's stylistic shift in *J R* away from the more conventional style of his first novel, and reflects on how "it seemed..., at first, that Gaddis was working against his own gifts for narration and physical description". However he recalls his eventual understanding that "[t]his was not self-denial...but a writer of uncommon courage and insight discovering a method that would allow him to realize his sense of what the great world had become" ("On William Gaddis" 149). The insight DeLillo derives from this shift away from conventional realism is, paradoxically, a reformulation of the possibilities of realistic writing which unmask the bases of more familiar realist writing. For DeLillo, Gaddis's style has become "so unforgivingly real that we may fail to recognize it as such. It is the real world of its own terms, without the perceptual scrim that we tend to erect (novelists and others) in order to live and work safely within it" ("On William Gaddis" 149).

However it is precisely the tension between establishing Gaddis's "sense of what the great world had become" and the removal of this "perceptual scrim" that reveals a significant

difference between the two writers. While the reader's activity in constructing the fictional world is an important part of the thematic content of the novels of both writers, the different stylistic choices made by the two writers influence the manipulation of the reader's attitudes towards that world. Where a number of critics have recognized that 'the medium' contributes to 'the message' in the novels I discuss, it also complicates the reception of that message, and the attempt to construct an implied authorial position overall.

Because I am less concerned with 'influence', I have resisted the temptation to sequence my discussion of each in novel in a way that reflects the chronological order in which they were published. Instead, I will begin with a reading of DeLillo's *The Body Artist*, which will explore introduce and explore the notions of space, place, and identity in its individual or existential manifestations. These related topics also form the conceptual basis for the discussion of the other novels which follow *The Body Artist*, as well as a discussion of self-other relations and (artistic) communication in the novel.

My account of 'spatialization' is in part a 'character centred' view of space: an attempt to interpret character psychologies in relation to their social and physical context. My reading of *The Body Artist* will take this approach, as an extension of DeLillo's stated desire to "paint a kind of thick surface" around his characters (cited in DeCurtis 63)¹. DeLillo distinguishes himself from a trend he sees in literature in which "characters... seem to live in a theoretical environment rather than a real one", and sees this as a response to contemporary conditions (63). In the LeClair interview, he considers how "[s]o much modern fiction is located precisely nowhere...." and that "fiction without a sense of real place is automatically a fiction of estrangement" ("Interview" 31). Accordingly, *The Body Artist* is set in an indeterminate coastal location, which enables both its close exploration of place and intimacy in its opening scene, and the "fiction of estrangement" of its subsequent chapters.

¹ In the LeClair interview quoted above DeLillo explains that he uses space in his fiction in order to "take psychology out of a character's mind and into the room he occupies", and "a way of saying we can know something important about a character by the way [s]he sees himself in relation to objects" ("Interview" 30).

Similarly, ‘fiction of estrangement’ is a particularly apt characterization of Gaddis’s *Carpenter’s Gothic*, a novel which also focuses on a single woman inside her home, employs gothic symbolism, and foregrounds similar questions of space, knowledge and identity. As distinct from the isolate setting of *The Body Artist*, *Carpenter’s Gothic* situates the home more within external social and economic forces. Yet DeLillo’s description of characters of recent literature that seem to exist ‘nowhere’ is suggested by the style of the novel, which predominantly consists of voices without attribution or physical description.

This tension between setting and style is consistent with the novel’s central preoccupation: the main character Liz’s desire for a home in the face of social relations that resist this. This unconventional technique, which refuses to supply that ‘perceptual scrim’ which is psychologically comfortable, engages with his representation of the social world, in which the boundary between the home and the external public world is shown to be difficult to maintain. An argument that the text evaluates the domestic positively can be mounted in familiar terms: sympathy is achieved through the mechanisms of focalisation and distance,² and as a result the novel as a whole can be seen to endorse the values of intimacy.

The relationship between intimacy and the home is developed further in *J R*, which directs its focus at the external public world gestured at in *Carpenter’s Gothic*. Where the external world in *Carpenter’s Gothic* is as a reference point through which the fate of the domestic is explored, in *J R* this dynamic is inverted. The domestic is a comparison point to the public world of the novel, one which has been largely read by critics as in line with Gaddis’s stated intention: a satiric attack on a dehumanized society, the instrumentalist social relations it encourages, and economic conditions which cause a general “decline from status to contract” (*J R* 509).

² Of which Wayne Booth’s account remains preeminently clear and persuasive. See Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961).

The form of *J R* can be seen to reflect this concern, resisting the reader's attempts to construct a coherent space represented by the text, and seemingly transferring the mental experience of contemporary social space on to the reader. Set in a variety of locations across New York, *J R* has been seen by many to enact a kind of 'performative realism' in the reading process. However by complicating the processes of readerly identification, the peculiar textual mode of *J R* intersects with (and complicates) the very criticism that *J R* is understood by critics to provide in its representation of city life.

The target of *J R*'s satire in terms of space - the operations of collective action on individual experience - is also particularly concerned with economic conditions. *J R* anticipates a number of aspects that characterize the 'regime of accumulation' that underpins David Harvey's account of postmodernity as a historical condition. The actions of characters in the novel can be understood as in part a reaction to the increasing instability in the social conditions that result from the post-Fordist economic behaviour the novel portrays.

In *J R*, features of what Harvey terms 'time-space compression' are shown to have a negative impact on the individual. In interviews Gaddis discusses his pessimism towards the culture at large, his "vision of decline" that is evident in all of his novels, and how "deep down" he is convinced that "nothing good will come of... [t]oday's America" (Igendaay 17). DeLillo, on the other hand, responds to a reading which emphasises the socially constructed nature of belief and value, and thus has a more equivocal account of tradition and identity.

DeLillo portrays characters variously preoccupied with cultural shifts, particularly the threat posed by changes in political, social and economic conditions to their constructed modes of cultural identification. DeLillo's representation of 'community' and 'intimacy, portraying such discourse as agonistic and contestatory, contrasts with that of Gaddis who seems more inclined to create a pessimistic representation of economic and cultural change.

In the interview with LeClair, DeLillo considers the novels he particularly admires and his belief that he is most influenced by “the ones that demonstrate the possibilities of fiction”, which have a “drive and a daring that goes beyond technical invention”, and which display “[n]o optimism, no pessimism. No homesickness for lost values or the way fiction used to be written” (“Interview” 26). DeLillo himself praises Gaddis for expanding the “possibilities of the novel”, particularly in the demands he makes on his readers (Harris 26). However I argue that, in *Underworld*, DeLillo’s writing differs from Gaddis in its refusal to endorse a ‘homesickness for lost values’, despite the prevalence of feelings of nostalgia and “longing” expressed by many of his characters.

The demands placed on the reader in *Underworld* and *J R*, encouraging the reader to act as participant, rather than mere observer, in relation to the fictional textual world they represent, means that the reader shifts towards a ‘readerly ethic’ in relation to both novels. A reading practice which takes into account the implications of such indeterminacy means a resistance towards the values endorsed by the text, and a willingness to somewhat suspend issues of moral and political judgement.

Chapter One: Theoretical Framework: Space

Rather than attempt a comprehensive argument about the metaphysical nature of space itself, my focus here is to explain how space can be conceived as a “representational strategy”(Thrift 1); to outline how spatial understandings shape individual and collective experience; and to explore some of the ways that this could be directed towards the fiction of Gaddis and DeLillo. While these topics will recur throughout this thesis, and will be substantially expanded upon in later chapters, an initial theoretical overview is required in order to introduce my usage of spatiality; in particular to introduce a conception of space as historically contingent and socially constructed.

Such a conception may seem counterintuitive. For those who are not philosophers or scientists, space has traditionally been conceived as unproblematically neutral and stable, a matter of common sense, or an objective aspect of reality. W. J. T. Mitchell describes how this neutral objective understanding of space is prevalent in both popular and academic discourses, and suggests that conventional notions of space have been heavily influenced by Newton’s scientific conception of ‘absolute’ space, an “absolute immovable system” or “static atemporal phenomenon” (543). The dominance of this view of space, as something that exists outside of mental operations, goes some way to explaining the difficulty and confusion that results from arguments that assert that ‘space’ is in some way constructed or socially produced.

However, as Zygmunt Bauman points out, such ‘absolute space’ can only be posited as an abstraction of lived spatial perception. He argues that:

...the idea of ‘physical space’ [can] be arrived at solely through phenomenological reduction of daily experience to pure quantity, during which distance is ‘depopulated and ‘extemporalized’ – that is, systematically cleansed of all contingent and transitory traits; only at the end of such reduction the ‘objective space’, the

‘space as such’ may be conceived of as ‘pure space’, ‘empty space’, space devoid of any content relative to time and circumstance. (145)

This draws attention to the processes by which the physical world is encountered, and the importance of the way in which the perceiving subject apprehends it. In “Post-Marxism without Apologies”, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe make the distinction between “the being (*esse*) of an object, which is historical and changing, and the entity (*ens*) of that object which is not” (85). Laclau and Mouffe do not deny the *existence* of objects, but instead challenge our ability to apprehend it outside of the mediating influence of language. In this view, the identity of an object is constituted through discourse, which “establishes a system of social relations with other objects, and these relations are not given by the mere referential materiality of the objects, but are, rather, socially constructed”(82). The fundamental shift in such theory, then, is a move away from a conception of space as part of an objective reality outside of mental operations, to one located within discursive understandings and social and historical processes.

Social space can therefore be understood to be *discursive*, where objects gain their identity through a socially constructed system of relations. Basing their argument on relational or differential theories of signification, they argue that “the relational or differential structure of language is the same for all signifying structures” which causes “any identity (i.e. the *being*, not the *existence* of things)” to be “unstable”. For Laclau and Mouffe, this ‘shows the impossibility of attributing to the being of things the character of a fixed essence, and what makes possible the weakening of form, which constituted the cornerstone of traditional metaphysics’ (Laclau 82). The external world as perceived entity only figures in consciousness through a (discursive) system of differences that makes the experience of it always mediated, and therefore socially constructed.

However due to the dominance of an understanding of space as neutral and objective medium, a significant degree of confusion can arise as a result of any divergent usage. As Rob Shields notes in *Places on the Margin*, because space is understood as “one of the ‘unsaid’ dimensions of epistemological and ontological structures” then “to question space is to question

one of the axes along which reality is conventionally defined” (*Places on the Margin* 31). Shields does not completely abandon an objective notion of space, describing how the spatial has both an *ontic* and an *ontological* aspect; it is understood as both “a socially-constructed arrangement of divisions and territories and the ontic medium of all such arrangements.” (*Places on the Margin* 8)

Shields incorporates various aspects of the ‘spatial’ into a single analytical approach, and argues for spatial conceptions, understandings and interactions that are historically contingent and intersubjectively constituted. However for the reasons I have mentioned, he avoids naming ‘space’ as his object for sociological enquiry,³ and instead employs the term ‘*social spatialisation*’ to encompass both “the ongoing social construction of the spatial at the level of the social imaginary” and also “interventions in the landscape”. This creates a single object of study out of the spatial: “its expression and elaboration in language and more concrete actions, constructions and institutional arrangements” (*Places on the Margin* 31). In this thesis I will also predominantly adopt this formulation as the basis for examining character psychology and action in the novel; as well as the physical world represented by the text.

Resisting the shift from the space encountered in social practice to ‘abstract space’ also reintroduces the temporal dimension to space, the fact that the ‘space’ of experience is always in flux. If this space is the ‘order of coexistent data’ that the subject encounters, then this order is not static but process-bound. It is ‘process-bound’, as Bauman suggests, both in the “contingent and transitory traits” the social agent encounters, but also in their spatial actions and discursive understandings, in their ‘spatializations’. Rather than grasping its fixed essence, our experience of

³ Shields instead uses ‘a space’ to denote “a limited area: a site, zone or place characterised by specific social activities with a culturally given identity (name) and image)” (*Places on the Margin* 30).

By necessity, however, there must remain some working conception of what constitutes ‘space’ in my usage, one broad enough to incorporate both the objective notion of space, its ontological aspect, and its range of other more particularised meanings within the discursive, including those “denoting time or duration” and those “denoting area or extension” (“Oxford English Dictionary Online”).

Mitchell adopts Leibniz’s definition “*spatium est ordo coexistendi* (space is an order of coexistent data)” as a potential alternative to Newton’s for the interests of literary studies. He argues for a combination of this “model of physical space” with a psychological model such as Kant’s in order to identify “the philosophical tradition in which a poetics of space ought to be situated” (Mitchell 543). This general notion of space incorporates the variety of different usages of the term, including its more specialised everyday meanings – environment, area, trajectory, distance, proximity – as well as ‘space’ in a more general sense.

objects is based on a 'performative projection' based on previous knowledge and biography. In understanding the experience of space and spatial experience over time, narrative becomes central; as James Donald puts it, "space is less the already existing setting for such stories, than the production of space through that taking place, through the act of narration"(183).

With such a performative account of space, an examination of fictional texts becomes particularly useful. Understanding space to be brought into being through language and narration, an examination of novelistic space has the potential to yield insights into the constitution of discursive space more generally. Both authors (in the writing process) and readers (in the reading process) *spatialize*; worlds are not 'represented' in novels but constructed in the interaction between reader and narrative discourse.

I therefore distinguish my approach from those critics who bring scientific discourse to bear on the fictional worlds of the writers I discuss. In *Fiction and the Quantum Universe*, Susan Strehle locates Gaddis in a mode of fiction that she terms "actualism", one that "emerges from a widespread change in the way reality is understood by the culture at large", and which she sees "localized usefully in the new physics"(6). Actualism, for Strehle, "develops in postmodern fiction because reality has changed" and she argues that "physics, the science devoted to studying non-living reality, provides an especially pronounced measure of the change in worldview". (7)

Where Strehle places Gaddis in the company of other writers that portray "the external world and the human relation to it" as "discontinuous", "relative", "subjective", and "uncertain"; I argue that this is less a reflection of a "transformation of the assumptions basic to the Newtonian/realistic paradigm" (8) than a response to historical changes in social and economic conditions occurring at the time of composition. It is the contention of this thesis that the preoccupation with space and the nature of reality in the fictional works of Gaddis and DeLillo

has more to do with changes in the experience of *social* reality than “relativity, quantum theory, and wave mechanics” (7)⁴.

In *The Ethics of Indeterminacy in the Novels of William Gaddis*, Gregory Comnes attempts to explain the implications for ethics of “the reigning epistemological sensibility of the postmodern era” and turns to the “principles of quantum physics” in order to demonstrate the way in which “contemporary epistemology shows that there is an essential limitation on any attempt to explain reality in a way that is complete, objective and unchanging”(26). I would argue that social space (rather than scientific discourse) is a more appropriate basis for exploring other concerns associated with these writers, particularly identity and the fate of ethics in postmodern society.

There is a second reason why I believe science does not provide the best theoretical approach to fictional space. As a number of literary critics have noted, the notion of discursive space as a *performative* utterance, one that performs rather than describes the action that it designates, is particularly useful in relation to fiction. As Jonathan Culler notes, “literary critics have embraced the notion of performative as one that helps to characterize literary discourse.... Like the performative, the literary utterance does not refer to a prior state of affairs and is not true or false” (*Literary Theory* 92). Explanatory models of material reality bear little relation to fictional worlds constituted in and by discourse. Such a performative account of space therefore brackets off scientific and metaphysical questions of space to a certain extent; to somewhat adapt Shakespeare, “the fault... is not in our stars/ but in ourselves...” (*Julius Caesar* I: ii, 148-9).

⁴ In her discussion of *J R* the problematic nature of her approach becomes clear. Noting the way in which much of *J R*'s plot is “compounded of accident on accident”(118), and the way in which many of the characters' fortunes are determined by chance meetings or other unintentional actions, she turns to the laws of physics as an explanation: “*J R* is not, like Newton's universe, casually constructed; actions and reactions do not follow each other in well-linked chains”. *J R*, she argues, represents something more akin to a “Heisenbergian universe” (118). Similarly, when one character steps on another's hand, she argues that “it means nothing – except that the world is accidental.” (118). Strehle seems to reject the notion that causality and individual agency are to be understood as existing in the fictional world of *J R*.

Chapter Two: Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*

The most common feature of reviews and critical responses to *The Body Artist* has been the inclusion of some discussion of the slim novel's relationship to DeLillo's previous work. In particular, *Underworld*, the novel that preceded it, was widely received as a culmination of his work to date, and a novel of some significance, not only in size and ambition but in the public recognition and critical acclaim it garnered. *The Body Artist*, by contrast, did not impress initial reviewers so much as perplex them. While articles and reviews all note the author's shift away from his usual preoccupations with media, mass culture and the condition of society in postmodernity, there seems to be considerable disagreement in describing precisely what it is that DeLillo's focus has shifted to.⁵

The novel has continued to elude comprehensive analysis in subsequent more extended critical responses. There are three aspects of the novel that contribute to its perceived opacity. Firstly, the novel provides little character motivation. The opening chapter consists of a close portrayal of a husband and wife at breakfast, with descriptions of the semi-conscious routines and idiosyncratic conversations of an intimate relationship. However the 'everyday' nature of the scene is then suddenly undercut by a newspaper report placed between the first and second chapters, which informs the reader of the husband's suicide immediately afterwards. *The Body Artist* provides little (if any) psychological explanation for his action, nor does it provide much that explains the wife Lauren's slightly curious behavior as a response. Secondly, a significant portion of the remainder of *The Body Artist* is dedicated to interactions with a strange being that Lauren discovers living in her home that she nicknames 'Mr Tuttle'. A being of ambiguous status and function, divergent explanations of 'Mr Tuttle' are provided by both Lauren herself, as well as critics interpreting the novel. Thirdly, Lauren gives a strange performance seemingly based on

⁵ Steffen Hantke provides an overview of how the *The Body Artist* suffered from "follow-up letdown" in its early reviews, with almost every reviewer comparing it to his 1997 epic, and argues that a number of critics have mistakenly associated its brevity with a lack of quality. ("Slow Spare and Painful")

her prior experiences. Foregrounding issues of artistic creation, it does seem to invite reflection on the novel itself, however once again the significance of this performance seems unclear.

In “Don DeLillo's Return to Form: The Modernist Poetics of *The Body Artist*”, Philip Nel argues that the shift in setting of the novel also represents a shift away from the social issues that were the focus of DeLillo's previous fiction. He argues *The Body Artist* should be considered a “lyrical meditation on language, memory, and the modernist (and romantic) project of bridging the gap between word and world” (736); glossing over the dramatic and psychological content of the novel, and instead arguing that the novel is a vehicle for a meditation on language and artistry. In this way, Nel speculates on DeLillo's intentions for the novel: a therapeutic response to the increasing pace of contemporary culture, and an expression of “faith in the value and power of linguistic art” (756).

By contrast, Laura Di Prete's article “Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*: Performing the Body, Narrating Trauma” goes to rather the opposite extreme. Di Prete reads the novel as “a narrative that stages a scenario of traumatic loss and return through the phantasmic figure of a ‘madman in the attic’, explores dynamics of psychic intrusion (of an inassimilable presence) and interconnectedness *as the consequence of traumatic experience*”(483 emphasis added). In this reading, the events and encounters subsequent to Rey's suicide are a manifestation of Lauren's own mental condition; the more philosophical issues that a reading of the novel raises are related back to psychological processes, and can be understood in terms of the limits of knowledge, particularly in self/other dynamics.

In “Echo Chamber: Undertaking *The Body Artist*”, Mark Osteen also focuses on self/other dynamics, but extends this to a discussion of narrator and reader in order to explore the various “forms of possession” represented in the novel. Also directing his attention to questions of artistry in *The Body Artist*, Osteen focuses on the issues of voice and identity, and the ways in which the novel suggests the “permeable membrane between character and performance” (64).

Tuttle's mind, he speculates, functions "less like a single bird than like an entire flock", and his "selving" is achieved only through impersonation, it is *performed*. Osteen further argues that Tuttle performs a variety of functions, but particularly concentrates on what he terms "linguistic and cognitive disabilities" which may complicate his experience of space and time (70-2).

In *The Physics of Language*, David Cowart argues that DeLillo's main preoccupation is this more philosophical question: that in *The Body Artist* DeLillo "grapples with time as it reveals itself in language and consciousness" (202). Cornel Bonca argues that this concern with temporality suggests that Heidegger's philosophy is a useful approach to the novel. (Being, Time, and Death in DeLillo's *The Body Artist*", 60). Not content to merely read the novel in Heideggerian terms, Bonca uses this as the basis for reconstructing DeLillo's own philosophical beliefs, and enters into a recurrent dispute surrounding the novelist: whether or not postmodern philosophical beliefs underwrite his fictional works. He claims:

The Body Artist is... the most explicit statement that his yearnings for and frank intimations of immanence now dominate his imagination, and calls for his critics to break away from the postmodern paradigms into which his work has until now mostly been placed (66-7).

However, I argue that these are represented as mere 'yearnings' in the novel, and that immanence is never fully realized in *The Body Artist*. By contrast, Lauren's behavior can be understood in relation to a conception of spatiality as performative, constructed and contingent.

The Body Artist is thus a novel that has provoked quite divergent critical responses, each emphasising different aspects of the text in their argument for its overall significance. There are, however, a number of themes that recur in all of these arguments: the figure of the artist and the work they create; the psychological state of Lauren as a reaction to her husband's death; self-other dynamics, particularly in relation to knowledge/possession; and the phenomenological experience of time. Furthermore, while each places issues of identity at the centre of its analysis, the significant theme of space in the novel is underexplored, particularly as it relates to the above

issues. Indeed it is spatiality, I would argue, that provides a conceptual framework that unites the above critics' seemingly disparate preoccupations.

In an argument for the centrality of "systems of spatiality" in understanding individual and collective identity, Shields outlines the importance of spatial conceptions and practices to cultural and discursive processes:

At the most personal, we think of ourselves in spatialised terms, imagining ourselves as an ego contained within an objectified body. People extend themselves - mentally and physically - out into space much as a spider extends its limbs in the form of a web. We become as much a part of these extensions, as they are of us ("Henri Lefebvre" 212).

In particular, in accounts of the influence of spatiality on identity formation, a frequent term that arises in theoretical accounts is 'place'. While there are a number of divergent approaches to what constitutes 'place', it is seen to be discursively related to 'space' in that, as Yi-Fu Tuan contends, "space is general as opposed to the particularity of place" (Cited in Agnew 81). Furthermore, because 'place' is a social construction, it carries with it a number of other metaphorical and psychological meanings particularly connected with identity. David Harvey describes how:

We talk about the place of art in social life, the place of women in society, our place in the cosmos, and we internalize such notions psychologically in terms of knowing our place, or feeling we have a place in the affections or esteems of others" ("From Space to Place and Back Again" 4).

Such 'commonplaces' indicate the way in which 'place' operates as a kind of spatial identification; it is the imbuelement of a particular point or area with cultural value. At the same time, it is through an individual's social interaction with their particular physical surroundings that a sense of selfhood is constructed. Such a focus on identity takes into account the way in which the physical world is never merely neutrally perceived by the subject, but rather this world is made meaningful in relation to the self (Relph 10).

Language (or signification) forms the basis of that process of differentiation through

which social spatialisation occurs; as James Meffan argues, “both identification and definition are concerned to indicate a boundary between a thing (or name) and that which it is not” (*Evaluation, Identity and Post-Colonial Politics* 46). The social construction of the identity of a ‘place’ therefore also involves an implicit exclusion; it establishes a relation of ‘there’ and ‘not there’. It is the discursive engagements and experiences that occur while being ‘in place’ that constitute the identity of both the place and the social agent in language. All ‘spatialisation’ is thus contingent; if the identities of particular objects or places are stable this reveals nothing essential but rather demonstrates the conditions that generate ‘durability’.

If language is the basis for this generation of meaning from the physical world then it is also the basis for the sharing of this signification. It is language which, as Peter Brooks states, “polices individuality by making it part of a transindividual, intersubjective system: precisely what we call society” (251). For Anthony Giddens, the intersubjective relation is also crucial in the maintenance of a sense of feelings of “ontological security” in order to perform the phenomenological “bracketing” required by the “natural attitude” in everyday life. This ‘natural attitude’ prevents the self from the experience of a kind of existential “chaos”, the experience not merely of “disorganization” but even of a “loss of a sense of the very reality of things and of other persons” (36). “In the natural attitude”, Giddens claims, “actors take for granted existential parameters of their activity that are sustained, but in no way ‘grounded’ by the interactional conventions they observe” (36). Describing the approach to infancy of object relations theorists such as Erikson and Winnicott, Giddens emphasises the quality of trust in a human agent’s relation to reality, one which to a certain extent relies on “confidence in the reliability of persons”(39).

In *Space, Place and Gender*, Doreen Massey connects such psychoanalytic approaches to identity formation as the reason that “settlement or place is so frequently characterized as bounded, as enclosure, and as directly counterposed to spaces as flows”. The prevalence of the desire to secure boundaries and borders, and to exclude the foreign or unpredictable can be

understood as a desire “to stabilize the meaning of particular envelopes of space- time” (5). They are attempts to resist the sense of the contingency of the identity of places in relation to the wider world, and by association, an attempt at stabilizing a sense of selfhood.

As a space of stable meaning and security, the ‘home’ is typically seen as the archetypal ‘place’, what Edward Relph calls “the central reference point of human existence” (20). Two of the key symbolic values associated with the home - *intimacy* and *interiority* – can be viewed in relation to the psychoanalytic issues I describe above: the construction of spatial relations of ‘self’ and ‘other’ on the basis of knowledge and security. For Bauman, ‘intimacy’ is produced by an individual’s knowledge, familiarity, and biographical experience of objects. This includes other human beings they encounter (“humans *as* objects”). Bauman argues that space is viewed in the context of “the differentiation of intimacy and anonymity, of strangeness and familiarity, of social proximity and distance” (148). In this way, the construction of the space of the home as ‘intimate’ is commonly a space of ‘selfhood’, generated through knowledge and biographical experience. In this sense it is also one of security and control, of familiarity and reliable understanding.

Intimacy is therefore closely connected with the quality of *interiority*, which invests the physical boundaries of the house with symbolic significance; it draws a line between the interior – a demarcated space of familiarity, security and control – and the exterior world. Public spaces, by contrast, tend to be constructed as exterior and, in contradistinction to intimate, as ‘impersonal’; they lie outside the home (as a space associated with the self) and are relatively unknown. The physical structure of the home represents a border between the interior and the exterior but also distinguishes the domestic from the historical and the intimate from the anonymous wider world.

“One may here well admire man, who succeeded in piling up an infinitely complex dome of ideas on a moveable foundation and as it were on running water, as a powerful genius of architecture. Of course, in order to obtain hold on such a foundation it must be as an edifice piled up out of cobwebs: so firm, as not to be blown asunder by every wind.”

Friedrich Nietzsche ‘On Truth and Falsity in an Extra-Moral Sense’ (182)

The first chapter of *The Body Artist* depicts a husband and wife – Lauren and Rey – having breakfast in the kitchen of their home. Much of the novel’s opening chapter is dedicated to describing the ‘everyday’ – the trivial details and actions of a married couple at breakfast, and the “shadow-dappled stuff of an undividable moment on a morning going crazy in ways so humanly routine you can’t even stop and take note” (*The Body Artist* 24). In this way, it portrays experience of an intimate environment, a domain of close knowledge and relative security.

Preceding this, however, the novel opens with two short paragraphs which contextualize both this chapter and the novel more generally. Rather than setting the scene in a conventional fashion, with a description of setting external to the characters, the novel first begins with an account of *experienced* surroundings. It runs:

Time seems to pass. The world happens, unrolling into moments, and you stop to glance at a spider pressed to its web. There is a quickness of light and a sense of things outlined precisely and streaks of running luster on the bay (7).

The narrator begins by invoking the temporal aspect of the narrative not as an absolute but by stressing its experientially contingent aspect: “time *seems* to pass”. The following description of the physical environment is similarly tied to percipience: even “things outlined precisely” are a product of mobile light. The subsequent lines also connect this spatial experience with identity; knowing “more surely who you are” is relational and is connected with a strong sense of one’s surroundings:

You know more surely who you are on a strong bright day when the smallest falling leaf is stabbed with self-awareness. The wind makes a sound in the pines and the world comes into being, irreversibly, and the spider rides the wind-swayed web (7).

