In the Territory

Place and Representation in Contemporary American Literature and Art

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the qualification of PhD

Kingston University
November 1st 2006

The mountain and sea are obviously not "the mountain and sea," but a picture of the mountain and the sea.

William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*

something that never was there
can't
disappear

Frank O'Hara, 'A Chardin in need of cleaning'

JULIEN: Come here, come here, come here. See from here, I can see all the way, I can see all the way across from New York City almost all the way across to Los Angeles.
BLINDMAN: Oh man! The big time, baby!
JULIEN: I can see all the way to the other side of America.
BLINDMAN: Whoa!
JULIEN: All the way over to the West Coast. I can see right over from the East Coast to the West Coast.
BLINDMAN: Oh man, oh man. Thanks man, for telling me man, damn!

Harmony Korine, *Julien Donkey-Boy*

ABSTRACT

Beginning with documentary and theories of immediate American experience, *In the Territory* plots an alternative course through the various connections and deviations of literary and visual practices in the fields of American literature and art since 1960. Taking in various perspectives, including Post-War urban design, photography and fiction, it argues that contemporary modes of American art and literature inform one another in terms of a pervasive, conditioned and mediated place-construction. In doing so, it intends to reframe conceptions of 'place' in terms of an ongoing cultural correspondence between fiction and immediate experience. Place-construction is read as signalling an interchangeable pattern of narrative and permanence. In novels such as *The Age of Wire and String* (1996) by Ben Marcus, the photographs of Jeff Wall or the films of Harmony Korine real places are blended with the imaginary and the material act of sense and experience. As such, place is conceptualised as a philosophy of description that, instead of prioritising naturalistic description, accounts for description, mediation and representation as a source material in itself. These practices speak to a wider crisis of location in the mediated landscapes of everyday life. From the textual and sculptural work of Robert Smithson through to the novels of Harry Mathews, *In the Territory* attempts to demonstrate that, in order to account for a contemporary notion of landscape and place, it is necessary to blur theories of description with theories of location so as to undermine preconceived expectations regarding experience and media. To construct representations in a territory of representation becomes the telling of stories of storytelling. The territory or place (to deliver and receive media) is, in this way, a site of continuous production. Picture and place, description and locale, metaphor and fact coalesce within a field of textual as well as experiential operations, informing an interchangeable technique of place and representation that seeks to undermine received or limited conventions of immediate experience and place.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would never have been written without the guidance, support and insight of my supervisor Dr James Annesley. Generous funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council as well as from the Post-Graduate Research Scholarship Scheme of Kingston University has been invaluable, as has the assistance and constructive criticism of secondary supervisors Anna Kiernan, Dr Stephen Barber, and Dr David Rogers. A condensed version of chapter five of this thesis is published as 'Seeing or Believing: Harmony Korine and the Cinema of Self-Destruction' in *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 3.2 (2005). *In the Territory* is dedicated to my wife, Alex.

Preface

'In the Territory'

> 'I should see the garden far better,' said Alice to herself, 'if I could get to the top of that hill: and here's a path that leads straight to it – at least, no, it doesn't do *that* –' (after going a few yards and turning several sharp corners), 'but I suppose it will at last. But how curiously it twists! It's more like a corkscrew than a path! Well, *this* turn goes to the hill, I suppose – no, it doesn't! This goes straight back to the house! Well then, I'll try it the other way.'
>
> – Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

Like the path to Alice's unattainable aspect, the territory is a place of indefinite bearings. Territory is, in its everyday use, a synecdoche; the word in itself a manner of speaking, an affectation, in which the whole is represented in part while in each of its parts territories are represented as a whole. To this extent, territory is meant to signal the interwoven relationship between language and place. Territories, it is true, exist as possessions in land; as the whole or a portion of a land belonging to a state; they are part of a confederation with an organised government not yet admitted to statehood: a dependency: a region: a jurisdiction: a field of activity (literally and figuratively): a domain or domains: even an area (among areas) that an animal or a bird treats as its own. Still, each territory is defined by a field of activity that is part of that territory but also extra to it. Though always material in form the territory has an existence beyond its materiality. As much as it is experienced or lived, it is spoken, written and read. It is not something in itself it is something *and* the act of its perception. The territory is, in this sense, a moving image: made up and in the process of being made up. In its various incantations, it is a photograph as much as it is the thing photographed, or it is a painting as much as it is painting. It is a vocabulary, writing, a power of naming; it is to describe and be described, a dilemma of observation and description, of seeing and being seen. As with a way of speaking, or a form of dress, territory is where place and representation,

not without friction and not without the cultural and historical tensions out of which it is produced, exist synonymously.

From the outset, then, the territory is conceived as a problem of fiction, of literature, of what William Gass calls 'the habitations of the word'.[1] To grapple with the territory is to grapple with texts, with writing as well as speech, with a world of words; that is to say with a conception of place derived from spaces of literature and discourse as well as (and in relation to) the spaces of everyday life. In other words, to grapple with the territory is to grapple with the manner in which places are produced as part of an ongoing representational process, the threads of which run between fiction and fact as if there is no difference.

But to emphasise the textual nature of the territory is not enough. To assert that the territory is a textual construction or to argue for a territory as text disregards a crucial aspect of the way in which places are produced and merely repeats over-familiar de-constructionist approaches. As illustrated in the work of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau place is principally a question of action. For de Certeau:

> Space is a practiced place. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning [*properly* speaking for de Certeau, a 'place'] is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e., a place constituted by a system of signs.[2]

Text and place are thus bound up in the complicated relationship between language and space – a relationship, according to de Certeau, defined by various practices (walking, reading, working, speaking etc). These practices are not merely a question of languages or discourses 'that have nothing to express but themselves.'[3] As Lefebvre notes, 'language in action is more important than language in general or discourse in general;

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[1] After William H. Gass, *The Habitations of the Word* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985).
[2] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 117.
[3] Henri Lefebvre, *The production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 131.

and speech is more creative than language as a system – and *a fortiori* than writing or reading.'[4] This is because 'every language is located in space' and the way in which this language is used, the action it embodies, is part of the way in which that space is produced.[5]

Yet the action of language is subject to many forces, especially within a society in which 'the visual has increasingly taken precedence over elements of thought and action deriving from the other senses (the faculty of hearing and the act of listening, for instance, or the hand and the voluntary acts of 'grasping', 'holding' and so on).'[6] Therefore, space, language and action need to be accounted for in terms of the wider mechanisms of representation where the visual is prevalent and the visualisation of reality exists in continuous correspondence with the real. In this sense, places of representation blur with representations of place. Thus, *In the Territory* employs a distinctively inter-disciplinary approach that encompasses different forms of textuality as well as photography, sculpture and film, in order to account for the question of representation in this wider context of practice and experience. There are then certain initial questions: how are these places produced? What is the representational process? Is place in this sense merely a fictional construct or are fiction and place related in ways that are less easily delineated? Here, the contention is that places are made up; or that, in other words, all places are representational, mediated and in relation. The way in which places are made up, through *stories of place* that are in themselves an *experience of place*, are integral to the art and literary practices looked at here in which 'description is starting to pull away from the object described' blurring representational space with spaces of representation.[7]

The ways in which the contemporary American novel as a textual practice is situated and situates itself as part of this territory of practice and representation is, thus, one of the initial problems posed at the outset of the research for *In the Territory*. Has the novel, in

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[4] *Ibid.*, p. 132.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 132.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 139.
[7] John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 90.

its very form or in its materiality, been able to develop in terms of these powerful forces (forces of visuality and media representation) and in terms of the textual practices these forces act upon? *In the Territory* argues that certain experimental novels have and that they do so by resorting to unconventional means that look towards the action or practice of language identified by de Certeau and Lefebvre. Such unconventional means include employing the unfamiliar strategies of everyday figures of speech such as proverbs and translation as well as the use of alternative textual sources drawn from the quotidian such as manuals, maps and recipes that involve a different kind of relationship between novel and reader. Yet the value of these literary practices that draw attention to the materiality of texts is perhaps not necessarily obvious or clearly defined unless it is considered in terms of other media such as film and photography in which practitioners are able to demonstrably express the condition of the territory wherein action, practice and representation meet explicitly and cross lines in ways that open up questions about the very medium (whether it be photography, film or sculpture) of storytelling itself.

This then represents a starting point: to characterise or describe contemporary reality, to write or tell stories in terms of modern landscapes increasingly stratified at each level of action, experience and practice by the textual, the pictorial and the representational, presents writers and artists with various and immediate difficulties, the first of these being: how to construct representations in a territory of representation?

Like Alice, in *Through the Looking-Glass* denied a viewpoint from which she can survey the garden of live plants in its totality, this representational process of place is a territory that rarely yields to the conventions of observation and interpretation commonly associated with the novel. This is because it relates to the very question of language and its uses. To use the novelistic conventions of given language, no matter how critical its intentions might be, is in itself to confirm the given conventions of perception, of how the world is seen and, in turn, accounted for. Thus, in order to examine the implications of this predicament most thoroughly, *In the Territory* focuses upon authors preoccupied with the operations of language, authors who are concerned with constructing a reflexive textuality. It is the way in which these authors open up questions regarding the

relationship between text and practice that makes them most relevant and situates their work in terms of media reception more generally. Be they the dynamic and relational arrangements intrinsic to various forms of media that characterise much of everyday experience in American society – these might include advertising and photography as well as film, television or a transportation map – or the uncertain relationship between experience and the fictional accounts of experience that are everywhere, it soon becomes clear that straightforward literary criticism does not allow for the type of cultural analysis that this interrelated media landscape demands, indeed, the nature of the territory has to be accounted for along other lines.

Raymond Williams notes, in terms of this form of cultural and literary analysis, that the 'means of communication are themselves a means of production', and divorcing the two risks reinforcing certain critical and cultural assumptions.[8] The first being that:

> The means of communication... are seen only as 'media': devices for the passing of 'information' and 'messages' between persons who... are abstracted from the communication process as unproblematic 'senders' or 'receivers.'[9]

The second assumption of critical analysis being:

> The commonplace distinction between 'natural' and 'technological' means of communication: the former characterised, and then usually neglected, as 'ordinary, everyday language', in 'face-to-face' situations; the latter grouped around developed mechanical and electronic communication devices and then generalised... as 'mass communication.'[10]

In The Territory focuses on authors who challenge these assumptions as an integral part of their practice. The (constructed and reductive) distinction between 'sender' and 'receiver' is a predicament built into the fabric of the experimental fiction of Ben Marcus and Harry Mathews that means to undo the cultural assumptions regarding wider forms of media experience. Marcus' and Mathews' work is situated in the territory identified

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[8] Raymond Williams, *Culture and Materialism* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 50-63.
[9] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

by Williams in which ''mass communication' processes include, in most cases necessarily, forms of ordinary everyday language use' as part of the 'simulation or conventional production of generally significant communication *situations*.'[11] Mathews' novel, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* and Marcus' novel, *The Age of Wire and String* (both looked at closely in this thesis) invent new 'communication situations' challenging these assumptions and the 'social conditions of reception' they reinforce by reevaluating distinctions between the various forms of language-use identified by Williams. Indeed, *The Age of Wire and String* or *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, open up questions relating to the very handling of language and speech, of metaphorical and material space, fact and fiction, communication, media and the everyday.[12] The relationship of these novelistic practices to the social and cultural *means* of production and communication (their textuality) is what renders the interdisciplinary approach of this thesis most necessary.

It is only by relating the novel to the text-based art of practitioners such as Robert Smithson, for instance, whose writing is often overshadowed by his more famous earthworks such as *The Spiral Jetty*, or to innovations in photography and cinema that respond to the wider visual cultures of advertising and developments in multi-media, that these questions of textuality and practice can be fully articulated. The nature of the modern day reading experience (or textuality) is developing rapidly. *In the Territory* is concerned explicitly with how these developments affect the relationship between production and reception. The conception of media as being something produced in one place in order to be received in another and the various ramifications this conventional assumption might create are challenged throughout by the thorough consideration of all the work focused on here for analysis.

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[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 51-2.

[12] This perspective could also be applied more widely to work not explicitly dealt with here; work which might include the meta-fiction of writers such as David Foster Wallace and Thomas Pynchon or the formal experiments of A. M. Homes, George Saunders, David Markson and Lydia Davis for example. As a high watermark for the contemporary moment in experimental American prose writing see *The Anchor Book of Short Stories*, ed. by Ben Marcus (New York: Anchor Books, 2004). Marcus' approach reflects the cultural selectiveness of this thesis. See his introduction: 'I wanted to align contemporary American story writers who might have radically different ways of getting to a similar place' (p. xi).

Mathews' experimental prose, for instance, operates in terms of what he calls the space of reading. For Mathews, reading is in itself an act of production and he explores this idea through various theories of translation. Encapsulated in the figure of the translator is the notion that reader and writer are synonymous and that all writing (as with all reading) is to some extent an act of translation. In this way, Mathews endeavours to locate, in reading (his own as well as his reader's), a space of creativity and so defines writing as a spatial practice. Yet the full implications of this sense of reading as production in which space and fiction become precariously intertwined cannot be drawn out unless it is accounted for in terms of what is meant by place. That is to say, the wider context of spatial practices that attempt to achieve similar ends (or indeed means) in disciplines which are not otherwise associated with mainstream textual practices.

The guidebook, for instance, represents a useful analogy for this kind of writing in which space, text and experience cross lines. The guidebook is intimately related to the place it describes, the place it provides insight into, opens up or reveals, the place it lays bare and provides ways through. It also enjoys an intimate relationship with the reader while remaining entirely objective, addressing the reader in the way of one expert to another (the narrator is an expert of places, the reader an expert in reading guidebooks to places). Yet the experience, the textuality of the guidebook (not the 'what' of reading, put crudely, but the 'how') is at odds with the self-contained ideal of the text.

For instance, guidebooks grow old, and once out of date, recommendations for attractions that have disappeared lose their currency. The guidebook's form of cultural description can be at best tenuous; opinions differ. The best coastal dining experience in the author's estimation (according to its description) is in fact the height of bad taste for the reader, used to an entirely different experience of *moules marinière*. The guidebook suffers from the 'illusion that language corresponds with much beyond itself,' revealing the unhappy situation of a reality that purports to exist in how it is described.[13] Yet cultural

[13] Harry Mathews, 'The Camera Ardente', in Harry Mathews, *The Case of The Persevering Maltese: Collected Essays* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), p. 100.

description (the stories that bring one to a place and, by extension, play an integral part in how a place is constructed) are often an entirely intrinsic aspect of experience. While without a guidebook or a map to direct her to the hilltop, Alice does not lose faith in the essential purpose of her path: a path will lead somewhere, a path will lead to a place, and what is more, it will lead to a place different to the place from which she sets out. This is why, after all, a path is called a path. It is a name among names, a means of understanding, navigating and accounting for space. 'Every itinerary, Michel de Certeau says, is in a sense 'diverted' by names which give it 'meanings (or directions) that could not have been predicted in advance.''[14] It is questions such as these that need to be brought to bear on textual practices. And, indeed, it is in these strange correspondences between language, text and place that the novels of Mathews and Marcus operate most fully, and are why they require a new adaptation of a critical approach more commonly associated with the study of art, visual culture and place.

Yet approaches in art criticism pose their own difficulties. Even within what is generally a vibrant and engaging field, the gap between interpretations of the novel and interpretations of the art text is wide. But this gap need not be so intimidating. Robert Smithson's influential writings are focused on in chapter two, not least because the cultural and literary coordinates of his texts include Edgar Allan Poe, Antonin Artaud, Lewis Carroll and Vladimir Nabokov. It is through a working relationship with the representations of literature and the imagination that Smithson's texts document the real. *In the Territory* is then concerned with the ways these practices mirror one another in order to draw out connections that speak to the nature of the relationship between representation and the places of everyday life or practice. With this in mind, art writings are of intrinsic value to considerations of the modern novel, and it is one of the principal objectives of this thesis to bear this out.

In the Territory does this in a number of ways. Principally it approaches works, the writings of Robert Smithson for instance, which exemplify an art practice that is

[14] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), p. 85.

responding to the material reality of texts. His essays, reports and surveys not only describe a reality, they describe a reality in the act of its construction. The relationship between his massive earthwork in Utah's Great Salt Lake, *The Spiral Jetty*, and the texts, photographs, films and reports he produces in order to document its existence raises any number of questions regarding not only the nature of immediate experience and the way in which immediate experience is mediated but also the way in which immediate experience is produced according to how it is mediated (as with the guidebook analogy). *The Spiral Jetty* exists, this is true, but it might appear to exist most materially (and, indeed, playing upon the heavy materiality of the *Jetty* itself) in how it is mediated, in how it is described, observed and reported upon. Smithson's position in terms of cultural mediation is precisely that which opens up the territory of this thesis. The point of view Smithson attempts to inhabit is inherently unstable because its point of production and its point of reception are indivisible. These indivisible perspectives inform his writing in ways that can be brought to bear on the current interpretation and understanding of literary and aesthetic works that attempt to distort further the impression that a fixed sense of production and reception inform a fixed sense of locatedness and place.

Fig. i.i: Robert Smithson, *The Spiral Jetty* (photograph: Robert Smithson, 1973)

Questions surrounding the problems of production and reception are born out in another concern raised by Smithson's writings. Smithson's work, in many ways, redraws the taxonomy of documentary. His texts point towards a contemporary notion of landscape and place that blurs a theory of description with a theory of location in order to undermine preconceived expectations regarding experience and media. It achieves this, principally through its use of the documentary formula and its related aesthetic. The blurring of description and location in documentary bears upon the relationship between representation and the immediate experience of everyday life and is reflected in a certain attitude towards survey and observation in art and literature more generally. Thus the thesis begins with the question of documentary and its role in the experiments of urban planning through which, as de Certeau notes above, proper places are constructed only to be transformed by the immeasurable idiosyncrasies of spatial practice. Practice and production are thus profoundly interrelated and it is arguably in documentary and reportage that the resulting implications of this interrelatedness might have for textual and visual forms of representation are played out most provocatively.

Indeed, documentary is a medium with inherent tensions that themselves help dramatise the problematic poetics of place: to what extent, for instance, is to document something to enact its construction? This predicament has informed a more reflexive form of documentary-like representation that plays on the relationship between the thing being, for instance, photographed and the historical and cultural practice of photography itself. In this thesis, questions surrounding documentary and the construction of the real lead to a more in-depth discussion of photography and also the techniques of cinema-verité that mix real and fictional places within the activity of filmmaking. These connections are made, it should be noted, in the historical and cultural context of a literary and aesthetic tradition that owes much to Surrealism and the avant-garde praxis of figures such as André Breton. Indeed, novels such as *Nadja* and *L'Amor Fou* anticipate the kind of textual materiality signalled here which blurs documentary with, in this case, the diary in order to reflect aspects of everyday life otherwise hidden from conventional means of representation.

The relationship between documentary and Surrealism, it should be pointed out, is also important in the context of a reflexive practice of ethnography (as a study of people in places) that draws on the predicaments of observation, reportage and the question of cultural description (looked at most closely in chapters two, five and six).[15] Indeed, new approaches in ethnography have much in common with site-specificity in art, as initiated by Robert Smithson, as 'both are ways of decentring established centres of art/cultural production and display.'[16] Site-specificity challenges the cultural context of the art object to the extent that the cultural context becomes the subject of conceptual art practices (as for instance in the work of Donald Judd, Robert Morris and Richard Serra). Site-specificity, like a reflexive ethnography influenced by Surrealism (exemplified by the work of Michel Leiris), interrogates the discursive landscape through which value and meaning are constructed. Not unlike new forms of collection and presentation, ethnographic writing has become increasingly reflexive regarding the role of ethnographic description within the relationships that define the nature of material culture. This reflexivity highlights the manner in which the centres of art/cultural production are displaced by moving the cultural context away from the gallery or museum and into the unlikely places of everyday life, as well as on the page.[17] Landscape and text are in this sense related in how they are read, that is to say, in the relationships between reception and production which challenge the cultural authority of description.