The opening of the novel resists a straightforward separation of the world of the novel into 'subject' and 'object', instead portraying a world that "comes into being" through percipience.. Given that the narrative is textual this unavoidably implicates the reader in the operations of projection and construction. The image of the spider in the wind is an apt metaphor for identity in the novel: moving out beyond the physical boundaries of the body and out into the environment that one inhabits and perceives; identity is *spatialised*.

The relationship I outline above between space, knowledge and a sense of 'ontological security' is thus foregrounded in the opening paragraphs of the novel, a concern that is continued in the remainder of this first chapter. The portrayal of breakfast at home between a husband and wife can be seen to be a dramatization of the 'lifeworld', which David Seamon defines as the "taken for granted pattern and context of everyday life through which the person routinely conducts his day-to-day existence without having to make it an object of conscious attention"(20). Through explicitly describing many of the everyday routines that occur at the breakfast table, the chapter evokes a sense of intimacy and contributes to the sense of 'place' in relation to the setting. The section begins:

It happened this final morning that they were here at the same time, in the kitchen, and they shambled past each other to get things out of cabinets and drawers and then waited one for the other by the sink or fridge, still a little puddled in dream melt, and she ran tap water over the blueberries bunched in her hand and closed her eyes to breathe the savor rising (7).

Through the descriptions of habitual routine, the scene evokes a sense of intimacy through the portrayal of close familiarity both within the space and between the characters. The couple are presented as largely interacting with the space in the 'natural attitude'; described as "puddled in dream melt", their interaction with the space is represented as barely conscious and unexamined.

By explicitly describing these seemingly mundane details – “how you live a life even if you don’t know it” (8) – the narration of the opening chapter portrays the kitchen as a domain of naturalised knowledge for the characters.

This construction of a space intersubjectively generated is also shown through the description of what Seamon calls “place-ballets”, the interaction of different individual routines which, over time, construct the space as one that is shared. Lauren is described as having “to sort of jackknife away from the counter” in response to her husband’s movements (8) and the narrator describes how Rey “never remembered the juice until the toast was done”. This positions the narrator as not just an observer of the scene but as someone equally familiar with the routines themselves, and the description of the environment is invested with the symbolic meanings that result for the characters:

He sat with the newspaper, stirring his coffee. It was his coffee and his cup. They shared the newspaper but it was actually, unspokenly, hers... She crossed to the cabinet with the blueberries wet in her hand and reached up for the cereal and took the box to the counter, the mostly brown and white box, and then the toaster thing popped and she flipped it down again because it took two flips to get the bread to go brown and he absently nodded his acknowledgement because it was his toast and his butter and then he turned to the radio and got the weather... (7-8)

The metaphorical ownership of various objects also further establishes the relationship between identity and the use of everyday physical objects.

If the sense of intimacy is created by careful restriction of attention to the details of the shared environment, it nevertheless becomes evident that not all details of the scene contribute simply by being there. When Lauren discovers a strand of hair in her mouth that “was somebody else’s”, a “short pale strand that wasn’t hers and wasn’t his”, (10) the symbolic impact of the discovery can be viewed in relation to the two qualities I describe above – intimacy and interiority. The phrasing “wasn’t hers” and “wasn’t his” places it in sharp distinction from the

other various objects in the kitchen –*her* newspaper, *his* coffee – it comes from an unknown, anonymous other. It is disturbing (she “regards it with mock aversion, or real aversion stretched to artistic limits”) in part due to its potential association with the stranger. Furthermore, by being in her mouth, it transgresses the boundaries of both spaces marked as crucially interior in the novel – the home and the body – and is a reminder of the world exterior to the setting of the novel.

The desire for isolation, of a space separate from the public world and the passage of history is both gestured at, and undermined in the chapter. At one point Lauren remarks, “[a]ll day yesterday I thought it was Friday” and continues: “I’m only saying. How does it happen that Thursday seems like Friday? We’re out of the city. We’re off the calendar. Friday shouldn’t have an identity here (21)”. Lauren sees only personal time as significant to the isolated domestic environment she inhabits, as distinct from the regulated public (and historical) world.

However in the chapter there are also repeated disruptions to this sense; as with the hair Lauren discovers, there are a number of vivid reminders of the wider context that any private space occurs in. While eating breakfast Lauren reads the newspaper and notes how it “begins to gather you into it and there are people being tortured halfway around the world, who speak another language” and the radio also reports “news about a missile exploding mysteriously, underground, in Montana, and she didn’t know if it was armed or not.” For readers of DeLillo’s *Underworld*, these references to media intrusion serve as a reminder of the public, post-Cold War world in which DeLillo’s previous novel is set and the wider social and political context through which it ranges.

While dramatising a number of symbolic and psychological qualities of place, DeLillo imbricates the lineaments of a wider world onto the realm of the home, an area spatialized as intimate and enclosed. Despite the fact that the boundaries of the novel and the boundaries of

the house are largely coextensive, *The Body Artist* reminds the reader that, as in the real world, any place always exists within wider space-relations. As David Harvey argues:

The simple answer is that we live in a world of universal tension between sensuous and interpersonal contact in place (with intense awareness of the qualities of that place within which temporal experiences unfold) and another dimension of awareness in which we more or less recognize the obligation and material connection that exists between us and the millions of other people who had, for example, a direct and indirect role in putting our breakfast on the table this morning ("From Space to Place and Back Again" 15).

The final image of the novel's opening page - the spider "riding the wind-swayed web" - can be read as significant in this respect. While the spider's demarcation of its space by lines of functional attachment is an apt metaphor for an individual's relationship to the environment he or she inhabits, the image of the web in the wind suggests that the relative stasis of this 'place' is always maintained within the flow of a wider contextualising space-time; the 'ahistorical' space of the private realm is located within a wider public world against which this domestic realm is defined.

Despite demonstrating the qualities of the home as intimate place, *The Body Artist* also demonstrates the way in such intimacy is generated from the being that inhabits it. While the environment is presented as shared, the narration is focalized entirely through Lauren and demonstrates access to her interior thoughts; the narration describes a "space inside her head that was also here in front of her" (23). Just as the opening of the novel presents the world as filtered through consciousness, the focalization and free indirect discourse in the narration of the novel inflects the description with Lauren's subjective experience.

This represented internal experience is particularly evident in the occasional shifts by the narrator into description of more reflective, conscious thought (making use of free indirect discourse) interspersed with the description of daily routine I have already discussed:

She noticed how water from the tap turned opaque in seconds. It ran silvery and clear and then in seconds turned opaque and how curious it seemed that in all these times in which she'd run water from the kitchen tap she'd never noticed how the water ran clear at first and then went not murky exactly but opaque, or maybe it hadn't before, or she'd noticed and forgotten.... (8).

In the description of such thought, Lauren reflects on the ability of language to capture the world of her senses. Described smelling her breakfast, for example, she also considers that “nothing described it”, that it “was pure smell” and “the thing that smell is, apart from all sources” (16). The narration moves between close, intimate description of the world around Lauren, and description of her consciousness in which she contemplates the inadequacy of any such description.

In *Postmodern Ethics*, Bauman summarizes Heidegger's two modes of interaction with the world: “*zuhanden*” and “*vorhanden*”. In the *zuhanden* mode, Bauman explains, objects “are not reflected upon. They are just where we know they are and nowhere else, they are just what we know they are and nothing else... we do not need to think twice to handle them, and thus we have no opportunity to think of handling as ‘handling’”. This can therefore be distinguished from the *vorhanden* mode, in which objects “need to be grasped before they can be handled” and become an object of conscious knowledge (147-8). The narration shifts between these two modes in the scene, and in the transition between summarized actions and represented thought *in process*, the narration creates the effect of reading the interior thought processes of Lauren.

In *How To Do Things With Words*, John Austin argues that there is a dimension to language use that has hitherto been under-recognized: its performative aspect. Rather than purely constative descriptions of the world, statements are also a form of action⁶. In “Ill Locutions”,

⁶In an attempt to clarify the nature of the performative, he distinguishes between a variety of different speech acts. Mark Devenney summarizes these as follows:

Locutionary acts represent states of affairs; perlocutionary acts produce an effect on the hearer; and illocutionary acts are those acts performed through the force of the speech act. Illocutionary force determines how the speech act is understood. This notion of

Christine Brooke-Rose looks to Austin's examples and relates them to narrative technique. Using 'locution' to refer to 'direct speech' and 'illocution' as 'indirect speech' or 'perlocution', with the latter summarizing the speech act and its effect, rather than representing it directly (157-8). She notes how "language has developed... different registers for specific reasons that have to do with distancing of the speaker's perception from that of the person whose words he is reporting, and hence with the indirect manipulation of his interlocutor" (158). However she argues that due to Austin's famous exclusion of fiction from his typology, he does not describe a type of sentence unique to fiction: free indirect discourse. She defines this as

...the type of sentence which gives the vocabulary and idiom characteristic of direct speech, expressive elements such as exclamations and questions, as well as the deictics of the character in his situation (now, for instance, although in a narrative past); but it retains the shift of tense and the change of person from first to third which are characteristic of indirect speech. It is like indirect speech but without the impression of summary, since we get the words and expressions of the character (158).

In this way, the third person narrative voice 'performs' the mental processes of the character. At one point the narration explicitly describes Lauren's consciousness, in terms that suggest a significant blurring between external perspective and internal thought process:

She had a hyper-preparedness, or haywire, or hair-trigger, and Rey was always saying, or said once, and she carried a voice in her head that was hers and it was dialogue or monologue and she went to the cabinet where she got the honey and the tea bags – a voice that flowed from a story in the paper (16).

However while this voice is described as 'in her head', her consciousness is 'brought into being' by the third-person narration in the novel: that "voice that flowed from a story in the paper". Performativity is an apt description for the ways in which the literary utterance, as Jonathan Culler states, "*creates* the state of affairs to which it refers" (*Literary Theory* 92).

illocutionary acts take up on the definition of the performative but extends it, attributing a performative force to all speech acts ("Performativity and Politics" 51).

The question of whether Lauren's interior voice is "dialogue or monologue" is a particularly vexed issue in the novel. While aspects of Rey's psychology are presented in this chapter, they remain filtered through Lauren's perspective. Rather than describing his interior consciousness, the narration describes his attitudes through Lauren's supposed intimate knowledge of his personality. Where Lauren considers the difficulty of accurately capturing the sensory world in language, her knowledge of Rey is described with relative certainty. During a conversation with him, she reflects:

Now that he'd remembered what he meant to tell her, he seemed to lose interest. She didn't have to see his face to know this. It was in the air. It was in the pause that trailed from his remark of eight, ten, twelve seconds ago. Something insignificant. He would take it as a kind of self-diminishment, bringing up a matter so trivial (9-10).

This relationship between knowledge and intimacy is particularly emphasized in the description of Rey's tobacco smell, which was "part of her knowledge of his body":

It was the aura of the man, a residue of smoke and unbroken habit, a dimension in the night, and she lapped it off the curled gray hairs on his chest and tasted it in his mouth. It was who he was in the dark, cigarettes and mumbled sleep and a hundred other things nameable and not (19-20).

In his reading of *The Body Artist*, Osteen makes a similar point, arguing that just as "intimacy is a kind of ventriloquism or echolalia", so too reading "is also a mode of performance or possession, and one that DeLillo invites his readers to undertake as well, so that our reading animates the characters, possesses them, and allows them to possess us"(66-7). Osteen's suggestion that intimacy is in some way 'ventriloquism' suggests the way in which knowledge of others inevitably involves projection; the identity of others must be constructed on the basis of previous experience rather than access to an interior state. The novel portrays this close knowledge through the kind of communicative utterances typical of intimate relationships, such as the following exchange:

"Cut your self again"

“What?” He put his hand to his jaw, head sunk in the newspaper. “Just a nick.”

Removed from the context of the chapter, the statement ‘cut your self again’ might sound like an imperative statement from Lauren (ordering him to cut himself). However this is quickly understood by the reader to be an observation due to the social context of the statement: a wife speaking to her husband in an intimate everyday situation.

In his discussion of *How to do Things With Words*, Jonathan Culler describes how, for Austin, ‘communication’ is determined by context; “to mean something by an utterance is not to perform an inner act of meaning that accompanies the utterance” The meaning of an utterance is determined not by what the speaker had in mind but by the “conventional rules involving features of the context”(On *Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* 111). Following such a performative model, language is not merely a tool for description of the objective world, but rather is how aspects of the *social* world are constituted (obligations, promises, and other aspects of interpersonal relationships). However as Culler (following Derrida) contends, the precise nature and meaning of those relationships can never be fully and reliably determined and secured. Just as the meaning of a statement is dependent on certain contextual conditions, one can always imagine a further detail which would change this context, and thus alter its meaning. He maintains, for example, that “[f]or any specification of the circumstances under which an utterance counts as a promise we can either imagine further details that would make a difference or else place a further frame around the consequences” (122).

The limited omniscience of the narration takes on a unique significance in *The Body Artist*. Inserted between the first and second chapters is a short section entitled “Rey Robles, 64, Cinema’s Poet of Lonely Places”, which takes the form of a newspaper article that informs the reader that soon after this breakfast Rey committed suicide in the apartment of his ex-wife. The intimate knowledge of Rey that Lauren possesses is shown to be crucially incomplete.

The precarious status of Rey's identity is further developed by the biography in the newspaper article, through which the reader learns of his death. It reports that his accounts of his early life were "inconsistent" and biographical details are shown to be somewhat speculative. Information on his childhood is based on "evidence" and his age is taken from "the most persuasive independent versions" (27). His early career continues this sense of character as performance; he performed as a "street juggler" and film extra and his name, Rey Robles, was adopted from a character he played in a film (he was born "Alejandro Alquezar") (27-8). The article quotes a critic who describes how Rey "extends the language of film" (29); as a character, Rey blurs the lines between performance and identity, and dramatises the impossibility of one person knowing another outside of how they represent themselves.

Rereading the opening scene in the light of this subsequent knowledge yields a re-evaluation of the breakfast scene, in which certain details suggest that the scene of intimacy delivered through third person narration is more one-sided than the reader might initially assume. With the following conversation over orange juice, for example, the reader armed with this knowledge might find more to suggest that Rey is actively refusing co-option into Lauren's projected sense of intimacy, than evidence of an objectively observed collusion:

.... "Tell me because I'm not sure. Do you drink juice?" he said, still shaking the damn thing...

She said, "What? Never drink the stuff. You know that. How long have we been living together."

"Not long," he said.

He got a glass, poured the juice and watched the foam appear. Then he wheeled a little achingly into his chair.

"Not long enough for me to notice the details," he said.

With the benefit of hindsight, these lines take on a particularly sinister significance, as does his description of Lauren as his "happy home" (17). On a second reading, the large jay that Lauren observes from the kitchen can also be read as a metaphor for her husband Rey; her description

of it as a “nest thief and skilled mimic”, metaphorically relates to his sudden violation of Lauren’s domestic situation. Similarly, the description of her failure to “work past the details” and know “the bird itself... the fixed interest in those eyes” (22) connects with her inability to realize her husband’s actual mental state behind his appearance at breakfast. The opening chapter of *The Body Artist* dramatizes the way in which the meaning of social space is temporally contingent, where various details are brought into meaningful relation in a process of revision and re-evaluation.

The opening chapter thus portrays an intimate kitchen scene between husband and wife, while at the same time showing how attention to specific details draws attention to the contingency of what is effectively a spatialised quality. The intimacy that might be presumed to be an organic quality of “home” is here identified as reliant on individual perceptions (and the intersubjective sharing of these perceptions) and is therefore vulnerable to aberrant or inattentive readings of the details of the quotidian. Defined against a more anonymous external world, Lauren is shown to desire stability in relation to her environment, and establish home as a domain of intimacy. However the reader’s discovery of the suicide dramatizes the precarious nature of this knowledge, the ways in which one’s knowledge and experience of social space is shown to be based on biographical experience that is necessarily limited and contingent.

Anthony Giddens describes how the “sense of the shared reality of people and things is simultaneously sturdy and fragile”, and that moments of “cognitive and emotional disorientation” demonstrate the “fragility of the natural attitude” (37). The qualities of ‘trust’, ‘hope’, and ‘courage’, he argues, are necessary to the emotional commitment to ‘reality’ required in order to participate in day-to-day life. He argues:

Learning the characteristics of absent persons and objects – accepting the real world as real – depends on the emotional security that basic trust provides. Those feelings of unreality which may haunt the lives of individuals in whose early childhood basic trust was poorly developed may take many forms. They may feel the object-world,

or other people, have only a shadowy existence, or be unable to maintain a clear sense of continuity of self-identity (43).

The third world that Devenney mentions above that is established through the intersubjective – through relations *between* – is precariously balanced upon a kind of implicit agreement. As Meffan suggests, “insofar as signification can said to be grounded, it is grounded relationally, on the basis of a tacit intersubjective agreement between parties in communication”(211).

Where the first chapter established the home as an environment of intimacy, it also showed that the symbolic meanings of this environment were grounded in the intersubjective. One might reasonably expect that the psychological reaction to this sudden violation to intimacy is to exert more effort in Lauren’s attempt to stabilize her home. Instead, I argue that she seems to display an awareness of the contingency and subjectivity of spatial knowledge, and is less easily convinced that she is simply observing immanent qualities in her lived spaces. This culminates in her use of her art as a practice by which she can explore, *using herself*, the contingency of conditions she has hitherto taken for granted.

The visual indeterminacy she experiences in the remainder of the novel can be explained as a reflection of Lauren’s experience of incomplete knowledge in relation to the kitchen scene. The re-evaluation of meaning causes Lauren to develop an awareness of the contingency of the meaning of her environments: The second chapter begins on the highway, and begins: “Everything is slow and hazy and drained and it all happens around the word *seem*”. Later the narrator describes how “things she saw seemed doubtful – not doubtful but ever changing, plunged into metamorphosis, something that is also something else, but what, and what” (31-6). That this visual indeterminacy is a response to her trauma is indicated by the suggestion that Rey is “the thing in the air, vaporous, drifting into every space” (33). Her limited perception is directly linked to the recent loss of her husband.

While Lauren is described as attempting to immerse herself in domestic patterns - to “organize time until she could live again” and fill her days with “small ravishing routines” (32), she seems to lose her aspects of domestic competence (she burns her hand while cooking and forgets to fill the ice tray) and her ability to maintain a faith in the qualities of domestic space is sundered to a certain extent (34):

How completely strange it suddenly seemed that major corporations mass produced bread crumbs and packaged and sold them everywhere in the world and she looked at the bread-crumbs carton for the first time, really seeing it and understanding what was in it, and it was bread-crumbs. (35)

Even her body is seen as “slightly foreign and unfamiliar”. At one point she collapses, experiencing “not the major breakdown of every significant function but a small helpless sinking toward the ground, a kind of forgetting how to stand” (33). The ‘natural attitude’ – that confidence in the reality and reliability of the exterior world that enables participation in an everyday manner – is thrown into question by Rey’s death.

This sense of ontological insecurity and subjectivity provides an explanation for her fascination with otherness that emerges in the second chapter, with respect to both people and places. Her fascination with the physically distant is particularly expressed through her discovery of an internet link to a highway in Kotka, Finland. She is captivated by her sense that “Kotka was another world but she could see it in its realness, in its hours, minutes and seconds” and she imagines how “someone might masturbate to this, the appearance of a car on the road to Kotka in the middle of the night” (38). The failure of the intersubjective explains her fascination with a Japanese woman, who is described as a “beautiful and problematic thing, if she is Japanese at all”. Because she is “watering her garden when the sky shows rain”, she represents someone whose engagement with their environment suggests a set of beliefs and knowledge different from Lauren’s own (36). Lauren’s sense of uncertainty evidently derives from Rey’s suicide, specifically from the awareness of phenomenological contingency this has produced. If space is constituted in the domain of the intersubjective, and a sense of the certainty towards the world is reinforced

by reciprocation, then Rey's suicide causes Lauren to experience a sense of considerable uncertainty in relation to that world, and an awareness of the extent to which certain qualities are sustained by her own projection.

The figure she discovers towards the end of the chapter is particularly significant in the context of these issues: space and identity as a performative projection, the relation to the other, and the limits of 'access' to interiority. Lauren hears a noise in the house, which she senses is not an animal because it "carried an effect that was nearly intimate, like something's here and breathing the same air we breathe and it moves the way we move" (40). On investigation she discovers an unknown man in one of the bedrooms:

He sat on the edge of the bed in his underwear. In the first seconds she thought he was inevitable. She felt her way back in time to the earlier indications that there was something in the house and she arrived at this instant, unerringly, with her perceptions all sorted and endorsed (41).

The appearance of this outsider, who at once confounds and endorses expectations, causes a further interpretative revision.

On her way to investigate, Lauren sees "a twirling leaf just outside the window. It was a small amber leaf twirling in the air beneath a tree branch that extended over the roof. There was no sign of a larva web from which the leaf might be suspended, or a strand of some bird's nest-building material. Just a leaf in midair, turning"(41). Both the nest and the larva web figure in the novel as metaphors for attachment to 'place', to the construction of the surrounding environment by the being which inhabits it. However the figure she discovers, like the leaf, remains apart from such connection. He is figured as an unknown, and it seems, virtually unknowable other.

In a footnote to her article, Di Prete outlines the “almost comic” variety of terms used by reviewers and critics in their attempt to describe the figure Lauren finds, providing the following list as evidence:

...“autistic”, “alien”, “ghost” (Begley); “inmate wandered off from a local mental institution”, “figment of Lauren’s imagination” (“Body Artist”); “shadow of a man” (Roncevic); “ageless, babyish homeless” (Evans); “medium”, psychotic” (Jones); “pure cipher” (Amidon); “Lauren’s projected identity”, “ghostly embodiment” (Simon); “figure of the double” (Gorra); and “emissary from beyond,” “projection of a troubled mind,” heteroclit muse” (Coward).... (484)

Indeed, Di Prete describes her own interpretation as a “partial and insufficient reading”, and argues that “the reader is doomed in an effort to decode or fully explain such a figure”(484). The difficulty in part stems from the novel’s narrative technique; all description where Tuttle is present is represented as focalized through the consciousness of Lauren. The question is, I argue, slightly beside the point: Tuttle is only a fictional creation of the text, and therefore his primary function in the novel, I would argue, is as a means by which Lauren reflects on her own constructive role in the intersubjective constitution of space.

In response to her initial interrogations on discovering him, his first statement consists of the phrase “it is not able”. The statement fails, it would seem, because there is no clear subject and no object. The speech could be seen to be referring to his own ability to use language – his language does not ‘work’. This would be supported by his other statements, which often refer to the action of speaking itself. These include: “I am doing. This yes that. Say some words” (62), “Say some words to say some words” (55) and “the word for moonlight is moonlight” (82). However this remains an interpretation, and it is clear that the content of the words does not deliver access to his interior state.

Tuttle fails to put out a full set of performative signals to aid Lauren's understanding of him, leading Lauren to realize that "she needed a reference elsewhere to get him placed" (45). She thinks:

There's a code in the simplest conversation that tells the speakers what's going on outside the bare acoustics. This was missing when they talked. There was a missing beat. It was hard for her to find the tempo. All they had were unadjusted words. She lost touch with him, lost interest sometimes, couldn't locate rhythmic intervals or time cues or even the mutters and hums, the audible pauses that pace a remark.... the references at the unspoken level, the things a man speaking Dutch might share with a man speaking Chinese – all this was missing here (66).

Lauren's inability to describe Tuttle is exacerbated, in particular, by his rather idiosyncratic use of language. The main problem with Tuttle's language is his failure to provide statements that fit with the usual contextual details that enable shared communication. If the meaning of statements is established through interpretation partially based on social context (rather than an inner act of meaning) then Tuttle seems to exist at the limits of such interpretation. The main gap in the communication here seems to be in the inability of Lauren to linguistically 'align' herself with Tuttle and thus 'understand' the content of his words.

Aware of the way all communication is an active process of interpretation then, Lauren therefore reflects how her lack of complete knowledge of him is merely an extreme form of something common to all self-other engagements: a kind of fundamental alterity:

This is what you feel, looking at the hushed and vulnerable body, almost anyone's, or you lie next to your husband after you've made love and breathe the heat of his merciless dreams and wonder who he is, tenderly pondering the truth you'll never know, because this is the secret that sleep protects in its neural depths, in its stages, layers and folds (54).

Where some critics have described him as a ghost, Mr Tuttle's uncertain status can be viewed as in part a symbol of the phantasmic structure of all self-other experience. If, as Nick Carraway

suggests in *The Great Gatsby*, personality is “an unbroken series of successful gestures” (Fitzgerald 8), then Tuttle’s apparent lack of identity can be explained in relation to the failure of his gestures to communicate successfully.

While Lauren does speculate extensively on what Tuttle is, we are never given a complete answer. Unable to establish his status from the content of his words, she attempts to ‘interpret’ his words in relation to other contextual factors. Noticing his “thinness of physical address”, she gives him a name ‘Mr Tuttle’ in order to “make him easier to see”, however it is clear that Lauren understands this as merely a conditional construction. Tuttle’s appearance, as is the case with spatial identifications, remains dependant on discourse, generated from the self. Towards the end of the novel we are told that Lauren “tried to remember what he looked like and then forgot his name” and remembers that “it wasn’t his name” anyway and merely “her name that she’d given him” (120). Giving him a name in order to make him ‘easier to see’ (based on his resemblance to an old science teacher) is the first of a number of attempts Lauren makes into order to impose some discursive framework on Tuttle, and fit him into a pre-existing ‘pattern’.

A number of her ‘interpretations’ of Tuttle can be viewed in relation to her own previous experience inside the home. When Tuttle states, for example, “I know how much this house. Alone by the sea” (48), Lauren takes it as a key into his perspective and an access to his interior world: “it was in fact, coming from Mr Tuttle, a formulation she’d heard in its echoing depths”. She also considers the illocutionary effect of his statement in spatial terms:

Four words only. But he’d placed her in a set of counter-surroundings, of simultaneous insides and outsides. The house, the sea-planet outside it, and how the word *alone* referred to her and to the house and the word *sea* reinforced the idea of solitude but suggested a vigorous release as well, a means of escape from the book-walled limits of the self (48)

Lauren's interest in this can be viewed as the establishment of a kind of spatial reciprocity: – Lauren reads into his words some basic confirmation of the intersubjective constitution of space. However she also acknowledges that “it was foolish to examine so closely. She was making things up” (48). Each attempt by Lauren to provide an explanation for who or what he is is dismissed as speculation. At this moment of heightened interpretation we see a kind of surrender of hermeneutic normativity to an acceptance of her role as addressee as mutually implicated in the communicative enterprise. Her retreat from this overt active participation can be read as a return to the normative situation in which the role of the addressee is actively discounted, allowing the maintenance of an illusion of unidirectional communicative transaction.

Lauren instead must engage in a more difficult process of interpretation: she must ‘read’ Tuttle in more open ways. At one point she thinks that she “began to understand what she was hearing” resulting from reflection on “whole social histories of how people listen to what other people say” (50). One such interpretation is that Tuttle inhabits a condition close to that of infancy. Initially mistaking him for a child (41), she repeatedly describes him as childlike. At one point, Lauren listens to him crying weakly, in which she hears “a desolation that swept aside words, hers or anyone’s” (90):

She didn't know what it meant. Of course she knew. He had no protective surface. He was alone and unable to improvise, make himself up. She went to the bed and sat there, offering touches and calming sounds, softenings of the night. He was scared. How simple and true. She tried to tend him, numb him to his fear. He was here in the howl of the world. This was the howling face, the stark, the not-as-if of things (90).

Thus, Lauren speculates that Mr Tuttle is outside the language system to a certain extent, outside textuality. Without the conventional use of language, he is similar to an infant at a prelinguistic stage, unable to establish discursive boundaries of identity⁷. However she immediately afterwards

⁷ Anthony Giddens cites Winnicott's description of the state of infancy, which is “all the time on the brink of unthinkable anxiety (cited in Giddens 39).”. As Giddens describes, at this early stage, the child is “not a ‘being’ but a going on being’ who has to be ‘called into existence’ by the nurturing environment that the

thinks: “But how could she know this? She could not.” Nevertheless, she attempts to ‘console’ him through a sexual act, which she seems to justify through a slightly bizarre application of some pre-existing norm of social behaviour that mixes parental behaviour with sexuality:

She uncovered him and lay on top. You are supposed to offer solace. She kissed his face and neck and rubbed him warm. She put her hand in his shorts and began to breath with him, to lead him in little breathy moans. This is what you do when they are scared (90).