Indeed, the problem of ethnography turns on the question of authority and authenticity, and as such, speaks to the main subjects of this thesis. As James Clifford writes, description has long since become the true subject of ethnographic practices: 'What has become irreducibly curious is no longer the other but cultural description itself.'[18] Places are constructed in how they are documented and, as such, described. This informs the material and metaphorical relationships between person, place and text and has come

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[15] For an illustration of recent debates in this field see *'Site Specificity: The Ethnographic Turn': de-, dis-, ex-*, 4 (2000).
[16] Alex Coles, 'An Ethnographer in the Field' in *Ibid.*, p. 59.
[17] See also Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), in which Crimp considers the Postmodern movement away from the artwork towards the discursive context or art itself.
[18] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988) p. 147.

to preoccupy recent studies of material culture.[19] The textuality of ethnographic interpretation, the problems it confronts in accounting for the relationship between observer and observed in documentary practices, is important and informs certain experimental forms of representation, namely a post-Surrealist avant-gardism most suggestively identified by Peter Burger (as well as Clifford).[20]

How does this relate to *In the Territory*? Quite simply: it underlines the notion that place is not just a question of true spaces as such, but a question of description and experience. Place is a question of how the real is related to the imaginary and the symbolic, or, put another way: it is a question of the interrelatedness of metaphorical and actual spaces. These all point to the ways in which, in the case of certain literary and aesthetic practices, such distinctions (between the real and the imaginary, the metaphoric and the actual) are continuously delimited in favour of complex arrangements of representation and place. Thus it is possible to talk about a syntax of space (chapter three), a grammar of the house (chapter six) or to speak of a correspondence in writing between a thing and the way in which a thing is described (in particular chapters two, three and six).

It should be reiterated that *In the Territory* advances a literary and aesthetic perspective. By selecting both established as well as more marginal figures from contemporary American literature and art the thesis seeks to demonstrate that there exist illuminating connections between a variety of different perspectives that each in their own way relate to similar problems surrounding the question of place and representation. While it owes much to the theoretical models of Walter Benjamin and Michel de Certeau, in particular, the emphasis is on close reading (or close observation) and certain critical accounts of exemplary practitioners.

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[19] See Christopher Tilley, *Metaphor and Material Culture*.(Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); Christopher Tilley, *Material Culture and Text* (London: Routledge, 1991); Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London: Routledge, 1993); *The Material Culture Reader*, ed. by Victor Buchli (Oxford: Berg, 2002).

[20] See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984). Bürger's ideas are looked at more closely in chapter two.

Having said that, as well as the work of de Certeau and Benjamin the influence of Lefebvre's work, as already demonstrated, is present. His insistence on a theoretical approach to the study of place emphasising the way *space is produced* socially and culturally as well as in the abstract, over and above any conventional analysis of *things in space*, has come to have an important impact on sociology and its related disciplines.[21] Indeed, Lefebvre's observation that 'space is not a thing, but rather a set of relations between things' informs much of the discussion in this thesis, in particular the opening moves of chapter one.[22] Still, although it alludes to the 'Postmodern Geographies' of Edward Soja and Frederic Jameson, *In the Territory* is not, strictly speaking, a geo-social study.[23]

The way in which *In the Territory* differs from such studies (those of Soja, Jameson and Lefebvre) is made most obvious in chapter four which represents a reappraisal of the critical context that frames the photography of Jeff Wall (who like Smithson stands out from the practitioners considered in this thesis as a major contemporary figure in the American art scene). Wall's work is often equated with Marc Augé's theory of 'non-place'. While it is useful to equate Wall's photographs with Augé's conception of what he calls 'supermodernity' its over-emphasis is in many ways misguided and conceals a more productive relationship between photography and place.

According to Augé the spaces of supermodernity are separated into symbolic and non-symbolic spaces (the latter represented typically by airports and highways), which, unlike in previous Modernist periods where new and old are part of the same space, creates an 'un-relational' category of space and experience. The 'un-relationality' of these spaces,

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[21] See for instance the account of this shift in disciplinary perspectives in Michael Keith and Steve Pile's introduction to *Place and the Politics of Identity*, ed. by Michael Keith and Steve Pile (London: Routledge, 1993).

[22] Henri Lefebvre, *The production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 83. Here, Lefebvre follows Marx: 'According to Marx... merely to note the existence of things, whether specific object or the object in general, is to ignore what things embody and dissimulate, namely social relations and the form of those relations. When no heed is paid to the relations that inhere in social facts, knowledge misses its target.'

[23] See Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989); Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Frederic Jameson, *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (London: BFI Publishing, 1992).

is perhaps best considered as a relation in itself, and Wall's photographs seem to explore this ambivalent sense of relatedness through the use of quotation and theatre in his illuminated photographs that pun on the notion of an 'autonomous' art object. In its cultural sense, 'autonomy', like the myth of un-relational non-places, always implies a particular kind of relatedness rather than its denial. Thus, Wall's photography, which is in many ways an elaborate and complex place-construction in itself, is not easily reduced to the expression of a neatly delineated socio-geographical theory. Indeed, in many ways it reports on this kind of critical and theoretical delineation and points to an alternative conception of place.

In answer to these questions, chapter four goes on to show how the geography of Wall's photography is primarily literary and aesthetic. For this reason, Wall's photograph, *The Storyteller* (1986), is central to the concerns of this thesis and is discussed in depth. The picture in many ways dramatises the story of storytelling, something that connects each of the practitioners considered in this thesis. Wall's photographic documents speak to the manner in which lived experience and representation are increasingly part of the same space. Not so much photographs of specific places, *In the Territory* argues they are photographs of the way in which place is envisioned. By alluding to the conventions of documentary practice while quoting late Nineteenth Century innovations in painting as well as scenes from mid-Twentieth Century American novels, Wall's work (indicative of all of the work selected for consideration here) has to be approached not exclusively in terms of a direct engagement with high theory but in terms of the relationship between alternative forms of art and literature that, informed by certain conceptions of place, help develop new and exciting critical perspectives on conceptions of literary, aesthetic and everyday spaces.

Indeed, most studies in this area fail to take account of the range of media and material involved in such discussions. They tend toward the theoretical and avoid engaging with specific practices. Only by reflecting the wide spectrum of interpretations as they are expressed here is it possible to identify the limits of each discipline but also to identify the ways in which certain integral tendencies and themes are mutually reflected across

disciplines. More to the point, by focusing only on literature or on art practices in their separate theoretical contexts, commentators overlook important interconnections that practitioners themselves take for granted.

In other words *In the Territory* is methodologically rooted as much in literary traditions, in particular in terms of important questions raised by Surrealism and the avant-garde (questions surrounding the relationship between art and the culture of art for instance), as much as it is rooted in modern theoretical debates surrounding space and place. If this were otherwise, it argues, analysis would continue to overlook much regarding the moves being made in contemporary American literature and art. In particular it would obscure the way in which these practices are or are not able to maintain a relationship with the shifting territory or place of their various productions. To be in the territory, in this sense, is to work within the representational process of place.

It is in answer to this that *In the Territory* begins by reconsidering the early visual investigations made by Kevin Lynch into the mechanics of urban design and how they might relate to the uses and perceptions of modern city streets. Lynch's book *The Image of the City* is an ideal starting point. It straddles the parallel coordinates of place and representation. Although somewhat superseded by the types of geographical studies alluded to earlier, certain aspects of his work have been overlooked, in particular his notion of legibility that speaks directly to the intentions of *In the Territory*. Also often overlooked is the way in which *The Image of the City* is as much about the problems inherent to documentary as much as it is about the problems inherent to place, not least because place is a question of perception *and* experience, of observation *and* representation. Thus the *Image of the City* and its concern for the legibility and practice of city streets, parks and urban landscapes in general, is necessarily situated within an American tradition of documentary as encapsulated by the work of Walker Evans and the way in which this tradition has informed more contemporary takes on the nature of documentary. By initially situating the discussion in terms of *The Image of the City* and how it accounts for the relationship between representation and place, a certain trajectory can be made that begins to make the case for an interdisciplinary approach that is a

challenge to, and partly the result of, the problematic correspondence between representation and place in America.

Chapter One

Environment, Image, Text

By way of departure and in order to outline the implications of its interdisciplinary approach, *In the Territory* will begin with a reappraisal of Kevin Lynch's influential survey of *seeing place* in his book, *The Image of the City*. Lynch's work is important in the way it draws attention to the everyday interconnectedness of reading and seeing in the immediate environment. His documentary-like fact-finding and his conception of the 'city image' cross boundaries between the imaginary and the material by investigating the ways in which landscapes are made 'legible'. A fresh consideration of his approach to urban design will help make available the interconnections between literary and visual art practices as they are repeatedly addressed in each chapter of this thesis. As such, this chapter, 'Environment, Image, Text,' is largely introductory. It aims to situate the themes of this thesis and provide them with a critical context that will allow for their elaboration. No doubt, it raises more questions than it answers. But these questions, and their identification, are crucial. Questions such as the relationship between seeing and reading, or the relationship between photography, painting and literary texts, or questions surrounding the various levels of representation and their relationship to immediate experience; in other words, vital thematic threads are introduced by revisiting some of the key tensions as they are expressed in work such as Lynch's *Image of the City* and which mark out the early moments of the contemporary period as it is considered here.

Most importantly, this chapter raises the dilemma of documentary as a principal form of representation. Central here is the documentary approach to the representation of place: the argument being that to document place is partly to construct place. By deconstructing Lynch's urban design as being in fact an expression of the cultural jurisdiction of photographic reportage, this thesis turns to the origins of an American documentary aesthetic that marks out this photographic territory by defining it as a coded cultural aesthetic. The photography of Walker Evans stands out from this tradition and the initial moves of this chapter turn to his collaborative work with the author James Agee as their

book, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (which is re-printed in 1960, in an edition revised from the original 1941 edition), appears to encapsulate, in many ways, the interdisciplinary tensions under scrutiny in this thesis. Indeed, Evans and Agee are not only interested in documenting particular places, but documenting the effect of their observational participation on the representational lives of those they intend to document. Most importantly of all, and what makes their work particularly relevant, is the way in which Agee refers to this process as a form of 'actuality'. Actuality is an important term as it immediately draws attention to the relationship between actual experience and the representation of actual experience. The emphasis on documentary as a model form of representation is thus meant to draw out the meaning of this concept and the implications it has for the construction of place and everyday life within the relationship between immediate experience and wider networks of representation and media.

These implications are returned to at various moments in each of the respective chapters that offer differing but related perspectives on this type of problem; problems that are essentially drawn out of a collapsible and cultural distinction between fiction and fact that is built into the notion of actuality. As such this chapter makes important preliminary connections between differing forms of representation that have, to some extent, responded to the myth of documentary. Ed Ruscha's art books of the late 1960s, the primarily aesthetic concerns of place and representation in influential forms of European Surrealism, as well as common themes identified in experimental urban design and the photographic territory of a more established documentary aesthetic typified by the canonical photography of Walker Evans all take these connections into account when considered in this context. These initial connections are crucial as they begin to articulate something of the difficult relationship between representation and place as it is discussed throughout *In the Territory*. In this thesis, place implies both an imaginary and a material condition. It is an ongoing production, a process of representation with implications for both literary and art practices that endeavour to maintain a relationship both with the places of their production and the production of their places. Thus it turns now to the production of place in Lynch's urban design and the place of production he attempts to identify through his representational conception of the city image.

Kevin Lynch: Impossible Place

> We only get on in the world because we consistently and persistently disbelieve the plain evidence of our senses. (Kenneth E. Boulding)

Published in 1960, Lynch's survey of the material and imaginary conditions of urban navigation, *The Image of the City*, is an important point of departure for any study of the contemporary representational process of place. Investigating what he calls the 'city image', a phenomenon as psychologically internal as it is environmental, Lynch attempts to study the ways in which the urban landscape is navigated and, in turn, how in its navigation the environment is constructed, both in the imagination and in the material of design. In order to 'understand the role of environmental images in our urban lives', Lynch and his team select three cities to look at according to their apparently diverse characteristics: Boston, Jersey City and Los Angeles. In each case a 'centre' of 'approximately 2 and a half by 1 and a half miles' is identified as the test site. Regarding his methods, Lynch is very clear. In each of the cities, two basic analyses are carried out:

> 1. A systematic field reconnaissance of the area was made on foot by a trained observer, who mapped the presence of various elements, their visibility, their image strength or weakness, and their connections, disconnections, and other interrelations, and who noted any special successes or difficulties in the potential image structure. These were subjective judgements based on the immediate appearance of these elements in the field.
> 2. A lengthy interview was held with a small sample of city residents to evoke their own images of their physical environment. The interview included requests for descriptions, locations and sketches, and for the performance of imaginary trips. The persons interviewed were people who were long resident or employed in the area, and whose residences or work places were distributed throughout the zone in question.[1]

It is in essence a documentary study. But by employing the techniques of documentary and reportage (using 'trained observers', 'reconnaissance' and 'interviews' of demographic 'samples' as well as photographic evidence, diagrams and personal testimony) Lynch means to gauge a particular process of abstraction, one he considers

[1] Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), p. 15.

vital to the development of the kind of city design that might work toward properly accommodating city inhabitants. His concept of the environmental image involves an imaginary map of perception; a city image that inhabitants develop and internalise as a direct consequence of sense and experience. The image informs navigation. The way in which a city is negotiated is managed according to its various 'elements'. These include paths through the city, obstacles that impede this passage, distinctive buildings, public monuments and other visual landmarks that help people mark their changing position within the landscape. Lynch devises a means of measurement that helps qualify and quantify the nature of this image. Interested in whether an image is 'strong or weak', Lynch notes that a vivid image informs a sense of identification in the subject as the relatedness of the image corresponds with the experience of visual reality, creating a connected 'image structure'. The strength of image and the consequent connectedness of the image structure denote how well the participant is able to map or negotiate the relevant city centre. A weak image corresponds with a profound alienation in the city's population. Lynch sets out to understand this imaginary correspondence of scale. The sense of proportion and perspective, one that relates to an ongoing comparison of the internal city image with external visual reality, generates (he hopes) a form of urban design that will render the city 'legible'.

As Lynch himself admits, *The Image of the City* has much more of a conceptual impact beyond urban design.[2] It comes most notably to the attention of literary critics and critical theorists through Frederic Jameson's work on 'cognitive mapping'. For Jameson, an aesthetic conception of the cognitive map is vital if the subject is to be able to develop a sense of location within 'the enormously complex new international space' of postmodernism.[3] Particularly appealing for Jameson is the manner in which Lynch's 'conception of city experience – the dialectic between the here and now of immediate perception and the imaginative or imaginary sense of the city as an absent totality – presents something like a spatial analogue of Althusser's formulation of ideology, as "the

[2] See Kevin Lynch, 'Reconsidering *The Image of the City*', in *Cities of the Mind*, ed. by Lloyd Rodwin and Robert Hollister (New York: Plenum, 1984).
[3] Frederic Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping' in *The Jameson Reader*, ed. by Michael Herdt and Kathi Weeks (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 280.

imaginary representation of the subject's relationship to his or her real conditions of existence'".[4] This is a useful observation as it begins to point toward what is meant in this thesis by the representational process of place in which the imaginary and the real are intertwined in complicated ways. Rather than an ideological analogue, however, the contention here is that place as cognition is not just an imaginary representation but is very much a part of the real conditions of immediate experience. While pointing out the flaws in Lynch's work, Jameson chooses to make use of the example or metaphor made available in the city image as 'emblematic' of a geopolitical condition. By expanding the scale of Lynch's cognitive mapping, casting a web across the gap that appears between 'phenomenological perception and a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience', Jameson intends to advance the scale of Lynch's 'imageability' to the 'totality of class relations on a global (or should I say multinational) scale'.[5]

But it is worth, for the time being, to remain with the local logic of Lynch's original intention. One of the reasons Lynch's study fails to impact more heavily on urban design might perhaps be the liberal model of political agency that the study implies (something Jameson claims the framework lacks). How an image stands in for the absent totality of the city is a representational process inherent to both the experience and the conception of place. Jameson is correct to underline the significance of the gap between reality and representation, or more to the point, the gap between totality and immediate experience. As is pointed out in the introduction to this thesis, the territory (as with territories in general and as it is considered here) is synecdochically derived. The city is always experienced in part. Its totality is thus representational in nature, but it is also important to stress that the representational process is not considered (in its conception here) to be a product of an ideological structure formed or arranged from outside of its local production. The representational process is a productive condition, a place in which space is socially produced. This happens every day and as such is still a local, quotidian phenomenon that Jameson is perhaps too keen to turn his back on.

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[4] *Ibid*, p. 283.
[5] *Ibid*, p. 283.

The gap between the immediate and the representational is characterised by Lynch as a sense of scale. This sense of scale underlines the scope of local experience as it navigates the immediate and the fragmentary as well as the totalising narratives of the city image. Totalising narratives of this kind, it should be pointed out, also include the elements of wider media culture that bombard the senses, and this shifting scale of perspective that moves between immediate or direct experience and the totalising narratives of representation, anticipate important debates that are raised throughout this thesis including the mediatory documentary scale of Smithson's textual practice, considered in chapter two, and the notion of 'seeing bifocally', raised in chapter six. This shifting scale of perspective and the way it relates to the social production of space also anticipates later considerations of de Certeau's and Lefebvre's theories of the everyday and the forms of resistance identified as being hidden within the representational practices of place as they are looked at in chapters three, four and five. For now it is worth considering the manner in which Lynch defines this sense of scale as 'imageability' and how it goes on to inform much of what is said regarding representation and mediation more generally. Imageability is, according to Lynch:

> that quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer. It is the shape, colour, or arrangement which facilitates the making of vividly identified, powerfully structured, highly useful mental images of the environment. It might also be called legibility, or perhaps visibility in a heightened sense.[6]

There is then a scale of imageability in and through which subjectivity operates. In this context, terms such as 'legibility' and 'visibility' will have profound implications for this study. The artistic practices considered here have this in common: they operate at the level of environmental construction identified by Lynch. It is important not to deny the undoubtedly idealistic traits in Lynch's work that are perhaps symptomatic of a more rarefied Modernism, but it is equally important to note how the high aesthetic principle represented by 'imageability' becomes a tool of the everyday; and rather than being passive or enforced, as is the implication in Jameson's evocation of 'a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience', it is conscious and active. As Lefebvre

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[6] Lynch, *The Image of the City*, p. 9.

points out, 'the lived, conceived and perceived realms (in spatial terms: spatial practice, representations of space, representational spaces) should be interconnected' as a part of subjectivity, or the way in which the world is experienced in relation to the world as it is represented.[7] Indeed, rather than elsewhere places are produced as part of a process of representation. In this sense, Lynch's imageability becomes a *tool* of the everyday because place is of itself a representational act. The work of Robert Smithson, Jeff Wall and Ben Marcus, operates within this terrain. Smithson's mediatory accounts of his earthwork *The Spiral Jetty*, for example, or Wall's photograph's that stage the performance of photography, or Marcus' narratives that reorganise the operations of cultural description in order to re-tell the stories of storytelling are all a part of the territory that blurs representations of space with the spaces of representation; and while their work might also position itself in critical opposition to Lynch's 'powerfully structured mental image' by breaking down the very constructions of visualisation and sight, Lynch gives us an account of the aesthetic coordinates.

The coordinates (as opposed to Jameson's 'complex new international space') are 'local'. While the local might be increasingly defined by 'global networks of capital', the scale of representation, or 'place', that constitutes immediate experience is not lost nor loses its validity. Lynch's 'localism' is wrongly formulated by Jameson as 'the absence of any conception of political agency or historical process'.[8] Lynch's work, no matter how flawed or unpopular (in the design world) means to inform the local control of environmental experience.[9] By contrast, Jameson's conception of local agency involves

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[7] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 40.

[8] Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', in *The Jameson Reader*, ed. by Michael Herdt and Kathi Weeks, p. 282.