This final sentence has a degree of irony, and can therefore be viewed in relation to her experience of her sudden loss of intimacy earlier in the novel, revealed to be unidirectional and unreciprocated.

Another such speculation is his idiosyncratic use of language which, she thinks, may cause a different interaction with space and time. When he “talked about objects in the room”, Lauren wonders “what he saw, or failed to see, or saw so differently she could never begin to conjure its outlines” (50). She hypothesises that “maybe this man experiences a kind of reality where he is here and there, before and after, and he moves from one to the other shatteringly, in a state of collapse, minus an identity, a language, a way to enjoy the savor of the honey-coated toast she watches him eat” (65). If time and space are in part constructed in and by language, then his failure to use language, Lauren speculates, could enable an entirely different experience of being. She thinks that “[t]here has to be an imaginary point, a nonplace where language intersects with our perceptions of time and space, and he is a stranger at this crossing, without words or bearings” (99). She also considers the possibility that

He didn’t know how to measure himself to what we call the Now. What is that anyway? It’s possible there’s no such thing for those who do not take it as a matter

caretaker provides” (39). He writes how “[t]he discipline of routine helps to constitute a ‘formed framework’ for existence by cultivating a sense of ‘being’ and its separation from ‘non-being’ which is elemental to ontological security” (39). Caretakers are responsible for the experience of trust’ which Giddens argues provides “a sort of emotional inoculation against existential anxieties”, bracketing off an inherent sense of risk and danger in interactions with one’s surroundings. (Giddens 39-40).

of faith. Maybe it was a physicist she needed to talk to, someone, she wasn't sure, who might tell her what the parameters were (67).

If, as Lauren speculates, there "is no sequential order except for what we engender to make us safe in the world", then by remaining outside normal language, Lauren considers that he may even inhabit a position outside time itself (83). Considering Tuttle's "walking talking continuum", Lauren contemplates this word, which meant "a continuous thing, a continuous whole, and the only way to distinguish one part from another, this from that, now from then, is by making arbitrary divisions" (91). She even considers that he may potentially have the ability to predict the future, and experience past and future as a kind of co-presence.

However she once again rejects this idea, thinking that "it can't be true that he drifts from one reality to another, independent of the logic of time." (92). Her interpretations of Tuttle can be viewed in relation to the experience of trauma that I outline above, consistent with her fascination with 'otherness' evident in the second chapter.

He also begins to impersonate voices and gestures, and for Lauren, his ability to replicate these so exactly means that he is not just impersonating these voices, but in some way becoming the people he impersonates: he becomes Rey "in his palpable verb tense". When he begins to speak in Rey's voice, she thinks that Rey "is alive now in this man's mind and body and cock" (87). While she later rejects the idea that Rey is "alive in this man's consciousness or in his palpable verb tense", in her speculations, the novel shows Lauren as having had the 'commonsense' view of individual identity as coextensive with the physical body disrupted (91). Instead, Tuttle reflects Lauren's preoccupation with a notion of identity as performative. She also repeatedly records Mr Tuttle's voice with a tape recorder. The recorded words, detached from physical presence, mirror Tuttle's impersonation of Lauren and Rey's voices; a detachment of voice from its original context. On the tape recorder she "hears herself say, 'I am Lauren,' like a character in black spandex in a science fiction film", continuing this notion of identity as a kind of performance.

Judith Butler's notion of gender identity as performative is therefore pertinent to this discussion. Culler outlines how, for Butler, this idea of identity as a "condition one enacts" is one established by repeated acts which "depend on social conventions, habitual ways of doing something in a culture". In this way, identity is a "reiterative and citational practice" (Culler *Literary Theory* 99).

Despite some of these speculations, however, at the end of the novel she considers that maybe it "was all an erotic reverie" and it remains a mystery exactly what he 'is'. Figured as peculiar kind of deficient interlocutory counterpart to Lauren – one who reveals to Lauren the provisional and frangible framework of discourse and the potential gap between utterance and communication – it could be argued that this question is beside the point. Either way a putative relational dynamic is figured (in the same way readers of texts only imagine themselves to be interacting with "characters") that elaborates on all discursive relationships, real or imagined. By only offering words (and no bodily signals) Tuttle in many ways resembles the interpretation of the novel itself. Tuttle turns Lauren into a 'reader', and draws attention to the 'readerly' quality of her relation to the world.

While Tuttle remains a mystery, I would argue that it is Lauren's internal journey that is most significant here; Lauren embarks not on a discovery of Tuttle but of herself. *The Body Artist* therefore depicts a character that processes a major disruption to her lifeworld. Just as intimate space is shown to be a co-production between willing partners, her husband's sudden suicide means that Lauren is forced to confront basic phenomenological issues of knowledge, both of objects and others *as* objects. Her 'working through' of these issues plays out in more manageable terms through the ambiguous figure of Mr Tuttle, who is a kind of externalized locus for performative interrogation, and is an exploration of the ways in which being is a kind of performance that plays out in the locutionary world.

This notion of identity as a process of ‘enunciation’ is also expressed in her artistic performance. Her work as a body artist means that the body in the novel is constructed as a space of expression. We could equally apply the model of spatialization: the body becomes a space which is the place of selfhood, established through its entry into language. However her body art seems to be on one level a denial of simple co-presence of the self with the body; that most intimate of spaces. During her practice, Lauren recalls how Rey once told her: “I think you are making your own little totalitarian society.... where you are the dictator, absolutely, and also the oppressed people, he said, perhaps admiringly, one artist to another” (57).

The Body Artist raises issues of knowledge not only of others, but of the self. The final paragraph of the novel describes Lauren opening the window, and we are told: “She didn’t know why she did this. Then she knew. She wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was” (124). The novel displays the realisation that identity is a process in part generated through forces outside the self, and that identity is constantly brought into being through language.

The performance can be seen as an expression of the way in which selfhood is a kind of performance. Her art performs the possibility of making her body bring into being other identities. In her ‘body art’, Mariella describes how Lauren “tries to shake off the body – hers anyway... She is acting, always in the process of becoming another of exploring some root identity” (104-5):

Hartke’s piece begins with an ancient Japanese woman on a bare stage, gesturing in the stylized manner of Noh drama, and it ends seventy-five minutes later with a naked man, emaciated and aphasic, trying desperately to tell us something (105).

Her performance displays the key components of performativity – of both voice and body. The fact that Lauren’s performance is described solely by an observer, Mariella, also raises questions about the extent to which this is also interpretation. Like “Body Time”, *The Body Artist* therefore

explores the impossibility of access to interior conditions and the ‘performance of identity’ and in this way “[w]hat begins in solitary otherness becomes familiar and even personal”. (109)

Philip Nel notices the similarities between the descriptions of Lauren working on her own body, and a writer carefully revising a manuscript (749). Several critics have also recognized the similarities between the descriptions of “Body Time”, Lauren’s performance, and the style of the novel itself, which could equally be described as “obscure, slow, difficult, and sometimes agonizing” (109). With this equation between bodily performance and textuality, Lauren’s performance can be read in metafictional terms; as an expression of the performative nature of space and identity in fiction. Like Mr Tuttle, literature ‘brings into being’ characters through the adoption of different voices. Just as Tuttle impersonating Rey leads Lauren to see him as the man himself, so too does the narrator use voice to construct fictional characters, even to construct worlds.

This reflects on the interpretation of the novel itself, demonstrating that any such linguistic interaction does not have to be about totalization and ‘complete knowledge’. The lack of psychological explanation for Lauren’s actions, particularly in relation to the novel’s philosophical questions, means that a reading such as this is forced to foreclose on the character as object, one which is ultimately unknowable. The interpretative gaps in *The Body Artist* are so significant that its interpretation can only ever be partial, contingent, and in this sense the reader is implicated in the same performative activity that Lauren is so preoccupied with.

Chapter Three: William Gaddis's *Carpenter's Gothic*

"Why, all this around us is for people who can keep their balance only in the light, where they move as though nothing were fragile, nothing tempered by possibility, and all of a sudden bang! something breaks. Then you have to stop and put the pieces together again. But you never can put them back together quite the same way. You stop when you can and expose things, and leave them within reach, and others come on by themselves, and they break, and even then you may put the pieces aside just out of reach until you can bring them back and show them, put together slightly different, maybe a little more enduring, until you've broken it and picked up the pieces enough times, and you have the whole thing in all its dimensions."

William Gaddis *The Recognitions* (113-14)

In my previous chapter I suggested that *The Body Artist* demonstrates how space, even at the most intimate levels of home and self, is always in the process of construction, an ongoing performance of conjugation of space and place. While Rey's action can be understood to undermine 'the home', Lauren's response is not to simply repair the "perceptual scrim" that Rey has damaged, but to incorporate this disruption as a kind of provisional and partial knowledge.

At the beginning of chapter 4 of *The Body Artist*, birds return as a symbol for the world outside of the known, reliable, and located, vectors that readily transect the established boundaries of the social. The birds, which come in and out of Lauren's life-world, or the "basic range of her worldly surround, the breadth of nature that bordered the house" (53), are a symbol of this unknown outside world; they "read a message in some event outside the visible spectrum" (53). The birds are cause for reflection of the limits of Lauren's knowledge of the space around her. At one point she notes a blurred movement in her peripheral vision, "eerie and birdlike but maybe not a bird":

She saw it mostly in retrospect because she didn't know what she was seeing at first and had to recreate the ghostly moment, write it like a line in fiction, and maybe it wasn't a sparrow but a smaller bird, gray and not brown and spotted and not streaked but not as small as a hummingbird, and how would she ever know for sure unless it happened again, and even then, she thought, and even then again (91).

Despite the indeterminacy of the initial moment of sight, Lauren is figured as "recreat[ing]" the movement as object related by narrativising, "writ[ing] it like a line in fiction."

There is a frequent association, in much spatial theory, between 'fixity' and representation, a suggestion that in our spatializations, as David Harvey writes, we "tame the spatial into the textual and the conceptual: into representation" (206). Harvey connects this desire for fixity in response to flux with the aesthetic. He argues:

Even the written word abstracts properties from the flux of experience and fixes them in spatial form. Any system of representation, in fact, is a spatialization of sorts which automatically freezes the flow of experience and in so doing distorts what it strives to represent (206).

This equation of spatialization with textual representation is similar to that made by DeLillo in "On William Gaddis". Describing Gaddis's unconventional style in *J R*, he reflects on how he initially thought "Gaddis was working against his own gifts for narration and physical description" However DeLillo remembers how he came to the realization that Gaddis's style could be seen as "the real world of its own terms, without the perceptual scrim that we tend to erect (novelists and others) in order to live and work safely within it" ("On William Gaddis" 149). DeLillo's parenthetical comment here implies that the erection of 'perceptual scrim' is not confined to the novelist's enterprise; it is something that individuals perform more generally. The metaphor suggests that the way that writers of fiction construct their fictional worlds is similar to the processes by which the social world is constituted for individuals.

Like *The Body Artist*, *Carpenter's Gothic* explores the conditions under which this construction breaks down. *The Body Artist* portrays a character who comes to understand her knowledge of the world as not merely a 'realization' but a production, a creation of that world through a reading of it in narrative terms. Through Lauren we see that immediate perceptual uncertainty is limited but not removed in this "reading" of the world. While fitting perceptual details to pre-existing narrative patterns might limit the possibilities of what specific details might mean, Lauren discovers that there are in fact many different types of narrative that might be made to fit material and experiential conditions. The figure of Tuttle precipitates this awareness through his capacity to disrupt the idea that such readings can be reliably validated on stable hermeneutic grounds. With reading thus relativised as a mutual co-production between reader and read, the extra-textual reader is also implicated in this process of post-facto construction.

Gaddis's novel also problematizes the fictional world for the reader, but in a different way. In *Carpenter's Gothic*, this is achieved predominantly through the dialogue-based style, and a significant reduction in the supply of detail from the third person narrator through which the reader usually constructs the contours of the spatial world that is assumed to be 'represented' by the text.

Like *The Body Artist*, the novel is set almost entirely in the home and focuses largely on the fortunes of a single woman - Liz - who experiences insecurity in relation to the world around her. Through Liz in particular, the difficulties of sustaining a space as intimate and domestic are dramatised. However while the challenge to the intimate and domestic is again predominantly the result of the actions of others, in *Carpenter's Gothic* this threat is expanded to include the actions of the world external to the home. The threat is portrayed as not merely deriving from the actions of single characters, but from the contemporary world more generally. Where in *The Body Artist* Rey's action causes Lauren to examine the basis of her own spatializing practices, *Carpenter's Gothic* promotes readerly identification with Liz to portray the home as a lost ideal.

As a number of critics note, any attempt to describe the plot of the novel is fraught, primarily due to the disjunctive nature of its presentation, and its many contradictions and ambiguities. In the novel largely unattributed dialogue predominates. The reader can, however, distinguish speakers in the novel by a process of deduction: there are few speaking characters, and each displays distinctive verbal habits and character traits.

Five speaking characters emerge for the reader: a married couple, Liz and Paul Booth; Liz's younger brother Billy; their landlord McCandless; and an old acquaintance of McCandless named Lester. The majority of the novel consists of the husband Paul coming and going, involved in various business schemes, and acting towards Liz in an insensitive and abusive manner. The other male characters also mistreat Liz; Billy generally turns up to borrow money and regularly criticizes her life, and McCandless comes and goes without offering any explanation for his movements. Even Lester, who turns up looking for McCandless, is aggressive towards Liz, accusing her of being merely McCandless's "latest" (37).

The accusation has a degree of irony: Liz eventually does have an affair with McCandless. This is shown to be a response to his demonstration of (a relative degree of) consideration towards her. However he also eventually thwarts her desire for intimacy, and is viewed by Liz as partly to blame for Billy's death towards the end of the novel. As Steven Moore points out, the opening image of young boys hitting a dead dove back and forth between them like a "battered shuttlecock" becomes an appropriate metaphor for Liz's role in the novel (125). Liz, the primary peacemaker and most sympathetic character, is used and abused by all the male characters of the novel until her eventual death towards the novel's end.

While what occurs within the house is (comparatively) clear in the novel, the dialogue that takes place there refers extensively to what occurs outside of it; the business dealings and political events that Paul is preoccupied with, the legal disputes and money problems their family is tangled up in, and the disputes in Africa to which both Paul and McCandless are connected.

The characters are variously implicated in the complex and turbulent political climate in which the novel is situated, and the novel concludes with the suggestion that the world is on the brink of nuclear war.

This nuclear context is focused on by Joseph Dewey, who discusses *Carpenter's Gothic* in relation to other literature that responded to the anxieties around nuclear threat in the 1980s. Dewey compares *Carpenter's Gothic* to DeLillo's *White Noise*, seeing them as two novels which are exemplary in their response to such conditions, particularly the ways in which both relate events of large historical significance to individual experience.

Nicholas Brown also argues that this can be viewed as the novel's strength. Brown invokes the common critical assessment of modernist literature as unable to accurately represent the relationship between the individual and the historical that characterized realism (153). The modernist preoccupation with fragments of everyday life, he contends, did not express the wider historical and political forces that underpin it. Brown's article thus focuses on the representation of the wider historical forces the novel refers to, including the novel's numerous references to Mozambique.

By contrast, Jeff Bursey and Anne Furlong argue that the setting of *Carpenter's Gothic* is its primary weakness. They argue that the strength of Gaddis's larger novels was the use of a variety of different character types and social situations which were underpinned by certain common features, enabling the reader to detect the "underlying patterns", and perform a diagnostic role towards Gaddis's fictional world. The more restricted setting of *Carpenter's Gothic* means the novel is a relative failure, as it cannot "comment persuasively on the global realities that truly concern Gaddis" (126).

Each of these critics therefore focus on the way in which the home is shown to be imbricated in wider socio-historical forces, however each take this political and historical world as

their focus. Other critics do adopt a more ‘universal’ (and a-historical) approach. Knight reads the novel in terms of characters’ attempts to assert order in the face of perceived disorder. Knight argues, for example, that “[d]omesticity may be a delicate order... but [in *Carpenter’s Gothic*] it may be the most viable order about”. (152). In a similar vein, Paul is a representative of the “paranoid mentality” (155), which McCandless also demonstrates at a basic level (156) . However Knight provides some historical evidence for the assertion that McCandless’s fears are the more credible, and that his knowledge is superior. Providing a sensitive reading of a variety of themes and motifs in the novel, he concludes that the novel is “constructed not only on the principle of the dialogic, but also (and without contradiction) on the notion, Gaddis says, of a timeless “unity”.

In the end, however, we ourselves assume some interpretative responsibility. We may prefer one character’s reading of reality more than another’s, or we may prefer a second or third possibility, including elements not mentioned. But while our beliefs differ, I suspect that most readers will agree that Gaddis, in *Carpenter’s Gothic*, leaves the question of final determinations open, and that only those who think otherwise will experience the novel as “savagely pessimistic” (200).

Knight’s reading thus hinges on related conceptual issues which form the primary focus of this thesis: spatial indeterminacy, moral evaluation and fictional critique.

Steven Moore and Gregory Comnes both argue that the difficulty of the plot is a reflection of the indeterminacy of contemporary existence, and that the novel positions itself against self-certainty and absolutist thinking in the face of such conditions⁸. Moore examines the variety of uses of the word ‘fiction’ in the novel, particularly in relation to the writer figures in the novel, as well as various characters’ different attempts to sustain sense of the world’s coherence.

⁸The overwhelming negativity of the novel is only compensated for, Comnes argues, by the way in which it “teaches” the reader (16). He argues that “revealed truth” and “cynical humanism” both “lose” as values in the novel, and that the novel offers a “third alternative” only by following allusions to V.S. Naipaul, Robinson Jeffers, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and reading their fiction (and theories) further. He argues that “the allusions to Hopkins (and to Jeffers and Naipaul) function as facts, transcriptions of real theories whose function in *Carpenter’s Gothic* is to remind reader’s how they must act, believe and use language to recover meaning outside of narrative interpretation, in the real world” (23). Comnes’s expectation that ‘the reader’ will track down these allusions, follow in his own conceptual footsteps, and come to the same complex conceptual realization seems particularly problematic.

In this way, he argues that Gaddis suggests that “all the world’s a text... and all the men and women merely readers” (132-3).

My own approach suggests that the breakdown of the spatial is one of the central themes of Gaddis’s *Carpenter’s Gothic*, a dark satire in which intimacy is shown to be under attack on almost every front, and which depicts a full-scale violation of the domestic sphere. This failure is represented in three ways: for the characters, an external world increasingly announces its presence within the home, and attempts to exclude it are repeatedly thwarted. The characters’ experience of unavoidable, pervasive and intrusive world events is paralleled in the reader’s experience of the novel. Finally, through the reader’s assumed identification with Liz, and the representation of the relations between her and the male characters in the novel, the novel shows how the values of intimacy are undermined. However an implied authorial position can be constructed that draws attention to this desecration of the intimate and the homely as a *loss*, and therefore indirectly reinforces its value.

For David Harvey, Heidegger is particularly influential in the development of historical and political arguments surrounding place construction. Describing place as “the locale of the truth of being”, Heidegger argues that ‘dwelling’ is being increasingly challenged by the increasing penetration of “technology, rationalism, mass production, and mass values” (12) into the everyday social life or ‘life-world’ of individuals (12). Heidegger writes:

All distances in time and space are shrinking. . . . Yet the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness; for nearness does not consist in shortness of distance. What is least remote from us in point of distance, by virtue of its picture on film or its sound on radio, can remain far from us. What is incalculably far from us in point of distance can be near to us. . . . Everything gets lumped together into uniform distancelessness What is it that unsettles and thus terrifies? It shows itself and hides itself in the way in which everything presences, namely, in the fact that despite

all conquest of distances the nearness of things remains absent (cited in Harvey
“From Space to Place and Back Again 9-10).

For Heidegger, according to Harvey, homelessness is more than a lack of physical shelter; it is a “much deeper crisis” of ‘rootlessness’, particularly through the influence of technologies of communication and representation (11). The reformulation of the relationship between physical and social proximity that characterizes contemporary existence, as Heidegger describes it, is thus a destabilizing influence on self-identity.

In Mark Devenney’s account Heidegger sees anxiety as a unique emotion that points to the condition of our ‘being’. Anxiety, for Heidegger, is “objectless” and “points toward selves that experience the uncanny” and “gives us the sense that we are no longer at home in our own homes” (Devenney “Lecture”). Similarly, it is the challenge to the ‘homely’ posed by modernity that underpins Anthony Vidler’s description of the emergence of the gothic genre and the *unheimlich* or ‘uncanny’. In *The Architectural Uncanny*, Vidler argues that the uncanny figures as a response to insecurity and a manifestation of psychological threat, “a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming” (11). Vidler connects the rise of ‘the uncanny’ in literature with the “fundamental insecurity” that arose from socio-historical changes. A common motif of early gothic literature was “the contrast between a secure and homely interior and the fearful invasion of an alien presence”, which Vidler argues can be related to factors such as the emergence of the bourgeois home; the encounter of social heterogeneity in urban experience, and other conditions of estrangement associated with modernity where social, cultural and economic relations were reconfigured (3-4). “*Das Unheimliche*”, according to Vidler’s account, is “a frame of reference that confronts the desire for a home and the struggle for its apparent opposite, intellectual and actual homelessness, at the same time as revealing the fundamental complicity between the two...”(12).

Vidler suggests that the uncanny is particularly relevant to architecture as it is the physical location for the violation of traditional symbolic boundaries of identity: both with the house which “pretends to afford the utmost security while opening itself to the secret intrusion of terror” and the city “where what was once walled and intimate, the confirmation of community... has been rendered strange by the spatial incursions of modernity” (11). The ‘uncanny’ is thus not entirely separate from the home but arises from the idea of the home itself; it is that which threatens the security of the intimate, and which disrupts the stability of its identity.

In my previous chapter I discussed *The Body Artist* in terms of the figuration of the home as space in which the limits of selfhood and intimate relations are dramatised. However where the references to the external world remain a background presence in *The Body Artist*, in *Carpenter’s Gothic* the intrusive effects of the world are repeatedly asserted by the novel, comprehensively undermining any sense of intimacy there. As the title ‘Carpenter’s Gothic’ suggests, the novel links the ‘Gothic’ a literary genre in which the unknown, the mysterious and the threatening prevail, and the construction of the home. In particular, *Carpenter’s Gothic* invites a consideration of the ways in which the home is a projected, spatialized quality.

The opening paragraphs of *Carpenter’s Gothic* introduce the main ways in which the security of the ‘homely’ is portrayed as challenged by the external world in the novel. As with *The Body Artist*, intimacy is challenged through the limits of the characters’ knowledge in relation to the world around them. At the beginning of this chapter, I described how the use of bird imagery in *The Body Artist* functions as a metaphor for the external world outside the known, reliable and located. The opening of *Carpenter’s Gothic*, also features a woman, looking out of her home, trying to discern an ill-defined shape:

The bird, a pigeon was it? Or a dove (she’d found there were doves here) flew through the air, its colour lost in what light remained. It might have been the wad of rag she’d taken it for at first glance, flung at the smallest of the boys out there

wiping mud from his cheek where it hit him...a kind of battered shuttlecock moulting in a flurry at each blow, hit into the yellow dead end sign on the corner opposite the house where they'd end up that time of day.

The twilight environment (in contrast to the strong bright day of *The Body Artist*) causes Liz's perception and knowledge of the outside world to be limited. The world around her is portrayed as indeterminate to her under these conditions, and the description of the boys outside performing some unknown activity is the first of Liz's numerous encounters with strangers that occur throughout the novel.

These occur most frequently in the novel through the ever-intrusive phone calls, one of which she answers immediately following her observation of the boys at play. The phone conversation is typical of the majority of the phone conversations in the novel; identities are mistaken, details are confused, and interaction is disharmonious:

Hello? She said, -who...? Oh yes, no, no he's not here he's... No I'm not, no. No, I'm... Well I'm not his wife no, I just told you. My name is Booth, I don't even know him. We've just... Well, if you'll just let me finish! We've just rented his house here, I don't even know where Mister McCandless is I've never even met him. We got a card from him Argentina that's all, Rio? Isn't that Argentina? No it was just a card, just something about the furnace here it was just a postcard. I'm sorry, I can't help you, there's somebody at the... No I have to go goodbye, there's somebody at the door (2).

The telephone is one of the many ways the presence of the geographically distant is announced within Liz's life-world, and her somewhat dysfunctional relationship to it is further developed by her mistaken belief that Rio is in Argentina. Like the internet link to Finland in *The Body Artist*, communications technologies link the home to the strange and unfamiliar, and such technology is shown not to bring her closer to these unnamed others but to emphasise the social distance that lies between them.

As Liz mentions on the phone, the home she lives in is owned by an initially mysterious figure named McCandless. Liz rents the house off him without ever meeting him, until he suddenly shows up, and proceeds to arrive and leave with little explanation. Liz is unable to bring her own furniture in, as the place is still filled with his ex-wife's furniture, and Liz repeatedly expresses her wish for the house to feel more like her own, despairing at how the "whole place looks like [the ex-wife] walked out for lunch and expects to be back for dinner" (22). Forced to put her own furniture in storage, she later discovers that her possessions have been sold because she and Paul are unable to pay the cost of storage, and Liz and her husband struggle to pay the landlord the rent. While they remain physically sheltered throughout the novel, the insecurity of the tenancy of their home is a further way that the novel portrays the deeper, emotional homelessness that Marx and Heidegger describe. Liz is unable to achieve the distance from the economic world she desires.

For Bauman, modern conditions are unique in that "the coordination between physical and social/cognitive proximity is broken. Aliens then appear physically within the life-world" (152). As Bauman argues, this means an increased contact with 'the stranger'. Bauman describes the psychological threat that the encounter with the stranger produces, as a "threat to classification...to the order of the universe, to the orientation value of social space – to my life-world as such...The 'strangeness' of strangers means precisely our feeling of being lost, of not knowing how to act and what to expect, and the resulting unwillingness of engagement" (149-50). As Vidler notes, the hostility towards the stranger is clearly detectable in Marx's description of how emergence of the rent system contributed to the alienation of the working class. In *The Economic and Philosophical Notebooks*, Marx declares:

the cellar-dwelling of the poor man is a hostile element... a dwelling which he cannot regard as his own hearth – where he might at last exclaim: "Here I am at home" - but where instead he finds himself in *someone else's* house, in the house of a *stranger* who always watches him and throws him out if he does not pay his rent (cited in Vidler 5, emphasis in original)

The feeling of security and control provided by the home, and the desire to exclude the external world is to a certain extent sundered by an economic dependency on a relatively unknown other.

The encroachment of an unknown external world is shown to be unsettling for Liz. In the opening scene, while hanging up she sees “somebody hunched down, peering in where she’d stood staring out there a minute before”, and the figure comes in the door without knocking, despite Liz’s protestations. When it turns out to be her brother Billy, Liz’s expression of relief is marked:

I didn’t know who you were out there. Pushing open the door you looked so big I didn’t, how did you get here?”

[...]

I’m just, I’ve just been nervous. I’ve just been very nervous that’s all and when I saw you out there I, when you say Adolph sent you I thought something’s wrong. Because something’s usually wrong (2-3).

The anxiety she expresses seems clearly linked to her limited knowledge, and a fear that the outside world is the source of problems that, given this limited knowledge, she cannot adequately respond to. When Billy leaves she asks him to first get the mail for her, indicating a significant disinclination to go outside (9).

As both Moore and Dewey recognize, the Gothic functions in the novel as more than just the use of recognizable generic features; it is linked to the state of mind of the characters. Whereas Moore argues that this demonstrates “the spiritual isolation of the individual in society” (118) and Dewey sees it “as a model of the long-feared nuclear apocalypse” (60), I argue that the gothic is employed primarily to depict the *unheimlich* aspect of contemporary existence. As Dewey claims, Gothicism emerged historically as a response to the threat to “bourgeois reality” and the sense “that it is merely a tenuous element in a far vaster, more threatening cosmos” (60).