[9] To the extent, at least, of 'influencing planners to pay more attention to those who live in a place – to the actual human experience of a city, and how it should affect city policy.... The original work has now been replicated in many communities, large and small, in North and South America, Europe, and Asia... In every case the basic ideas have held, with the important proviso that images are much modified by culture and familiarity.' See, Kevin Lynch, 'Reconsidering *The Image of the City*', *City Sense and City Design: Writings and Projects of Kevin Lynch*, ed. by Tridib Banerjee and Michael Southworth (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990). Here also Lefebvre makes a useful distinction (in terms of representational space and representations of space) that may help situate Lynch in terms of a design tradition: 'it could be shown that today's theoreticians and practitioners worked for either one side of it or the other, some developing representational spaces and the remainder working out representations of space. It is arguable... that Frank Lloyd Wright endorsed a communitarian representational space deriving from a Biblical or Protestant tradition, whereas Le Corbusier was working towards a technicist, scientific and intellectualised

a sweeping internationalism. Place in the sense made available by Lynch is inherently contingent. In terms of the relationship Jameson sees in Lynch's city image and Althusser's formulation of ideology, the imageability of the city demonstrates the manner in which 'real conditions' are experienced as an imaginary representation of subjectivity (or as Lynch puts it: 'the image of a given reality' as opposed to a reality in and of itself which may well be far harder to define, and 'may vary significantly between different observers').[10] It is questions of place, however, (rather than ideology) that draw attention to the initial crisis of location in Lynch's work that is otherwise forgotten.

Place and Representation: Legibility

Place is first and foremost, then, a problem of representation. The problem is most suggestively raised in *The Image of the City* in those chapters in which Lynch discusses the ways in which an environment is or is not 'legible':

> Legibility is of special importance when considering environments at the urban scale of size, time and complexity. To understand this, we must consider the city not just as a thing in itself, but the city being perceived by its inhabitants.[11]

Legibility in this sense suggests something textual; it suggests that the elements of a landscape come together in the mind of the observing inhabitant to form a coherent pattern like words on a page. Here attention needs to be drawn toward a dilemma that will preoccupy the discussion. It involves the uncertain formulation of presence and absence. Does the act of reading induce a presence that would otherwise be unavailable? If so what is the nature of this presence and what, to that extent, is the nature of the absence it may or may not conceal? Is it indeed a form of concealment? The representational process of place, in this way, involves what might be described as an essentially poetic dimension. Poetic, in this sense, refers to Gaston Bachelard's work *The Poetics of Space*. Of the same period as Lynch, Bachelard also formulates a theory of the image. Like Lynch, Bachelard is concerned with the nature of the presence that the image induces in the reader's mind. Bachelard 'asks the reader of poems to consider the

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representation of space.' Lynch was a student of Frank Lloyd Wright at MIT. See Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 43.

[10] Lynch, *The Image of the City*, p. 6.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

image not as an object and even less as the substitute for an object, but to seize its specific reality'.[12] Here, suggestively enough, absence is a form of presence; the experience of reading poetry is akin to the way people read streets, buildings, monuments and paths. Both involve something that is not simply a thing in itself, but a thing being perceived.

> The image offered us by reading the poem now becomes really our own. It takes root in us. It has been given to us by another, but we begin to have the impression that we could have created it. It becomes a new being in our language, expressing us by making us what it expresses; in other words, it is at once a becoming of expression, and a becoming of our being. Here expression creates being.[13]

To this extent, perception cancels the original experience so that the substance of being is developed in terms of creative uncertainty. As a point of conceptual departure, Bachelard's work is as equally important as that of Lynch. *The Poetics of Space* differs crucially from *The Image of the City*, in that it is principally concerned with interiors, the intimate spaces of everyday life. However, both writers invoke a phenomenological frame of reference that, in setting out to map the nature of immediate experience, continually blurs the false distinction between 'real conditions' and 'metaphorical space', a subject returned to in much more depth in the considerations of Robert Smithson's writings in the following chapter.

For now, it is important to note how these two conceptions of the image inform the approach of this thesis. In order to, as Bachelard puts it, seize the specific reality of the image, Lynch guides his participants to a designated city centre in order to evaluate a form of visual perception that functions according to a system of scale and centres. This proves most difficult in Los Angeles where the designated centre appears particularly arbitrary. Removed from the everyday experience of the inhabitants interviewed by Lynch, the 'centre' as he sees it (in this case the financial district) holds little relevance for his subjects. The narrow scale of relatedness is expressed in terms of the most profound form of absence:

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[12] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by John R. Stilgoe (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. xix.
[13] *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

> When asked to describe or symbolise the city as a whole, the subjects used certain standard words: 'spread-out', 'spacious', 'formless', 'without centres'. Los Angeles seemed to be hard to envision or conceptualise as a whole... Said one subject: 'It's as if you were going somewhere for a long time, and when you got there you discovered that there was nothing there after all'.[14]

What Lynch and Bachelard document is the material nature of this 'nothing'; it is the material of the image – its specific reality – that renders reading, whether it is the poetic text or the streets and corners people inhabit, an act of 'creation'. The two perspectives illustrate not only the dimensions of this absence but the manner in which it is made available in experience; an availability or appeal characterised by the representational figure of the image so that experience is mediated through and within the image even as it is created (and, in turn, broken down). Thus to consider what is 'real' is in fact to consider figures of legibility and reading. The image is constructed according to this poetic ambiguity: 'It has been given to us by another, but we begin to have the impression that we could have created it [ourselves]'.

But what of this image, and its imageability, if it is to be considered absence made present? It is important again to underline how in Lynch's work imageability and cognitive mapping involve a process of abstraction in which the part is experienced in terms of a largely imaginary whole. A city such as Los Angeles cannot be experienced at once in its entirety.[15] This impossibility is an inherently strange predicament and is demonstrated in Lynch's documentary 'evidence':

> In order to accomplish continuity in the face of sensuous confusion, many observers drained their images of visual content, using abstractions such as 'restaurant' or 'second street'. These will operate both day and night, driving or walking, rain or shine, albeit with some effort and loss.[16]

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[14] Lynch, *The Image of the City*, p. 40.
[15] Although a work such as Iain Sinclair's *London Orbital* is an attempt to do so poetically. Though not 'psycho-geographical' in the sense of Sinclair's work, Lynch's *Image of the City* would be profoundly relevant to any further consideration of *London Orbital* (London: Granta, 2002).
[16] Lynch, *The Image of the City*, p. 86.

This is perhaps a surprising function of the cognitive map. To break the city into parts, 'draining' the whole in order to provide a clustered continuum of fragmented signs, in this case single words, is more an act of distortion than the production of a coherent 'image structure'. The suggestion is that the city in its entirety can only exist in, and according to, a pattern of blind spots; the ongoing effects of 'effort and loss'. The aerial perspective might challenge this or the view from the hill, but both are perhaps the most profound form of abstraction or removal as before the onlooker, now outside and above, the city exists in its entirety only at the expense of his or her absence. This lack, reminiscent of Alice and her frustrated aspect drawn on in the introduction, in favour of an all-encompassing desire to know, is perhaps most drastically disorientating. As the internal image cannot be overlaid, it is denied or cancelled by an undeniable and terrible presence.[17] This is symptomatic of Lynch's imageability and is useful in how it identifies a crucial working distinction between 'representation' on the one hand and 'mediation' on the other.

Representation and Mediation: The Painter of Modern Life

The Image of the City investigates the extent to which the city experience is made manageable or becomes subjective in the minds of its inhabitants by transforming experience into an activity of representation. The chaotic urban environment – the anxiety, 'sensuous confusion' and uncertainty – is made liveable through a strategy of image-building, but only once the 'real conditions' are first cancelled and denied and then replaced with an imaginary and coherent pattern: an environmental image each person can develop and use in order to orient themselves and navigate space. This may be, by turns, ideological, epistemological or poetic, but it is nonetheless necessary and measurable. Representation in this sense means cancellation or taking away, the effort and loss of draining the city of its totality as part of city-going that pre-exists the poetic city image. As Lynch notes, the process of representation is first and foremost a making absent, an operation of 'draining', one which always involves 'effort and loss.'

[17] This is further sustained by the sublime in the landscape tradition, the fear and dread that make the awesome all too familiar.

Another example might help clarify this representational process of making absent. In 'The Painter of Modern Life' (1863), Baudelaire describes the artist at work in his studio making a study of his model. The painter works from life with the model before him, sketching a likeness and making preliminary drawings. When it becomes time for the artist to begin the final blank canvas onto which he will cast his image, the painter of modern life is inclined (and, for Baudelaire, no doubt bound) to ask his model to leave. The subject removed and as such cancelled; the artist now works from memory. In this regard the composition is forged from denial. So as to be rendered 'accurately' on canvas the subject must be hidden, removed from sight and made in its proper likeness only once the artist has been left alone to work from the 'image imprinted on [his] brains, and not from nature.'[18] The painter of particular value to Baudelaire is Constantine Guys, an illustrator by trade whose work is particularly influenced by the urban experience. Many of his illustrations depict a bustling crowd. Baudelaire equates modernity with the urban and, in a sense, is interested in an early form of Lynch's city image. The 'mnemonic art' he is championing in his vision of modernity is one that grapples with the representational process of absence that characterises the conception of place being argued for here. For Baudelaire, painting is the subsequent relationship between this rendering absent and the image it can then be made to produce: 'The spectator... receives a clear-cut image of the impression produced by the external world upon the mind of Monsieur G. The spectator becomes the translator, so to speak, of a translation.'[19]

The idea of the spectator becoming a translator in this way is a crucial theme in this thesis. Harry Mathews, as is shown in chapter three, argues that all writing, as with any act of representation, has this translational quality about it. Translation, in the way it is invoked by Mathews (and Baudelaire) situates the reader, or spectator, as an active participant in the act of representation. Rather than an original experience or source against which all is measured there is instead a continuous process of translation. The reader, like Lynch's city-goer, is involved in the act of production. To translate a translation is to re-configure the relationship between production and reception, as it is no

[18] Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, ed. by & trans. by P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 407.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 407.

longer clear where one ends and the other begins and so undermines reductive notions of exchange and consumption as the conventional model of representational reception.

In these terms, representation can be distinguished from what will come to be called mediation. At heart, representation is absence and the formal organisation of that absence. Mediation is the substitution that this formal organisation involves, or what Lynch and Bachelard term the image. Representation is taking away, mediation is adding in. While the two in reality are perhaps part of the same fabric of experience, it is useful in analysis to separate them accordingly, thus demonstrating the manner in which absence is made present in the representational process of place.

Baudelaire's conception of the artist's relationship to his subject is important for another reason. It raises the question of photography implicit in much of this discussion of the image. If, as with Guys' painting, something of the experience of his subject has to be cancelled and denied before it can appear in the mediatory image, does this same mnemonic process still apply to the function of the photograph or the photographer? The uncertainty concerning photographic reproduction on the one hand and mnemonic production (as a special form of reproduction) on the other causes Baudelaire a certain cultural anxiety. As Walter Benjamin points out: 'To Baudelaire there was something profoundly unnerving and terrifying about daguerreotypy; he speaks of the fascination it exerted as 'startling and cruel'.'[20] For Baudelaire 'photography should be free to stake out a claim for ephemeral things... as long as it stops short of the 'region of the intangible, imaginative'.'[21] Benjamin notes the way in which Baudelaire realises the extent to which photography might come to affect cultural consciousness and the manner in which a world is invented through the way it is visualised mechanically. For Baudelaire the 'technique of mechanical reproduction reduces the scope for the play of the imagination.'[22] The photograph fixes the image, drains it of its translatability; it is no longer the translation of a translation but an exact copy of what is seen.

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[20] Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudeliare' in, *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico), p. 184.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 182.
[22] Benjamin is here 'paraphrasing' the sentiments of Baudelaire: *Ibid.*, p. 183.

Or is it? Chapter four of this thesis is concerned with the photography of Jeff Wall. Wall locates a kind of historical consciousness in the tradition of photography which he taps through his use of quotation and reference in his staging of documentary-like photographs. His lightbox, *The Storyteller* (1986), is a photographic quotation of Manet's painting *Le Dejeuner sur l'herbe*, and is to this extent like Baudelaire's mnemonic painting, a translation (from painting into photograph) that the spectator must translate. Chapter four also looks at the way in which Wall's photograph relates to Benjamin's work on the changing cultural role of the 'storyteller'. Rather than a lost continuity between the places of stories and the stories of places (in terms of an oral tradition that might somewhat mythically precede modern technologies of mediation), Benjamin suggests that the new forms of mediation merely make more apparent the inherently mediated qualities of all forms of storytelling. Similarly, and in contrast to Baudelaire's anxiety, it could be argued that photography does not simply deny the relatedness of absence and presence in representation (such as in Guy's paintings of modern life) but deepens its complexity (as perhaps does Manet's 'engagement with the photograph [that] was... an engagement with its particular mode of theatricality').[23]

Indeed, the imminence or 'presentness' of the photographer automatically intensifies the drama (or theatricality 'that implies an awareness of being beheld') of 'being there' and represents an inherent tension in photographic practice, a tension Wall explores in full through his use of quotation and what he calls 'cinematography.'[24] The subject cannot be sent out of the studio, it is true (one has to be present in order to be photographed), and subsequently the nature of the relationship between photographer and subject, even if not

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[23] Manet often uses photographs as source materials for his paintings and is fascinated by the 'technology of impression' that photographs create. See Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 323-331. It is also useful to note here in terms of Wall's use of photographic quotation and Baudelaire's conception of the mnemonic in painting, Fried speculations on the divided attitudes of Baudelaire, 'Manet's chief intellectual companion in the 1860s', towards Manet's own use of quotation in his work. Baudelaire, according to Fried, is not just 'out of sympathy but hostile to the painter's borrowings from old masters' (p. 167). These are Fried's own speculations of a 'thematics of memory' in Baudelaire's earlier essay, 'The Salon of 1846', but they are useful as they are part of the question of memory or the mnemonic as a kind of cultural consciousness operating in terms of the representational image that has built into it a network of other images – something that is developed further in chapters four and six of this thesis.

[24] This is Fried's conception of 'theatricality' in Manet's painting, see *Ibid.*, p. 326.

explicitly addressed in the photograph itself, is a keen point of contest. Yet the photograph does turn presence into a form of unreality, or absence, in as much as the photograph is not a place but a photograph of a place. That is to say, the photograph is an act of representational production as much as it is a representation of something already in existence. The place in the photograph is, after all, nothing but the photograph.

Another reason for raising the question of the unnerving daguerreotype is that it points to the issue of whether the photograph and the photographer (as distinguished from the painting and the painter) also challenges the textual nature of description that is characteristic of place as a process of representation. A photograph is not a text. The photograph, compared with writing, does not describe – it presents (although both may well construct, rather than merely reflect a given reality). Yet a photograph is to some extent read and is as such involved in the question of legibility as it is raised here. It is the influence of this 'unspoken' relationship between reality, description and presentation in photography and its impact on writing (as well as painting) that underlines the problem of documentary, especially in work such as Lynch's *Image of the City*. The act of description and how it relates to immediate experience, again what might be termed 'place', point to a poignant tension between writing and the 'automatic truth' of photography.

Here it is important to turn to the wider cultural aesthetic of American documentary. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* explicitly concerns itself with the automatic truth of photography. Conceived as a collaboration between the photographer Walker Evans and the author James Agee, it also encapsulates the representational tension between the text and the photograph. Originally published in 1941, it is updated and reprinted in 1960 partly in response to the growing influence of Evans' photography and its quintessentially American aesthetic. Like *The Image of the City* it is something of a representational experiment that demonstrates the way in which places are produced not only in how they are experienced but in how places are described. At times contradictory and inconsistent, text, image and environment refract one another through a rich multiplicity of perspectives. For Agee, the problem of writing becomes the problem of photography. In

response he envisions a new form of prose-style that, like the experiments of William Carlos Williams or the poems of Wallace Stevens, could account for the 'automatic truth' of the photographic image. As Robert Coles points out, 'fact is the "quality of being actual", hence Agee's concern with actuality.'[25] Even though its focus is essentially rural, Agee evokes the city street in order, like Baudelaire who is fascinated by the representational conundrum of the urban, to outline the nature of the problem:

> Trying, let us say, to represent, to reproduce, a certain city street, under the conviction that nothing is as important, as sublime, as truly poetic about that street in its flotation upon time and space as the street itself. Your medium, unfortunately, is not a still or moving camera, but is words ... [The naturalistic description] gathers time and weightiness which the street does not of itself have: it sags with this length and weight: and what have you in the end but a somewhat overblown passage from a naturalistic novel: which in important ways is at the opposite pole from your intentions, from what you have seen, from the fact itself.[26]

Immediately, Agee raises the problem of observation as being the difference between 'what you have seen' and the 'fact itself.' In order to overcome the distortions of naturalistic description he draws on a multiplicity of perspectives that are essentially reflexive (in that they reflect on the action of reflection drawing attention to the influence of his own presence on those whom he observes), and couched in Modernist experiments attempting to capture the radical contemporaneity of the machine age as part of a socially conscious aesthetic (Agee often talks about a Cubism in prose). It is interesting that the move away from Naturalism ('and what have you in the end but a somewhat overblown passage from a naturalistic novel') should be in part a response to the 'reality' of photographs. It is almost as if the perceived accuracy of the photograph undermines the

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[25] Robert Coles, *Doing Documentary Work* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 87. Coles is explicit about Agee's connection with William Carlos Williams, and underlines how they mutually advocate a certain Modernist subjectivity that emphasises what Cole calls the 'human particularity' which underpins the way in which Agee and Williams approach the problem of describing their subjects. He quotes from Agee's 'A Country Letter', (in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*), at length: 'All that each person is, and experiences, and shall ever experience, in body and in mind, all these things are differing expressions of himself and of one root, and are identical: and not one of these things nor one of these persons is ever quite to be duplicated, nor replaced, nor has it ever quite had precedent: but each is a new and incommunicably tender life, wounded in every breath, and almost as hardly killed as easily wounded: sustaining, for a while, without defence, the enormous assaults of the universe' (Coles, pp. 87-8).

[26] James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (London: Violette Editions, 2001), p. 213.

somehow inherent inaccuracy of textual description. With this in mind, and before considering *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in more depth, it is worth considering the use of photography and its implications for textual description in Lynch's design-documentary work in order to underline the way in which the representation of places and the production of places blur.

One of the key documentary tools in *The Image of the City* is the photograph. As such parts of the book (in particular the three long appendices) are reminiscent of the kind of photographic study made popular by Agee and Evans. While, unlike Evans, Lynch is not principally concerned with the nature of photography, the street-level point of view which the study continually makes its own is used in order to verify a form of immediate perception. As such, the relationship between experience and its depiction is in many ways a secondary motif in the design work of Lynch. The photograph (alongside the freehand drawing) is a key tool precisely because Lynch hopes it will automatically demonstrate how the representational process of abstraction (or 'imageability') operates. At this level, the jurisdiction of the *Image of the City* is certainly photographic reportage, but Lynch's assumptions about the automatic qualities of photographic representation break down.

The documentary quality of Lynch's study is systematic in its approach. Not only does his team conduct extensive (and admittedly 'subjective') 'reconnaissance' of the areas in question but a select group of inhabitants is interviewed and surveyed intensively. As part of the interview process, participants are also asked to perform 'imaginary trips' as well as to draw diagrams and maps that illustrate the connectedness (or disconnectedness) of their personal 'image structures.' Lynch also chooses to demonstrate the scale of perspective as it operates in the field with a large amount of photographs taken at street-level and from the air. More than just picturesque illustration, Lynch's documentary approach is informed by a keen sense of 'being there.' But while it may 'record' the experience of a street in Jersey City, for instance, the photograph is both the cancellation of this 'being there' and also its mediation; the representational process of place, in other

words, has this degree of impossibility built into it: there is no 'being there', it is something other than the experience of a street in Jersey City in 1960.

Fig. 1.1: 'A Street in Jersey City' from *The Image of the City*

How this use of the documentary image both informs and contradicts the scale of visual perception Lynch attempts to record textually is most obvious in his qualitative conception of the 'good image'. In order to be 'good' (or in other words, 'to have value for orientation in the living space'), the image, no matter how subjective, has to have several discernable qualities. The most suggestive of these involves shifting, changeable or 'blank' characteristics that allow for certain mediatory contingencies:

> The ['good'] image should preferably be open-ended, adaptable to change, allowing the individual to continue to investigate and organise reality: there should be blank spaces where he can extend the drawing for himself.[27]

In contrast to a conception of the 'good image', however, the documentary photograph acts as a fixed record. This is part of the criticism levelled at the project as a whole (registered by Lynch himself in retrospect): 'We elicited a static image, a momentary

[27] Lynch, *The Image of the City*, p. 9.

pattern... The dynamic nature of perception was denied... We are pattern makers not pattern worshippers.'[28] The reality of the photographic image contrasts with the descriptions of reality as it is perceived and induces a kind of rhetoric of the image.[29] Perhaps more a problem of application, this criticism suggests a misunderstanding of the 'factual' dynamics being recorded in the project. The difference between the 'shifting' and 'adaptable' image and the 'static', 'momentary' pattern the project elicited is perhaps an integral function of reportage photography and one it is important to examine in greater detail in order to uncover more of what is meant by cancellation, mediation and the 'representational process of place'.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men is a valuable example of the ways in which the tensions that exist between a 'static' and an 'adaptable' image inform the ambiguities of documentary reportage. Connecting Lynch's reportage with the documentary aesthetic of Evans' photography is important as Evans is a key influence for the practitioners considered later in this thesis – especially those whose work explicitly relates to notions of documentary, namely the documentary texts of Smithson, the 'social photographs' of Wall and the verité-like films of Harmony Korine. Evans contrasts with these practitioners, perhaps, as an established figure; indeed, his photographs represent the construction of a culture of authenticity that subsequently becomes the ironic subject matter of contemporary practitioners. Famously, Sherrie Levine's series of photographs entitled 'After Walker Evans' (1981) which include photographs of reproductions found in art catalogues of Evans' original prints, attempts to re-appropriate the Modernist and patriarchal institutionalisation of the way in which America imagines itself through these images. This is no doubt also the case in the work of Ruscha or Wall that spoofs Evans'

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[28] See Lynch, 'Reconsidering *The Image of the City*', in *City Sense and City Design: Writings and Projects of Kevin Lynch*, ed. by Tridib Banerjee and Michael Southworth, p. 252.

[29] Lynch's scientific and analytical textuality contrasts with Agee's more reflexive blending of fact and fiction. By way of illustrating the ambivalent (and, here, rhetorical) relationship between photograph and text in documentary it is worth considering Dorothea Lange's documentary photography of the 1940s. Lange also worked for the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Andrea Fisher notes the way in which her photographs are folded in with a gendered reading of motherhood in Pare Lorendtz texts that are attached to her FSA series, *US Camera* (1941). Lorendtz' 'emphasis... as much on Lange herself as on the pictured migrants', constructs a 'mother's compassion for each person ... isolat[ing] her subjects and remov[ing] them from social context'. See, Andrea Fisher, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Women: Women Photographers For the US Government 1935-1944* (London: Pandora, 1987), pp. 141-4.

aesthetic of authenticity, as photography becomes the subject, not just of a way of looking, but the subject of a way of looking at looking. *The Storyteller*, as will be shown in chapter four, is a photograph that acts as a means of observing the act of observation. Emphasising this type of reflexivity also underlines the value of the seemingly eclectic nature of the material chosen for analysis in each chapter. The eclecticism reflects an approach that moves between the household name and the marginal in order to reappraise the (limitations of the) scope of institutional, canonical and disciplinary assumptions, as well as drawing out the wider cultural implications that determine the nature of these practices.

Documenting the Image: 'Frauds, compromises, artful dodges and tenth removes'

In 1936, James Agee, a writer 'in flight from New York magazine editorial offices', and Walker Evans, a photographer 'on loan from the Federal Government', are employed by *Fortune* magazine to document the living conditions of 'North American cotton tenantry as examined in the daily living of three representative white tenant families'.[30] The article is never published and it is not until 1941 that Agee and Evans secure a contract to publish the project as a full-length book. The book is relevant to the concerns as they are expressed here on two counts: a) the collaborative attempt at combining images and text and the subsequent 'fictional' quality that informs its presentation of 'factual truth' will establish a frame of reference for later discussions of 'fictionality' in visual representation; b) in order to further understand the dynamic of the 'good image', it is important to establish just how much of an effect the photography of Evans has on Agee's writing as he and Evans, like Lynch, explore a form of abstraction inseparable from the representational process of place. The timing of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is also important. The book is reprinted in 1960 and it is clear that a growing interest in the photography of Evans has an important impact on post-1960 conceptual artists such as Dan Graham.[31] Through this work and the historical status of its impact, it

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[30] *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. 7-10. The fact that they are employed by *Fortune* magazine also suggests a wider commercialisation of the aesthetic of social responsibility that underpins the activities of the Farm Security Administration, or FSA, that also employs Evans in 1935.

[31] See in particular Dan Graham's article 'Homes for America' originally published in *Arts Magazine* 41, no. 3 (Dec-Jan. 1966-67), in Dan Graham, *Rock My Religion*, ed. by Brian Wallis (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 14-23. Also, Graham's work arguably owes a debt to *The Image of*

is possible to identify the origins of a contemporary moment central to the concerns of this thesis.

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men purports to 'tell the story' of three families living in the rural South and, like *The Image of the City*, it is concerned with a condition of 'being there'. Agee and Evans live with the families in question for several months. As with Lynch's study, there is a heavy emphasis on observation. Agee conducts extensive interviews with his subjects and attempts to 'get inside' the minds of the people he hopes to understand and in some way learn from. Obviously, the setting is quite different. Rather than the streets of Los Angeles or Boston, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* concerns itself with the rural and as such, arguably, reverses (or at least questions) the urban bias of modernity (although it might equally be argued that the photographs in particular target an urban audience and as such play on certain modern sensibilities). Both books are critically concerned with the production of images: the photograph and the imaginary image of perception and navigation. In Lynch's work, however, the photograph not only documents a visual subject (the view from the city street, for example, a path through a park) but it also and most importantly documents the way a subject is visualised: how something is seen.

Similarly, Evans is a photographer undoubtedly concerned not only with a visual subject but the manner in which a subject is visualised. As such his pictures have come to embody the classical documentary style that commentators associate with a particularly American aesthetic. The style is usually associated with terms such as 'purist', 'objective', 'removed', 'cold', 'clear'. As William Stott describes it: 'Documentary, [Evans] says, is "stark record"... For Evans, documentary is actuality untouched; the recorder not only does not put anything in, he does his best not to disrupt or revise what is already there.'[32] The visual record involves a process of selection, however, that

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the City, making uncanny parallels with homes in Jersey City, in what is evidently an imitation of Lynch's documentary aesthetic as much as it is that of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. See also Jeff Wall's early documentary project equally reminiscent of Graham, Lynch and Evans: *Landscape Manual* (Vancouver: Fine Arts Gallery, University of British Columbia Press, 1970).

[32] William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1973) p. 269.

prioritises the manner in which a subject is visualised so that a very specific effect might be achieved: 'the making of images whose meanings surpass the local circumstances that provided their occasion.'[33] The selection is one of framing, but also that of distinguishing between a 'good' image and its other. An effect that suggests the photographer is presenting something that isn't otherwise there and is perhaps a contradiction in itself undermining the photographer's assertion of visual 'truth' or 'reality'; but the element of forgery involved, as will be shown, is in some ways incorporated into the working principles of the project.

Perhaps as a consequence of this, and of the kind of immediacy the preoccupation can induce, the photographs enjoy greater recognition than Agee's prose. But the intention of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is suggestive, and again aligns it with Lynch's project. As noted above, Evans and Agee are principally concerned with what they define as 'actuality'. They intend to document the lives of three tenant families as they are 'lived' (named in the book as the Ricketts, the Woods and the Gudgers). This is not unlike the theory of 'being there' that characterises Lynch's understanding of place and representation. 'This is a book only out of necessity. More seriously, it is an effort of human actuality, in which the reader is no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell.'[34] Rather than presenting facts, documentary becomes in this case a question of the relationship between reception and authorial authority. In this way, Agee and Evans identify an aesthetic approach concerned with reframing an otherwise given distinction between production and reception that is key.

In attempting to describe lived experience in this way, Agee and Evans produce a peculiar form of representation, one that endeavours to complicate the nature of documentary reception. Somewhat misguidedly, most critical accounts of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* insist on dividing the photographs from the text.[35] There are certain inconsistencies that characterise the relatedness of the photographs and the text which

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 269.
[34] *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. 11.
[35] Most notably in William Stott's book *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* and Astrid Böger's *Documenting Lives*. Although both, especially Böger, offer illuminating discussions of the work when they consider the photographs and the text together, they only do so as part of their concluding remarks.

perhaps encourage their disentanglement. One of the more important inconsistencies is the 'distancing' of the photographs, which contrasts with Agee's desire to close the distance between himself and his subject. This in turn creates a prose style which some critics (something Evans himself notes) characterise as unnecessarily 'Baroque'. Certainly, there is a density and an attention to detail that creates the 'Elizabethan tones' that contrast with the 'stark record' of Evans' pictures. However, Agee is aware enough to do this strictly in terms of the photographic effect produced by Evans' stylised portraits and still-life depictions of uninhabited interiors. The documentary technique they then employ reflects a to-ing and fro-ing; a refracting entanglement that defines the interrelated relationship between image, text and environment. It is a technique that is vital for the methodology, theory and content of what will follow.

As such the relationship is by no means straightforward. Agee's references to Evans' photographs are often veiled. The prose composition is defined by a tension that suggests Agee is anxious about whether he should work from the photographs or from 'life'. There is a sense, in fact, that he works from both, employing the Modernist multiplicity of perspectives or the 'hybrid, semi-fictitious form' noted by critics such as Astrid Böger and reminiscent of William Carlos Williams. Indeed, Williams is a proponent of Agee and is 'among Evans' admirers.'[36] *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* should be considered part of a Modernist aesthetic that, exemplified by the work of Williams, 'struggled, as Evans did, to be almost austere... in [its] dispassionate insistence upon seeing many sides to whatever scene [it] was exploring.'[37] To be 'in things' as a way of describing things 'outside/outside myself' means that 'Williams was forever exploring... the nature of a writer's, a photographer's, a filmmaker's dealings with those being called to what he once suggestively described as a 'tentative alliance,' one that might 'fall apart at any minute'.'[38] This is part of a particular aesthetic sensitivity and is also a key aspect of

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[36] Robert Coles, *Doing Documentary Work*, p. 131.
[37] *Ibid.*, p. 131.
[38] *Ibid.*, p. 135; p. 132. James Clifford also uses Williams' poem 'The Pure Products Go Crazy', (*Spring & All*, 1923), to introduce his particular conception of ethnographic study that, again, blurs the divisions between factual and fictional forms of representation and cultural construction. For Clifford, the perspectives Williams (like Agee) seeks in his poetry, characterise the 'predicament' of 'ethnographic modernity: ethnographic because Williams finds himself off-centre among scattered traditions; modernity since the condition of rootlessness and mobility he confronts is an increasingly common fate.' See, James

Agee's struggle with the photograph, with the 'absolute, dry truth', that suggests Agee (like Williams) is as keen as Evans to engage not only his subjects but the manner in which his subjects are visualised:

> One reason I so deeply care for the camera is just this. So far as it goes (which is, in its own realm, as absolute anyhow as the travelling distance of words or sound), and handled cleanly and literally in its own terms, as an ice-cold, some ways limited, some ways more capable, eye, it is, like the phonograph record and like scientific instruments and unlike any other leverage of art, incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth.'[39]

The visuality in his 'semi-fictitious form' is most notable when Agee is trying to write like a photograph (and in particular, a photograph by Evans).[40] Here is part of his description of the front bedroom in the Gudger's house:

> Again out from the walls, symmetrically across the right angle made by the partition wall and the side wall, its tall mirror erect above it, a bureau:
> Exactly beneath the window of the side wall, again a little out from the wall, a trunk:
> Exactly across the angle of the side and front walls, and still again, not touching these walls, a sewing machine.[41]

In trying to be as uncluttered as the interior photographs, it is hard not to wonder whether an order is being imposed that is otherwise absent. As to whether the interiors are as uncluttered as the stark beauty Evans' photographs famously suggest is less clear in other parts of Agee's account where rooms are dominated by a chaotic mess of objects and inhabitants.

Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 3. Indeed, these Modernist experiments of Evans, Agee and Williams are in many ways part of the tradition out of which the work of Smithson, Mathews, Korine and Marcus stems. By beginning with this mixture of documentary and the representation of what Agee calls 'human actuality' and by noting its limitations but also the potential of its reflexivity it brings into focus the critical trajectory for a discussion of place-construction in contemporary American literature, art, photography and filmmaking.

[39] Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. 212.

[40] Photo-graph literally reads as 'light-writer'.

[41] Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. 149.

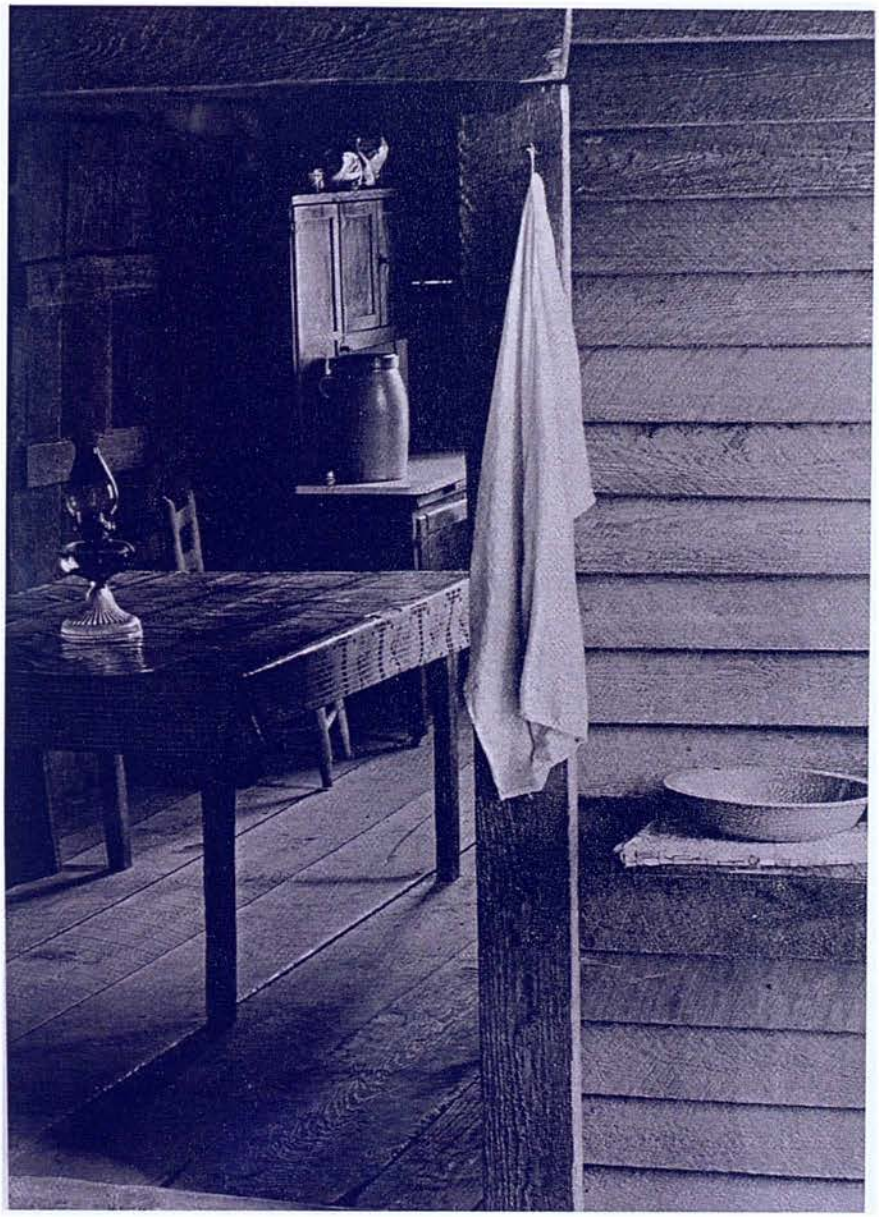

Fig. 1.2: Walker Evans, Untitled, from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

How successful this aesthetic exchange between text and image is in terms of documentary is difficult to quantify; it might be enough to suggest that a more successful 'documentary project' would be far less influential (or famous) than *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.*[42] But these questions remain central to the development of this thesis. Astrid Böger accurately characterises Evans' technique when she says: 'Evans' work is

[42] The influence of Evans' work on later artists such as Robert Frank, William Eggleston, Dianne Arbus, Larry Clark and Dan Graham cannot be underestimated. See for instance, Janet Malcolm, *Diana and Nikon: Essays on Photography* (New York: Aperture, 1997).

marked by a blurring of the categorical distinction of the 'factual' and the 'artistic' that is unusual for documentary.'[43] The distinction between fact and art, while somewhat crude, is useful as it suggests both Evans and Agee see 'actuality' as something other than the factual. As such they view documentary as being a profound form of representation which, rather than re-presenting the facts of a given situation, is an attempt at recreating the circumstances of an otherwise absent experience. Later, in chapters five and six, it will be shown how this working distinction comes to have such a profound impact on more contemporary forms of fiction. As will become evident, both the films of Harmony Korine and the novels of Ben Marcus explore the territory of strangeness that defines the gap between these two poles of representation and echo the experimental approaches seen here in the work of Lynch, Agee and Evans.

The approach of Evans and Agee is, thus, concerned heavily with reception. Reception is meant to signal a process characterised by what might be termed an impossibility of place (see in particular chapter four of this thesis). Throughout Agee's text there is a fear that, after having spent several months in the company of the three tenant families, Evans' photographs are more like being there than his written account could ever be. 'Words ... are the most inaccurate of all mediums of record and communication', Agee states, and yet 'for the camera, much of this is solved from the outset.'[44] In a sense, Agee characterises the camera as being a kind of cure for the 'falsification' of words, as if the imaginary leaps involved in the written account of lived experience (if it is to appear as being true to the reality it purports to represent) is undermined by the presence of photography.[45] Yet by its very nature the collaboration suggests it is only in the mutual reciprocity of image and text that the book can work in the way intended. Böger characterises this relationship as 'dialogical' after the theory of Mikhail Bakhtin. 'The prevailing structuring principle is dialogue, as opposed to the monolithic image of the degraded and distracted Other commonly invoked in Thirties documentary.'[46] This

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[43] Astrid Böger, *Documenting Lives: James Agee and Walker Evans's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 85.
[44] *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. 213-214.
[45] People who are otherwise invisible, although how 'invisible' in terms of a heavily mediated Post-Depression American consciousness is debatable.
[46] Böger, *Documenting Lives*, p. 137.

useful observation involves a mutual reciprocity that acknowledges not only the relationship of photographer and writer or that of artist and subject, but also the position of the audience. As such, Baudelaire's assertion that 'the spectator becomes the translator, so to speak, of a translation' haunts the documentary approach of Evans and Agee. As with the city image in the work of Lynch, the original experience is cancelled before it reappears at the moment of reception. Agee and Evans are both attempting to come to terms with this moment of reception as a site of cultural production. This is what is meant by 'actuality'. The production is in turn informed by the impossibility of place and the 'faithful' representation of 'being there' (or, in Böger's sense, the Other). As a result, the documentary technique is unusual, blurring the boundary of fiction and fact in order to challenge the reader's expectations, and as such, the taxonomy of documentary.