Both *The Body Artist* and *Carpenter's Gothic* employ gothic motifs, and in both they connect the 'uncanny' with the threat to the homely posed by contemporary existence. As in *The Body Artist*, *Carpenter's Gothic* uses various forms of media to inform the characters of the physically and socially distant, juxtaposing these details with the intimate domestic routines. In *Carpenter's Gothic*, a rare piece of narration describes how the radio "warned" Liz that "five million Americans had diabetes and didn't know it and that she might be one of them" as she attends to various domestic tasks (105). *The Body Artist* represents a similar contrast between the physically immediate details of everyday life, while at the same time being mentally alerted to distant obscure threats through media forms: Lauren is described reading an old newspaper, where "you look at a page and distinguish one line from another it begins to gather you into it and there are people being tortured halfway around the world, who speak another language... and then you stop, seeing whatever is in front of you at the time, like half a glass of juice in your husband's hand" (19). In *Carpenter's Gothic*, an old newspaper catches Liz's eye, and she sees "[y]esterday's headline or the day's before, of no more relevance then than now in its blunt demand to be read, building the clutter, widening the vacancy, driving it elsewhere, anywhere, the still embrace of the armchair beyond the hearth... (29). The newspaper at once builds the mental "clutter" and, paradoxically creates a sense of "vacancy", undermining the home through the incursion of an exterior world.

The chapter featuring the most recognizably gothic features cements this association between gothicism, indeterminacy, and disorder, depicting a stormy night on Halloween, where Liz observes a "black rage of crows" and "flurrying" limbs outside (116). Liz attributes her anxiety to "the mess out there, Halloween out there" and McCandless replies "like the whole damned world isn't it" (118). When she checks the mail, some youths place a pornographic image in her mailbox, she is harassed on the phone by someone asking for her brother, and someone again comes to the door, "peering in". Unhomeliness (the gothic condition) is the means by which the novel represents how world disorder has stormed the self's last bastion. After McCandless walks around his house, observing the physical clutter inside the home, the narration

is interrupted from lines quoted from V.S. Naipaul, which describe a “*vision of disorder which it was beyond any one man to put right.*”(150)

Carpenter's Gothic's depiction of the uncanny is thematically related to contemporary conditions; a general phenomenon which describes the way in which our idealizations of ‘home’ are challenged, and where the spatialized environment of security suddenly becomes ambiguously sinister or threatening. The media forms which are described in the home are often described in terms of threat by these occasional passages of physical description that are interspersed throughout the novel. In particular, a Natural History magazine which features an African “Masai warrior” with an “unwavering leer” on its cover is alluded to throughout; the narration describing, for example, how “TEARFUL MOM wailed mute from the coffee table where Town & Country lay menaced by the Masai in a glint from the streetlight” (93). Causing a ‘presencing’ of the physically and culturally distant, technologies of representation in the novel smuggle in an alienating uncanny which unsettles attempts to stabilize the identity of the house as ‘home’.

There are some particularly striking parallels between *Carpenter's Gothic* and *The Body Artist*, particularly in the way they connect the exterior world's presence with psychological threat for the female protagonist of the novel. The relationship between close knowledge and psychological security provides a useful basis for understanding the indirect characterisation of Liz and Lauren; explaining the insecurity each displays towards her life-world. In both, bird imagery is suggestive of the limits of the characters' knowledge. In both, technologies of communication and representation link characters to an unfamiliar and only partially known outside world which they struggle to “read”, making the intimate space of the home “unhomely” with the defamiliarisation of the familiar, the gothic gesture. The Gothic is thus a generic mode which represents a condition whereby external forces challenge the identity and security of a socially spatialized environment.

However one of the most significant points of difference between the two novels is the ways in which the ‘vision of disorder’ is communicated to the reader: in the two novelists’ divergent use of narrative technique. Through *Carpenter’s Gothic’s* unconventional narrative discourse, the reader is made aware of the extent to which he/she is equally complicit in this process of projection and performative construction. However far from being an exceptional case, the reader’s activity in relation to *Carpenter’s Gothic* invites reflection on the processes by which fictional space is constructed more generally.

W.J.T. Mitchell argues that “certain aspects of literary experience insist on being regarded in spatial terms” and suggests different levels of spatial form. The second level refers primarily to the ‘descriptive’ aspect of a fictional work; the “world which is represented, imitated, or signified in a work” which is “clearly a spatial realm that has to be constructed mentally during or after the temporal experience of reading the text, but it is none the less spatial for being a mental construct”. Mitchell notes that, “the world of ‘real’ space, as perceptual psychologists have shown, is also inseparable from mental constructions and is also revealed to us in time”. In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale outlines theories of literary ontology consistent with a reader’s intuitive sense that fictional texts “project objects and worlds”. McHale summarizes Roman Ingarden’s argument that the fictional world is constructed through ‘ontological layers’. In the ‘stratum of meaning units’ the reader uses the meanings of nouns to “actualize part of our concepts of objects” (31). Such signification is then the occasion for the individual reader’s imaginative projection of objects and worlds, the construction of the “stratum of presented objects”. As McHale summarizes:

In the aggregate these presented objects constitute an “ontic sphere” of their own – a world. This world is partly indeterminate: “It is always as if a beam of light were illuminating a part of a region, the remainder of which disappears in an indeterminate cloud but is still there in its indeterminacy”... Linguistic categories abstract properties from the flux of experience and the world they project is not a

completely filled-in picture but more like a connect-the-dots puzzle, a grid through whose interstices the concreteness of the real world inevitably escapes (31-2).

McHale regards the house as a classic example of the 'cloudy' nature of fiction's ontological structure, how in fiction "all houses... are partly specified, partly left vague" (32). The reader's own store of (culturally generated) spatial knowledge and experience supplies these features, filling in those gaps which the novel leaves open.

While the most notable stylistic feature of *Carpenter's Gothic* is its use of dialogue to generate much of the plot, there are still some significant sections of narration in the novel. These are predominantly focalized through the perceiving character in the novel, giving a sense of proximity which is frequently enhanced through the use of free indirect discourse:

The bird, a pigeon was it? or a dove (she'd found there were doves here) flew through the air, its colour lost in what light remained. It might have been the wad of rag she'd taken it for at first glance... (1).

As in *The Body Artist*, the representation of space in these passages of description is restricted to the cognitive limits of the character; the "indeterminate cloud" of the fictional world in the novel remains particularly thick⁹. This is reinforced by the narrative description on the second page, where the character's 'line of sight' is described: "Somebody hunched down, peering in where she'd stood staring out there a minute before, *a line straight through* from the kitchen past the newel to the front door fitted with glass, shuddering open." Other descriptions in the novel reflect the indeterminacy of the characters' perceptions of the world, such as the description of Liz "standing there in the doorway, quelling the tremor in an empty hand seizing it on the knurl of the sideboard, piano, whatever it was..." (178). While *Carpenter's Gothic* does have the narrator provide some framing information as to the contours of the fictional world, it is generally kept to a bare minimum, and highlights the extent to which a reader supplies imaginative lineaments to join the dots.

⁹ The exact nature of the bird or "wad of rag" outside is not explained until the conclusion of the opening chapter, where the reader learns that "It was a dove" (24).

In Mieke Bal's *Narratology*, "place" in fiction refers to "the topological position in which the actors are situated and the events take place". This is constructed through "our imaginative faculty" – particular objects and points of perception are brought into relation with one another through the reader's own spatial imagination (133). An important way in which place is constructed in *Carpenter's Gothic* is through what Bal terms 'the frame', in which the reader constructs the boundary that establishes the "space in which the character is situated, or is precisely not situated" (134). This concept of 'the frame' is analogous to the relations of 'interiority' and 'exteriority' elaborated in relation to identity in *The Body Artist*. Beyond merely delimiting the spatial dimensions of the presented environment, literature incorporates (and generates) the symbolic associations of the relations of interior and exterior in a culture.

As Christopher Knight points out, words which delineate relations of 'inside' and 'outside' are used with great frequency in the opening scene: "out", "in", "door", "open," "inside," "closed" (162). Narrative description routinely (if barely) deploys these spatial markers, enabling the reader to construct the fictional world. Some of these include Liz looking outside from within the house (1, 58, 254) her returning to the house and closing the door behind her, (25, 218), getting dressed and going downstairs (96), her glancing outside while in bed (151), the "red glare" from the alcove windows which suggests "the sun's rise on the river below"). Such markers constitute interiority through an anxious or intrusive awareness of its other.

While the reader's ability to construct the spatial contours of the fictional world is problematized, the physical structure of the home is relatively stable and uncontested for the reader. This is contrasted, in the novel, with the external world, which is almost entirely indirectly represented through character dialogue, and is frequently confusing and ambiguous. In this way, the opposition between 'space' and 'place' in the novel is reinforced by the nature of the narrative discourse of the novel. While the narration plays a significant role in the construction of the space of the novel, the primary means by which the fictional world is generated in the novel is through the indirect references in the characters' dialogue. Indeed the attempt to provide a plot

that fits with the variety of characters and events referred to is one of the reader's main activities; establishing the relationship between the variety of people and situations referred to is no easy task.

By setting up these relations of 'inside' and 'outside' through the narration in the novel, the novel creates a kind of spatial opposition in terms of the reader's plot construction: the interactions and relations inside the house on the one hand, which the reader can construct relatively easily, and the complicated web of relationships and events which the characters refer to outside the house, which are particularly difficult to understand. As Moore argues:

Paul's refrain "fit the pieces together you see how all the God damn pieces fit together" doubles as Gaddis's instructions to the reader. ...Even after multiple readings, several events remain ambiguous, sometimes because too little information is given, sometimes because there are two conflicting accounts and no way to confirm either. As Paul explains later, "pieces fit together problem's just too God damn many pieces (104).

Carpenter's Gothic employs such spatial relations - 'inside' and 'outside', 'interior' and 'exterior' – to contrast the interior with the exterior.

Bursey and Furlong argue that the relative failure of *Carpenter's Gothic* lies in the reader's activity in the novel. They describe how Gaddis's signature device is repetition, which enables the reader to gain a sense of the dominant features of the world he represents. Whereas in his larger novels the reader is able to see specific character traits in a variety of different characters, and therefore see them as a product of their cultural context, in *Carpenter's Gothic* the reader's primary activity is the construction of a few characters (127). Bursey and Furlong argue that the novel is a 'relative failure', which resulted from an "unforeseen consequence" of Gaddis's decision to restrict the scope and setting of the novel to a single home, where "much of the action in these kinds of works occurs off stage, reported rather than witnessed" (124). Bursey and Furlong suggest that the failure of *Carpenter's Gothic* is its descent from "the mountaintop" to "the plain";

from a position where features can be seen to “extend[] beyond the individual, or even the group, to the culture itself”. They argue that the repetition of particular character traits “acts as a form of amplification; each separate instance of similarity supports the development of a comprehensive theory about the root causes of duplication. The variety of cases is an illusion: they are in fact all versions of a single type” (132).

However one could equally argue that this ‘shift to the plain’ exhibits a refusal to treat the author’s own vision as authoritative, and a thematic shift on the ethics of large-scale generalisations about the culture at large. I would suggest that it is just such a mountaintop position that *Carpenter’s Gothic* satirizes in the character of Paul. With his incessant repetition of the phrase ‘same goddamn thing’, Paul is a character all too willing to see a variety of characters as various manifestations of ‘a single type’. After encountering Billy, he rants:

Rock bands, queers, spades out there dealing drugs and all this Buddhist crap you know he just tried to pull that on me again out there? that Karma crap he got from those Tibetan creeps he had following him around? Same thing Liz the same God damn thing, that greasy little burr head monk in the red blanket doing him a favour taking his money same God damn thing, giving him a chance to show his contempt for the money, show his contempt for the people he gives it to and the system it came out of like all these god damn kids parading around with their guitars and their hair died pink.... (18)

Paul is a character whose obsession with attempts to “get something going”, to set up a business and establish himself, means that he behaves in deceitful and inconsiderate ways towards those around him. His response to Liz’s objections to his behaviour is to assert the importance of his own priorities: the political and economic situation he is embroiled in:

Problem look, problem Liz you don’t try and see the big picture he came on scattering bills, envelopes, mailing pieces in thrilling colour, flushing the blank side of a letter opening Dear Friend of the Bowhead whale –look. He had a blunt pencil, - here’s Teakell... and a smudged circle appeared and shot forth an arrow... the

blob erupted – he’s all over the God damn country, constituency goes from way up here to all his blacks down here... a smudge unconnected to anything...

This attempt to provide the ‘big picture’ is later mistaken for the drawings of a child, suggesting the over-simplification and perspectival naivety of his representations, and his grasp on the entire situation seems tenuous at best. He attempts to set himself up in public relations for Reverend Ude, a fundamentalist preacher, who reduces the world into simplistic terms of good versus evil. Paul mishandles the situation throughout, and his combination of ignorance, hypocrisy and self-righteousness means that his various attempts to diagnose the economic or political situation come across as absurd.

In contrast to Paul, the landlord McCandless seems to be the voice of reason in the novel. Formerly a geologist, and writer of both fiction and non-fiction, he appears to have a solid grasp of the way the world works. However McCandless has his own set of obsessions and preoccupations linked to his own experience, what he sees as the ignorance and stupidity of the rest of the world, particularly those who hold religious beliefs. Like Paul, McCandless is also prone to ‘mountaintop’ judgements of the problems with culture: A man of science, McCandless is particularly enraged by the form of Christianity embodied by Reverend Ude, of those supposedly “defending the Bible against the powers of darkness”:

-It’s all just fear... just this panic at the idea of not existing so that joining that same Mormon wife and family in another life and you all come back together on judgement day, coming back with the great Imam, coming back as the Dalai Lama choosing his parents in some Tibetan dung heap, coming back as anything – a dog, a mosquito, better than not coming at all, the same panic wherever you look, any lunatic fiction to get through the night and the more farfetched the better, any evasion of the one thing in life that’s absolutely inevitable...

However setting aside the content of belief, the structure of rectitude is nearly identical; as Dewey notes, these men are both “adamant” and “unyielding”, McCandless and Ude are each

“convinced that moral rectitude rests with his position, and willing to immolate the world rather than alter that position” (62)

Despite subtle differences, these similarities are suggestive of an implied authorial position. As Bursley and Furlong note themselves, the identification of ‘repetitions’ in fiction is one of the primary means by which an implied authorial position can be argued for; repeated utterances “contribute actively to the construction of the core set of assumptions by which the entire text is interpreted, and so add to our apprehension of the writer’s more complex intentions” (124). They also note repetitive behaviour can be clearly detected in the novel, giving as an example the fact that “all three men harangue Liz. Paul and McCandless are especially fond of outlining how the world works, usually in language evoking blood, meanness and violence” (125)¹⁰ Despite this evidence of critical disapproval from within the text, however, Bursey and Furlong still maintain that Gaddis is himself committed to showing how “the world works”, and that by sticking to only a few characters, he is unable to achieve what they speculate are his “thematic concerns and preferences” (131): the “systems” that underpin culture. I would argue that *Carpenter’s Gothic* is interesting precisely because the target of its satire is the very broad-brush generalisation found in his other fiction, particularly *J R*, the novel that preceded it. *Carpenter’s Gothic* shifts the attention of the reader from the content of each character’s cultural beliefs, to the performative effects of their stubbornness on those around them. The novel thus can be viewed as a slight shift away from the political concerns of his fiction to some of the ethical issues that underpin them.

Furthermore, rather than the novel representing a particular character’s beliefs or position as authoritative, in *Carpenter’s Gothic* each character’s worldview appears limited and determined by biographical experience, and a function of perspective. Given the lack of intersubjective accord between perspectives, the home becomes a battleground, where conflicting

¹⁰ As Bursey and Furlong note, Liz repeatedly draws the reader’s attention to the behavioural similarity of the men despite their ideological differences. She accuses Paul: ‘you sound you sound the same you sound exactly the same the only difference is he says your God damn brother and you say fucking Paul but it’s the same, if I closed my eyes it could be either one of you’. (125)

views as to its use and nature are disputed. This is primarily explored through the actions of Paul towards Liz. While the novel suggests that Paul is physically abusive towards Liz before the novel begins (9), the main form of abuse towards Liz in the novel is symbolic and/or emotional. In particular, Paul prevents Liz from establishing a stable domestic existence.

Liz's married name – 'Booth' – is suggestive; Paul's sense of her is as instrumental as his view of the house: "just a place to eat and sleep and fuck and answer the telephone". Paul rationalises the house as a part of a developing economy, his attempt to "get something going", and his violation of common cultural beliefs in a public/private divide are comically portrayed throughout the novel. Paul treats Liz like a secretary, describing a conversation with her as "a breakfast meeting" with his "staff", and expecting her to answer calls and take messages:

Look, Liz, we've got to get a system. At least you brought [the mail] in, good. Now there's got to be place for it...See that's what I mean. I mean if I'm going to run any kind of operation from here I can't be looking for the mail under a bag of onions. Did my check come?

Paul also mentions plans to convert Liz's family home into a media conference centre, and during sex with her, even the most private parts of her body are given a disturbingly public function:

Grissom wants a thousand dollars retainer plus disbursements against sixty percent of the settlement to handle it... he eased over her, eased down where his hand intervened, - asking half a million all depends on your airline suit... his hand withdrew to close on her knee – show the, show the shape you've been in since the crash I've, how I've been deprived of, does that hurt?

The "airline suit" he refers to relates to a plane crash Liz was involved in, an accident which has left her with significant medical problems which impact on her sexual performance. Paul responds by suing the airline company for a "loss of marital services". Paul's actions continually frustrate Liz's desire for intimacy and the construction of the physical house as a space of intimate domesticity: a home.

By contrast, Liz's attraction to McCandless makes sense on the basis of the (minimal) care and interest he offers her. McCandless' acquaintance with Liz, though, is also described in terms that show scant distinction between person and place: McCandless "came in looking past her, looking over the room and the things in the room the way he's just looked at her, looked her over getting her in place, getting things located". He also treats her in instrumental ways and even his intimate actions constitute little more than a formal gesture. When he caresses her knee, the narrator implies that it might just as well as have been "a shoulder, an elbow, crossing a street, taking her arm to dinner as though they might have just met, a mere courtesy...." (156). In the description of his sexual encounter with Liz, he also continues to be preoccupied with his own obsessions. As always, the narration oscillates between distanced description and character consciousness using free indirect discourse. In the following example the intrusion of the (character specific) language of geological exploration in the description of McCandless' sexual exploration of Liz suggests the way he subordinates this intimate moment to his more worldly concerns:

-It's all just fear he said, -you think of three quarters of the people in this country actually believing Jesus is alive in heaven? And two thirds of them that he's their ticket to eternal life? Fingertips running light as breath down skirting the top of the rift, tracing down its edge

However while Liz displays a degree of tolerance towards this kind of behaviour she is clearly upset at McCandless when, after having slept with her, he calls her 'Mrs Booth'. Her desire for an intimate relationship is never reciprocated by any of the male characters.

The dynamics between characters in the novel demonstrates the way in which Liz's idealizations of 'home' are challenged, where the actions of the male figures refuse Liz's ability to maintain the public/private distinction and sustain a domestic mode of existence. The novel portrays the potential gap between the physical structure of the house and the rhetorical construction of the 'home'. In the novel, the physical qualities which for Lauren (and the reader)

are expected to facilitate 'domestic' life, are refigured in the sensibilities of the male characters, who view intimate space as inseparable from the wider world of politics, economics, and history. Liz demonstrates the most anger in the novel at McCandless, for his lack of consideration towards her continually frustrated desire for a home

Because when I woke up again that morning after I'd loved you and I knew you were in the house, I heard you cough downstairs and I knew you were here and it was the first time I, when I came up the that night in the dark and the lights were on and you were there in front of the fire, sitting reading in front of the fire because it had never been mine, it had never been like coming home. Because we've never had one... when I came down that morning and I knew you were here and I thought, and I felt safe (244).

The male characters' differing views as to the use of the space means that Liz's ability to sustain a 'home' is compromised, and renders it 'unhomely'.

This gap between physical structure and spatialization is revealed through the reader's access to physical descriptions of the house itself. Never described objectively, the house is described only through characters' descriptions and focalized narration, and each character's descriptions of the house reflect their own attitudes and desires. While Billy describes it as an "old dump" and "a heap", Liz describes it as "a beautiful old house". The description of the physical structure of the home by the characters can even be seen to be related back to the particular perspectives of the characters and their characterization. Looking at the outside of the house, Liz sees through the windows to the rooms inside and observes "an empty bookcase and sagging daybed in one and in the other a gutted chaise longue voluted in French pretension trailing gold velvet in the dust undisturbed since she'd stood there" (226-7) Moore notes how "perfectly this captures Paul and Liz's relationship: united under one roof, they are nonetheless divided by a wall of differences, his intellectual bankruptcy and lust caught by the empty bookcase and sagging daybed, her monied background and pretense to culture exposed by the chaise longue, 'neither of them really furnished' with culture, taste or education" (106). In his

description of the house, McCandless can also be seen to project his own attitudes: his cynicism and failure to achieve his own ambitions. Looking at the house, he describes

...a patchwork of conceits, borrowings, deceptions, the inside's a hodgepodge of good intentions like one last ridiculous effort at something worth doing even on this small scale, because it's stood here, hasn't it, foolish inventions and all it's stood here for ninety years... breaking off, staring up where her gaze had fled back with those towering heights and cupolas, as though for some echo; It's like the inside of your head McCandless, if that was what brought him to add – why when somebody breaks in, it's like being assaulted, it's the...

The house described as “like the inside of [his] head” lends itself to comparison to the description in *The Body Artist* of Lauren’s “space inside her head that was also here in front of her”. His comparison between the house being broken into and physical assault, establishes a metaphorical connection between the boundaries of the body and the boundaries of the home. Immediately after McCandless’s description, Liz looks at the ground around her, recalling how she had once looked “down on the greens of the lower lawn before they’d cried out their colours, before they’d seized separate identities....” (227). The natural imagery also is metaphorically related to self and space: the unity of the leaves on the lawn is undermined by each leaf ‘showing its colours’, just as the identity and function of the home is broken up by the various conflicting beliefs.

As I have argued, the identity of space can only be sustained by intersubjective agreement, and *Carpenter’s Gothic* dramatizes a situation in which this is broken down. Gaddis portrays space as a function of perspective, how a character’s view of the world is a product of their own biographical experience. Equally, *Carpenter’s Gothic* does not allow the reader a privileged perspective on the world outside but rather it is shown to be partial, a function of perspective. The reader must therefore equally realize that the nature and character of space is an active construction, rather than an inherent property. The reader only has access to the space of

the text through characters' perspectives, and thus must rely on their own descriptions in order to construct the space of the text.

Carpenter's Gothic therefore suggests that the way people view space is crucially related to their situation: to biographical experience. The 'desperate fictions' that constitute identity mean that space can be a site of contest. Like *The Body Artist*, *Carpenter's Gothic* portrays the home as a space of identity, of an interior 'us' versus an exterior 'them', and both novels represent further battles for control within that space, further struggles for identity. The identity of any space is contestable from both without and within.

Carpenter's Gothic portrays how the contemporary home is increasingly itself a "desperate fiction", representing the home as a lost ideal. This is through the reader's positioning in relation to the world of the novel: the reader sympathizes with the character of Liz whose desire for a home is repeatedly undermined.

Shortly after listening to Paul read out an article by Doris Chin, a journalist who seems to substantially twist events to alter their significance, the narrator describes Liz herself writing her own fiction, creating characters, "writing in other lives; through another woman for other women" (93). McCandless and Liz are both writers in the novel, and both write as a way of channeling their frustrated desires. Christopher Knight attributes Elizabeth's desire to write fiction to a belief that things could be brought into an "accommodating order":

If the world refuses to cooperate, there is always her fiction which, fleshed out by her hopes and her dreams, helps remedy the sense of "something missing" (247). "Here in her hands at least" there remains "some hope of order restored, even that of a past itself in tatters, revised, amended, fabricated in fact from its very outset to reorder its unlikelyhoods" (247).

Far from merely celebrating the compensatory power of fiction, the novel also explores the negative side of this kind of counter-discursive writing. The novel therefore explores the use of characters as mouthpieces, and the way a writer manipulates the world around them. In one of Paul's schemes, he attempts to get Liz to pretend she is a "good loving Christian mother" called Sally Joe, and get her to write a letter to help him. When she refuses on the grounds that it would be dishonest, Paul argues that her fiction writing is no less a deception:

Write a novel you make up these different characters? Put them in these situations getting rich, getting divorced, getting laid where they're talking to each other you pretend you're these characters so they sound real? Same god damn thing Liz (112)

Like Mr Tuttle impersonating voices, or Lauren 'performing' identities, *Carpenter's Gothic* explores ventriloquism as an oblique form of communication.

The ethics of political literature are also explored in the novel, in a rather oblique manner. In the argument between Lester and McCandless, Lester accuses McCandless of being "always smarter than everyone else" and that McCandless thinks that everybody else are "all just grasshoppers aren't they" (129). The comment, as Comnes notes, is one of a number of allusions to Robinson Jeffer's poem 'Wise Men in their Bad Hours', which describes the envy of intellectuals towards the "sleepwalking masses 'making merry like grasshoppers'". Steven Moore argues that McCandless's description of his novel as "just a footnote, a postscript" can equally be viewed as a description of *Carpenter's Gothic* itself (139). As I argue above, the novel can be understood as a satire of the very approach of his earlier fiction, the attempt to criticize society through the elaboration of broadly shared character traits.

Conclusion: *The Body Artist* and Gaddis's *Carpenter's Gothic*

The Body Artist portrays a house that was set in an unspecified isolated coastal location that the characters desire to be at a distance from social and economic forces. The novel represents a character, Lauren, and her desire to establish the house she rents as a private domain, an environment of intimate knowledge and security. The 'home', the novel demonstrates, is a socially spatialised environment, constructed through psychological and metaphorical meanings. The construction of this 'private' realm is shown to be on one level the desire for a demarcated space of social ownership; a desire for control over the physical location one inhabits. This is portrayed both in terms of economic control (the house is rented), and also a related kind of symbolic management of the meaning and use of the space. In the opening chapter of *The Body Artist*, this desire is reinforced by the characters' management of intimate relationships; while minor disputes for control are shown between Rey and Lauren, this is offset by a tacit agreement on the spatialised character of the environment they inhabit.

However the threat posed by the social world remains a constant presence throughout the novel. If the identity and nature of locations are intersubjectively constructed, then the 'other' becomes the source of both support and challenge to the psychological processes of spatialization. In *The Body Artist*, the primary means by which this is explored is through action of Lauren's intimate other, Rey, whose sudden, unexpected suicide can be viewed as in part a violation of the usual terms of close interpersonal relationships; his independent and unilateral action is striking in the way it displays little concern for its impact on others. In the novel, this causes Lauren to realise the fragile basis of her spatial knowledge, revealing it rather to be projections based on intersubjective negotiation rather than objective fact. As a result, Lauren invests her spatial experience in the remainder of the novel with a sense of contingency and subjectivity. While a relatively marginal presence in the novel, the social world outside the home also asserts its presence throughout. The occasional references to the outside world are portrayed

as both a threat to the social ownership and control that Lauren wishes to maintain, as well as a source of fascination as a site of 'otherness'.

Carpenter's Gothic explores similar concerns, yet more explicitly examines the fate of the home when its inextricable imbrication in external social and economic forces is acknowledged. *Carpenter's Gothic* explores the fate of the home in a late twentieth century context, in which a more and more pervasive external world is challenging the attempt to sustain such private and intimate idealisations of 'place'. In the novel, this challenge is in part merely through the actions of others, particularly the character of Paul, who obstructs Liz's attempts to establish a 'home' through his disregard of the norms of the public/private divide. While this is in part represented as a result of character action, the repeated invasion of the outside world through the ringing telephone, media, and the actions of strangers enables the construction of an implied authorial position that supports the idea of the home as a lost ideal, and the novel as a representation of the invasion of a sanctuary that is valued.