> The effort is to recognise the stature of a portion of unimagined existence, and to contrive techniques proper to its recording, communication, analysis and defence.[47]

The effort and loss involved in contriving the 'proper techniques' is due to an anxiety surrounding the legitimacy of 'faithfully' representing the Other. Agee employs a multiplicity of perspectives in his prose that attempt to disrupt the given expectations of the reader. In this way, 'Agee creates a communicative space' that implicates the reader 'by combining multiple voices and varying speaking positions'.[48] Böger claims Agee 'anticipates a movement in recent ethnographic critical writing that calls for a proliferation of literary... styles in order to undermine positivistic objectifications of the Other'.[49] Again this anticipates many of the representational predicaments that characterise the territory of this thesis. The implications of employing a 'proliferation' of styles, especially in the work of James Clifford, are looked at in the next two chapters which deal with 'metaphoric' and 'factual' space in the work of Robert Smithson and translation in the work of Harry Mathews. The proliferation of voices and perspectives that generate a 'a textual productivity to be re-enacted in the reading process rather than a closed net of controlled meanings' has far reaching implications for what is meant by the

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[47] *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. 10.
[48] Böger, *Documenting Lives*, p. 82.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

term 'fiction' and its relationship to everyday life.[50] Yet, for now, it is difficult not to wonder whether the anxiety in Agee's work is aimed more at the camera and its appeal to the immediacy of experience. For Agee, the moral and the aesthetic are reframed as the 'good image' and its 'other':

> Because the text oscillates between documentary non-fiction and modernist prose, Agee had to find ways of inscribing its authenticity, whereas Evans need not struggle in the same way as his medium has always automatically been invested with authenticity – a notion supported by the material evidence that the photographs provide.[51]

These kinds of assumptions are made increasingly awkward, however, when considered in terms of a more detailed look at the correspondence of text and image. Arguably nothing, not even a photograph, can be 'automatically' authentic. Chapter four, which will discuss the post-reportage photographs of Wall and their fictional staging, will show how Wall's later work challenges any notion of automatic photographic authenticity. Rather than the pursuit of authenticity, which is here the poetic principle of photo-journalism, it is the authenticating eye of the audience that Wall becomes, at times playfully, most concerned with. Nevertheless, the concern is, for Agee, a tangible one: 'I notice how much slower white people are to catch on than negroes who understand the meaning of a camera, a weapon, a stealer of images and souls, a gun, an evil eye.'[52] Like Lynch, Agee fears the static momentary image that might deny the shifting patterns of lived experience. The 'dry truth' of the camera that, on the one hand, he celebrates is also something he finds difficult to trust. Indeed, the questionable reality of the photographic act is in a sense the subject of Agee's prose. The photograph invariably involves a frame, a pose or performance and a sense of perspective each of which is selective and interpretive. As much as it reveals a certain truth about reality the framing of a photograph is also the partial construction of a reality.

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[50] Böger, p. 111.
[51] Böger, p. 147.
[52] *Let US Now Praise Famous Men*, p. 152.

This is particularly true of the photograph as an act of omission. When it is reprinted in 1960 in the wake of Agee's early death and Evans' burgeoning fame, the book generates a greater interest in its second run, due in many ways to the growing interest in what the original book leaves out. Evans himself, in the 1960 preface which praises the special relationship Agee enjoys with the families, notes how important he considers selective censorship to be in terms of the faithful representation of its subject:

> The families understood what he was down there to do... That is why in the end he left out certain completed passages that were entertaining in an acid way. One of these was a long, gradually hilarious aside on the subject of hens. It was a virtuoso piece heightened with allegory and bemused with the pathetic fallacy.[53]

To be 'entertaining in an acid way' contradicts the true intentions of the project; a rhetorical device that risks distorting the reality Agee and Evans intend to represent with 'accuracy' and as such is left out. Yet selective censorship appears to go beyond the wayward tendencies of a hubristic prose style. Stott argues that the most important photograph, or at least, the 'photograph that most reveals Evans' bias' is one that fails to appear in either the 1941 or the 1960 edition (although interestingly, it does, as it were, appear in Agee's prose).[54] It is a family portrait instigated by George Gudger himself, as a kind of condition before Agee and Evans are able to begin the project proper. The photographic act is an event; it represents a special occasion for the family. They wear their best clothes. The children are scrubbed clean; their hair is neat. Each family member, commanded by George Gudger resting his hand on his eldest son's shoulder, eyes the camera directly, posing for posterity. Although struck by its candour in the late 1960s, the photograph is immediately discarded by Evans. The photograph appears to deny much of the book's sense of social purpose, 'for just as Agee and Evans' book exposes the limitations of thirties documentary, it reveals the limitations of their book. They commended the full humanity of their subjects, but did not fully disclose it.'[55] As Stott goes on to say, 'the photograph is too much for the book... it explodes it.'[56] Why does this family portrait explode *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*? Arguably it does so

[53] *Let US Now Praise Famous Men*, p. 7.
[54] See Stott, p. 284, as he notes Agee describes the scene, or one very much like it, in some detail.
[55] Stott, 285.
[56] Stott, 286.

because the Gudgers are performing a reality in the photograph that contrasts with the reality perceived by those who are there to observe it.

Interestingly, the omitted photograph is selected by Levine as part of her photographic re-appropriation of the image:

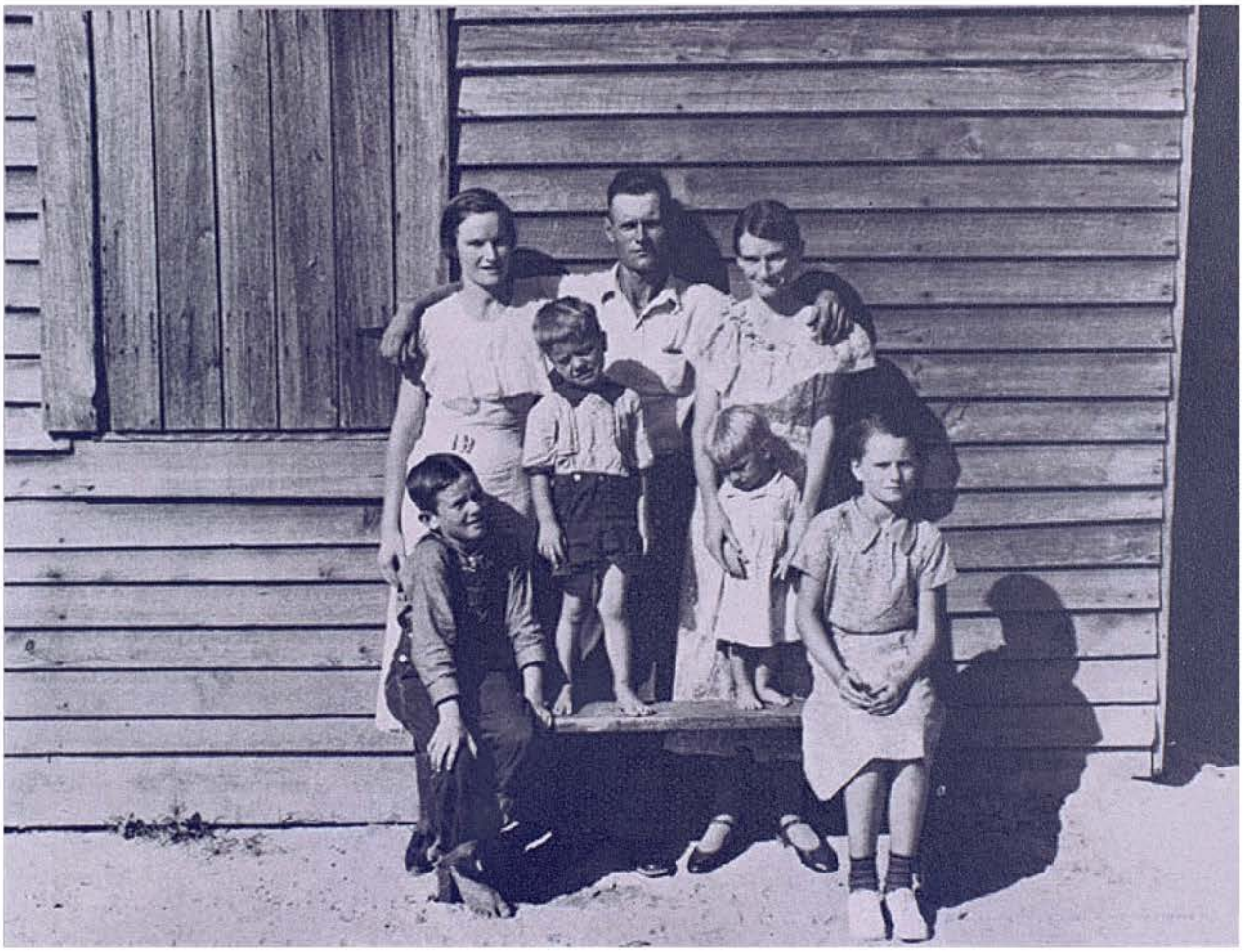

Fig. 1.3: Sherrie Levine, *After Walker Evans:* 2, 1981[57]

[57] While Levine's practice in many ways characterises what Douglas Crimp thinks of as the 'cultural shift' represented by 'Postmodernism' (in how the aesthetic frame moves away from merely being a kind of looking, but a means of looking at looking), Crimp is sceptical about the ongoing value of this type of 'appropriation': 'The strategy of appropriation no longer attests to a particular stance toward the conditions of contemporary culture... Appropriation, pastiche, quotation – these methods extend to virtually every aspect of our culture, from the most cynically calculated products of the fashion and entertainment industries to the most committed critical activities of artists... If all aspects of the culture use this new operation, then the operation itself cannot indicate a specific reflection upon the culture.' See Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum's Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), p. 126. There is, however, something to be said for the break-up and distortion in Levine's photograph of Evans' photograph that comments on Crimp's sense of the 'everywhere' of cultural appropriation and the assumed 'newness' of its

The divisiveness of this photograph has implications for the authorial attitude of the project as a whole. Indeed, Evans' use, or misuse, of the absent image in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* helps to demonstrate the nature of the strange interrelatedness of terms such as fiction, visuality and experience; it is a strangeness returned to throughout this thesis. Again it is reminiscent of the problems Lynch encounters in his study of the city image. The documentary photograph is defined by being present only in terms of absence. The living context is cancelled by the photograph and reproduced as something new in the image of mediation. What it is important to recognise, however, and is perhaps the most significant contribution of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, is that 'actuality' does not begin or end with the image; it is a process of cultural production that continually blurs fact with fiction. This is what Bachelard calls 'the being of an image' and is perhaps what is meant, here, by 'place'. It is also what informs Agee's hybrid style. Rather than a fixed moment defined by cultural givens of media messaging, reception is a site of production where, as Bachelard states, 'expression creates being'. It is the way in which, for instance, the words of another begin to take root and become, as is noted above, creations of the reader's own imagination. The image is a form of absence made present. In many ways, Agee and Evans attempt to occupy the gap between this play of presence and absence because they consider it a more faithful representation of real experience: that is, Evans, throughout *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, continuously returns to each moment of experience in order to build a multiplicity of perspectives, a kind of cubist collage.[58]

But their occupation of this mediatory territory also involves the kind of censoring selectiveness that denies the value of what Stott correctly identifies as the book's most valuable image, an image that only further complicates and enriches the process of reception. The manner in which the Gudgers perform for the historical and cultural

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operation – the distortions and break-ups within the cultural reflection of culture point toward the process of place being argued for here and are not so easily reduced or passed off as mere 'pervasiveness', as they are a key aspect of experience and everyday life. Chapters three and five look more closely at the locatedness of these distortions and break ups and the spaces of representation, reading and experience of which they are a part, something Crimp overlooks.

[58] See the various chapters entitled 'On the Porch' in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*.

moment of the photograph is deeply ambivalent and is in itself a comment on the photographic construction of reality otherwise hidden within the myth of documentary authenticity. The Gudgers are not 'acting themselves'; they are acting out the expectations of others. Yet these two acts, as the photograph testifies, are perhaps part of the same representational performance. The Gudgers wish to be remembered in a way that transcends (and so contradicts) the immediate conditions of their environment as it is perceived by Evans and Agee. The reality of place, that is to say, the act of representation (in this case the photographic event) has become 'other' or alien. Yet it is the very impossibility of place embodied by the photograph that makes it so explosive. Place is representational, a field of fiction and performance. This is what the image proves in the way it contradicts the 'actuality' that the authors wish to construct. Its unreality proves to be only too real and is, as such, withheld.

The ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent

After 1960 and the publication of books such as *The Image of the City* and the re-publication of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, there is an important development in the aesthetic concern for a form of conceptual reportage that further distorts the nature of 'actuality'. There is no doubt that Evans and Agee contribute much to the manner in which this process is initiated. Commentators on the work of Ed Ruscha, for instance, often note the influence of Evans in his work. But Ruscha's sense of reportage, like Levine's re-appropriation of the way in which Evans' actuality visualises and so constructs reality, is removed from the tradition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that tends toward the certitude and presence of representation. In contrast, Ruscha's work is geared towards its inherent doubt and absence. This attitude is important as it demonstrates a shift in contemporary artistic attitudes that is of the greatest concern to this thesis.

Ruscha's work is important here not only in how it relates to the documentary authenticity of Evans' work or in how it relates to the reportage techniques of Lynch's urban planning and its visualisation of place, but also in how it relates to European Surrealism. Here Ruscha's work is considered in terms of the Surrealist reportage of

André Breton's novels that draw on the photography of Jacques-Andre Boiffard and Eugene Atget's photographs of empty Parisian streets, in order to mix the seemingly blank (or 'un-artistic' photographs of Boiffard, in particular) and the blank anti-style of Breton's prose which is 'based on that of medical examination' as a way of constructing a fiction of factuality.[59] Ruscha's work blends this Surrealist tradition of reportage with that of Agee and Evans, in books like *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations* (1963) and *Real Estate Opportunities* (1970), as part of a textual practice that coordinates the tensions and contradictions of environment, image and text in ways that speak to the central concerns of this thesis. Ruscha's work investigates the blanks of American urban landscapes, the physical realities of Lynch's 'effort and loss' of imageability; landscapes in which the imaginary and the factual merge as part of a wider field, or territory of representation.

When asked whether he is aware of Evans' photography while making his book *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations*, Ruscha responds: 'Sure, but they didn't have anything to do with that book.'[60] Nonetheless, Ruscha inherits something of the documentary ideal from Evans' work:

> I had a vision that I was being a great reporter when I was doing the gas stations... a simple, straightforward way of getting the news and bringing it back.

The relationship between a reporter, or a documentary-maker, and his or her subject matter offers Ruscha something of a model for his own practice. He is in many ways impersonating a form of photojournalism. Yet Ruscha's work breaks fundamentally with Evans': 'Evans takes pictures with people in them'. The pictures that make up Ruscha's spoof documentary book are uninhabited. The book is arguably concerned with how the subject matter relates to this absence. What is present can only be encountered in terms of the strangeness created by what is absent. Ruscha says later:

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[59] Breton quoted in, Ian Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in the Interwar Years* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 50.
[60] Ed Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal: Writings, Interviews, Bits, Pages*, ed. by Alexandra Schwartz (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), p. 214.

> On the way to California I discovered the importance of gas stations. They are like trees because they are *there*. They were not chosen because they were pop-like but because they have angles, colours and shapes, like trees. They were just there so they were not in my visual focus because they were supposed to be social-nerve endings.[61]

What this 'being there' might mean advances on the 'being there' of Lynch (and Evans) because it fully anticipates the impossibility of place that is suggested but otherwise left undisclosed in *The Image of the City* (and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*). The suggestion here is that Ruscha has to learn to see the gasoline stations: by just 'being there' they are otherwise invisible. A sparse 48-page book constituting a collection of twenty six photographs and a record of where they are taken, *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations*, in a sense, documents this odd form of learning. As Robert Venturi points out in *Learning from Las Vegas*, this type of architecture (the gas station) is pure representation. The gas station is all sign and very little building.[62] Ruscha realises (perhaps through the work of Evans) that the photograph has become a de-representational activity that makes the building visible. The photograph achieves this by cancelling what is (or, more to the point, isn't) there and produces an image that occupies the absence only in terms of the original invisibility that characterises its experience. This approach is no doubt also influenced by Surrealism and Dada, as around the time that Ruscha discovers the photographs of Walker Evans he also discovers those of Man Ray.[63] The aesthetic and cultural correspondence between documentary reportage and Surrealist preoccupations with the nature of experience and reality is, as will be shown, in many ways significant:

> It's an extension of a readymade in photographic form. Instead of going out and calling a gas station 'art', I'm calling its photograph art. But the photograph isn't art – the gas station might be. The photograph is just a surrogate gas station. The photograph by itself doesn't mean anything to me; it's the gas station that's important.[64]

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[61] Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal*, p. 250

[62] See Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown & Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1977).

[63] Marcel Duchamp's Readymades (including Man Ray's photographs of Duchamp's Readymades) are also an important influence on Ruscha's work, see *Ed Ruscha*, ed. by Neal Benezra and Kerry Brougher (Washington: Hirshhorn Mueum, Smithsonian Institutre, 2000), pp. 150-2.

[64] Ed Ruscha, *Leave Any Information at the Signal*, p. 215.

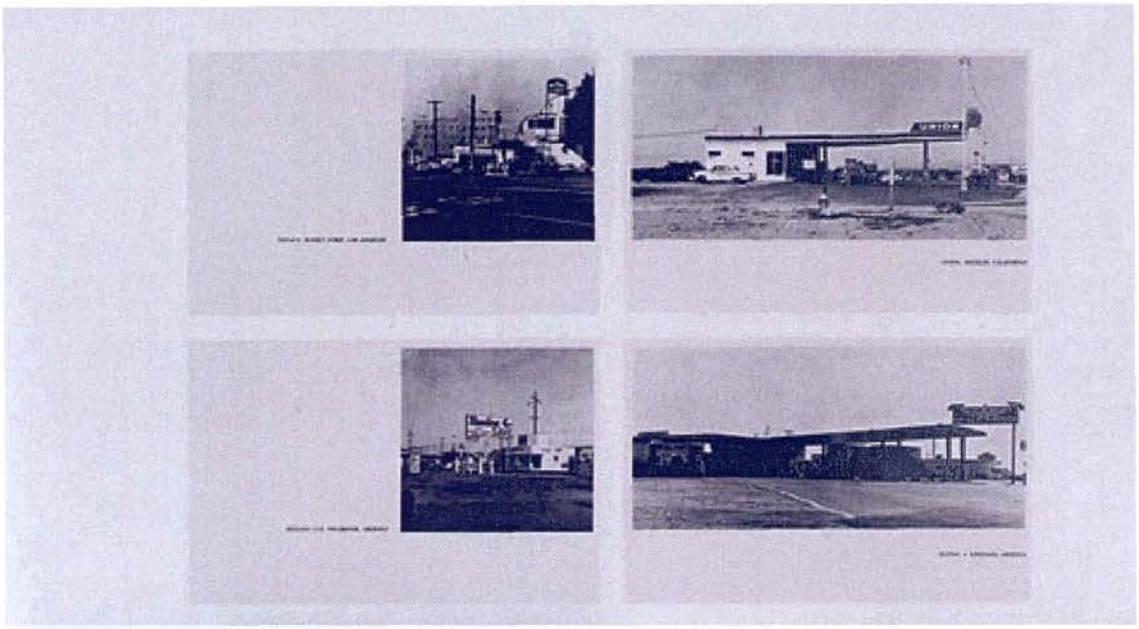

Fig. 1.4: Ed Ruscha, from *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations*, 1963

The implication of the photograph is that reality can only exist in and through the medium. This is looked at in greater depth in the following chapter, which considers the writing of Robert Smithson in terms of Maurice Blanchot's critical theories and the 'de-materialised' in Antonin Artaud's correspondence with Jacques Rivière. It is, at this stage, important to orientate the discussion in terms of certain concept of the 'book' that begins to become apparent in the shift from Agee and Evans' work towards that of Ruscha. Indeed, Ruscha's critical evaluation of the image is, made most available in the books, such as *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations*, that he manufactured during the 1960s and 70s.[65] Undoubtedly, this type of book is derivative of 'communicative space' anticipated in experimental compositions such as *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *The Image of the City*. Arguably books such as *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations* and *Real Estate Opportunities* (1970), which consists of photographs 'documenting' various vacant lots in Los Angeles, go further in that they openly declare the moment of unreality that defines the representational process of place.