While the experience of insecurity that Gaddis portrays can be seen as an emergent feature of contemporary conditions, a celebration of place in response to spatial transformations and the breakdown of spatial barriers deserves further examination. While such places may provide psychological security and comfort, place-based identity is also necessarily exclusionary and potentially parochialist¹¹. While *The Body Artist* is less directly concerned with the effect of the home in the context of post-modern culture, the novel nevertheless explores the contingency of spatialisation. Furthermore, through details such as the Internet link to a highway in Kotka, Finland, there remains an awareness that the experience of 'place' is, with increasing frequency, reformulated in contemporary conditions. However while DeLillo recognizes increasingly, as Bill Gray states in *Mao II*, that "home is a failed idea" (92), his portrayal in both *The Body Artist* and *Underworld* remains more descriptive and ambivalent in its overall approach. By contrast, Gaddis sets up the private home as an environment increasingly threatened and undermined by an

¹¹ Harvey provides a useful overview of such arguments in "From Space to Place and Back Again", pp 7-12.

external public world. In *Carpenter's Gothic* the city, or public space in general, is figured as a “negative space” with respect to the domestic sphere, whereas in *J R*, Gaddis takes public space, the space of the city, as his explicit focus.

Tom LeClair in ‘The Art of Excess’ argues that *J R* deserves to be described as an example of “mastery” due to its sheer size and range, and that this kind of representation is increasingly necessary in the contemporary world, in which there is increased recognition that “Earth is an ecological whole, that its survival is endangered by its large-scale human control systems, and that postmodern American life is composed of multiple new relations among the local and the global, the personal and the planetary, the private and the multinational”. LeClair argues that novels such as *J R* are “masterworks” because they “flexibly employ postmodern methods to displace the priority of the individual and to deform the conventions of realism which encode an ideology of the local” and shift the reader’s attention “from the personal and local to the communal and the global” (*The Art of Excess* 2-3). While I am in accord with LeClair’s argument that novels such as *J R* and *Underworld* reflect an attempt to engage or represent collective conditions, I am more hesitant about an unqualified celebration of this attempt in political terms. Neither am I convinced, as I argue above, that Gaddis’s work challenges such an “ideology of the local” and the “priority of the individual”. Rather I argue that the satiric content of *J R*, like *Carpenter's Gothic*, is an attempt to reassert the importance of the individual, intimate and the local in the face of increasing anonymity and spatial dislocation.

Nevertheless, LeClair raises an issue that is particularly pertinent to this discussion; as I will demonstrate, the spatial representation rehearsed in the novel bears an important relationship to its portrayal of the relationship between the individual and the collective and between the interactions in ‘place’ and the spatial relations that support them. *J R* and *Underworld* both reflect the fate of spatialisation in the context of increasing interpenetration between individual and collective conditions: the encounter of numerous, anonymous others, the increasing presence of mass media and communications technologies in the ‘life-world’, and the emergence of different,

more volatile economic conditions, characterized by Harvey as one of 'flexible accumulation'. These changing individual experiences, as Harvey describes, contribute to an overall collective "condition of postmodernity", one in which 'spatialization' plays a crucial role.

Chapter Four: William Gaddis's *J R*

In 'Mr. Difficult', Jonathan Franzen caused a degree of consternation amongst admirers of Gaddis by publishing a relatively negative essay about his fiction. He described Gaddis as the classic example of the "status writer": one whose work is "quintessentially difficult" and someone who disdained what Franzen terms the "contract" model of authorship, where "the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of connectedness, to resist existential loneliness" (239). For Franzen, Gaddis's second novel *J R* is too bleak, and at times just too mentally taxing, to sustain a rewarding reading experience and that this 'violates... the categorical imperative for any fiction writer' (241).

It does not seem a particularly contestable assertion that the world that the reader encounters on opening *J R* is a negative one. The narrative style is even more demanding of the reader than *Carpenter's Gothic*, and this is seen by several critics (Franzen and DeLillo included) to be part of the point; the novel's difficulty is a reflection of an aspect of contemporary existence.

Set in a variety of locations around New York, the novel has been largely understood as a satire of an unwieldy collective world, and a portrayal of Gaddis's negative vision of urban and public life. However the textual indeterminacy that the reader experiences also problematizes the attempt to read the novel as a straightforward communicative act in this way. As a result, the means by which the novel represents space reflects the experience of space in contemporary conditions; the reader is more aware of their own processes of construction in relation to the text, and the way in which space is a performative projection, and a function of individual perspective.

In this way, spatialization offers a particularly useful and suggestive conceptual framework to apply to the novel. This framework is also highly relevant to the novel's portrayal of economic dynamics and corporate culture. Bearing a striking similarity to David Harvey's description of the shift in economic conditions at the time it was published, *J R* portrays

characters that experience the volatility of contemporary capitalism as disruptive and destabilizing to self-identity.

Among these, the artist characters have been read as consonant with Gaddis's attitudes. However here I am in accord with those critics who do not necessarily see the views and actions of these characters as endorsed by the novel. John Johnston and Stephen Schryer in particular provide persuasive arguments in relation to the characterisation of the artist figures, particularly their creative response to a sense of disorder or entropy in relation to the world around them. This reflects back on the project of *J R* itself, and issues surrounding the role of the artist in the context of late capitalism.

The most significant difference between *J R* and *Carpenter's Gothic* is the former novel's size and scope. Whereas in *Carpenter's Gothic* there are only five different character-voices directly represented and developed, in *J R* the list of characters runs well into double figures. At 726 pages it is nearly three times the length of the novel that followed it. LeClair, describes *J R* as a "masterwork", a novel that takes advantage of its medium in order to "represent large cultural and global wholes" (2). Earlier in his book, however, LeClair recognises the essential inaccuracy of his own description, correctly identifying such 'mastery' as an "illusion":

To be precise, no writer masters the world or even information. What he masters is synecdoche, the illusion that the parts he has selected, structured, proportioned, and scaled are appropriate substitutes in context for what could be a much larger set of parts, which in turn would only suggest, not exhaust, the whole of discourse (*The Art of Excess* 18).

LeClair then goes on to elaborate a brief theoretical account of fictional representation in which the reader 'fills in' the gaps of the fictional world in the process of reading the text, elaborating "the total synecdoche of the novel – how its information stands for all information about the world" (*The Art of Excess* 19).

LeClair's account also provides an explanatory basis for the common tendency to read *J R* as representing general, collective conditions. By taking numerous characters and plot-lines, and gathering them in the same novel, the reader's attempts to read the novel in terms of some unifying principle requires reading these characters in metonymic terms, as members of a collective. Bursey and Furlong align their own argument with LeClair's, suggesting that the characters of the novel are like a "field of wheat" which enables the reader to "see the wind". For Bursey and Furlong, by representing a "swarming cast" of numerous different characters, *J R* creates a "density of iteration", which allows the reader to see particular character traits as a product of collective conditions.

However the size and scope of *J R* is not entirely enabling for the reader; establishing a workable plot and character-list on the basis of the voices of the novel is difficult. Opening *Fictional Space in the Modernist and Postmodernist American Novel*, Carl Darryl Malmgren quotes a critic's claim that "few Americans will be able or willing to read *J R*" (116), and enumerates some of the demands made on the reader. With even less narration than *Carpenter's Gothic*, Malmgren suggests that the "seamless web" of voices requires the reader to engage in different types of "narrative management" just to read the novel (118). The first of such demands is the need to identify the "individual strands in the stream of voices" and establish who is speaking. This can generally be done only through close attention to the style and content of the speech itself, by "mastering various idiolectical codes" and identifying "linguistic idiosyncrasies" or "personal hobbyhorses". However as distinct from the shorter novel, the vast range of different characters means that the reader can at best sustain only a "managed and manageable fugue" (119).

Furthermore, unlike *Carpenter's Gothic* which is almost entirely set within a single house, *J R* is built out of conversations that take place in numerous different locations. Following various transitional passages, an attentive reader may have only a vague idea as to the new setting, and must actively concentrate in order to "locate and imaginatively reconstruct the fictional milieu" (120). The transition between such locations is achieved primarily through heterodiegetic

narration, written in a ‘fluid’ style which usually follows the movements of a character, object, or even a sound across space. Malmgren describes the narration as seemingly performed by a “mediating technological instrument” such as a camera “fitted with a kind of impressionistic lens” (120). Finally, the reader must establish the “general context(s) for the speech acts”, not helped by the disjunctive and confused communication between characters in the novel (121). While the reading of all novels involves some form of narrative ‘plotting’ of this kind, the extent of the experience of indeterminacy in *J R* means that the reader’s activity in relation to the novel gains a particular prominence.

Opening the novel, for example, the reader enters the fictional world in mid-conversation. It is not until some way into this conversation that they are able to identify the speakers and their topic of discussion: a lawyer, Mr Coen, attempting to obtain information from two elderly sisters, Anne and Julia Bast, in order to clarify the rather sordid family history of their family and settle the family estate (*J R* 1-11). The reader is then positioned with Mr Coen as he drives away from the Bast’s property and along the highway:

To the squeal of breaks, the car burst out into the world trailing a festoon of privet, swerved as the immediate prospect of open acres flowered in funereal abundance to regain the pavement and lose it again in a brief threat to the candy wrappers and beer cans nestled along the hedge line up the highway, that quickly out of sight ...
(17)

This continues for two lengthy paragraphs, before the car eventually travels into “the centre of town” where it passes “a man pasteled to match the furniture, crowding the high-bosomed brunette at the curb” (17-18). *J R* then shifts to the conversation that occurs on the street between the figures there:

-something, Mrs Joubert, something I’d mean to ask you but, oh wait a moment, there’s Mister Best, or Bast is it? Mister Bast...? He’s music appreciation, you know.
- He?

- What? Oh there, coming out? No, no that's Vogel. You know him, the coach?

Coach? Good morning . . .

- Good what? Oh, Whiteback. Good morning, didn't see you....

This conversation, between a few characters meeting by chance, is the first of a number of such (mis)meetings; the overall narrative of *J R* is built of a collection of similar social encounters across the city of New York: streets, train stations, schools, offices, among others. Rather than following the fortunes of a single character, the novel is built up from the intersections of the lives of numerous different characters, often with only an arbitrary social significance to each other¹². The structure of *J R*, built from a mass of different, singular voices which construct 'fictional place' for the reader through their conversations and interactions, is thus in close accord with De Certeau's account of city populations:

Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of these 'real systems whose existence in fact makes up the city'. They are not localized; it is rather that they spatialize (97).

The narrative style of *J R* accentuates our experience of a public world configured in just this way.

As I have mentioned, DeLillo believes that *J R* demonstrates "a writer of uncommon courage and insight discovering a method that would allow him to realize his sense of what the great world had become" ("On William Gaddis" 149). While the narrative technique of *J R* strays markedly from the conventions of the realist genre, DeLillo recognizes how its technique can be

¹² David Harvey, in *The Condition of Postmodernity*, argues that the question of the relationship between representation in the novel and changing economic conditions dates back to the end of the 19th century. Harvey describes how, for a number of novelists, the awareness of the increased interactions and economic interpenetration with the physically distant seemed to have "undermined the cogency and meaning" of realist fiction (*The Condition of Postmodernity* 265). He writes:

How was it possible, using the narrative structures of realism, to write anything other than a parochialist and hence to some degree 'unrealistic' novel in the face of all this spatial simultaneity? Realist narrative structures assumed, after all, that a story could be told as if it was unfolding coherently, event after event, in time. Such structures were inconsistent with a reality in which two events in quite different spaces occurring at the same time could so intersect as to change how the world worked (*The Condition of Postmodernity* 265).

described as *more* realistic in certain terms; it can be understood as “so unforgivingly real that we may fail to recognize it as such” (“On William Gaddis” 149).

Through its style, the novel foregrounds a particular aspect of the contemporary world; the “pigeon coop clutter” of the city in which numerous others are encountered with little background knowledge or contextual information. Richard Sennett defines the city as “a human settlement in which strangers are likely to meet” (cited in Livesey 69). *J R* can be seen as realistic in the context of a world where, as Daniel Bell argues, “reality is becoming only the social world”: where the relationship with others is “the most trenchantly opaque, resistant and unmanageable aspect of living experience” (17) (cited in Bauman 16). On reading *J R*, the ‘management’ of character identification becomes the reader’s primary activity; reading *J R* involves the repeated textual encounter with unknown others, and therefore mirrors an aspect of the mental experience of urban environments.

Furthermore, critical responses to *J R* have treated the novel as a negative portrayal of this world. The novel has been widely read as a work of satire or cultural criticism of some kind, with critics such as Tom LeClair arguing that *J R* “radically documents what it hates” and “relentlessly insists that readers occupy in fiction what they inhabit in America” (87). Before discussing the nature of Gaddis’s representation of city life, a brief theoretical account of city space is useful to provide historical context for the claims surrounding the novel.

De Certeau’s account of the anonymous others that inhabit the city collectively combining to form a ‘system’ relates in part to his distinction between the city and the home. We might say that what distinguishes the concept of home from public space is the limits it allows on ownership and control; what happens in the home is, to a variable extent, under individual control, or negotiated with intimate others, while the city is an environment of coexistence in which this influence is subordinated to the governed control of public bodies. In the city the

individual is more at the mercy of forces outside of their own control; the experience is of a 'system' built up from the multiple expressions of individual volition.

Written at the beginning of the 20th century, Georg Simmel's essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' has been highly influential in subsequent accounts of the experience of the city. Simmel argues for a correlation between the number of individuals interacted with and the nature of self-other engagements. An increase in the size of a social group means that "its immediate inner unity and the definiteness of its immediate demarcations against others are weakened and rendered mild by reciprocal interactions and interconnections..."(331). The increase in social numbers in a space of cohabitation causes a concomitant reduction of the expectations placed on others by members of the social group; as Simmel argues:

The smaller the circle which forms our environment and the more limited the relationships which have the possibility of transcending the boundaries, the more anxiously the narrow community watches over the deeds, the conduct of life and the attitudes of the individual and the more will a quantitative and qualitative individuality tend to pass beyond the boundaries of such a community (333).

There is a basic correlation, for Simmel, between "the increase in the size of the social unit and the degree of personal inner and outer freedom", one that is offset for Simmel by an increasingly impersonal, "objective" culture (334). As Ben Highmore contends in *Cityscapes*, "if it is the heterogeneity (and waywardness) of the city that is the cause of anxiety for some, for others it is precisely the social promiscuity of the urban that makes the city a source of possibility and hope"(8-9).

Simmel recognizes the psychological necessity of treating those one encounters in terms of relevance, with a "mental attitude" of "reserve". He argues that

"[i]f the unceasing external contact of numbers of persons in the city should be met by the same number of inner reactions as in the small town, in which one knows almost every person he meets and to each of whom he has a positive relationship,

one would be completely atomized internally and would fall into an unthinkable mental condition” (Simmel 331).

Simmel thus displays a level of ambivalence in his description of the city as social space. A place of close proximity to numerous others is indeed inimical to the formation of intimate relationships with all its inhabitants. However such an objectification of others, he suggests, may be also psychologically necessary, and the nature of urban engagements can have valuable consequences that can be given positive values, namely a degree of freedom from expectations.

Walter Benjamin makes a similar point in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”. Citing Friedrich Engels’s description of the city, he describes how Engels finds “something distasteful about the very bustle of the streets, something that is abhorrent to human nature itself”:

... are they not all human beings with the same characteristics and potentialities, equally interested in the pursuit of happiness? . . . And yet they rush past one another as if they had nothing in common or were in no way associated with one another. The greater the number of people that are packed into a tiny space, the more repulsive and offensive becomes the brutal indifference, the unfeeling concentration of each person on his private affairs. (cited in Benjamin 163).

Walter Benjamin is more equivocal in his response to Engels’s “moral” and “aesthetic” reaction, arguing that “the description lacks the skill and ease with which the *flaneur* moves among the crowd ... he may never have faced the temptation to lose himself in a stream of people” (162). In this way, Benjamin recognises Simmel’s argument that a breakdown in a sense of community also entails a degree of freedom from cultural norms and expectations, and facilitates the desire (even need) to be anonymous.

Engels’ fastidious distaste for the crowd seems consonant with critical arguments that find in *J R* a scathing attack on the ‘civil indifference’ of collective urban existence. Most critics readily agree that Gaddis’s novel develops an unequivocally negative picture of city life and the operations of mass society on individual experience. Indeed if a reader orients himself toward

the text in this way, many passages seem to offer a pointed critique of the conditions that city life imposes on its citizens. Take the following extract of the scene set in Penn Station:

..the train stopped, and started, stopped as though exchanging refuse from one teeming shore to the next.

-Watch out you stupid fuck you.

-Watch the doors there . . .

-Is this the Penn Station?

- Who you calling stupid you dumb fuck, you want me to bust your fucking ass?

Let them out there, let them out. . . resonant, unrelated, syllables blared from a loudspeaker, purse clutched her glance over a shoulder swept ahead ready when he turned square in his path steadied against a vending machine.

THE LORDS PRAYER

Use it as a Lucky Charm Medal

25c

OUT OF ORDER scrawled across it – sorry . . . he caught her elbow, - are you all right?

- I think I hurt my ankle, they're like animals I swear.

- Can't get you a lucky charm how about a drink. . . elbows found ribs and shoulders backs – place is like the dawn of the world here, this way... countless hands and unattached eyes, faces looking in different directions, rolled newspapers clutched and their wives' umbrellas, frankfurters redolent, a muffled explosion and falling glass (161).

The passage could thus be read as a negative portrayal of city life in the terms described above. Bauman describes how, at a certain level of scale, the individual experience of the crowd is less as “a collection of individuals” but an “indiscriminate and formless aggregate in which individuality dissolves” and in which “[d]e-faced, the formed – or the never-fully-formed- individuals blend in the homogenous compound in which [one's] life is inserted” (Bauman 155-6). The ease with which the characters lapse into a relation of open hostility suggests the “aversion and antipathy”

which for Simmel is “a natural defence against the dangers inherent in living with strangers”, where “repulsion and subdued hostility” make urban living “technically possible and psychologically bearable” (Bauman 156). The train station is a particularly characteristic space of the contemporary city, a space purely for transition, or what Marc Auge calls a ‘non-place’, an area “where people coexist or cohabit without living together” (220). The passage therefore supports a reading of an act of compassion in an otherwise self-interested environment, in which the aggressive and unsympathetic actions of the strangers in the crowd injure a defenseless young woman, and the sensitive artist (later evidence suggests the man is Jack Gibbs) moves to protect her. The two are set off against the brutal indifference and self-interest of the larger crowd.

Described by Gibbs as the ‘dawn of the world’, the scene seems straightforwardly to represent the worst aspects of urban life: the overcrowding and impersonal utility of a mass transit system leading to the aggressive and indifferent prosecution of self-interest, the brutality of which is highlighted by the brief focalization through a vulnerable woman and her erstwhile protector and sympathiser. Paraphrased in this way, it is a simple matter to argue for an implied authorial position that ‘sides with’ the compassionate and vulnerable against the aggressive mass.

However I would disagree with the assumption that limited narrational intervention immediately translates as unmediated access to a ‘fictional world’, free of authorial intervention. Such an attitude is evident in critics’ comments such as this from Gregory Comnes: “*J R* neither describes locale nor provides discursive transitions, scenes are not set in the novel, they occur, while the identification of topics, never mind their relative significance, is left *totally* to the reader” (162 emphasis added)."

It is salutary to attend more closely to the mechanism by which such a “self-evident” reading is mounted. The first and obvious assumption is that sympathy for two characters against the mass is generated through the provision of greater personal detail. Yet it is typical of the novel as a whole as it is in this passage, that it is difficult to exactly enumerate the characters, a

difficulty largely due to the lack of clear, direct attribution of speech to character. Instead we might say that speech *is* character; attribution is performed, as Malmgren notes above, by performing differentiations of tone and content in specific utterances. Breaking down the above passage into “voices” immediately makes evident some of the mechanics of this process of attribution:

Voice 1: “- Watch out you stupid fuck you.”

Voice 2: “- Watch the doors there . . .”

The convention of the dash distinguishes these utterance from each other. Whether it belongs to a character responsible for any of the other utterances remains an open question, only answered by various kinds of evidence found *in* those utterances. The content of *this* dialogue tells us that the second speaker is concerned for the safety of others (expressed in the imperative mood), averting others present to a risk posed by (probably, on the basis of the following) closing train doors. This could be taken to suggest someone in an official capacity (a guard, for instance) or merely a traveller concerned for the safety of others. This might be directed at a general group or a single person.

Voice 3: “Is this the Penn Station?”

Once again this is differentiated from the preceding and subsequent voice(s) by conventions of dialogue. Could this be a further utterance of voice 1? The fact that the speaker articulates a question shows them to be unfamiliar with the location. Supposing a person in an unfamiliar environment to be less inclined to assert themselves so aggressively as voice 1 does suggests not.

Voice 4: “Who you calling stupid you dumb fuck, you want me to bust your fucking ass?”

This seems distinguishable as a new voice on the basis of conventional and tonal evidence. While it shares the aggressive, colloquial tone of voice 1, the content shows this to be an answer to that voice. Identifying this as an active dialogic engagement with voice 1 establishes a character pairing: voice 4 is responding to voice 1 and in doing so suggests that voice 4 belongs to the character told by voice 1 to “watch out”.

Voice 5: “Let them out there, let them out”

Like voice 2, this is in the imperative mood, though more plainly authoritative. Like voice 2 this might be the utterance of a concerned fellow passenger, though the authoritative demand suggests that a railway functionary (a guard, probably) is more likely. Given the probable nature of obstruction it is likely that this is addressed to a general group rather than a single individual. This could reasonably be assumed to be the second utterance of voice 2 although evidence is not decisive.

Thus we can see the way in which while the construction of attribution for these speech acts (and the context in which they occur) is difficult and necessarily slightly tenuous for the reader, it is nonetheless manageable. Like the fleeting encounters that occur in the city, the reader must reconstruct the personalities behind the voices based only on the barest information. In this way, the novel itself is a kind of performative crowd-scene, and the indeterminacy of the text resembles the fragility and indeterminacy of contemporary urban interactions.

However while I argue above that the narration functions to ‘shift’ the position from which the reader views the story world, it also performs another function: to work against the ethical indeterminacy that one would expect to follow, and to provide some narratorial judgment in the scene. The narration can be identified by the absence of the dash, the reporting of a (distanced, mediated) speech act in the past tense, and a syntax which does not resemble

conventional everyday speech. In commenting on the peculiarities of Gaddis's style in *J R*, most commentators draw attention to the radical shift in balance from narrative intervention to unattributed, and therefore seemingly unmediated, reported speech. While it is true to say that there is, on balance, much more unattributed dialogue in Gaddis's work (and particularly in *J R*) than in most other novels, to go from this recognition to disregard what is delivered through narration seems a serious critical deficiency. Statements made by the third person narrator may be few and far between, but when they occur they do serious work. Prior to the scene just discussed, the narrator metaphorically describes the way the train appears as "though exchanging refuse from one teeming shore to carry to the next" (161). This suggests one of two things: either the reader is being asked to concur that the people are indeed like "refuse" and of low value, or (and more likely), the reader is being asked to deplore the way that such a system seems to disregard the humanity of those it "processes".

Other pieces of narration further guide the reader. Further on the narrator reports a broadcasted speech act: "resonant, unrelated, syllables blared from a loudspeaker". The decision to describe the "syllables" as "unrelated" (despite the probability of them being every bit as "related" as syllables produced in any communicative speech-act) positions the narrator as (for the moment) an auditor (along with all others) on the platform. The narration then assumes a close proximity to two characters, describing the actions of a male and female character:

...purse clutched her glance over a shoulder swept ahead ready when he turned square in his path steadied against a vending machine.

The fact that the woman is 'clutching' her purse and looking over her shoulder suggests she feels threatened by her surroundings, and the man 'steadying' himself suggests he is more physically stable. This provides some contextual information for the reported speech that follows, further developed by the dialogue that occurs between the couple:

Voice 6: “sorry . . .”

The content of apology sets this against the antagonistic dialogue between voices 1 and 4; the fact that this is individually directed (personal) distinguishes it from the impersonal tenor of voices 2 and 5. This suggests this voice is the male actant described above.

Narrator: “he caught her elbow,”

This adds a physical detail that further qualifies “his” relationship to “her”: not only is he apologetic, but he is providing physical support. His catching her elbow might equally have been read as restraint if not for the surrounding apology and the following:

Voice 6: “are you all right?”

This is the conclusion of his initial address to her: an enquiry into her well being. The indication of consideration and compassion suggests that (for anyone who prefers compassion to aggression) this character is separate from the more widely evident brutality.

Voice 7: “I think I hurt my ankle, they’re like animals I swear.”

The addressee of the previous utterance replies to her erstwhile companion. The surrounding text encourages the reader to see this character’s hurt as a result of the carelessness of others; either the general melee of those she describes as “like animals” or some unintended impact from the owner of voice 6: the event for which he apologises in the first place. Her assessment of the surrounding crowd as “like animals” is interesting for the fact that the third person plural pronoun (“they”) excludes both herself and her interlocutor from a generality towards whom she feels critical, and in doing so implies that he and she are not animal-like. If he has in fact apologised for some physical infraction that has “hurt” her, then she is effectively

transferring the blame for his knock to the wider, excluded crowd. The differentiation she forges claims a differentiated sense of comradeship between her and him.

This separation is further developed; a voice that seems to be the male character offers to buy the woman a drink and then describes the place as “like the dawn of the world”. While the narration describes how ““elbows found ribs and shoulders backs”, description which departs from the pair within whose developing conversation it is embedded, not only does it briefly cover a generality of actions (variants of transgressive, probably uncomfortable physical contact), it generalises attribution (the summary nature suggests that these actions are performed in the undifferentiated crowd) and depersonalises the actions, leaving individuals unspecified in favour of the body parts that come into contact. This is continued by the final piece of narration in the extract:

. . .countless hands and unattached eyes, faces looking in different directions, rolled newspapers clutched and their wives’ umbrellas, frankfurters redolent, a muffled explosion and falling glass.”

The de-individuation of the crowd is therefore continued by describing individual body parts, and the narration’s description of the “muffled explosion” and “falling glass” describes events associated with a threat to personal well-being, while providing little contextual information as to why or where they have occurred.

This analysis of the crowd scene suggests the extent to which our moral positions are guided by contextual knowledge, an issue particularly relevant to the unconventional style of *J R*. The reader also does not know the exact motivation for the unspecified person who cries “watch out you stupid fuck you”. It could, conceivably, be one of the more sensitive and sympathetic characters suddenly lashing out as a response to the pressure of the environment, or a person trying to protect a small child from being pushed in front of a train. The world remains indeterminate; while we might be encouraged to read the voice in a particular way, and similar responses to the voices in *J R* are reliably produced by readers of the novel, this construction is

never complete and finalized. Gaddis's novel appears to give "the big picture" while relentlessly demanding irregular levels of identification and disidentification and thus suggesting a response to the experience of urban living that is necessarily personal, but seems to attach generally to the whole.

While the discussion of the city seems to demand some kind of broad view, something that can take in the "undifferentiated mass" at a broad and therefore quasi-objective level, this objectivity is unable to cope with the correlative fact that individual experience within this is not generalisable. To develop an evaluative response, one based on sympathy and antipathy, we are required to move back into the familiar Boothian rhetoric of the management of *individual* proximity. What we can say about these city crowds is that they are made up of individuals who are there for various socio-economic reasons, and often by choice. They use mass-transit systems as part of their own projects, pursuing individual goals that are orchestrated as part of functional wholes.

The novel reflects the indeterminacy of the city, where motivation is difficult to discern and the ability to have close knowledge of others is significantly restricted. However the text also carefully manipulates the reader's position in relation to those disagreements, and in doing so can be seen to encourage particular reactions to the events portrayed, and therefore implicitly endorses a specific set of values.

An approach which constructs a set of norms and values that would make sense of the various characterisations and relationships represented in the text is somewhat frustrated by the 'open' nature of a novel such as Gaddis's, in which the reader must supply much of the context. The extremely minimal narrational commentary, the proliferation of voices and judgements represented, and the difficulty establishing the spatial environs that surround the voices, means that the text is particularly indeterminate. If the general role of the reader, as Culler suggests, is to

“fill in gaps, to render concrete and determinate the... places of indeterminacy of a work”, then a particularly indeterminate and ‘open’ work such as *J R* works against the attempts to perform such a function. (*On Deconstruction* 37).

Malmgren attempts to restore an implied authorial approach by arguing that this is Gaddis’s intention anyway. “Gaddis’s point”, he argues “is that meaning and coherence are less properties of a text than they are products of activities performed upon it”. Steven Moore quotes Malmgren, and also argues that the indeterminacy of the form is connected to the themes of the novel; that “the reader’s search for meaning and coherence parallels that of the novel’s characters – for meaning and coherence are less properties of life than products of activities performed upon it.” (69). However, Moore still attempts to attribute meaning and coherence to the text anyway. After providing some careful story lines that do work with the narrative discourse of the novel, he argues that the novel is about “the difference between ‘the things worth having’ and ‘the things worth being’ as Gaddis wrote in *The Recognitions*”. Moore’s attempt to find a ‘moral’ to the story leads him to a reading based on a distinction between ‘approved’ and ‘disapproved’ of characters, and the construction of an implied authorial position with ethical beliefs and values. He argues:

It is [the] commitment to such intangibles as art, manners, and ideals that sets Bast, Amy, and the artists (in their better moments) apart from the rest of the novel’s characters... it is the difference between those who treat others and even themselves as marketable commodities, who measure the value of any idea by what William James called its “cash-value”..., as opposed to... those few people who would not only “rather hear a symphony than eat” (659) but who insist on the human use of human beings. (Moore 69-70).

Such characters, he argues, include Jack Gibbs, Edward Bast and Amy Joubert¹³. However the character distinctions he makes seem to be based on his own moral evaluations. If ‘meaning and

¹³His parenthetical comment – ‘in their better moments’ – is significant, because it reveals the way the complexity of *J R* resists such an easy distinction based on moral identification. As I will discuss, the artist characters can be criticised in a number of ways. For example Gibbs, here a ‘favoured’ character, is

coherence' are more the reader's own response to the text, then surely the same goes for the *moral* significance of the world that they construct. Moore is therefore prepared to abandon the indeterminacy of the text in favour of an organic moral order in the textual world which is outside of individual projection. If it is assumed that regardless of its textual mechanics, the novel plays off against clearly held, quasi universal values, then the claim to indeterminacy is simply a formal one that has no content. In this way Moore's approach excuses *J R* from any claims to totalization, but then reapplies them at the level of normative assumptions.

It is a reasonable assumption to make: that most readers would find some of the characters' behaviour and events objectionable, and would therefore feel critical of the type of world that the reader constructs in response to the text. However the fact that the reader largely actively constructs this world, and that this kind of moral judgement is predominantly supplied by the reader is crucial here. Like Moore, Comnes also does not reconcile his argument about the indeterminacy of the form of the novel with its potential implications for the indeterminacy of moral positions. Comnes argues that the values and actions of certain characters are self-evidently wrong in moral terms, and that *J R* portrays a "morally bankrupt and socially entropic landscape" (161). He argues the novel portrays a corporate world "bereft of love, the world in which moral belief is absent and economic 'shit' is the only operant force" (165)¹⁴.

frequently shown to be corrupt, insensitive and dishonest, Eigen, another of the artists, attempts to pressure a girl into sleeping with him and lies about the episode afterwards, and even Edward Bast could be seen as 'fallible' – he assists *J R* for some time with his business schemes, and his sexual relationship with Rhoda could conceivably be criticised in moral terms.

¹⁴ Instead, the potential for a more careful examination of the implications of the indeterminacy he gestures at is sacrificed for a rather spurious argument about readerly 'redemption'. Comnes argues for a rather complex 'recompense' for the reader's experience of the difficult technique of the novel. He ascribes didactic intention to Gaddis, arguing that he "creates his unreadable text to instruct the reader, to teach him through unconventional narrative how to understand in an unconventional way what's worth doing" (162). He suggests that the reader finds this instruction through "oblique allusions" to Walter Benjamin (162). His argument for these allusions is particularly tenuous: Benjamin isn't mentioned or quoted at all in the novel, and instead he believes the allusion is achieved in the slight similarity between Gibbs's list of epigraphs in the novel and Benjamin's "thought fragment" technique in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*:

Gibbs describes the quotations as "mere trash", but Gaddis' purpose of turning the reader into a Benjamin-like collaborator is nonetheless strengthened by their presence. Gibbs asks Amy, "-what are there about a dozen?" (p. 487) but in fact there are eighteen, the same number as in Benjamin's *Theses* (Although nineteen are listed in *J R*, the fourteenth duplicates the second...)

He finds (and believes that "the reader finds") a "mirror of Benjamin's basic themes: socioeconomic upheaval (the Depression, union conflicts, child labour), the failure of traditional art (rejection of artists by

Gaddis's unconventional narrative technique in the novel, which might seem little more than an experiment in style, has implications beyond merely formal concerns. Malmgren, for example, argues that "the need for these activities [exercises in readerly 'management'] extends beyond the realm of textuality". He claims that the increased demands on the reader means that the reader is "compelled to penetrate its seamless wall of language, to transform its noise into information, to resist its entropy, to construct from the words a "reality" that is sensible, in many senses of that word" (123). As Malmgren argues, this can be a more "meaningful and humanizing experience" because, somewhat paradoxically, the deindividualization of the narrative discourse of *J R* may have an inverse effect on the reader, requiring them to attempt to actively imagine the person behind each voice.

A reading which truly takes into account the indeterminacy of the text could be conceived as one that declines to make ready judgements about the relative merits of different characters, and that demands we suspend character judgement in relation to all characters, and not merely the ones we travel most closely with. It is also surely one which is suspicious of transcendental normative values, and one which is attentive to the way in which Gaddis does encourage a particular vision of the world, the way in the text *does* favour particular evaluations of character and event. While the text clearly manipulates the reader's view of the world represented, it also features a narrative discourse that never claims objectivity for the standpoints it provides on the world it portrays.

film industry) and the need to "politicize aesthetics". From these allusions, the "careful reader" (rather than the overzealous critic) makes the necessary conceptual leaps that Comnes requires, and then realises his "task": to "blast" from the 'bunk' of the novel's contexts of false value fragments that illuminate an understanding of worth heretofore hidden" (168, 174). Such a "careful reader", it would seem, requires a detailed background knowledge of not only Benjamin, but also Wagner (164), G.B. Shaw (165), Harman Broch (174), Williard Gibbs (176), Norbert Wiener (176), Walter Pater (178) and even Einstein (178) in order to reconstruct the 'recompense' he proposes. One could probably reasonably conclude that the "reader" Comnes could only be himself. I would also be interested to learn precisely what the 'hidden' values he discovers, buried beneath the 'false' ones, are.

I will now outline what I take to be the principal targets of Gaddis's satire of city life, based on this manipulation of readerly sympathy. There are three themes I will outline here: the influence of money on social relations, the ethical consequences of this influence, and the impact of contemporary capitalism on individual spatialization.

Once again, Gaddis's representation of urban life in *J R* is remarkably consonant with Georg Simmel's description of social relations in a capitalist economy. Simmel argues for a strong relationship between money and social existence in the city. For Simmel, in the 'impersonal' world of the city, which stands outside the home, interactions are conducted with a minimum of emotional investment. Money, which functions as a medium of exchange informing the basis for the social division of labour, has a significant influence on these social relationships. As Bauman describes, Simmel considers money to be "simultaneously the inescapable product, indispensable condition and...most illuminating metaphor of city life." In *The Philosophy of Money*, he argues that "the desirable party for financial transactions – in which, as it has been said quite correctly, business is business – is the person completely indifferent to us, engaged neither for us nor against us" (cited in Bauman 152-3). For Simmel, money also converts all forms of social value in interaction to an abstract 'universal' value:

To the extent that money, with its colorless and its indifferent quality, can become a common denominator of all values it becomes the frightful leveller – it hollows out the core of things, their peculiarities, their specific values and their uniqueness and incomparability in a way which is beyond repair. They all float with the same specific gravity in the constantly moving stream of money (Simmel 330).

As David Harvey states, in a money economy, "[w]e move from a social condition, in which we depend directly on those we know personally, to one in which we depend on impersonal and objective relations with others" (100).

The opening of the novel establishes a connection between 'money' and the voices of the narrative discourse:

-Money . . . ? in a voice that rustled.

-Paper, yes.

-And we'd never seen it. Paper money.

-We never saw paper money till we came east.

-It looked so strange the first time we saw it. Lifeless.

You couldn't believe it was worth a thing (3).

The entire opening scene is based on the tension between two conflicting attitudes to interaction: the officious Mr Coen, the character whose voice “rustles” like money (one also notes the near-homophony of his name with ‘coin’), and who attempts to resolve a legal situation in a brief and impersonal way, and the Bast sisters, who impart long and convoluted pieces of family history, much of it seen by the lawyer as “not precisely relevant” (5). The impersonal nature of money also provides one explanation for the unconventional narrative discourse of the novel; for the reader, the ‘anonymous’ voices can be understood to be connected to the de-individuation of social relationships in the city.

At one point Anne Bast begins a story about her father's remains and dying wishes, only to be rebuked by her sister Julia for describing such stories to “a perfect stranger”. Anne replies that she'd “hardly call Mister Cohen a stranger” as he “knows more about [their] business than [they] do [them]selves”(3) The pun here on ‘business’ reflects one of the central tensions in the novel: between the world of ‘business’ and one's ‘private business’, between commercial interests and the social values, personal relationships, and emotional life that make up “intimate affairs”. One of the commercially-oriented characters Crawley suggests that “business” is “what brings people together eh?” (85); the comment has an ironic subtext in the novel's portrayal of business as something that brings people together merely in the sense of co-location, rather than encouraging the development of intimate or in any sense affective relationships. The tendency towards impersonality is again comically explored later in the novel, when Eigen's four year old son David is asked by his mother how much he loves her, and replies, “Some money...?” (267).

The infant clearly struggles to measure his relationship in any other term than 'anonymous' exchange value.

In *Postmodern Ethics*, Bauman argues that one of the implications of the kind of impersonal engagement of the city is its influence on sympathy towards others, and its implications for responsibility. The diminishment in emotional affect has an influence on individuals' concern for the effects of their actions and, due to the complex interdependence of the contemporary economic world, individuals are "less likely to claim (or be charged with) the 'authorship' of (or the responsibility for) the end result" (18). Bauman cites a related reason that responsibility has been "floated" in contemporary society: in the divide between a private realm of the 'self' and a public realm, in which responsibility rests with "the role, not with the person who performs it". With such an approach to social engagement, business partners "are not persons, not individuals. Their obligations could be performed by others, if need be; if it is I who does it, it is merely because I signed the contract" (58).

Gaddis's satirical attack on such impersonality (and the corresponding implicit endorsement of intimacy) can be seen through the portrayal in *J R* of the younger characters' attitudes to moral responsibility. This is especially the case with the eponymous J R. J R goes from trading junk mail and pamphlets with another boy at school, through to doing business through a telephone he gets installed in the school, to a powerful position in the U.S. economy with his 'J R Family of Companies'. J R builds his business through loans, playing the sharemarket, and eventually through the buying and selling of companies, and his rise is shown to be in part attributed to the impersonality of relationships in economic transactions. He conducts his business through mail and telephone, speaking through a dirty handkerchief to hide the sound of his voice, and he believes he is able to gain such an influence despite his age because "you don't see anybody you don't know anybody...because that's how they do it nobody has to see anybody":

I mean like all those guys at the Stock Exchange where they're selling all this stock to each other? They don't give a shit whose it is they're just selling it back and forth for some voice that told them on the phone why should they give a shit if you're a hundred and fifty" (172)

J R is shown to view others almost entirely as means to various remunerative ends, and displays an inability to separate the world into public 'business' and private relationships, seeing all others only in instrumental terms. He fails to understand the impacts of his actions in any terms other than legal obligations (296) and, against any sort of criticism from other characters, earnestly defends himself by repeatedly stating "that's just what you do" (135, 169, 173, 466). We get a sense of how disconcerting this attitude is for more sensitive characters when, at one point, Amy Joubert discusses the boy with Jack Gibbs, claiming that in conversation it seems as if J R is "trying to fit what you're saying into some utterly different, some world you don't know anything about. . ." (246-7). Portrayed as having derived his sense of ethics from the corporate culture he embraces, the attitudes of J R can therefore be seen as the primary target of the novel's criticism, Gaddis's vision of an emerging world that is "utterly different" to his own values. This sense that society seemed to be heading to a relentlessly monetarist future is punningly picked up in an early subtitle that Gaddis discarded for *J R*: 'A Novel About Futures' (Moore 76). The claim by Jack Gibbs (among others) that "the whole problem's the decline from status to contract" parallels Bauman's description of 'business ethics' is one that focuses not on the person themselves but on the action they perform.

The second, related aspect of Gaddis's "novel about futures" is its portrayal of capitalist economic organisation more generally. As John Johnston argues in *Information Multiplicity*, J R's fortunes also seem to be reflected in the form of the novel; as the business activities of J R proliferate and the company gains increasing influence, "characters and events begin to proliferate at... a frenetic and less dramatically apprehensible pace" (129). Johnston argues that the narrative discourse of the novel is linked to its historical moment, and reflects a shift in the nature of capitalist production at the time. He argues that "the conventions of *J R* seem to have

been invented in order to represent the newer world of corporate capitalism. More precisely, *J R* can be said to encompass the two worlds corresponding to these two regimes of capital and to articulate their difference in both the form and content of its language” (Johnston 129). The “General Roll Company” can be read as a symbol of Fordist production; the ‘piano rolls’ they manufacture are a symbol of the mass-produced and standardized production that characterized economic development in the early to mid 20th century.

Contrasted with ‘General Roll’, the two representatives of the new ‘world’ are the “J R Family of Companies” and the Typhon Corporation. Typhon controls a number of the companies mentioned in the novel: Diamond Cable, Nobili Pharmaceuticals, Endo Appliances, and J R subsumes a variety of different businesses under his “paper empire” (651), its success built on speculation and corporate acquisition. J R gains a number of business ideas from a class field trip to Typhon, there to learn “what America’s all about”, and is told by some businessmen in the toilets that “money is credit” (109). J R embraces this entrepreneurial culture, borrowing against his class bank account, and gradually building up his ‘portfolio’. Initially described as “a bunch of trash” by a sharemarket expert, eventually J R has substantial economic influence and is treated more seriously by others in the corporate world. J R builds his company not on production *per se*, but on capital, using bank loans and sharemarket speculation.

The activities of these umbrella corporations can be read as representatives of the substantial trend towards capital-oriented “mergers”, “acquisitions” and “corporate diversifications” coming to prominence in the 1970s and accelerating in the 1980s, in which many of major American companies, as Harvey argues, “work in lines of activity that have nothing to do with the primary line of business with which their company is identified” (*The Condition of Postmodernity* 158).¹⁵ In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey argues for a distinction between the modernist and postmodernist periods based on historical changes in the

¹⁵ In an interview in 1993 with Marc Chenetier and Brigitte Felix, Gaddis discusses his retrospective realization of his own novel’s prescience. He reflects how the novel is “the record of what the ‘80s became, lots of money floating around, producing *nothing* . . . This is what *J R* is about, the nonproductive use of capitalism” (Chenetier).

nature of capitalism. The modernist period he links with “Fordist/Keynesian” economic regime, and traces a shift from the “rigidities” inherent to this regime to “more flexible modes of capital accumulation” (*The Condition of Postmodernity* 147, 201) which entailed “new systems of production and marketing, characterized by more flexible labour processes and markets, of geographical mobility and rapid shifts in consumption practices”(35).

This increasing flexibility was achieved in part through an acceleration of “turn-over time” in production, and a variety of organizational shifts which enabled production to more quickly respond to increasingly volatile market conditions. Harvey claims that the period was witness to “the extraordinary efflorescence and transformation in financial markets” which enabled “highly sophisticated systems of financial coordination on a global scale” (*The Condition of Postmodernity* 194). It also resulted in the financial system achieving “a degree of autonomy from real production unprecedented in capitalism’s history” (194). The distinctive change between the 1960s and the 1970s, for Harvey, lies predominantly in these “financial aspects of capitalist organization” and “on the role of credit”, which resulted in a variety of flow-on effects throughout society (*The Condition of Postmodernity* 196).

An emblematic feature of this developing economic regime was the emerging role of credit and the futures market. The nature of capitalist production in recent decades means an insecurity in relation to future conditions, and an increase in time pressures; the proliferation of ‘futures’ and other such “techniques for discounting the future into the present” are, Harvey argues, both a cause and a response to such temporal “compression”. This tendency towards the shortening of “time horizons”, combined with technological advances in travel, communication and media forms, have caused a substantial change in the material conditions of everyday life. For Harvey, the defining feature of contemporary existence (and therefore postmodernity as a social and historical condition emerging in the early 1970s) is the “overwhelming sense of *compression* of our spatial and temporal worlds” (*The Condition of Postmodernity* 240).

Nicholas Spencer's "Critical Mimesis: *J R*'s Transition to Postmodernity" also uses Harvey's argument as the basis for his exploration of the novel. Spencer only briefly discusses the portrayal of time-space compression in the novel, and the remarkable consonance between the economic changes Harvey outlines and the kind of financial behaviour depicted in the novel, exemplified by *J R*'s "paper empire". He argues that the fictional world of *J R* is *simultaneously* indeterminate and "self-contained". Arguing that Gaddis "never introduces metafictional elements that might suggest multiple worlds of experience", he claims: (141)

While the isolated effects of postmodernity are suggestive of indeterminacy, the concept of time-space compression enables them to be viewed as components of a highly uniform and integrated social formation. Similarly, the numerous instances of postmodern indeterminacy and self-referentiality in *J R* do not compromise Gaddis's coherent representation of the early 1970s as an era of time-space compression (141).

I am in accord with Spencer in his use of Harvey as a framework that relates the novel's representation of psychological experience with the novel's portrayal of finance, connecting "seemingly autonomous and unrelated spheres of postmodernity". (140). In this way, Spencer argues that the novel's "representation of temporality mimics postmodern transience, but the wider context of time-space compression historicizes and gives critical coherence to this dimension of the novel." (142).

Almost all the characters display evidence of a kind of 'time-compression', particularly within the corporate world. The extreme speed at which characters such as *J R*, Cates, and Davidoff make their decisions in the novel reflects the need to either be "highly adaptable and fast-moving in response to market shifts or mastermind the volatility"(Harvey *The Condition of Postmodernity* 287). The phrase that "time is money" is repeated throughout the novel (85, 115, 552), a phrase representative of the reduction in "the time-horizons of meaningful decision-making" that accompanies these new economic conditions. Triangle Paper Products is acquired

by J R Family of Companies and their lawyer Beamish is retained by the “parent company”. At one point he observes:

I must be frank to say I’m as yet unfamiliar with the entire extent of their holdings which appear quite diverse, this is our floor yes, down this way. In fact the entire situation is moving with a rapidity to which I’m quite unaccustomed but then times change don’t they Mister Duncan...

Describing himself as “a bit old-fashioned”, Beamish accounts for the environment as a result of “the decline from status to contract... the key to the whole thing I believe, the decline from status to contract . . .” (509). Beamish’s perception of the change of economic culture is in accord with Harvey’s description of business structures in flexible accumulation: diversity in production, and sudden shifts in production and ownership.

The shift from ‘status to contract’ is also an apt summation of Harvey’s overview of the social and cultural effects of flexible accumulation. For Harvey (following Lyotard), this “accelerating turnover time” and “write-off of traditionally and historically acquired values” means that “the temporary contract in everything... becomes the hallmark of postmodern living”. The impact of the collective actions of others in a period of flexible accumulation is even more pronounced when economic conditions mean more sudden changes in the surrounding environment, and increase a sense of ‘ephemerality’. As already noted, these changed conditions are most notable in urban environments. In the influential “Urbanism As A Way of Life”, Louis Wirth echoes Simmel, suggesting that urban living results in an increased exposure to heterogeneity and results in “the acceptance of instability and insecurity in the world at large as a norm”. He writes:

Overwhelmingly, the city dweller is not a home-owner, and since a transitory habitat does not generate binding traditions and sentiments, only rarely is he truly a neighbour. There is little opportunity to obtain a conception of the city as a whole or to survey his place in the total scheme. (101).

For Wirth, this heterogeneity problematizes the social agent's capacity to understand the city as in any sense stable. In the city, the attempt to impose order through spatialization is undermined due to the difficulty of maintaining the boundaries of the physical environment, the home as a demarcated space of control is undermined by the external world, increasingly immersed in the world of numerous, anonymous others. For Alvin Toffler, this has been significantly amplified by contemporary culture, where the decrease in continuity and tradition and other such cultural terms of reference causes instability in relation to the experience of everyday life, and a "temporariness in the structure of both public and personal value systems" (cited in Harvey *The Condition of Postmodernity* 286). In the accounts of such theorists, identity itself then also is drawn into such a shift 'from status to contract'. Harvey and Wirth thus make the somewhat paradoxical claim about the inaccessibility of a total view, while at the same time attempting to articulate a kind of universal (or at least dominant) condition of experience: the experience of heterogeneity and indeterminacy.

It is precisely this tension that underpins critical responses to Gaddis's work: the argument that the text resists totalizing claims, while at the same time asserting the essential accuracy of its depiction of contemporary culture. However once again this kind of position is clearly guided by the narration in the novel, describing the transience of the world around the characters. The first piece of narrative description in the novel uses light imagery to connect the spatial with the monetary; the phrase "Sunlight, pocketed in a cloud, spilled suddenly broken across the floor through the leaves of the trees outside" (3) parallels the dropping of the bag of money in the second scene. The narration also later describes "the center of town where all allusion to permanence had disappeared or was being slain within earshot by shrieking electric saws" (18). While describing Bast's journey home, the reader learns of the "indecipherable relics of street signs that had signalled a Venetian bent real estate extravaganza in the twenties, until even those limbs of rust lay twisted to earth and naked of any sign of place... any memory at all" (59). The accelerated cycles of overproduction are figured as causing a loss of traditional knowledge. In describing the external world in terms of the "dumping of outmoded appliances,

fornication, and occasional suicide” *J R* emphasizes the kinds of conditions described by these theorists in which the economic overproduction challenges the ability of the individual to feel ‘located’, and stabilize their view of the world spatially (*J R* 59 emphasis added).

While the narrator’s view of postmodernity may seem unequivocally blighted, characters are portrayed as having somewhat unequal experience of “the noisiest country that ever existed” (289). *J R* and Dan DiCephalis are described as “mov[ing] at home through crowd and noise” (332), whereas Amy Joubert, the Bast sisters, and the artist characters are more committed to values of privacy, domesticity, aestheticism, and the exclusion of the economic world from aspects of everyday life. Indeed the issue of identification is a crucial one for the supposed ‘moral’ of the story. In particular, the question could be raised: where does the novel locate the blame for these inimical conditions? The characters who are shown to perpetuate such a culture are those such as Major Hyde, *J R*, Crawley, Whiteback, Governer Cates et al; characters whose character traits are exaggerated and somewhat unrealistic. Rather than ‘documenting’ the reality he seemingly opposes, Gaddis must instead manufacture it; and place the reader in an oppositional position to contemporary conditions. Just as in the crowd scene, where the narrative discourse manipulates sympathy by using some “characters” as really just voices that represent antagonists to our carefully focalised protagonists, so too are numerous ‘bad’ one-dimensional characters in the novel played off against those more psychologically ‘rounded’ characters which the novel portrays.

Moore notes the “blatant metaphoric associations” between money and excrement evident in certain passages, such as the following in which Major Hyde refers to the school’s television education programme:

-Yes well I think we ought to get back to that social service lesson there Dan looks like she’s giving these youngsters a sense of real values, my boy there . .

- when the silkworm starts to spin it discharges a colorless. . . that happens in the large bowl before . . . billions of dollars, and the market value of shares in public corporations today has grown to . . .

Through switching between channels, the juxtaposition establishes the appearance of relationship. The “symbolic equation” between money and faeces in the novel is the basis for Moore’s argument that the corporate world in the novel is represented as “a veritable wasteland where activity amounts to little more than “shitting around”... with paper trash” (79). Through the kind of juxtaposition above, the ‘values’ of the youngsters and the corporate world are implicitly compared to the value of excrement.

Moore argues that what marks the artist characters in the novel out from others is their resistance to these emergent values. He quotes Gibbs and Bast’s references to Mozart’s statement that “believing and shitting are two very different things”. While he recognizes that “Gaddis’s artists have their faults”, he nevertheless argues for their moral superiority:

...the artists are distinguished from the businessmen in their devotion to ideas loftier than profit margins and tax shelters. . . by listening to the voice inside, Gaddis’s artists can redeem their chaotic lives – and in works of genius, the chaotic lives that surround them – with something more memorable than a balanced stock portfolio (80).

Once again, while Moore’s argument is particularly instructive in establishing the key themes of the novel, his distinction between characters in this way reflects his own normative values. There is a degree of circularity in his claim: that the novel demonstrates why certain values and actions are ‘wrong’ because he believes them to be so.

Through the artist characters, the novel can equally be seen to interrogate some of the consequences of the attachment to a notion of authentic value. Edward Bast, for example, describes how Wagner could not compose if he could see the garden path because it “led to an

outside world, to the real” (116) and is particularly disturbed by a break-in to the barn behind the Bast residence, not for fear of theft but in symbolic terms:

That’s not the point! If nothing’s gone or broken it’s the idea of somebody in here somebody I’ve never, I don’t even know, its like finding somebody’s broken into the one place I, where nothing happens, where I work where nothing else happens can’t you understand that! (69)

The intrusion of the contemporary world, and Bast’s inability to keep separate from it as an artist is most graphically symbolized by the intruders who break in, leaving beer cans everywhere, and defecating in his piano. Indeed, the event that causes his complete emotional and physical breakdown towards the end of the novel is his return home to find his family home has been picked up and shifted without his knowledge (664). These events symbolize Bast’s inability to exclude the external world, and the impossibility of maintaining a distance from the spatial transformations of contemporary culture.

Bast is forced to compose in the other significant residence in the novel: the 96th street apartment in the city that all of the artists share. It is through this apartment that Gaddis depicts a particularly disruptive representation of contemporary urban life. The apartment is shown to be chaotic and disordered, mail constantly arriving, clutter everywhere, and people constantly coming and going. J R even views it as ‘head office’ for his company, installing a picture phone, and causing the phone to repeatedly ring there for business-related activities. Both Gibbs and Bast attempt to do creative work there, but they are unable to concentrate, and are repeatedly drawn back into the world they attempt to remove themselves from. If one treats the apartment as a microcosm of Gaddis’s vision of the late capitalist world, then the artists’ relationship to these conditions parallel Gaddis’s own satirical project.

This attempt to transform the world through art is represented as a primary aspect of Bast’s artistic drive. While composing in the apartment, Bast comments that until he can “make other people hear what he hears it’s just trash...it’s just trash like everything in this place” (725).

Early in the novel, Amy Joubert asks Bast about Richard Wagner's *The Rheingold*, in particular the creative impulse to "create an entirely different world" and "ask[] the audience to suspend its belief". Bast interjects:

-No not asking them making them, like that E flat chord that opens the Rhinegold goes on and on it goes on for a hundred and thirty-six bars until the idea that everything happening underwater is more real than sitting in a hot plush seat with shoes on... (111)

Just as the extraordinary duration of the opening of the opera makes peculiar demands of its listeners, so the reader of *J R* can only make sense of the novel by allowing him or herself to become immersed in its voices. Bast's model of artistic communication - the imposition of one's (critical) view of society on its consumer - matches the approach of critics who endorse the novel's political, oppositional aspects.

An implied authorial position could be constructed on the basis of the "symbolic equation" between money and faeces in the novel, as well as the clear parallels between the position of the artists and the position of Gaddis. The other central artist figure in the novel is Jack Gibbs, who also takes a negative stance towards the world around him. As Schryer notes, several critics have argued that Gibbs's various descriptions of "entropy going everywhere" (287) as an implied authorial comment on contemporary conditions (Schryer 76). Gibbs is particularly disturbed by his friend's suicide, an artist who could no longer convince himself that writing had purpose, value and relevance in relation to the world around him, and that he "finally found everything around him getting so God damned real he couldn't see straight long enough to write a sentence" (70). The suicide of Schramm, this suggests, was a response to his inability to maintain his view of his own aestheticism as self-evidently superior - as 'more real' - than the business-minded world around him.