[65] Although his word paintings are also relevant.

The only text in *Real Estate Opportunities*, for instance, is the address printed beneath each vacant lot. As such the 'real' of the title is heavily loaded. If reality can only exist in and through the medium, the process of absence and cancellation attributed to the conception of the image is here characterised as the rubric of property and acquisition. 'Realty' becomes a misspelling or (more to the point) a misreading of 'reality'. The confusion of reading and seeing signalled by this type of publication is another important point. As will be shown in chapters three and six that discuss the contemporary novel and the techniques employed by writers such as Ben Marcus and Harry Mathews, this conception of the book challenges the nature of narrative, storytelling and reception. Fact and fiction are realigned by a process of absence and cancellation. As John Miller points out in his essay on what he calls 'fugitive' books:

> Pictures displace words in [Ruscha's] books. Literature, particularly the mainstream novel, remains tied to a monolithic discourse by and for the anonymous subject; Ruscha in effect hollowed out the book so that the disparate life of everyday narrative could flood in. He restored the book to the status of a dumb object, albeit an uncanny one. [66]

The 'disparate resonance' of everyday narratives in terms of documentary representation owes a debt to 'Surrealist reportage' as is demonstrated most profoundly in the novels of André Breton. As will become increasingly clear, the legacy of Surrealism is far reaching in terms of the working principles developed in this thesis. It is important at the outset to note the nature of the Surrealist attitude toward photography. As has been shown, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is charged with ambivalence in its attitude towards the photographic image. A figure of 'faithful' representation, the photograph also involves a divisive mistrust. Agee is explicit about the inadequacy he faced: 'Words cannot embody, they can only describe'.[67] However, while there is (perhaps, justifiably) an anxiety that naturalistic description is exploded by the photograph, it may well be the case that the photograph is merely more adept at staging the embodiment of its subject. For Breton, and the Surrealists, this is fair game. In *Nadja*, rather than being true in the

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[66] John Miller, 'The Mnemonic Book: Ed Ruscha's Fugitive Publications' in *Parkett*, 18 (1988), p. 71.
[67] *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, p. 214.

world, facts are produced in and through the act of description. The novel is furnished with photographs as a means of documenting the uncanny nature of this process.[68]

> I am concerned with facts of quite unverifiable intrinsic value... facts which may belong to the order of pure observation, but which on each occasion present all the appearances of a signal, without our being able to say precisely which signal, and of what.[69]

Reportage and the inherent inconsistencies between fact and fiction represent an integral part of this type of Surrealism. It is worth noting a moment of censorship in Breton's work reminiscent of the missing photograph in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Close to the outset of *L'Amour Fou* (or *Mad Love*, first published in France ten years later than *Nadja*) Breton notes the absence of an image. In light of *Nadja, L'Amour Fou,* reports further on Breton's conception of beauty. The novel provides the reader with a variety of photographs (within the text as opposed to being separated in the manner of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*) as part of its Surrealist sense of reportage. Here Breton accounts for a missing photograph:

> I regret not having been able to furnish, along with this text, the photograph of a speeding locomotive abandoned for years to the delirium of a virgin forest.[70]

Breton, in noting this absence, identifies a tension between the poetic image (upheld by Bachelard) and its photographic counterpart. In a note to her translation, Mary Ann Caws suggests that 'this picture is all the stronger for not being pictured'.[71] But Caws is,

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[68] As Roger Caillois notes: 'It is not by chance that Surrealism turned to the spells of photography to make confessions more convincing. Struck and *alerted* by some revealing fact (or one that he finds to be so at the time), the author can furnish the visible proof of his prior emotional agitation. With this precise and incontestable document he tries to make the reader at least understand how he himself was overwhelmed, if not experience the same astonishment or confusion.' See *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, ed. by Claudine Frank (London: Duke University Press, 2003). However, it is the argument here that the sense of the reader suffering 'the same confusion' is an unlikely assumption. The photograph mediates the cancellation of the image – altering the passage of experience. As an anecdotal, but illustrative aside, in the same essay ('Signs and Images') Caillois suggests he gave Breton the fencing mask that appears in a photograph (by Man Ray) in *L'Amour Fou*. In the novel, however, Breton claims that Giacometti bought the mask while the two of them scoured for dream objects in an antiques market in Paris. Here, it might be said, the photograph and the image relate in terms of a doubled cancellation.

[69] André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 19.

[70] André Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. by Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 10.

[71] *Ibid.*, p. 124. The picture is subsequently published in *Minotaure* in 1937.

perhaps, too quick to make a clear distinction between a real image and the imaginary, or dream image that Breton would like to report. Indeed, his regret regarding the absence is in many ways profound because in describing its absence Breton has acknowledged that the poetic image is put at risk by the photograph. This risk or wager is perhaps more attractive to the Surrealists than Caws appears to think. To see an object in its nature – or in Breton's terms, in its 'convulsive beauty' – is to see it 'in its motion *and* in its repose'. Simultaneous motion and repose are, arguably, the definition of a photograph, what Hal Foster calls the photograph's 'in/animation.'[72] Perception and experience (to see something in its nature) do not begin or end in one place but occur as a continuous form of exchange or correspondence. Thus Breton's 'regret' is that he is unable to furnish a real image as a counterpoint to its imaginary original, for this would have better expressed its ongoingness, its simultaneous motion and repose. Origins remain a question of reception: as with Bachelard and Lynch, Breton is concerned not with the object in itself but the object as it is perceived. As such, the unreality of the image is characteristic of the wider representational process of place as a form of continuous cultural production. As will become clear, this continuous cultural production is best thought of as a kind of correspondence between the copy and its absent original.

Before going on, in chapter two, to look more closely at this sense of correspondence in terms of the work of Robert Smithson (who advances on many of these concerns), it is worth considering how these observations move on from the initial problem explored in Lynch's *The Image of the City*. Lynch is concerned with an imaginary image of perception, one that is contingent: produced in terms of lived experience. The city image represents a form of the 'actuality' pursued by Evans and Agee. The value Lynch observes in the empirical role of the imaginary image has much in common with Breton's Surrealism and, as with the tradition of photo-documentary or photojournalism, it involves an agreement or contract with the facts of experience. Often, like Breton, Lynch notes that the facts of experience reappear in the image as something unexpected. Shock and confusion inform the Lynchian approach to 'city sense'. As such, the sense of shock and confusion should be related to a concept of 'subjectivity' implicit in much of the

[72] Hal Foster, *Convulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), p. 25.

discussion. Attention is drawn to the relatedness of lived experience, as a concept of 'actuality', in order to show that the nature of subjectivity is otherwise characterised by disruption. If nature is taken to be 'the various multiplicities to which we give the same name', for instance, 'sky' or 'chair', subjectivity would then merely be a reversal of this operation: the difference between multiplicities that make each the same. As Lynch observes, this 'sameness' is obviously charged with many emotional and experiential connotations that hinder or refine orientation and imageability. This is the point at which the *Image of the City* breaks down.[73] According to these alternative forms of actuality, the nature of lived experience becomes increasingly fugitive, contingent and ephemeral.[74]

Arguably, the most important aesthetic response to Lynch's documentary approach, which breaks down whenever it encounters the inherent ephemeral contingency of 'being there', is embodied by the conceptual work of Robert Smithson. As John Miller points out: 'Smithson once said that in a museum it is the gaps or absences between artworks that are the most interesting; as a kind of framing device, Ruscha's vacant lots work like Smithson's non-sites.'[75] Indeed, like Ruscha, the impact and form of the documentary photograph has had a profound influence on Smithson's work, and as a framing device, points in many ways toward the contemporary moment that this thesis is most concerned

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[73] How these systems of reportage and documentary break down is vital. Here is one final example. For Evans and Agee, the Gudgers' family portrait was a form of distortion. The Gudgers' performance of unreality created a kind of cultural feedback that in turn created the wrong kind of static, contradicting the authors' sense of 'actuality'. Lynch notes a similar distortion in the behaviour of his participants as they describe the 'location' of Boston Common in terms of an internalised city image:

> There were indications that the image may be a continuous field, the disturbance of one element in some way affecting all others. Even the recognition of an object is as much dependent on context as on the form of the object itself. One major distortion, such as the twisting of the shape of the Common, seemed to be reflected throughout the image of Boston. (*The Image of the City*, p.85)

The image is a process of place according to its distortion. This is a problem for Lynch. Where the image breaks down according to various 'blind-spots', there is a crisis of location as the experience of place exists in terms of an anxiety surrounding the legitimacy of representation. If the image makes place less impossible (easier to navigate), the actual nature of place is to be considered an impossibility. Place, in this sense, corresponds with a refusal; its essential distortion (the fragile, shifting image) acts as a denial which in turn informs a process of representation characterised as an economy of absence: something is exchanged for nothing.

[74] This being Baudelaire's definition of modernity, see 'The Painter of Modern Life', Charles Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. by P. E. Charvet, p. 403.

[75] John Miller, 'The Mnemonic Book: Ed Ruscha's Fugitive Publications' in *Parkett*, 18 (1988), p. 78.

with. Primarily known for earthworks such as *The Spiral Jetty* (1970), Smithson also makes a significant contribution to deepening a consideration of the 'textuality' of representation and place. Before going on to look at the impact of these departures on the novel in chapter three, *In The Territory* will first account for the body of texts published by Smithson before and after his death in 1973, as his writing embodies much of what these observations might mean in terms of 'fiction', 'correspondence' and 'mediation'. Indeed, Smithson's textual practice points to the ways in which the conceptual artist comes to occupy the territory or landscape of mediation and representation that is so much a part of the construction of contemporary American place.

Chapter Two

Making Writing: Fiction and the Texts of Robert Smithson

Why might not the world *which concerns us* be a fiction? (Friedrich Nietzsche)

I have only ever written to say that I have never done anything, never could do anything, and that, when doing something, in reality, I was doing nothing. All my work has been and can only ever be built on nothingness. (Antonin Artaud)

He seeks the fiction that reality will sooner or later imitate. (Robert Smithson)

Photographing a photograph

In December 1967, Robert Smithson's article 'The Monuments of Passaic (A tour of the Monuments of Passaic New Jersey)' is published in the magazine *Artforum*. The article, journalistic in tone, is a 'mixture' of various textual elements. Photographs, maps, facsimiles, clippings and quotations are pasted into a documentary narrative recording a trip that Smithson (may or may not have) made to the New Jersey suburb of Passaic. The intertwining techniques of 'mixture' and 'narrative' are important and characterise the manner in which Smithson contributes to (and in many ways advances on) the post-documentary aesthetic developed by Ed Ruscha and Dan Graham, shown to be part of a response to a wider cultural interest in Walker Evans and James Agee.[76]

'A Tour of The Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey' is an important introduction to the varied practices of Smithson that, arguably, best define the response to a post-documentary aesthetic that seeks to reengage with, and re-orientate itself in terms of a representational process of place based on a falsifying distinction between fact and fiction, or experience and sense. This chapter will consider Smithson's substantial body of writing in order to demonstrate how his brand of textual practice might shed light on

[76] See Phyllis Rosenzweig, 'Sixteen (and counting): Ed Ruscha's Books', in *Ed Ruscha*, ed. by Neal Benezra and Kerry Brougher (Washington: Hirshhorn Mueum, Smithsonian Institutre, 2000), p. 185: 'Ruscha's photographs with their organisation into books, absorption of the documentary style of Walker Evans and Robert Frank, their deadpan, wry (or alternately romanticised) view of ordinariness, celebration of repetition and banality, and influence on contemporaries such as Dan Graham and Robert Smithson, leave us to question the boundaries between "documentary" and "conceptual" art.'

the wider literary as well as aesthetic concerns of this thesis that seek to challenge traditional patterns of receiving and producing texts. Texts are not simply produced in one place in order to be received elsewhere but are constructed as part of a textual practice that challenges the conventions of media representation. In order to undo the conventions of cultural production, Smithson initiates a textual practice to some extent in tension with his better known earthworks, in order to position himself within this territory of mediation and representation. Indeed, Smithson instigates and enacts (textual) operations crucial to these wider concerns. His textual practice opens up questions of reception and production, performance and representation, correspondence and experience, the process of material communication in visual art and how it relates to and impacts upon wider textual concerns with mediation and perception, all in vital and various ways.

Partly in response to Dan Graham's earlier article 'Homes for America' (January 1967) published in the same magazine, Smithson's 'essay', 'The Monuments of Passaic', draws on the documentary technique of Evans and Agee, as well as a Duchampian irreverence for the axiomatic.[77] Smithson draws on the conventions and gesture of documentary in order to reposition the artist as a cultural recipient, a figure of transient make-believe awkwardly inhabiting various sites of entropic production found within the suburban landscapes lining the Passaic River in New Jersey.[78] Far from the cultural centres of the Manhattan art world, Passaic is the town of Smithson's birth and becomes in this text the location through which he is able to document imaginary and material narratives of place in order to identify the place of imaginary and material narratives. As with Lynch's work *The Image of the City*, Smithson's text is as much about the problems inherent to documentary as it is about the problems inherent to place, not least because place is a question of perception *and* experience, of observation *and* representation.

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[77] See Smithson's text 'Entropy and the New Monuments' (1966), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed by. Jack Flam (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996): 'Duchamp and [Robert] Morris may be seen as artificers of the uncreative or decreators of the Real. They are like the Sixteenth Century artist Parmigianino, who 'gave up painting to become an alchemist'.' p. 19

[78] Acting at that time as one of the magazine's editors, Ed Ruscha helped with the layout of both the Smithson and the Graham piece.

Like Agee and Evans who mix text and image in imitation of the multiple-perspectives of actuality, Smithson's documentary technique is unusual, blurring the boundary of fiction and fact in order to challenge the reader's expectations, and as such, the taxonomy of documentary. Smithson, like Evans (and in particular, Agee, who describes 'actuality' as a question of experience in relation to the way in which experience is described) immediately accounts for his own position within the landscape he proposes to document in order to establish a form of correspondence or exchange between the object in itself and the way in which it is perceived. Smithson is, in effect, looking for a point of view, while remaining in a continuous dialogue with an *a priori* point of view that is cultural, learned or conditioned. Addressing the reader directly, he begins by giving an account of his bus journey out of New York. According to a technique that will become increasingly important to this thesis, Smithson immediately introduces a textual counterpoint to his matter of fact account:

> On Saturday, September 30, 1967, I went to the Port Authority Building on 41st Street and 8th Avenue. I bought a copy of the *New York Times* and a Signet paperback called *Earthworks* by Brian W. Aldiss. Next I went to ticket booth 21 and purchased a one way ticket to Passaic. After that I went to the upper bus level (platform 173) and boarded the number 30 bus of the Inter City Transportation Co.[79]

The art section of the *New York Times* and the Aldiss novel act as a backdrop to a backdrop: 'The sky over Rutherford was a clear crystal blue, a perfect Indian summer day, but the sky in Earthworks was a 'great black and brown shield on which moisture gleamed.''[80] This is a crucial operation, because, rather than the traditional, self-generative, concept of authorship, Smithson immediately identifies himself as a reader within the act of reading, so that authorship becomes a mixing of various textures.[81]

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[79] Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic New Jersey' in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. by Jack Flam (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 68.
[80] *Ibid.*, p. 69.
[81] This has obvious crossovers with literary criticism, and Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author' is a useful analogue here: 'The true locus of writing is reading.' (see Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977). Interestingly, the crossover of art theory and literary criticism is anticipated in the magazine *Aspen*, 5/6 (1967) in which Barthes' essay is first published (in English) in conjunction with other text-based artworks and phonographic recordings including a conceptual poem by Dan Graham that employs the magazine form as it is considered later in this chapter. See *www.ubu.com* for a full digital archive: http://www.ubu.com/aspen/aspen5and6/index.html

This type of textual operation that challenges the authoritative position of the author through the very manner of the text's construction, informs a vital aspect of the frame of reference that *In the Territory* means to develop. The notion that cultural artefacts are produced in one place only to be received elsewhere is challenged throughout. In this sense the kind of textual practice advocated by Smithson is, somewhat perversely, an act of reception before (or as) it is one of production. This has various implications and involves various points of departure. The relationship between reality and the representation of reality that defines Smithson's textuality points to an avant-garde tradition as identified in the theory of Peter Bürger.[82] Bürger identifies avant-garde practices according to how the work relates to the process (or indeed, place) of its production. Unlike conventional artworks that seek to disguise the fact that they have been made, the avant-garde work proclaims itself to be an artificial construct. Instead of a fixed or unified form, the artwork is mediated as artefact. The moment of reception becomes a site or place of production. Smithson's reflexive textuality also implicates some consideration of the 'cultural break' identified as Postmodernism. More importantly, perhaps, it relates to certain feminist conceptions of gendered binaries that differentiate between 'metaphorical space' and lived experience which are drawn out here in order to challenge certain conceptions of where and how representation takes place.

Acting as a tour guide to the 'Monuments of Passaic' and identifying sites that may or may not be of inherent cultural value, Smithson attempts to mix the poetic (Bachelard) imagination and the geographical (Lynch) imagination in order to reframe the dialogue or the communicative space (that has been shown to be so important to Agee and Evans) that an author and reader generate merely by being identified as such. Smithson, perhaps more than any artist at the time, recognises that place and the potential of immediate experience is a representational process or 'system' and so locates himself in terms of the mediatory procedures defined by Kevin Lynch; that is to say, he situates himself as an author and as an artist in terms of the image that stands in for the cancelling of

[82] Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans by. Michael Shaw (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

representation. This informs what Smithson calls a self-styled 'dialectical' approach that helps him to develop a working non-distinction and non-correspondence between two false poles of binary opposition: the 'site' and the 'non-site', both looked at in more detail in the third section of this chapter. His conception of place also informs an important philosophy of description that, instead of prioritising naturalistic description, accounts for description as a source material in itself whereby to describe something is to produce a copy without an original.[83] In Smithson's early essay, this theory of description is conceived as a pattern of location and dislocation, reminiscent of a classically Borgesian or Derridian spectacle:

> The monument was a bridge over the Passaic River... Noon-day sunshine cinema-ized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an over-exposed *picture*. Photographing it with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph. The sun became a monstrous lightbulb that projected a detached series of "stills" through my instamatic into my eye. When I walked on the bridge it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was

[83] Reminiscent of Wallace Stevens' poem 'Description without place':

> In flat appearance we should be and be,
> Except for delicate clinkings not explained.
>
> There are the actual seemings that we see,
> Hear, feel and know. We feel and know them so,
>
> Thus the theory of description matters most.
> It is the theory of the word for those
>
> For whom the word is the making of the world,
> The buzzing world and lisping firmament.
>
> It is a world of words to the end of it,
> In which nothing solid is its solid self.

Stevens' theory of description 'for whom the word is the making of the word' is reminiscent of a methodology James Clifford identifies in the work of William Carlos Williams where the poet not only describes what he sees but constructs the thing, whether seen or not, in how it is described. These ideas appear to draw Smithson to the work of Williams and other poets. In an interview with Paul Cummings he describes visiting Williams and notes how he discovers a mediated world of experience through the older poet's descriptions of Paterson, New Jersey: 'I guess the Paterson area is where I had a lot of my contact with quarries. And of course, they figured strongly in *Paterson*. When I read the poems I was interested in that, especially this one part of *Paterson* where it showed all the strata levels under Paterson. Sort of a proto-conceptual art, you might say. Later on I wrote an article for *Artforum* on Passaic which is a city on the Passaic River south of Paterson. In a way I think it reflects the whole area. Williams did have a sense of that kind of New Jersey landscape.' See Interview with Robert Smithson (1972) in, *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, ed. by Jack Flam, p. 285. Williams was Smithson's family doctor.