When Amy Joubert asks why he is perpetually upset by the world around him, he replies that this is the "only way to keep something real long enough... (496). However Gibbs's

stubborn insistence on his own beliefs – his desire to ‘keep something real’ - means that he often behaves in an insensitive and deceitful manner. In the same conversation, Amy asks him to explain his upsetting behaviour, in particular, to tell her why, when in an elevator in town, he suddenly began to pretend to be an intellectually challenged man being taken shopping by his family. He replies that his behaviour is a response to “situations that just don’t seem to have a solution in their own context”:

the only thing to do is step in and change the whole context almost like, sometimes it’s like a whole little play starting in my head... in Triplers how God damned helpless you feel in an elevator and standing there this summer suit sleeves halfway to my elbows... and that prosperous old bastard looking us over, he looked like he was going to speak to you and I just thought grab a context before he can.... (496)

Gibbs’s behaviour is a reaction to his own moral objection to the situation he encounters. The link between ‘grabbing a context’ and the artistic impulse is clear here, and this links it to political opposition in art more generally. As in *Carpenter’s Gothic*, however, the oppositional attitude of the artists achieves little in the novel except further distress to those around them.

As John Johnston argues, such scenes suggest that the novel contains some internal criticism of the position it seems to espouse. Bast continually attempts to assert a view of art as separate and superior to the world around him. However, Bast’s refusal to accept his participation in the business world is responsible for some of the more damaging actions towards others. As Johnston points out, “[t]hat Bast acts simply as JR’s business “representative” allows him to maintain the illusion that, as only a representative of these schemes, he somehow stands outside and apart from them. In other words, he may represent JR’s business interests, but *he* is not represented by them” (147). His attachment to a ‘real’ artistic self, which is outside of his ‘fake’ employment that he performs for money only, means that he ends up providing a “human face” for the J R Family of Companies’ more objectionable behaviour (147). It is Bast’s insistence on the superiority of his own values that is responsible for some of the worst excesses of the business activity in the novel.

Like Comnes above, Schryer describes how a number of critics have followed the reference by Gibbs to Wiener and the scientific concept of 'entropy', and that such critics have argued that this concept can be seen as a metaphor for Gaddis's vision of the decline of society. Schryer disputes this argument, contending that "Gaddis's understanding of aesthetic form should not be confused with that of his characters" (77) and that, instead, Gaddis adopts an "aesthetics of textual openness" which "self-consciously incorporates the reader's perspective and constructive presence" (77). Schryer's article concludes with a more internally consistent approach to the role of the indeterminacy of the novel. He argues that Gaddis's "elimination of the narrative voice" means that Gaddis "demands that readers actively construct the novel's meaning" and forces the "reader into taking responsibility for the contingent order that can be constructed out of the novel's noisy exchanges" (89). In doing so, the novel represents "a turn toward a readerly ethic" (89). However he also concludes that Gaddis's novel has a political demand: that the reader "actively confront the omnipresent cultural entropy depicted in the novel rather than attempting to build sheltered spaces within it" (89). In this way he argues that the reader should follow the ideological vision of the text.

Gaddis, like Gibbs, is attempting to 'grab a context' and assert the dominance of his own view of the conditions of late capitalism. A number of critics, by treating the novel as a 'document' on reality, have unwittingly subscribed to Bast's view of art, where the audience is a mere consumer of artist's vision, where the artist is "not asking them" to suspend their disbelief but "making them" until the artist's vision "is more real than sitting in a hot plush seat with shoes on". However a reading which truly takes into account the implications of indeterminacy should resist the supposed 'reality' of *J R*'s vision. As distinct from the implied reader of the text, who embraces its world view, a 'responsible reader' could equally be seen to question its status as 'reality'.

Chapter Five: Don DeLillo's *Underworld*

"The present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment. I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein".

Michel Foucault *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, p. 350

Everything connects, or seems to, or seems to because it does"

Don DeLillo, *Underworld*, p. 465

In my previous chapters, I have discussed the extent to which an evaluative response to contemporary collective co-existence is a function of perspective. In *J R*, while the diminishment of a narrator figure might seem to provide the reader with an 'unmediated' view of the conditions it represents, the text actually carefully positions the reader in order to encourage a negative view towards the fictional world. Far from being a 'polyphonic' text therefore, the unique narrative discourse of *J R* is put in the service of a particular ideological vision.

Don DeLillo's *Underworld* is particularly aptly comparable to *J R* in its structure, narrative technique and representation of collective co-existence. Despite its similar size and scope, the novel cleaves more to individual perspective than *J R*, and the various characters are more clearly delineated for the reader by a narrator figure. However rather than providing a more determinate text with a singular ideological vision, *Underworld* does not control readerly identification in the same way, endorsing certain characters over others. Representing the internal perspectives of a variety of different characters, each attempting to establish a stable selfhood in the face of disruption, the novel does not clearly prioritise particular narrative positions. As a result, *Underworld* maintains an ambivalence and a resistance to singular evaluation that *J R* does not.

There are some significant similarities in the reader's role however. Like *J R*, *Underworld* is a lengthy novel that portrays an array of different characters, often with only a marginal social significance to one another; and also makes considerable demands on its readers, requiring considerable readerly 'management' in order to follow the individual plot lines dispersed throughout the novel. In a similar way to *J R*, the structure of the novel means that the different individual characters are read by critics both in terms of the individual and the collective; the reader pieces together the story of their different individuals' lives, while also reading them in symptomatic terms, as representatives of the culture more generally. However the novel's thematic content also problematizes the basis of such a 'symptomatic' reading, foregrounding issues of collective identity and large scale narrative representation. In this way, *Underworld* enacts a double-handed representation of the collective.

The motif of waste also serves as a particularly suggestive intersection between the two novels' thematic preoccupations. In my last chapter I drew attention to Moore's assertion of a "symbolic equation" in *J R* between waste, faeces, and contemporary social existence. In *Underworld*, by contrast, the motif suggests the contingent and relational aspect of evaluation, and the ways in which symbolic qualities of high and low are socially constructed, intersubjective properties. Through the metaphor of waste, the novel invites reflection on processes of symbolization more generally, and suggests the potential for conflict and difference in the construction of these categories. Furthermore, if the implications of this are fully recognized, then this reflection incorporates the activities of novelist, reader and critic; any 'reading' of a text also involves the construction of relations of high and low (and is therefore an enterprise with which this chapter is no less complicit).

Focusing on the characters of Nick Shay, Marvin Lundy, and others, I argue for a reading of *Underworld* which traces the gradual disappearance of clear national boundaries, and technological changes which enact a shift away from identity based in 'place', to a historical

moment where new modes of identification are demanded. In particular, contemporary existence is portrayed as an environment in which the meeting with cultural difference is a central aspect of contemporary experience. It could be argued that *Underworld* portrays the postmodern condition as one in which individuals are increasingly faced with the contingency of their own spatialization.

However through the novel's dispersal of readerly identification, the novel resists a singular view of such conditions, instead providing a plurality of perspectives on cultural change. Unlike *J R*, the novel does not clearly articulate an implied authorial position which endorses a nostalgia for lost or threatened values. The portrayal of contemporary indeterminacy is thus extended to the novelist's own representative position.

Widely viewed as a writer particularly responsive to contemporary social conditions, DeLillo has received a significant degree of critical attention in recent decades with a number of book-length critical studies and articles addressing his fiction. One of the first to consider the writer's work as a whole, Tom LeClair's *In the Loop: Don DeLillo and the Systems Novel* has been particularly influential for the criticism that followed. As has often been said of Gaddis, LeClair argues that DeLillo uses the form of his novels to connect with its thematic content, encouraging the reader to question the "creator's position" towards the world represented in and by the novel, to denaturalize the assumptions the reader holds towards its form and representation, and to urge the reader to become "self-conscious, reflective about his reading and himself" (x). In this way, he argues, DeLillo aims to communicate the "looping uncertainty" of contemporary existence itself.

The introduction, wherein LeClair outlines his conception of the 'systems novelist', also provides a rare description of DeLillo's similarities with Gaddis, and a number of these intersect with my own points of comparison in this thesis. In his introduction to this work he argues that Gaddis also deserves the label 'systems novelist', particularly for *J R*, and points to a number of

“correspondences” between Gaddis and DeLillo’s work (*In the Loop* 16). He argues that in both writers’ work the complex interdependence of contemporary existence is reflected in the spatial relations of the novel, where there is “a new scale” of time and space represented (17). Because the novels of DeLillo “extend themselves to a massive scale”, LeClair contends that this “forces” the reader to question the kind of “system” they are confronted by. This kind of question is also raised by the characters of their fiction, as their protagonists are also frequently “producers and consumers of messages, would be artists or detectives in multiple, frequently overloaded communications loops”. Like the reader, the main activity of these characters is the “interpretation of semiotic systems, the world’s codes transformed into human codes”. For both writers, LeClair argues, “contemporary man... lives in and interprets an environment he has made, a world he has projected” (17).

However it seems the novelist, in LeClair’s account, is exempt from such limitation. LeClair argues that DeLillo is influenced by the “contemporary scientific paradigm” of Austrian biologist von Bertalanffy, whose ‘systems theory’ “offers an alternative to both the cruel ‘certitudes’ of mechanistic thinking and the extremes of relativity” which “concentrates on the reciprocal – looping – communications of ecological systems (including man)” (xi). While the characters may experience the world as discontinuous, LeClair argues that DeLillo portrays the world as permeated by ‘systems’, and argues that DeLillo composes his novels of “multiple looping patterns and orders, reminding the reader of a systems complexity and sanity that his characters cannot or will not accept” (26). While the systems novelist might seem “less in control of perspective”, the reader is to read each perspective as “constituents of a large whole” (19). Thus while DeLillo is, LeClair contends, “critical” and “pessimistic” towards contemporary culture, he argues his fiction is a gesture of hope, as it aims to “communicate a new version of the world” (20).

While an assessment of these claims in relation to DeLillo’s entire body of work remains outside the scope of this thesis, I argue that *Underworld* offers multiple perspectives, refusing to

offer the 'large whole' that this systems model proposes. Interestingly, through characters such as J. Edgar Hoover, DeLillo could even be seen to offer a critique of the 'systems' perspective, as well as a critique (or at least qualification) of "pessimistic" and "critical" fiction.

The view that *Underworld* is a depiction of a "whole" of collective coexistence is held by several reviewers and critics; in particular, the novel is viewed as a representation of the American nation. Tim Adams, in an early review, deems the novel to be "nothing less than the story of the States in the Cold War"(cited in DeLillo *Underworld* 1), and Joseph Dewey describes it as "a cultural biography" and "wide-lens look at fifty years of the American experience" (10). Joanne Gass writes:

Underworld traces the fortunes of the United States, of its anguished paranoia, and of Bobby Thomson's home run baseball from that eventful day in 1951 to the eve of the millennium. It looks back and asks "How have we come to be as we are?" and "Where have we been, and where are we going?"(115)

For Gass then, the prologue and epilogue of *Underworld* respectively provide the origin and telos of a national narrative, and the individual lives it portrays in the chapters of the novel are read as metonymic agents of a national collective¹⁶.

In my previous chapter I argued that the city could not be experienced as totality, but rather is necessarily a construction based on individual perspective. While the encounter with numerous others is of central importance to urban existence, the city *as* collective is a social construction based on experience within the life-world. Benedict Anderson, in his influential *Imagined Communities* makes a similar argument for the nation, and argues its historical emergence as a discursive formation arose from a change in social conditions and technology. Novels and other forms of print media enacted the "presentation of simultaneity" (25), and helped to establish a sense of 'meanwhile'. This facilitated a form of communal identity without the need for gathering in a physical, geographical sense (35). He writes:

¹⁶ Parts of this argument are a significantly expanded and adapted version of my 2005 research essay 'Plotting the Nation: Don DeLillo's *Underworld*'.

An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000,000-odd fellow Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity (Anderson 26).

He argues that the nation was the result of the emergence of a notion of “homogenous empty time”, which increased a sense of the collective across significant geographical distance¹⁷. In Anderson’s account then, the novel features a similar dynamic to that which occurs in national imagining. Both rely on a similar assumption that different individuals are bonded by their mutual membership to a shared overall space, moving through abstract linear time (Anderson 25-6). In describing the nation as ‘imagined’, Anderson’s argument is in accord with the account of ‘spatialization’ in this thesis which treats collectively experienced spaces as socially constructed, historically contingent, and discursive.

Such an account highlights the relevance of examining the expression of such a ‘community’ in discourse, treating it not as a description of a material object in the world but as socially constructed in and by language¹⁸. Homi K Bhabha in “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and The Margins of the Modern Nation” examines the “cultural construction of nation-ness as a form of social and textual affiliation”. (292). In this way Bhabha is concerned with the identificatory practices that underpin ‘the nation’, rather than the political institutions such as the state that result from them (91). In understanding the nation as a “discursive formation”, as Mark Currie summarizes, any representation of the nation necessarily employs “a strategy of totalization: that is, using some parts or characteristics to represent the whole complex entity” (92) In particular, the realist narrative creates the sense of “a transparent medium” which “creates

¹⁷ In a later edition of *Imagined Communities* Anderson noted that he had “[become] uneasily aware that what I had believed to be a significantly new contribution to thinking about nationalism – changing apprehensions of time – patently lacked its necessary coordinate: changing apprehensions of space”(xiii-xiv).

¹⁸ This introduces the kind of theories of discursive identity explored by Laclau and Mouffe in my first chapter. Jane Mummery summarizes such an approach, where community is “‘necessarily partial and provisional – at best standing for what she describes as a system of articulated equivalences. More specifically, the ‘we’ of any community is instituted through the processes of relating – articulating – disparate elements and, in so doing, transforming them. The ‘we’ of a community is thus a relating or articulating with no inherent selfness or identity”. (36)

the impression of a continuous community". By representing the nation using realist narrative, a single story with an 'origin' and an 'endpoint' is constructed, one which "conveys the impression that the continuity from national origins to the modern nation is natural and real rather than constructed by exclusions" (92). Such a narration "will tend to view immigrants at best as late additions to the nation... and... as a contamination of the purity of that character"(92).

Underworld might initially seem susceptible to such criticism, particularly through its 'prologue' and 'epilogue', opening with a baseball game where various characters express patriotic feelings, and closing with a chapter which features characters reflecting on the steady undermining of the cultural reference points of national identity through global capital. However the unconventional structure of the novel, in which the chapters are arranged so that the novel's story¹⁹ goes backwards, undermines the logic of the supplement where, as Currie describes, "that which comes later" makes the story into "one of loss of innocence or original purity"(83).

The novel's opening prologue in particular rehearses the dynamics of group identification. Depicting one of the central symbols of American nationalism, a famous baseball game, the prologue portrays characters expressing communal sentiments in a variety of guises. Like the opening of *The Body Artist*, the first line of *Underworld* begins in the second person, and directly addresses the reader: "He speaks in your voice, American, and there's a shine in his eye that's halfway hopeful" (11). It thus foregrounds the act of identification (or dis-identification, depending on the nationality of the reader), based on a shared feature: voice. Some lines later, it continues:

Longing on a large scale is what makes history. This is just a kid with a local yearning but he is part of an assembling crowd, anonymous thousands off the buses and trains, people in narrow columns tramping over the swing bridge above the river, and even if they are not a migration or a revolution, some vast shaking of the

¹⁹ In the sense that story is used by narratologists such as Abbott to distinguish the sequence of events in chronological sequence (story) from the often non-sequential representation of those events (discourse) (12).

soul, they bring with them the body heat of a great city and their own small reveries and desperations... (11)

Expressed in the gnomic present tense, the comment is one of the few moments in which the narrator detaches from character's reflection and observation in the novel, and this lays down some general principles for the novel: history is formed through the expression of individual agency, and identity is established through both individual 'longing' and collective 'belonging'. DeLillo undercuts the organic metaphors for the collective; they are not "some vast shaking of the soul" and despite the formative influence of the "body heat of a great city" these "anonymous thousands" still carry "their own reveries and desperations" (11).

This preoccupation with identification is continued throughout the prologue. The particular 'longing' described here is that of Cotter Martin, an African American boy from Harlem, unable to afford to watch the game and at the margins of 1950s baseball. Beginning outside the stadium, the narrator follows Cotter over the turnstiles into the stadium and then focuses primarily on a representation of the crowd inside the stadium walls. Shifting between close focus on particular characters at the game, out to a more generalized description of "people" in the crowd, before returning back to various individuals, the constantly shifting focus unites the various characters through their very association in the narrative discourse. In contrast to the crowd portrayed in the train station in *J R*, the members of the crowd in *Underworld* are also united by their shared interest in the baseball game being played out in front of them:

The crowd, the constant noise, the breath and hum, a basso rumble building now and then... And the lapping of applause that dies down quickly and is never enough. They are waiting to be carried on the sound of rally chant and rhythmic handclap, the set forms and repetitions (19).

Descriptions of the game on the field are scattered throughout the narrative discourse ("Pafko throws smartly to Cox") which functions as a kind of focal point for the crowd. As the game begins to lose its appeal, the crowd is portrayed as gradually losing its coherence and unity, until excitement on the field causes it to be "made over" and "renewed" (37). The prologue rehearses

the dynamics of communal identification, in which a sense of shared features transcend the differences of individuals and is the basis for a sense of shared identity: the construction of a mutual membership to a group beyond the self.

The game's capacity to unite crowds is even shown to extend beyond the stadium; following the win, the narration describes how "[a]ll over the city people are coming out of their houses" and the home run that won the game "makes people want to be in the streets". Russ Hodges, the baseball commentator at the game, thinks that "they will carry something out of here that joins them all in a rare way, that binds them to a memory with protective power" and "that a thing like this keeps us safe in some undetermined way" (60). More than mere entertainment, baseball in the prologue functions as a shared experience that enables a sense of commonality, and affirms a general sense of belonging that is psychologically comforting.

The representation of the game is not purely positive and nostalgic however. Cotter's presence at the game gestures to racial tensions prevalent at that particular historical moment, and those at the margins of national culture. The presence of J Edgar Hoover at the game introduces a second negative element when he is informed of a nuclear test by the Soviet Union. While the figuration of the convergent crowd at the ball game suggests the kinds of cultural symbols out of which nationalism coalesces, the external nuclear threat provides a kind of negative space which delimits the nation. Hoover considers the "public anxiety" that the test will cause, and considers how "all these people formed by language and climate and popular songs and breakfast foods and the jokes they tell and the cars they drive have never had anything in common so much as this, that they are all sitting in the furrow of destruction." (28).

"And what is the connection between Us and Them, how many bundled links do we find in the neural labyrinth? It's not enough to hate your enemy. You have to understand how the two of you bring each other to deep completion (51)."

While his rigid oppositional mindset is also shown to be pathological, seeing the world in strict camps of rigid categories, of 'Us' and 'Them', of "black and white forever" (50), the figure of

Hoover also reminds the reader of the way in which seemingly positive, affirmative aspects of collective identity are also a response to insecurity and threat.

The figures of Hoover and Cotter therefore gesture to the exclusions and oppositions in any articulation of identity. In an early article John Duvall argues that baseball is portrayed as “an aesthetical ideology that masks troubling political realities” (286). Duvall argues that DeLillo’s evocation of American nostalgia performs an implicit critique, dramatizing the way such collective identification is “authoritarian” and “almost proto-fascist” (287-8). He examines the three different perspectives on the game, each represented by different characters, and each of which, he argues, shows how baseball functions to de-politicize and aestheticize various social divisions (292). He argues that the character of Hoover reminds the reader of the geo-political context of its historical moment, and therefore raises a question: “Why on a particular day in our history – October 3 1951 –does one cultural event, a baseball game, eclipse a moment crucial to the construction of the Cold War?” (287). While he acknowledges there is “never a position outside ideology”, he nevertheless asserts that the game distracts the crowd from a more important ‘realities’: that, as Hoover realizes, they “are sitting in the furrow of destruction” (28).

However his article is a reading of an earlier version of the prologue, published as a novella titled *Pafko at the Wall*, and his assertion of these priorities is problematized by a number of changes between versions: a significant number of the lines that Duvall argues are important in the novella have been removed in the version reproduced in the prologue, including many of those that foreground issues of class and racial politics. Indeed the fact that Duvall’s political reading is based on these removed elements suggests the latter version shifts away from the kind of argument Duvall provides: where the political is a ‘fundamental reality’, as opposed to characters such as Hodges’s belief in the “false aura” of baseball and community. Each character in *Underworld* represents a different set of values and beliefs in relation to the particular historical moment represented, and Duvall’s own particular political interests dictate his account of the prologue’s significance.

What the prologue dramatizes (including Duvall's response to it) is that despite the seeming 'unity' generated by the baseball game, its significance is varied. The prologue does not represent experience as easily generalizable, and represents the articulation of collective identity as the imposition of sameness on difference. Despite its apparently celebratory tone, the prologue contains elements which portray collective identity as a fragile construction based on exclusion, rather than an affirmative organic order.

After the prologue, where the third person narrator shifts from the generality of the collective to the desires and beliefs of specific characters, the novel changes its focus. The majority of the representation of *Underworld* is dispersed, dedicated to the portrayal of numerous different individual narratives, which intertwine and intersect in a variety of different ways. Thus, any attempt on the part of the reader to unite these various lives in cultural, thematic or symptomatic terms is qualified by the prologue, which foregrounds the limits of such an approach.

One of the common motifs which unites these various lives is waste and the abject, which I argue comes to function in the novel as a metaphor for the exclusions created by socio-symbolic construction. In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, Peter Stallybrass and Allon White argue that the formation of a collective identity comes about through various symbolic hierarchies, through a "complex cultural process whereby the human body, psychic forms, geographical space and the social formation are all constructed within interrelating and dependent hierarchies of high and low" (5). Stallybrass and White argue that the "low-Other" is excluded from the social formation, while at the same time it is "instrumentally constitutive" of its "shared imaginary repertoires" (White 5). Waste, excrement, the deformed, and disease (all recurrent motifs in the novel) belong in those categories by which, White and Stallybrass argue, the "bourgeois spectator" in the Renaissance period "surveyed and classified *his own*

antithesis”(128. emphasis in original.) All constitute what they describe as “the depths of social classification, the lower bodily stratum, the sewers, *the underworld*” (5 emphasis added).

In Wilcox’s interpretation of the treatment of national identity in the novel, the psychoanalytic perspective emphasizes these excluded aspects.. Drawing from Žižek, he provides a Lacanian account of the nation, and argues that “[a]ny symbolic representation of the nation is... tainted with failure; there is always a troubling remainder that throws off balance a normative ideality....” (212). It is this ‘troubling remainder’ he argues, that explains the repeated reference to waste in the novel; Wilcox contends that *Underworld* is “precisely concerned with the destabilizing residues of national construction” that “haunt the social edifice of the nation” (212). In the prologue, for example, Hoover’s obsession with disease and germs is linked to “moral decay” of communism, and therefore his psychology can be understood as desiring what Žižek describes as “the binding of ... enjoyment to a certain signifying, symbolic formation which assures a minimum of consistency of our being-in-the-world” (201).

Wilcox’s argument places him in the camp of a number of critics who explain the prevalence of the waste motif in relation to spatialization, in particular psychoanalytic theories of identity formation. Ruth Helyer reads the novel in terms of the Kristevan notion of abjection, which “draws us to the place where definition disintegrates” (992). Helyer argues that human identity is represented in *Underworld* as “a fragile construct, achieved only by disavowing valid parts of ourselves in the evacuation process...” Helyer emphasizes the importance of boundaries, both physical and conceptual, to identity in the novel, where processes of knowledge management are in part means by which one “keep[s] abjection at bay” (990).

Both Helyer and Robert McMinn make similar arguments about the characterisation of Nick, one of the most central characters in the novel. McMinn reads him in terms of Mary Douglas’s *Purity and Danger*, in which Douglas argues that individuals attempt to impose order on their environment through a need to “chase dirt”(42). Working in the waste industry, his faith in

his work is described as a “religious conviction” (88) and Nick displays a firm commitment to security, control and living “responsibly in the real”. In one introspective passage, he considers how he disagrees with “this business of life as a fiction” and, (acknowledging its fascist overtones), expresses a desire to view history as “[a] single narrative sweep, not ten thousand wisps of disinformation” (82). Nick’s dedication to the consistency of the social world and a desire for spatial security - his “self-conscious shaping of a life” (257) - can be understood as a response to a level of insecurity in relation to his father’s sudden, unexplained disappearance.

While Nick’s insecurity is portrayed as related to his father’s disappearance, much of the first section features characters preoccupied with uncertainty attributable to cultural change more generally. Pondering the experience of the airport, Nick’s description is contrastable to the portrayal of the shared purpose of the baseball game; he recalls wondering where the people in the crowd “were going, and why, and who are they, and how do they all disperse so quickly and mysteriously” (105). As distinct from the baseball game, airport space appears particularly emblematic of some of the more unique changes associated with postmodernity, Nick’s sense of alienation is thus connected to his environment. Part One of the novel concludes with Nick’s preoccupations with spatial dislocation, remarking to his wife how it has “been years since [he] looked at a real map” and that it has become antiquated, a “sort of Louis Stevenson thing to do”. Instead, he quips that “our maps have pancake houses” (128). The final paragraph demonstrates Nick’s nostalgia for a lost past: he recalls himself sitting on the roof listening to the radio transmission of the baseball game, looking out at the view around him. The scene thus establishes a comparison between the localized experience of the past and the more commercialized (and de-territorialized) space of contemporary globalized culture.

Writing of the impact of ‘time-space compression’ on the management of identity, Currie argues we can see “a contest in the contemporary world between an old and a new order of things, so that the postmodern world is always a dialogue between old and new processes of identification”. These two processes he characterizes as “a traditional sense of identity as a

narrative based in the origins of place” and a “postmodern sense of identity as unfixed commodity affiliation” (106). *Underworld* responds particularly well to a reading in terms of this cultural shift between an ‘old’ and ‘new’ order; a shift away from place-bound identity, or one based on notions of tradition, to the “floating zones of desire” that are an emergent feature of contemporary existence (319).

This dialogue between orders is evident in a number of chapters in this opening section. Nick considers the effects of shifting his mother out of Arizona, taking her out of the Bronx where she has spent most of her life. He thinks that only the television provides a sense of continuity with her past, making “the place more plausible” and drawing “her toward a perceptible center” (103). In another scene, Nick and his friend Brian Glassic visit a store called ‘Condomology’. Located “out where the map begins to go white”, the store is a place largely filled with young people, each exhibiting “the package of attitudes and values known as lifestyle” (109). Dedicated to the display and sale of a variety of different condoms, and condom-associated products, Brian understands these products as a particularly contemporary form of identity. He considers the significance of the fact that one of his children has a tattoo of the Pepsi logo and speculates that eventually “[k]ids will shoot each other for expensive lamb-skin condoms” (109-11). The reader is positioned with Brian and Nick as observer of these young people, and as a result shares their role as a spectator of perceived cultural change.

Brian’s response to the apparent rootlessness of this postmodern mode of shifting affiliations is evident elsewhere. In the third chapter, Brian, Nick, and ‘Big Sims’ watch a baseball game from a corporate box, the crowd “at an eerie distance, soul-moaning like some lost battalion” (91). Brian, wanting to be amongst the crowd, declares that “this isn’t reality. This is virtual reality. And we don’t have the proper equipment” (92) and complains that “we had the real Dodgers and Giants. Now we have the holograms”. Glassic’s view of the game’s demise reflects a sense of the change from a cultural symbol associated with localized identity and

collective feeling, to a less social and more commercialized form of entertainment, dominated by spectacle.

However as with the baseball game in the prologue, the scene provides a variety of positions on the shift in baseball culture, and the response is not uniformly negative. Big Sims demonstrates little problem with the change, replying that they are just “here to eat a meal and see a game...” The men are also accompanied by an English television producer, who had been “busy...devouring American culture...porno kings, contemplative monks, blues singers in prison” and had just “finished a sweep of California and was headed to a poker tournament in Reno and then into the desert to interview Klara Sax”. Her highly mobile cultural tourism and consumption continues as she watches the game (she orders wine in order to try “a local white”) (93). The English documentary maker is representative of a commodified form of identity as consumption (pithily described elsewhere as “you are defined by what you consume”), her appreciation of the game is enabled by the contemporary world.