> made of wood and steel, and underneath the river existed as an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank.[84]

Three years before he builds the famous *Spiral Jetty* on the edge of the Great Salt Lake in Utah, Smithson is, in this essay, beginning to come to terms with a contemporary notion of landscape and place, one that blurs a theory of description with a theory of location in order to undermine preconceived expectations regarding experience and media. To take a photograph of a photograph, in this way, is to suggest that representation is always conducted in terms of a field of representations. The landscape, rather than source or origin, is a message relayed; the copy cannot be a copy as such, instead, it is a photograph of a photograph. Thus, if Smithson is to be considered a sculptor it is necessary to frame his practice in terms of a continual mistrust of 'primary' materials. As he gets closer to his subject he finds himself falling away from it and as such he draws the attention of his audience to a deviating point of view that can begin to accommodate the nature of certain 'unseen' monuments.

Figure 2.1.

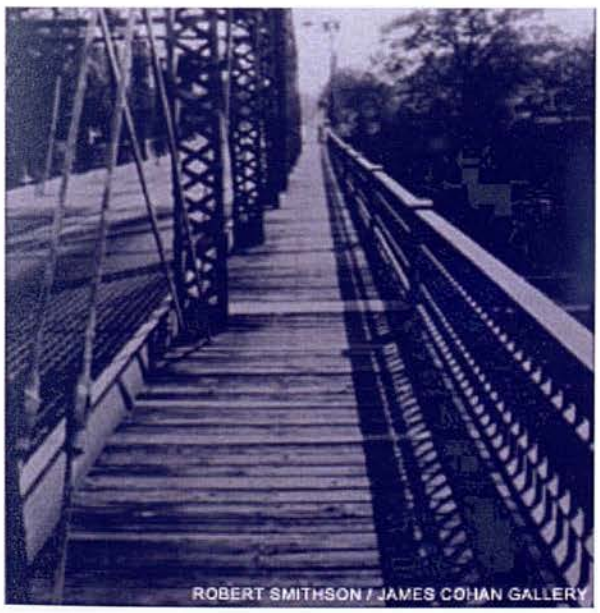

Figure 2.2

Fig. 2.1: *The Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Sidewalks* (Photograph: Robert Smithson)
Fig. 2.2: *The Fountain Monument – Side View* (Photograph: Robert Smithson)

[84] Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic New Jersey', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 70.

Traditionally speaking, a monument would stand in the place of a focused form of collective memory, a statement of historical significance that acts as a cultural coordinate and as permanent ballast that holds everyday experience and existence in contact with a greater tension of memory and fact. 'The Bridge Monument,' however, is a monument to nothing and nowhere, but this nothing and nowhere can only exist as such according to a set of relations. It is these relations that are the material of the various monuments ('The Bridge Monument', 'The Great Pipe Monument', 'The Fountain Monument', and so on), a set of movements that, in the Surrealist sense, are also part of a simultaneous repose. 'One could refer to this bridge as the 'Monument of Dislocated Directions'.'[85] And like the bridge a point of view can only operate according to a certain set of conditions. In terms of material (a photograph of a photograph), and in terms of experience and actuality, as it was for Evans and Agee, the conditions are photographic: they are where picture and place, description and location, metaphor and fact blur within a field of textual as well as experiential (another distinction that will become increasingly difficult to sustain) operations.

Smithson's Fictions

It is according to these conditions that the question might be asked: How is it known the *Spiral Jetty* exists? As this chapter will go on to suggest, the question is important because Smithson's writing creates a set of conditions that frames its consideration as such. Of course there are the reports of those who have seen *The Spiral Jetty*. There are the many photographs taken since its construction in 1970. There is also the film of the same year that Smithson produces himself undoubtedly in expectation of the Jetty's enigmatic estrangement. Yet few people will have experienced *The Spiral Jetty* as such (this is compounded by the fact that for many years it lay beneath the surface of the lake, something Smithson may well have been expecting), and instead, or indeed, in its *place*, Smithson folds into the landscape of encounter: personal accounts, photographs and collective narratives.

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[85] *Ibid.*, p. 70.

In this way, location and metaphor inform a diffused form of geographical obscurity creating a form of writing that operates according to a correspondence with 'something that [otherwise] fails to exist.'[86] Failure to exist is not the same, clearly, as non-existence; but failure endows the ephemeral artwork with a model of contingency valuable to the interrelated conditions of presence and absence noted in the preceding chapter. As will be shown, contingency as it is employed here relates to a wider discussion regarding Postmodernism, the avant-garde and allegory. Maurice Blanchot's definition of the novel is borrowed initially in order to draw attention to what is arguably the *central* (and the word is used precisely because of its problematic nature) operation of Smithson's construction of *The Spiral Jetty* (as with each of his earthworks) as something that fails to exist – namely, his writing. In other words Smithson's textual practice constructs the non-existence of the *Spiral*. In this way the *Spiral*'s non-existence is made material in the text.

Obviously, *The Spiral Jetty* is in existence. Yet *The Spiral Jetty* is not generally encountered as such, and it is perhaps this non-existent encounter that Smithson explores in his textuality. Smithson's influential insistence on documentation, one that seems to suggest an inherently social concern for the conditions of subjectivity and mediation, suggests that Blanchot's notion of failure or redundancy may shed valuable light on a practice that has far reaching implications in terms of reframing the correspondence between fiction and immediate experience.[87] As such, Craig Owens suggests that the nature of *The Spiral Jetty*'s negotiable existence is primarily 'textual': 'that Smithson has transformed the visual field into a textual one represents one of the most significant aesthetic "events" of our decade.'[88] And yet what is to be achieved by thinking of

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[86] See Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Anne Smock (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982). In 'The Absence of the Book' he writes: 'to write is to produce the absence of the work (worklessness)... The book: the passage of an infinite movement, a movement that goes from writing as operation to writing as worklessness; a passage that immediately impedes... The book, a ruse by which writing goes towards the absence of the book.' Blanchot quoted in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. by Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 384.

[87] See Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto, 2000), p. 69: 'When subjectivity becomes a matter of documents in the world and technological mediation it has become a social and political issue rather than the preserve of the individual soul.'

[88] Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture* (Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), p. 42.

Smithson's writing as the central operation of his work, especially in consideration of earthworks such as *The Spiral Jetty* that appear organised around an inherent unavailability? Perhaps it is because, not merely an isolated object (a site-specific sculpture), *The Spiral Jetty* is a work of continual correspondence that operates in and through the terms of its mediated conditions.[89] Again the condition of representation, according to Blanchot, might be considered that which 'makes art present only when art conceals itself and disappears.'[90] In this sense, the act of disappearance is a material act (an absence made present) and, as such, Blanchot is interested in writing as a material misallocation or failure that informs a changing and contingent field of experience.

The Spiral Jetty's field of experience, however, is one of inaccessibility. Well removed from the cosmopolitan landscapes of contemporary American art and beyond the reach of accessible roads, visiting the site is of 'doubtful probability.'[91] This is perhaps why the material encounter is organised and reorganised within a system of texts which point to a consideration of the relationship between fiction and place. The actuality of *The Spiral Jetty* is, for Smithson, a question of position and locatedness. The problem, however, as posed in the figure of the spiral, is a fictional equation of geography and metaphor. The original question might therefore be re-posed as where, among these disparate and various forms of representation, is 'experience' – that is to say, where is *The Spiral Jetty*? *Where*, being a form of failure in that *The Spiral Jetty*'s existence is produced as part of, not a priori to, the form of its representation. What is important is that Smithson sets out to make this failure visible: visibility, being in this sense, a question of location.

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[89] Site specificity is a sculptural movement in contemporary art that intends to break down the cultural context of the gallery space and challenge the cultural discourse of art and its presentation by moving it into unfamiliar fields of everyday life. For a recent survey of site specificity's critical potency see Douglas Crimp, 'Redefining Site Specificity', in *Richard Serra*, ed. by Hal Foster and Gordon Hughes (London: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 147-174.

[90] See 'The Disappearance of Literature', in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. by Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 142.

[91] Here Smithson is discussing the out-of-the-wayness of his 'Mirror-displacements', in 'Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan', *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 132: 'If you visit the sites (a doubtful probability) you find nothing but memory-traces, the mirror displacements were dismantled right after they were photographed.' But a similar feeling for (near) remoteness underpins *The Spiral Jetty* project.

The essay 'The Spiral Jetty', written in 1972 a year before Smithson is killed in an aeroplane accident, is only one of a number of texts at the centre of this ardent concern for decentring the cultural production of art. The other key writings informing this conceptual paradox stem from a period of roughly five years, that is to say, between 1967 and 1972. *The Collected Writings* edited by Jack Flam cover all of Smithson's previously-published work from the beginning of his artistic maturity in 1965 up until his death in 1973; however it is perhaps not until 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey' in 1967 and the publication the following year of 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art' that Smithson begins to demonstrate the variety and scope of his interests. More to the point, as literary as they are conceptual, it is during this period that Smithson begins to situate his texts in opposition to his earthworks.

The published writings generally appear in magazine publications such as *Artforum*, *Art International* and *Aspen*. Smithson makes the most of the reading experience associated with magazines; one that is naturally leisurely, interrupted by images and encouraging of an arbitrary movement back and forth (in and out) rather than a linear passage of beginning, middle and end. This in turn qualifies the type of folding or self-reflection occasioned by a process of writing that is perhaps best characterised as an arrangement of antagonisms that distort preconceived notions of locatedness and place. Here for instance is one moment of disassembly in 'The Spiral Jetty':

> The preceding paragraphs refer to a "scale of centres" that could be disentangled as follows:
>
> (a) ion source of cyclotron
> (b) a nucleus
> (c) dislocation point
> (d) a wooden stake in the mud
> (e) axis of helicopter propeller
> (f) James Joyce's ear channel
> (g) The Sun
> (h) A hole in the film reel
>
> Spinning off this uncertain scale of centres would be an equally uncertain "scale of edges":

(a) particles
(b) protoplasmic solutions
(c) dizziness
(d) ripples
(e) flashes of light
(f) sections
(g) foot steps
(h) pink water

> The equation of my language remains unstable, a shifting set of coordinates, an arrangement of variables spilling into surds. My equation is as clear as mud – a muddy spiral.[92]

It is this insistent referring back-and-forth, spiralling and destabilising that characterises Smithson's key writings and points toward what is meant by locatedness. The "scale of centres", through which the pervasive spiralling in Smithson's work is coordinated, relates to the theories of perception and experience that inform the work of Kevin Lynch. Like Lynch, Smithson is weary of fixing the shifting image of actuality, framing himself in terms of an unsettled and unsettling landscape. It is this representational point of view, spiralling on itself, that induces the uncertain and unsettled coordinates of locatedness or 'being there'.

To be unsettled or to experience the unsettling is a useful analogue as it is indeed the uninhabited, the settled river bank now unsettled, that no doubt catches Smithson's eye and draws him to the community-less 'monuments' of Passaic, and the lake shore in Utah. Smithson chooses to document the unsettled landscape not only in terms of immediate experience but in terms of texts, images and various forms of throwaway media. Moving toward the work of Smithson in this way it is possible to see again the value and prominence of the Lynchian documentary approach and the concept of the 'city image'. Lynch is concerned not with the landscape in itself, but with the landscape as it is being perceived. This is an aspiration, evidently frustrated by the nature of his project, that has a tendency to fix or make static an image that is inherently shifting and

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[92] 'The Spiral Jetty', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 150.

changeable.[93] Smithson appears to be aware of this dilemma and attempts instead an approach that exploits the representational predicament intrinsic to 'being there'. In order to document what he perceives as a changing present, Smithson pays close attention to the aspect of his changing presence that shifts between the imaginary, the material, science fiction and art. These add up to the uncertain coordinates of locatedness that are attached to his scale of centres and scale of edges:

> My eyes stumbled over the newsprint, over such headlines as 'Seasonal Upswing,' 'A Shuttle Service,' and 'Moving a 1,000 Pound Sculpture Can be a Fine Work of Art, Too...' Outside the bus window a Howard Johnson Motor Lodge flew by – a symphony in orange and blue. On page 31 in Big Letters: THE EMERGING POLICE STATE IN AMERICA SPY GOVERNMENT. 'In this book you will learn... what an Infinity Transmitter is.' The bus turned off Highway 3, down Orient Way in Rutherford.[94]

The 'spiral' is, in this sense, a device of representation but also a representational condition, simultaneously a figure for control and uncontrol. It is at once a movement away and towards and it is perhaps a force in terms of nothing but itself. The point of view Smithson attempts to inhabit within both the spiral of representation and the representational spiral is inherently unstable because its point of production and its point of reception are indivisible. The source appears as its lack of source and informs the process of writing in ways that can be brought to bear on the current interpretation and understanding of literary and aesthetic works that attempt to distort further the impression that a fixed sense of production and reception inform a fixed sense of locatedness and place.

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[93] A useful point of reference for this sense of the 'inherently shifting', or changing nature of the image is Merleau-Ponty's essay on Cézanne: 'To say that a circle seen obliquely is an ellipse is to substitute for our actual perception with what we would see if we were cameras: in reality we see a form which oscillates around the ellipse without being an ellipse.' See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt' in The *Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Paining*, ed. by Galen A. Johnson and Michael B. Smith (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993), p.64.

[94] Smithson, 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 69.

The Fiction of Discourse

In the piece, 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art' (1968), Smithson introduces his writing by testifying to this inherent instability:

> The following is a mirror structure of macro and micro orders, reflections, critical Laputans, and dangerous stairways of words, a shaky edifice of fictions that hangs over inverse syntactical arrangements ... coherences that vanish into quasiexactitudes and sublunary and translunary principles.[95]

The mirror properties of reflection and refraction, a consistently seductive presence in his work (addressed directly, as will be discussed, in 'Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan'), appeal to an ongoing anxiety in his writing: 'One must remember that writing on art replaces presence by absence by substituting the abstraction of language for the real thing.'[96] For Smithson, writing on art and writing as art are closely related; a trope of the avant-garde that critics often associate with wider critical notions of 'discourse.' Indeed, Smithson is as much critic as he is artist.[97] The act of replacement and substitution, while saying something about representation and experience, also forces the audience to consider the nature of the absence at the centre of this textual encounter.

> Whenever Smithson invokes the notion of a centre it is to describe a loss ... Paradoxically the concept of a centre can only occur within language; at the same time, language, which proposes the potentially infinite substitution of elements *at the centre*, destroys all possibility of securely locating any centre whatsoever ...

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[95] Smithson, 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 78.

[96] *Ibid.*, p. 123.

[97] See for instance Jeffrey Weiss, 'Language in the Vicinity of Art: Artist's Writings, 1960-1975', in *Artforum*, (Summer, 2004): 'It is one hallmark of American art between roughly 1960 and 1975 that objects and installations were attended by massive quantities of artists' words, texts that fall across the art-making landscape and settle like a heavy discursive drift. For one thing, artists were critics: Donald Judd reviewed dozens of exhibitions in New York galleries from 1959 to 1965 and composed several essays, such as 'Specific Objects,' in which he attempted to describe and account for the changing ontology of painting and sculpture; during the late '60s and early '70s, Mel Bochner covered exhibitions of new art in the critical press; both Bochner and Robert Morris composed defining theoretical texts - concerning seriality and 'anti-form,' for example - of post-Minimalism. But words - concrete verse (Andre), transitive verbs (Richard Serra), logical propositions (Bochner), 'statements' (Lawrence Weiner), quasi-absurdist formulations (Sol LeWitt), the transgressive attenuation of banal speech (Bruce Nauman), the scientizing harangue (Robert Smithson), the magazine piece (Dan Graham) - were also often inseparable from the art itself. A proliferation of writing and other applications of language clearly distinguishes this generation. If we include avant-garde filmmakers - and considering how important film was to, say, Smithson and Serra, we probably should - the number of writers mounts even further.'

> That dizzying experience of *de*centring which occurred 'at the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when in the absence of a centre or origin everything became discourse'. If this collection of Smithson's writings testifies to anything in our present culture, it is to the eruption of language into the field of visual arts, and the subsequent decentring of that field – a decentring in which these texts themselves play a crucial part.[98]

Owens is correct to identify the importance of Smithson's preoccupation with language.[99] However, a history of language in the visual arts would perhaps be of more considerable significance and scope than Owens is suggesting. Certainly, Smithson engages with the conditions of exchange that are perhaps the more ingrained vestiges of language in the

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[98] Craig Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, p. 42.

[99] As well as Owens, Alan Shapiro's book *Earthwards* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995) also offers important insights into Smithson's written material drawing attention to Smithson's consistent position concerning the materiality of language: 'My sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas.' But Shapiro is perhaps too inclined to equate the written work with explanation and exposition (thought and experiment), and neglects to dwell on the oppositional nature of Smithson's texts. Joseph Cunningham in a more recent article offers an intensely critical evaluation of Smithson's writing and indeed 'thought'. See, Joseph Cunningham, 'Image and word, object and idea, inside and outside: Excavating Robert Smithson's Art from Under his Writings', *Art Criticism*, 19.1 (2004). Cunningham hopes to 'excavate' Smithson's art 'from under his writings' attempting to break down the very textual operation so integral to Smithson's process as a whole. Little is achieved in this approach. Distinguishing Smithson's writing from his art is in itself problematic and as such Cunningham denies the relevance of Smithson's mediated form of representation and goes so far as to suggest that the conflicting positions contained in the writings should be treated 'metaphorically' if they are to be in any way 'salvageable'. As will be demonstrated later in this chapter, for Smithson, metaphor was an intrinsically material part or moment of lived experience. Cunningham distorts this subtlety by reinforcing the very binary Smithson was attempting to escape.

> While this might reflect something close to Smithson's view, the world is not an enormous text, nor is it even much like one... Smithson's comment should be taken as at best a metaphor stripping it of any critical or material force. (p. 30)

The idea that 'Smithson saw and treated the world as an enormous text' stems from Jack Flam's introduction to *The Collected Writings* rather than Smithson himself, and should perhaps be thought of in the Borgesian category out of which it is generated. Rather than an 'enormous text', Smithson conceives of the world as a museum of fictions, and as with the 'Library of Babel', it is perhaps more useful, and is indeed the proposition of this chapter, to consider Smithson's textuality as a 'fictional' operation. Rather than formally representing the artist's sense of thought, ideas or validation, for these texts to operate in terms of fiction tells us something of their performative elsewhere. This might mean that they are a site of displacement; one of process and contestation; a form of mediation and non-encounter; an attempt to understand textuality and fiction as a shifting landscape of entropy and waste:

> In the illusory babels of language, an artist might advance specifically to get lost, and to intoxicate himself in dizzying syntaxes, seeking odd intersections of meaning, strange corridors of history, unexpected echoes, unknown humors or voids of knowledge ... but this quest is risky, full of bottomless fictions and endless architectures and counter-architectures ... at the end, if there is an end, are perhaps only meaningless reverberations. (*Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 78).

visual arts. But this is not the same as declaring his work to be essentially discursive. The 'text' is only ever a failure of language.[100] Yet for Smithson this failure is material: 'words are matter.' The 'factual' quality of *The Spiral Jetty* is difficult, in the end, to avoid, and so jeopardises any textual insistence on discourse. What points to this is Smithson's continued employment of the term 'fiction' rather than 'discourse.' *The Spiral Jetty*, like 'The Monuments of Passaic' represents a study of the principle that fiction, as with fact, has weight in the world.