A number of critics have described the unequal experience of contemporary spatial conditions. Stuart Hall characterizes the condition of this mobilized cultural elite:

You take it in as you go by, all in one, living with difference, wondering at pluralism, this concentrated, corporate, over-corporate, over-integrated, over-concentrated, and condensed form of economic power which lives culturally through difference and which is constantly teasing itself with the pleasures of the transgressive other (cited in Currie 105)

The unequal experience of postmodern spatial conditions implicit in Hall’s description is also evident in Wilcox’s reading of *Underworld*. Drawing from Bauman, Wilcox characterizes these two groups as ‘tourists and vagabonds’: “an affluent class whose access to global mobility enables them to inhabit the spaces of uniform affluence (and experience poverty by way of the distanced perspective of the tourist), and an underclass that dwells in a world of poverty and depredation” (208).

DeLillo also does not portray a universal economic experience (and response) to the processes of globalization and flexible accumulation. While certain characters are portrayed as highly mobile and slightly alienated by this constant travel, others remain firmly entrenched in their geographical position, and not necessarily by choice. This is primarily explored through the scenes set in 'the Wall' in New York City, a place where the homeless, impoverished and other socially isolated characters reside (208). The wall figures as 'a tuck of land adrift from the social order' (239) and the repeated motif of abandoned cars (one homeless girl is living in one) suggests its exclusion from the mobilizing processes of globalization. In one scene, a busload of tourists visit the wall, run by a company called 'South Bronx Surreal', which as Wilcox argues, "suggests the promise of a glimpse into the nightmare of the Other by way of the aestheticised tourist gaze, a gratifying horror that serves to verify the validity of 'our' way of life" (208). Globalization is not represented as the end of difference, merely its redefinition.

Particularly suggestive is the way in which the scene portrays social space and the constitution of 'real' as a site of discursive contestation. A nun who is attempting to assist the homeless is infuriated by the tourist company, yelling at them that their life is "not surreal. It's real, it's real. Your bus is surreal. You're surreal...Brussels is surreal. Milan is surreal. This is real. The Bronx is real". By providing a variety of positions on contemporary globalized culture (each, to a varying extent, represented as reasonable and sympathetic) *Underworld* complicates a single evaluative response to the conditions represented in the novel. The sense of 'unreality' articulated by the tourists and Sister Gracie in the Ghetto, and Brian Glassic at the game, are only a few instances of a sentiment expressed repeatedly throughout the novel. If this repetition suggests anything, it is that postmodern culture is represented as multifarious and indeterminate, and that the complexity of spatial relations, and the "compression" of space, makes the meeting of cultural otherness and difference a more prevalent feature of everyday social life.

It is this otherness, those elements that disrupt and unsettle identity and stable meaning that waste represents in the novel. This is most clearly seen in relation to national identity in the scene in which one character, Marvin Lundy, travels across Europe in search of his long-lost half-brother. Lundy becomes increasingly preoccupied with his own bowel movements; as he traverses geographical boundaries and moves further into Russia, his “B.M.s” smell progressively worse and become “intense and deeply personal and seem[] to say something about the bearer” (310). When he and his brother finally meet, they argue about the merits of their respective nations and, when defecating afterwards, Marvin “unleashe[s] a firewall of chemical waste” which is “infused with... geopolitics” (312). It is clear that waste is related to other forms of symbolic differentiation here, specifically the processes of exclusion that underpin identity.

This symbolic association between identity and waste in this chapter provides compelling evidence that waste does function as a meaningful symbol in the novel. This evidence also contradicts David H Evans’s argument in “Taking Out the Trash; Don DeLillo’s *Underworld*, Liquid Modernity, and the End of Garbage”, in which he argues critics go “subtly off track” in their insistence that garbage’s significance in *Underworld* is in “its capacity to represent something else”. For Evans, the critics who use psychoanalysis as an explanation for the prevalence of waste all display “an unwillingness to let garbage be garbage. Instead, they recycle the material reality of trash, converting it into a useful abstraction or meaningful symbol, and in doing so sacrifice its stubbornly senseless singularity” (111).

Evans takes Bauman’s categorizations of ‘heavy’ and ‘light’ modernity as his theoretical framework for the novel; periods that resemble (but do not match exactly) Harvey’s periods of “Fordism” and “Flexible Accumulation”. He characterizes these two periods in terms of “general principles”: a movement from “size, immobility, and solidity” to “lightness, speed, and flexibility”; as well as in terms of the “organization of space”, where “the imitating gesture of heavy modernity is one of enclosure and exclusion”. Heavy modernity enacts a division between that which has “been brought under the regime of measured and instrumental control – and

outside – the space of all that remains unassimilated, unutilised, or unregulated” (107). Liquid Modernity, by contrast, entails the constant recirculation of objects and representations, and thus suggests “the end of garbage”. Holding garbage, or that which “resists conversion or translation”, to be the “last preserve of individuality”. Evans thus argues that DeLillo rejects allegory, and instead “plunges into garbage’s material immediacy”. This, he argues, also explains the form of the novel on a more general level:

While critics have often attempted to provide some meaningful pattern that justifies the novel’s apparently haphazard divagations, the experience of the reader is more likely to resemble Tony Tanner’s exasperated response: ‘I just did not see the point of DeLillo’s randomizings... the fragments do not collect around anything.... paranoia has long been for DeLillo... the fundamental organizing principle of his world-view... *Underworld*, however, takes this fixation to a new level, offering endlessly proliferating narrative intersections above and beyond the call of necessity, or even sense... (105-106).

Instead, Evan perceives design in the novel’s lack of design: the absence of any other clear underlying relationship between the disparate events, characters, and motifs in the novel is part of DeLillo’s didactic intention: “DeLillo insists that we pay attention to the resistant and repulsive thing itself, instead of recycling and reprocessing it into an intellectually palatable form more useful for our critical aspirations...” (117). In the end, and despite his claims to the contrary, Evan’s argument is not that divergent from those who draw from psychoanalysis. Evans merely expands the theme into the reader’s hermeneutic process itself, establishing relations of significance and marginality, relevance and irrelevance. It is also a process that he is not exempt from.

As Ruth Helyer argues, *Underworld* sets up a reflection on a kind of “identificatory quandary” where “[w]e are implicated in our own excrement; it remains bound up in our identification” and with the fact that [i]t is infinitely more attractive to be “something” embracing the boundaries this brings, rather than be “nothing” and try to deal with the chaos we feel sure

this would bring (1003-4). Through the metaphor of waste, *Underworld* points to that which is excluded by any narration, and the 'waste' of our processes of knowledge generation. For the reception of an overall message, or implied authorial position, is equally dependent on construction (and exclusion); a process of prioritising particular characters' perspectives over others. Part of the confusion in critical responses to *Underworld* is the difficulty in establishing which (if any) character's position is endorsed.

With a novel such as *Underworld*, where a variety of different characters express theories, or observations about contemporary existence, any argument for a character as the mouthpiece of an author must be approached with a fair amount of trepidation. This, I argue, is the most problematic feature of the argument of James Annesley's "‘Thigh bone connected to the hip bone’: Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* and the Fictions of Globalization". Arguing that the novel engages with debates around globalization, he contends that the novel offers "a vision of total coordination and describes a realm in which experience, culture, and environment are increasingly integrated into a homogenous global whole" (85). Through the thematic patterns and connected symbols and motifs, the novel "identifies a relationship between its own integrated narrative trajectories and the coordinating processes of globalization". Annesley works from the assumption that certain characters' attitudes are representative of DeLillo's own beliefs, including Klara and Nick's observations on the organization of the city around them. In these characters' comments, he argues, DeLillo "figures globalization as an irreducible reality", a representation which he criticizes in the way that it "limit[s] critical endeavour" and "strengthen[s] the ideological and conceptual foundations of globalization itself". (91). Annesley, for example, takes the following lines that open the epilogue as one of several "key passages of authorial commentary":

Capital burns off the nuance in a culture. Foreign investment, global markets, corporate acquisitions, the flow of information through transnational media, the attenuating influence of money that's electronic and sex that's cyberspaced, untouched money and computer-safe sex, the convergence of consumer desire –

not that people want the same things, necessarily, but that they want the same range of choices. (785)

However textual evidence surrounding these lines suggest that these are remarks by Nick Shay, and Nick even informs the reader that he is “mostly quoting remarks made... earlier in the day by Viktor Maltsev, a trading company executive”. Too hasty in his construction of an initial implied authorial position, Annesley then argues that the incomplete plot lines of the novel are accidental, and “work against its integrated design”. It is particularly difficult, based on textual evidence, to discern which characters DeLillo endorses or supports, and in the end a reading on such a basis is significantly compromised.

Futhermore, the validity of characters’s beliefs cannot be easily disputed or refuted based on textual evidence alone. When Marvin Lundy offers one of his particularly outrageous conspiracy theories, Brian allows that “he did not reject it entirely” and “believed it provisionally here in this room located below street level in a frame house on a week-day afternoon in Cliffside Park, New Jersey”. The geographical distance and mediated relationship to the far off country means that the theory remained “unprovably true, remotely and inadmissibly true but not completely unhistorical...” Brian’s response can be understood in terms of the recognition of the leap of faith that underpins all received knowledge claims, and the difficulty in treating any claim in terms of final predication. While readers would be easily forgiven for dismissing the comic notion that the birthmark on Mikhael Gorbachev’s head is a map of Latvia on its side which functions as a secret signal to convey the news “that the USSR faced turmoil from the republics”, the suggestion is never able to be dismissed with absolute certainty (171). The novel deals in an array of truth claims which might seem, commonsensically, to fit along a continuum between plausibility and deranged paranoia, but challenges the basis on which one might finally say for sure which are true and false. Thus we are forced to question the bases on which we make these distinctions for ourselves.

It is this kind of gesture to the incomplete or provisional nature of character perspective that invites reflection on the indeterminacy of space in postmodernity. Anthony Giddens argues

that contemporary conditions have “radicalise[d] and globalise[d] pre-established traits of modernity”. In particular, the diminished relevance of tradition has led to an overall increase in a sense of insecurity and risk in relation to the world one inhabits. The experience of radical doubt, Giddens argues, “permeates into everyday life as well as philosophical consciousness, and forms a general existential dimension of the contemporary social world” (3). He argues that modernity “institutionalizes the principle of radical doubt and insists that all knowledge takes the form of hypotheses; claims that may very well be true, but which are in principle always open to revision and may have at some point to be abandoned” (2-3). Contemporary social organization (particularly globalization) intensifies this experience of radical doubt.

This kind of radical doubt is one of the most prominent features in the novel. In “Everything is Connected”, Peter Knight argues that the novel traces a shift from the more ‘secure’ paranoia of Cold War threat, enabling a stable sense of identity, to a more ‘insecure’ conspiratorial attitude as a response to the complexity of contemporary social existence. The various theories contemplated by the characters are offered in non-committal and even ironic ways; they are “not so much items of irrefragable faith as tentative gestures...” (822). Characters display this kind of non-committal paranoia as a response “to the bewildering complexities or the current world in which everything is connected but nothing adds up”. This shift, Knight argues, is portrayed as less an expression of geopolitical changes (the end of the cold war) than societal: “the gradual transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist economy” (824). These economic changes caused “the loss of the sense of control over national (not to mention individual) economic destiny” and increased the “interconnectedness of social and economic relationships within a global economy” (824). Knight argues this is reflected in the reader’s activity towards the novel’s “system of connections”, which consists of numerous disparate plot and thematic connections (830).

We learn about connections belatedly, haphazardly, in passing, since the different strands of the novel’s converging plots are not presented in linear chronological fashion... That everything is connected remains, for the reader as much as for the

novel's characters, a subliminal suspicion and an act of discovery, rather than a tritely proven observation (831).

He argues this is an "attempt to map the impossibly complex interactions in the age of globalization between individuals and larger social and economic forms that resemble but exceed the logic of conspiracy theory (830).

All characters in *Underworld* offer only a vision or fragment of reality, and the perspectival nature of the fictional world is emphasized throughout for the reader. While the reader might reliably be sceptical of the various conspiracy theorist figures, their existence is a reminder to the reader of the provisionality of all knowledge. When Cotter and his family discuss a paranoid street preacher and whether or not he is mad, Cotter's mother acknowledges that he "has a life even if we can't imagine it" and repeats the point, that "the man has a life and it's a mystery to me how he lives it" (141). At one point, Marvin Lundy's wife considers that despite her intimate knowledge of him there were still "deep currents" that were inaccessible to her, and that in the "Marvinness of his unnamed depths", there still remains "an obscure something that caused disquiet". The indeterminacy of contemporary spatial organization is connected in the novel to a more universal indeterminacy that underpins all self-other relations. Such moments gesture to the potential limitations of the reader's access to full knowledge, opening the text to the possibility of other explanations, and other readings.

Nonetheless, an examination of these different characters reveals a variety of highly suggestive positions on contemporary culture, particularly on the role of the artist in this context. Timothy L. Parrish provides a particularly convincing account of a number of characters throughout *Underworld* that provide a variety of perspectives on artistry and creation in postmodern conditions. He argues that various "marginal or unlikely artists... create competing and often complex renderings of experience in different formats" (699), which include Russ Hodges, Klara Sax, Lenny Bruce and Moonman 157. A number of these invite reflection on

Underworld itself. Just as Hodges reminisces about how he used to simulate baseball games for the radio from telegraph reports, often with idealized imagery, DeLillo also “mimics nostalgia” in the prologue, and demonstrates “Cold War America’s desire to recreate perpetually the conditions of his own cultural innocence despite the obvious conflicts of its history” (703).

The central artist figure of Part 5 of the novel is Lenny Bruce, and as Parish argues, his art also resembles DeLillo’s in significant ways, “moving in and out of voices, channelling through the cross-currencies of American speech and consciousness”, as well as in its confrontation of difficult realities from his marginal creative position (714). Through Bruce, DeLillo “toys with the possibility that the bond between him and his audience also derives from a sense of knowing powerlessness” (714-5). For Parrish, Moonman 157 performs an analogous role to DeLillo, tagging subway trains with his name and addressing an unknown anonymous audience. The artistic drive, as embodied by the graffiti writer, is to attempt to inflict their identity upon a resistant culture, to “write over” culture, and thus to “affirm the story of backstreet life” (434).

Other characters can also be seen as ‘artist figures’ in the way that they engage with the space around them. Albert Bronzini, for example, believes that “walking was an art”, and takes the role of the urban flaneur. He walks his neighbourhood, allowing the route to “produce a medley of sounds and forms and movements, letting the voices fall and the aromas deploy in ways that varied, but not too much, from day to day” (661). Bronzini imagines a museum display of a “fragment of chalked pavement’ sharing the space of marble carvings from antiquity.

By portraying a variety of spatializing figures, *Underworld* introduces a plethora of positions and attitudes on cultural change. While none of them are clearly endorsed more than others, there are two figures that are particularly relevant to the concerns of this thesis: Klara Sax and J Edgar Hoover. Sax is the most prominent of the artist figures in the novel, with numerous

passages dedicated to the description of Sax's "rooftop summer" (371). Looking out from the top of her building, she discovers a

....hidden city above the grid of fever streets...Ten million bobbing heads that ride above the tideline of taxi stripes, all brain-waved differently, and yes the street abounds in idiosyncrasy, in the human veer, but you have to go to roof level to see the thing distinct, preserved in masonry and brass" (371).

From her "principle view" she wonders whether the intersecting "dark metal structures... might tell her something". While the unique access to the city in its totality provided by this vantage point is empowering for Sax, she is resistant to the same approach in her art; displaying a commitment to the personal, and a suspicion of large-scale representation: "[s]he was wary of ego, hero, heights and size. This was the stuff of rooftop eloquence. Admire but do not emulate" (374). This echoes the metaphor which Bursey and Furlong use to praise Gaddis's representation of the collective: the 'mountaintop view', however Sax is somewhat more hesitant than such critics in its celebration.

Two decades later (but described in the first chapter of the main section of the novel), Sax's 1992 'Long Tall Sally' project does return to "ego, hero, heights and size", but with a specific purpose: an attempt to provide a sense of connection to the historical past through art, and maintain a sense of continuity in response to the disruptions of postmodern culture. Painting a series of decommissioned B52 bombers in the desert, her art has a number of parallels with DeLillo's: taking the materials of history and recontextualising them.

A number of her comments around her art in this scene are particularly consonant with statements expressed by DeLillo in his article "The Power of History". In this article, DeLillo regards *Underworld* as in part a response to his sense of a "period of empty millennial frenzy", and views the novel as "free and undivided, the only thing that can match the enormous dimensions of social reality" (68). His project has less of a political ambition, to bring about change, than a psychological one, an attempt to provide an enduring narrative for both himself and his readers.

It is precisely the fictional status of novels, for DeLillo that liberates them from historical fact and enables them to develop narratives of psychological significance. The form of the novel gives the writer “a flat surface that he will decorate, fitfully, with words” (69). Where critics viewed *J R* as replicating the more alienating aspects of contemporary existence, DeLillo states his intention in “The Power of History” for *Underworld* to *counteract* this alienation and dehumanization.

The parallels between DeLillo’s description of his own novel and Klara’s comments are numerous. Her volunteers are those who are looking to escape the contemporary social world and work in “some zone of exalted play” (75), and the need for a certain distance from the real world also can be seen on Klara’s insistence on “a cleared area around the finished work” (70). Despite using the materials of a significant military conflict, Sax insists that “this is an art project, not a peace project”, and views her work as an attempt to restore an enduring relationship to the past. However due to the variety of different ‘artist’ figures, the treatment of Klara as mouthpiece is significantly qualified. The playful approach to intentionality in *Underworld* is accentuated by the first chapter’s inclusion of an interview with Klara, where she discusses the ideas behind her work:

I want to keep our intentions small and human despite the enormous work we’ve done and the huge work we have ahead of us and I’m sitting here...talking endlessly about my work when I’m completely aware of Matisse and what he said, that painters must begin by cutting out their tongues (78).

Significantly, the novel’s description of the artwork is from another character’s perspective; Nick Shay looking down from hot air balloon (an aerial perspective that recalls Klara from the rooftop). Nick remembers that Klara “wanted us to see a single mass, not a collection of objects” and “invited us to see the land dimension, horizonwide, in which the work was set” (84). His description of the work is particularly suggestive:

Sweeps of color, bands and spatters, airy washes, the force of saturated light – the whole thing oddly personal, a sense of one painter’s hand moved by impulse and afterthought as much as by epic design... these colors did not simply draw down

power from the sky or lift it from the landforms around us. They pushed and pulled. They were in conflict with each other, to be read emotionally, skin pigments and industrial grays and a rampant red appearing repeatedly through the piece – the red of something released, a burst sac, all blood pus thickness and runny underyellow. And the other planes, decolored, still wearing spooky fabric over the windscreen panels and engines, dead-souled, waiting to be primed (83).

The description of the colours parallels closely DeLillo's approach to representation. While there is some common thematic content between the various figures DeLillo represents in *Underworld* ("sweeps of color, bands and spatters") and the sense of a single artistic figure behind the work (the "sense of one painter's hand"), the individual lives are given no overall unified significance, (neither "draw[ing] down power from the sky" nor lift[ing] it from "the landforms around us"). The polyphonic nature of the novel is also evident in this description (the various colours are "in conflict with each other") and the theme of exclusion also appears here (the red of communism 'released', the "runny underyellow", and those excluded entirely from representation, those other planes "dead-souled, waiting to be primed"). The relationship between spectator and artwork nonetheless remains central consideration to its overall significance.

If Klara Sax's project represents the ameliorative possibilities of art in the face of the dispersals of postmodern capitalism, J Edgar Hoover can be seen as the flipside of the artist of mass representation. As I discussed in relation to the prologue, the project of evoking the distant past in order to maintain a sense of continuity risks nostalgia, conservatism and exclusionary behaviour. Rigidly nationalistic, and nostalgic for days gone by, Hoover thinks that he "liked the thirties" and doesn't "like the sixties... at all" (559) and worries about the prospect of "ideas" becoming "insurgent" and "long-haired men and women, scruffy and free-fucking, who moved toward armed and organized resistance, trying to break the state and bring about the end of existing order". Also worried about such "kids who lie down in the street and wave flowers at the police", his faithful companion and assistant Clyde states that "Vietnam is the war, the reality. This is the movie, where the scripts are written and the actors perform. American kids don't want

what we've got. They want movies, music" (564). Clyde's comments connect with the dispute between Sister Gracie and the tourists in 'The Wall', where one's sense of 'real' and 'fake' and 'fiction' are a site of discursive contestation, and the dispute of various evaluative positions and political priorities.

This issue of knowledge as a site of contestation and dispute is also explored elsewhere in relation to Hoover's portrayal. Hoover describes how he responds to his "enemies-for-life"; through the acquisition of knowledge and surveillance:

The way to deal with such people was to compile massive dossiers... The dossier was a deeper form of truth transcending facts and actuality. The second you placed an item in the file, a fuzzy photograph, an unfounded rumour, it became promiscuously true. It was a truth without authority and therefore incontestable [...] He rearranged the lives of his enemies, their conversations, their relationships, their very memories, and he made these people answerable to the details of his creation (559).

The unique usage of Hoover in the novel is also noted by Parrish. He argues that at the baseball game Hoover "is the only character present who is capable of making the sorts of cultural and historical connections that DeLillo demands of his readers; thus, in a disturbing way, DeLillo makes reader and author complicitous with Hoover" (706). As Parrish argues, "by showing how Hoover co-opts novelistic strategies, DeLillo imagines Hoover inventing the kind of postmodern novel that DeLillo writes" (708).

The connection of between literature and surveillance has been explored by a number of critics. In *The Novel and The Police*, D.A. Miller also argues for an analogy between Foucault's notion of panoptic vision and narrative technique. In his examination of Balzac's *Une ténébreuse Affaire*, he argues that the novelist's activity is a "penetration of social surfaces" and that "Balzac's omniscient narration assumes a fully panoptic view of the world it places under surveillance.

Nothing worth knowing escapes its notation, and its complete knowledge includes the knowledge that it is always right. (23)” Despite appearing ‘powerless’ over the circumstances and events of the ‘story world’, such free indirect narration “controls the discursive framework in which they are perceived as such”. He argues that

The panopticism of the novel thus coincides with what Mikhail Bakhtin has called its “monologism”: the working of an implied master-voice whose accents have already unified the world in a single interpretative center. It continually needs to confirm its authority by qualifying, cancelling, endorsing, subsuming all the other voices it lets speak. (25).

However while *Underworld* also adopts the free indirect mode, and extensively describes the interior lives of its characters, the novel also undermines its own authority, suggesting the incompleteness of its vision, and the limits of its knowledge. A central tension permeates *Underworld*; between the desire for order, for ideological vision on the one hand, and the capacity for the acknowledgement of its limits, and the recognition of difference and openness.

Conclusion: Space, Identity and Indeterminacy in Gaddis and DeLillo

The above comparison between the ‘open’ and ‘closed’ texts of Sax and Hoover parallels my own comparison in this thesis between DeLillo and Gaddis. While DeLillo portrays a variety of different characters through a single third person narrator figure, his text is more indeterminate from an ideological perspective. Gaddis, on the other hand, puts his cacophony of different voices in the service of a more particular ideological vision.

In *J R*, a symbolic equation is made between the contemporary world and faeces, a motif which is part of the negative stance of the novel more generally. In *Underworld*, the motif of waste is thematically connected to the processes of evaluation more generally, and instead can be viewed as an expression of the novel’s ambivalence towards contemporary culture. Relatedly, where in *J R* a number of artist characters attempt to assert their aestheticist perspective as ‘more real’ than the world around them, *Underworld* shows ‘real’ and ‘fake’ to be socially constructed concepts that are always a site of political contestation.

While *The Body Artist* and *Carpenter’s Gothic* may seem divorced from many of the concerns that inform *J R* and *Underworld*, the desire for stability and order expressed by female characters in these short novels are shown to be part of the same process which is the basis for exclusionary and parochialist tendencies in the larger fiction. In each novel, the identity of space is intrinsically linked to self-identity, and is always a site of struggle and discursive contestation; and in each the identity of self and environment is shown to be a “desperate fiction”.

In my theoretical framework, I articulated a model of social space whereby the identity of objects and environments is not based on the passive reception of a fixed essence but socially constructed and maintained through active process and discursive performativity. This model of ‘social spatialization’ is inextricably bound with identity; self and space are notional products of

mutually constitutive processes, and stable identification is contingent upon the compliance of the material conditions of specific environments, particularly the intersubjective agreement with other inhabitants in any such space.

Following such a model, *The Body Artist* begins with the portrayal of an everyday domestic environment of the relations between husband and wife, in which the narration of the scene foregrounds the relationship between intimacy, knowledge and identity. The ontological security provided by such an environment for the wife Lauren is suddenly undermined by the introduction of a highly significant contextual detail: her husband's subsequent suicide. This incident causes a radical revision of the earlier domestic scene's significance and meaning and in doing so, the novel dramatizes the ways in which, as Culler puts it, "meaning is context bound, but context is boundless" (123).

The remainder of the novel can be viewed within this context: a meditation and exploration of a more fragile and conditional experience of self, other and environment. Just as Lauren's interactions with, and reflections on, the strange figure of Mr Tuttle, reflect a preoccupation with the notion that identity is, as Butler puts it, "a condition one enacts", so too does Lauren's 'body art' explore a performative notion of the self, brought into being in and by performative language.

Similar themes of space and identity arise in *Carpenter's Gothic*. Just as Lauren realizes in *The Body Artist* that 'intimacy' and the 'home' are projected, spatialized qualities; Gaddis's novel employs the Gothic genre to depict contemporary existence as ambiguously sinister, threatening or 'uncanny'. Through the indeterminacy of its indirect representation of the world outside the home, directly contrastable to a more stable domestic interior, the home is portrayed as simultaneously under threat, while at the same time its identity and value is reinforced on an ideological level. Despite the relative absence of physical description, the nature of the narrative

discourse and the novel's overt manipulation of sympathy encourages the reader's idealizations of the domestic.

The disruptions that contemporary conditions cause to the maintenance of identity is more explicitly explored in *J R* and *Underworld*, both of which portray characters struggling to maintain a coherent and stable sense of self, a struggle which is more explicitly linked to postmodern capitalism. If *The Body Artist* and *Carpenter's Gothic* depict the relationship between knowledge and a sense of security, then *J R* and *Underworld* explore the impact of a large and indeterminate collective world on the self.

In both, the indeterminacy is also experienced by the reader as a result of innovative narrative techniques. The narrative techniques of *Underworld* and *J R* suggest that significance is on some level determined by the reader; however any novelist subtly manipulates the context within which this occurs through his or her representational techniques and strategies. DeLillo points to the 'outside' of such a context in *Underworld*, and the limits of his characterization of contemporary culture. While the unconventional narrative form of *J R*, with its significant reduction in narrational description, might initially seem to suggest a greater commitment to spatial indeterminacy, the novel also does a large amount of work to ensure that a particular position towards collective conditions is encouraged.

In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey argues that the common trope of indeterminacy in postmodern fiction can be historicized in relation to contemporary spatial conditions. He speculates that

The superimposition of different worlds in many a postmodern novel, worlds between which an uncommunicative 'otherness' prevails in a space of coexistence, bears an uncanny relationship to the increasing ghettoization, disempowerment, and isolation of poverty and minority populations in the inner cities of both Britain and the United States. It is not hard to read a post-modern novel as a metaphorical

transect across the fragmenting social landscape, the subcultures and local modes of communication in London, Chicago, New York, or Los Angeles. (114)

Both *The Body Artist* and *Carpenter's Gothic* dramatize the contingency of spatial knowledge, and the extent to which space is built on the basis of knowledge that is a function of biographical experience and position as it inflects intersubjective negotiation rather than any essential property of the physical world. This model of spatialization is also particularly relevant to the 'second-level' political concerns of the larger novels of Gaddis and DeLillo. In both *J R* and *Underworld*, there is a basic tension between the treatment of a text as satire, with the communication of a clear political message, and the argument that such texts are reflective of the indeterminacy of collective existence. The distinction primarily applies to critical practice; any approach that seeks to read a novel as demonstrating the superiority of particular political standpoint must foreclose on the characters as objects, as well as accept the rhetorical manipulation of point of view as reflective of an organic moral or political order that pervades social organization. However the argument that the fictional representation of numerous characters' lives 'demonstrates' a particular principle is dependant on a model of interpretation which subsumes the different beliefs of characters into an overarching singular message. The construction of such a position is dependent on identification, and its implicit alignment of certain characters' attitudes with the reader.

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