Fiction is more than the 'text' and perhaps less than discourse; certainly it is not the same as discourse. It is important to consider fiction as absence made present, while discourse, in terms of the work of Jaques Derrida, is better characterised as presence made absent. In discourse there is no source or origin except '*difference*.'[101] The continual dislocation celebrated by Derrida, while no doubt relevant, is, for the purposes of this thesis, un-incumbent. *Différance* points toward a circular 'discourse' characterised as a form of 'placelessness'. This placelessness is not as desirable as perhaps first thought (and is not considered the effect of Smithson's project, in fact, it is considered quite the contrary). This is because in representing or documenting place (in its removal or cancellation – in its placeless-ness), place is also produced.[102] Smithson's work speaks to the site, or locatedness, of this production. Reception means the site of production is not placeless. Rather, it is a correspondence between fiction and place. As such, this correspondence

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[100] For Blanchot this is the textual contradiction of literature: 'Whoever affirms literature in itself affirms nothing. Whoever seeks it only seeks that which slips away; whoever finds it only finds what falls short of or, worse still, lies beyond literature. This is why, in the end, it is non-literature which each book pursues as the essence of what it loves and passionately wishes to discover.' See, 'The Disappearance of Literature', in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. by Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 147.

[101] 'Language, and in general every semiotic code – which Saussure defines as "classifications" – are therefore effects, but their cause is not a subject, a substance, or a being somewhere present and outside the movement of *différance*... there is a circle here... Nothing – no present and in-*different* being – thus precedes *différance* and spacing. There is no subject who is agent, author and master of *différance*, who eventually and empirically would be overtaken by *différance*. Subjectivity – like objectivity – is an effect of *différance*, an effect inscribed in a system of *différance*.' Derrida, 'Semiology and Grammatology', in Jaques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. by Alan Bass (Continuum: London, 2002), p. 28.

[102] This distinction between representation and mediation is informed by the work of Maurice Blanchot: mediation is the absent centre of representation (closer to the primary notion of 'placelessness') – that which is more traditionally thought of as technique or the experience of representation. This, in turn, relates most importantly of all to the writings of Walter Benjamin whose work is discussed in chapter four of this thesis.

can, in some sense, be located in its production which is contingent and ephemeral even at its least apparent.

This, in turn, relates to the question of Postmodernism and allegory. It is not the intention of this thesis to advocate:

> An approach that argues for a break between Modernist or High Modernist art... seen and understood in terms of the symbol as autonomous, self-sufficient and transcendent, and so called Postmodernist art... seen and understood in terms of allegory as contingent and lacking in transcendence.[103]

Such easy distinctions are problematic on many counts. The problem here is the assumption that an 'allegorical impulse', as coined by Owens, is in some way an attempt to make up for the contingency and the lack of transcendence in practices that may be deemed Postmodern.[104] Owens considers the proliferation of artists' writings in the 1960s as a 'definitive index of the emergence of Postmodernism.' The 'distance achieved by imposing a text between the viewer and the work' is indicative of the new period's model of perception. It is, however, the problem of place that derails any insistence on language as discourse and gives way to certain, arguably, insufficient claims about allegory. Owens insists that Smithson's site specificity, 'the desire to lodge his work in a specific' place is to make his work 'rooted' in that place; for Owens, this 'is an allegorical desire, the desire for allegory.'[105] The emphasis on allegory, however, runs the risk of deriving a symbolic narrative out of a particular construction of reality. Rather ironically, allegory, when endorsed in this fashion, runs the risk of becoming the 'grand narrative' of Postmodernism.[106]

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[103] Fred Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns*, (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), p. 12.

[104] A useful reference for a form of the 'transcendent' in art can be found in the work of Georges Perec, who intriguingly, deemed perfect fakery to be the purest form of aesthetic transcendence. Transcendence is aligned with understanding, knowledge and enlightenment. Only the greatest forgeries attest to an artist's true understanding of their subject. These fakes are endowed with their own divine qualities that separate them from the original in a manner Perec can only apprehend as 'transcendent'. See David Bellos, *Georges Perec* (London: Harvill Press, 1999), p.224-230.

[105] See Owens, *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*, p. 42-48.

[106] Again reminiscent of Bryson's sense of visuality as compared with vision: 'Between the subject and the world is inserted the entire sum of discourses which make up visuality, a cultural construct and makes visuality different from vision, the notion of unmediated visual experience. Norman Bryson, 'The Gaze in the Expanded Field', in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. by Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), p. 91-2.

However, allegory should perhaps not be dismissed wholesale, even if it is the case that ultimately any attempt, however rigorous, to read Smithson's work as allegory risks overemphasising a unifying concept that tends to be prescriptive about the nature and characteristics of disparate, shifting and resistant works. Allegory has no doubt been an appealing notion for critics such as Owens because of the ways in which it points to the condition of the symbol in terms of material actuality.[107] Allegory denies the sovereignty of the symbol as it speaks to the conditions or contingency of experience and context. Even so, there is an older argument here that risks being limited to claims about Modernism, one that involves a traditional Aestheticism regarding the symbol system of art as being separate from the realm of everyday life. Hegel, for instance, defines the 'principle of romantic art as the elevation of the Spirit to itself'; the quest of an 'inner life' that would transcend 'external experience.' The insistence on allegory is perhaps what this is a warning against.

A useful reference is Peter Bürger, who reads Benjamin's concept of allegory as a theory of the avant-gardiste, or 'non-organic', work of art which is in strict opposition to the older conception of 'art in bourgeois society [that] continues to be a realm [...] distinct from the praxis of life.'[108] 'In the organic (symbolic) work of art, the unity of the universal and the particular is posited without mediation; in the non-organic (allegorical) work to which the works of the avant-garde belong, the unity is a mediated one.'[109] For Bürger, the 'avant-garde' category defined life (or 'praxis') as the condition of art. Art can be produced only in terms of how it is received, that is to say, only in terms of mediation:

> The organic work of art seeks to make unrecognisable the fact that it has been made. The opposite holds true for the avant-gardiste work: it proclaims itself an artificial construct, an artefact.[110]

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[107] Fred Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns*, p. 12: 'The ideology of the aesthetic that supports the symbol is disrupted by allegory. No matter how or to what expense it is valorised, the symbol always resolves into the material actuality of allegory.'
[108] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 92
[109] *Ibid.*, p. 56.
[110] *Ibid.*, p. 54.

As such, montage is considered the 'fundamental principle' of the avant-garde and Smithson's work (especially his writing and his films which employ certain montage-like tropes) is readily identifiable with Bürger's notion of the non-organic work of art. Closing the gap between production and reception by drawing attention to the artificial status of that relationship, the non-organic work operates in terms of the 'where' of production as a failure of location. Place as contingency is, in this sense, a stronger term than allegory: 'to be in *The Spiral Jetty* is to be out of it.'[111]

Museums and Magazines

A sense of this non-organic contingency, in how Smithson regards media and material, can be viewed as a justification for writing. 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art' positions itself as a review of artists' writing at the time and employs a mock documentary style dedicated to its status as an artificial construct, or artefact.[112] Technique is never far removed from its subject – namely, technique. The emphasis on technique is no doubt, as with the now canonised figures it refers to, a category of the 'avant-garde':

> The language of the artists and critics referred to in this article becomes [sic] paradigmatic reflections in a looking-glass babel that is fabricated according to Pascal's remark, "Nature is an infinite sphere, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere." The entire article may be viewed as a variation on that much misused remark; or as a monstrous "museum" constructed out of multi-faceted surfaces that refer, not to one subject but to many subjects within a single building of words – a brick = a word, a sentence = a room, a paragraph = a floor of rooms, etc. Or *language becomes an infinite museum, whose center is everywhere and whose limits are nowhere.*[113]

Smithson's shifting centres include the demonstrative techniques of minimal and conceptual artists such as Dan Flavin, Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd and Ed Ruscha. In a collage-like collection of quotes, illustrations and speculative suggestions, Smithson's 'textual analysis' is drawn to the variety of 'textual uncertainties' that define

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[111] Smithson, 'The Spiral Jetty', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 147.
[112] Also reminiscent of much of Borges' fiction.
[113] Smithson, 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 71.

their work in terms of the material of failure.[114] The films of Andy Warhol, for instance, are revered precisely because their 'language has no force':

> It's not very convincing – all the pornographic preoccupations collapse into verbal deposits, or... "degenerative information". Warhol's syntax forces an artifice of sadomasochism that mimics its supposed 'reality'. Even his surfaces destroy themselves.'[115]

It is the self-destructive, the throwaway and the ephemeral that characterise Smithson's sense of the non-organic. Sol LeWitt's handwriting, in an announcement for an exhibition at the Dawn Gallery, Los Angeles, 1967, is 'like getting words caught in your eyes' and so takes its place in the 'museum of language'. Likewise, Ed Ruscha's book *Royal Road Test* which documents the unhappy fate of a Royal (Model X) typewriter thrown from a speeding 1963 Buick on a 'perfect day in August 1966', is included as a book 'carrying within itself the seeds of its own destruction.'[116] In this way Smithson replaces the gallery or the museum with textual presentation, in an attempt to displace the centre of cultural authority with an openly contingent value system or cultural context.

Smithson also includes the work of Dan Graham. Well known for his use of magazines and print advertising space, Graham's ability to 'read the language of buildings' informs Smithson's conception of the museum as an architecture of fiction; an anxious space in which the document is more real than the reality it purports to document.[117] Here Smithson is referring to Graham's magazine piece 'Homes for America' originally published in *Arts Magazine* in 1966.[118] In presentation the piece is reminiscent of the work of Kevin Lynch. Graham presents photographs of purpose-built tract housing developments in Jersey City as well as statistics and interviews acquired 'in the field' in order to document the effect of the 'technologies of mass-production' and models of 'land-use economics' on the living environment of American suburbs. Graham appears

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[114] Cunningham in his criticism misconceives of this textual uncertainty as a lack of 'material force' when in fact the inclination toward dematerialisation is vital for Smithson's concept of the 'fictional'.
[115] Smithson, 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art', p. 82.
[116] *Ibid.*, p.83.
[117] *Ibid.*, p. 82.
[118] Dan Graham, 'Homes for America', in *Arts Magazine*, 41.3 (1966). The photographic essay is reprinted in Dan Graham, *Rock My Religion*, ed. by Brian Wallis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), pp. 14-21.

to detect in this apparently new relationship between production and reception (or, more specifically, between architect and inhabitant) an analogue to the aesthetic position, or point of view, of the artist. The artist is, like the architect, subordinate to the technologies of reproduction that repeat designs and materials irrespective of the local environment. The architect/artist is as such denied the 'unique role' associated with the cultural authority of the individual producer (again, conventionally associated with the architect or artist):

> Contingencies such as mass-production technology and land-use economics make the final decisions, denying the architect his former 'unique' role. Developments stand in an altered relationship to their environment. Designed to fill in 'dead' land areas, the houses needn't adapt to or attempt to withstand nature. There is no organic unity connecting the land site and the home. Both are without roots – separate parts in a larger, predetermined, synthetic order.[119]

As part of this position in terms of reception and production, Graham uses the magazine format in order to inhabit this territory of disconnection; a territory he identifies implicitly as a process of description and mediation, a process that otherwise accommodates the disunity of home and land-site. Yet Graham also emphasises the uncertainty or the contingency of the artist assuming this role through the very medium he employs in order to communicate his message – namely the throwaway and ephemeral medium of magazine publication. Indeed, the organic unity he alludes to may in itself be a construction of description and mediation (something which is discussed further, in relation to Walter Benjamin's theories of storytelling, in chapter four) and is perhaps attested to (through form) by positioning the art work within the transient permutations of the magazine rather than the permanent or culturally secure realm of the museum or gallery. Magazine and gallery are juxtaposed in this way in order, arguably, to challenge the established conventions of the art world as a system of language. As Smithson points out, paraphrasing Graham: 'The 'block houses' of the post-war suburbs communicate their ''dead' land areas' or 'sites' in the manner of a linguistic permutation.'[120] Thus the relationship between language and space is challenged in order to call into question the

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[119] Dan Graham, 'Homes for America, in *Rock My Religion*, p. 21.
[120] Smithson, 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p.82.

relationship between production and reception as something that is inherently prearranged, built into what Smithson calls 'an architecture of fiction'. As such it is possible to blend museum and magazine in ways that widen the scope of the territory characterised as a representational process of place.

The 'linguistic permutation' of the American house is considered again in chapter six which looks more closely at the relationship between fiction, language and space in terms of the living areas of the model suburban home. Still, these are important initial moves being made by Smithson and Graham that open up the question of textuality and the mediation of space. There is a sense that both artists are attempting to occupy the space between production and reception as a space which is not fixed but is instead a shifting representational process. Thus Smithson claims that Graham 'responds to language as though he lived in it'. But Smithson's essay suggests that while language (in this case a documentary-like language of description) is a space to be occupied, it is best occupied through a form that is inherently contingent. The magazine pages, as well as Ruscha's 'Road Test', LeWitt's ephemeral invitations and Warhol's 'degenerative information', are each what might be described as a form of 'non-writing', where for instance 'Flavin's writings like Flaubert's 'vases' are of 'no possible use'', or as in the case of Carl Andre 'each poem is a grave for his metaphors' and in which the distinction between 'metaphorical space' and 'material space' (a binary contested by feminist geographers such as Gillian Rose and Judith Butler) is dematerialised as 'fiction.'[121]

This idea of art and world as a kind of fictional equivalent is common among Smithson's contemporaries and has to do with their concern with the convergence of time and space and the construction of a 'present tense', and informed many of the subsequent conceptual investigations of textual mediation in visual culture. When he and artists such as Graham equate their work with the throwaway temporality of magazines, for instance, they invoke a concern for what Graham would describe as the 'just-past'. As with

[121]Smithson, 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art', p. 81-4; see Gillian Rose on Judith Butler in her essay 'As if the Mirrors had Bled: Masculine Dwelling, Masculinist Theory and Feminist Masquerade,' in *Body Space: Destabilising Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. by Nancy Duncan (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 55-67.

Benjamin's surreal history of the modern arcade, the out-of-date magazine advertisement, announcement or issue can uncover or disclose the nature of commodity culture's continuous construction of the everyday present, and is 'one way in which 'the commodity dream' might be broken'[122]. In 1966 Graham conceives of a 'schema' to be published in various magazines that documents and appears to map the magazine's language of the 'just-past'. By listing the number of adjectives, adverbs, nouns, numbers and italicised words as well as the 'area not occupied by type' or 'the area occupied by type' (among other 'component variants'), Graham is able to establish a self-generating record of textual dematerialisation. In other words, the text folds in on itself or is dematerialised by the reflexive bureaucratising of how it has been constructed. That is to say, by drawing the reader's attention to the material of the text by breaking down and listing the 'component variants' that combine in a particular order so as to be legible in a particular way, the material begins to dissolve. The dissolving, or dematerialising, mirrors the way each magazine inevitably dissolves as it goes out of date and, as such, develops a relationship with its referents that differs from that intended – the presentness of the magazine has become something else. For Graham, the matter of the text's presentness is, in this way, always 'just-past'.

By alluding to the fictive nature of the text's temporality within the medium itself, Graham echoes Smithson's earlier version of the text being based on an inherent displacement:

> Time as ideology has produced many uncertain 'art histories' with the help of the mass-media. Art histories may be measured in time by books (years), by magazines (months), by newspapers (weeks and days), by radio and TV (days and hours).[123]

Thus, at a time when 'fiction is not believed to be a part of the world', these 'slap-stick letters to the editor' (or non-writings) have a profound influence on Smithson and lead him towards an art of the textually mediated. The field of representation, identified by

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[122] See Graham's 'Magazine Pages' in Dan Graham, *Two-Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham on his Art*, (Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), p. 10-21.
[123] See Smithson's 'Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space' (1966), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 35.

Smithson as a relationship between art histories and the ways in which art histories are reported upon, is wide. As Smithson notes it includes all of the elements of mass-media (books, magazines, newspapers, radio, television - to these might be added direct and outdoor advertising, film and the internet), as well as being a field of representation, or territory, that includes direct experience, or the 'being there', of everyday life. The scope and pervasiveness of representation informs the position of the artist (in this case, Smithson) constructing representations in a field of representation and leads not just towards a discussion of texts (or written language) as a means of occupying this territory of representation but towards the discussion of what is meant by *textual practice*. Thus, it is now worth considering, as with the material of words and the matter of sculpture, the way in which the practice of writing and the (indicative) practice of travelling are often analogous in Smithson's work. Rather than the cultural value of finished texts, what he calls the 'illusory Babel of language' and the 'architectures of fiction', Smithson draws attention to the practice of making texts itself.

Mirror Travel

In 'Incidents of Mirror Travel in The Yucatan' published in *Artforum* a year after 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art', Smithson attempts to document his own strata for mapping the mediated world and its fictions. Arranging mirrors in the Yucatan landscapes of Mexico and Guatemala so that they reflect very little of their surroundings (very little, that is, that would render the landscapes identifiable), the present is conceptualised as a failure of memory: 'The memory of what is not may be better than the amnesia of what is', and somewhat jeopardises the very desire for a strata of documentation[124]. Going to a place of rich archaeological significance and failing to document the experience of factual investigation, one might argue, Smithson in turn chooses to equate travel and documentation as the construction of a non-encounter. Again, space, time and the construction of the present act as the material for Smithson's sculptural and textual interventions. Here, as with the Passaic piece, travel is emphasised as being integral to textual practice. Driving into Mexico, Smithson notes:

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[124] Smithson 'Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan', (1969) in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 31.

> A scale in terms of 'time' rather than space opened up. Space is the remains, or corpse, of time, it has dimensions. 'Objects' are 'sham space', the excrement of thought and language. Once you start seeing objects in a positive or negative way you are on the road to derangement.[125]

Here Smithson expresses a particular form of materialism. Smithson is not interested in objects so much as he is interested in the fictions that lend an object value and significance. This is perhaps why travel opens up a 'scale of time rather than space'. Yet, as will be shown, this is conceived in tension with the space of the text. Temporal experience and spatial representation are at odds in Smithson's work.[126] In this way language is as material as sculptor's clay and if it is ever conceived of as ideal, or, in other words, as the myth of objects fixed in space, it is only the *form* of an ideal and not something ideal in itself. This has far reaching consequences in terms of the experimental prose discussed later in the thesis and is perhaps why during this period in his work Smithson alludes to Frank Kermode's sense of the 'integrity of the fiction', bridging the gap between Smithson's textual practice and contemporary literature in ways that will be drawn out in order to fully appreciate the scope of his textual practice.

Kermode's book, *The Sense of an Ending*, published the year before 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art' is quoted both in that essay and in 'Incidents of Mirror Travel in the Yucatan', and underlines Smithson's preoccupation with the workings of fiction more commonly associated with the study of novels.[127] In many ways texts such as 'The Spiral Jetty' and 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art' that document the manner in which they are constructed, register a dichotomy in written language that Kermode identifies at the time as the difference between myth and fiction:

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[125] *Ibid.*, p. 122.

[126] Perhaps summed up by Carl Andre's phrase used as the title for a brief magazine piece Smithson published in 1968: 'A thing is a hole in a thing it is not', see *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 95.

[127] Smithson's quotation of Kermode's work in 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art' is most indicative of this: 'Modern art, like modern science, can establish complementary relations with discredited fictional systems; as Newtonian mechanics is to quantum mechanics, so *King Lear* is to *Endgame*.' *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, p. 83.

> We have to distinguish between myths and fictions. Fictions can degenerate into myths whenever they are not held to be consciously fictive. In this sense, anti-Semitism is a degenerate fiction, a myth; and *Lear* is a fiction.[128]

What appears to strike Smithson, and indeed signals a characteristic trait of the 'avant-garde' and its identification with what Kermode calls 'discredited fictional systems', is the suggested dematerialisation of the (fictive) distinction between 'world' and 'representation'.[129] For Kermode to suggest that 'literary fictions belong to Vainger's category of 'the consciously false'', means that fictions are subject only to their un-truth; in this way they become a kind of 'test-site.'[130] The fictional remains 'fictive' as the text operates in the manner of non-writing, as something throwaway, or as a test-case for itself, so that 'when the fictions change ... the world changes with them.'[131] Or as Smithson puts it, the artist 'seeks the fiction that reality will sooner or later imitate.'[132] The relationship between world and representation is the territory Smithson travels as part of his textual practice and informs a particular form of fieldwork that relates more or less explicitly to earthworks such as *The Spiral Jetty* and their mediation in Smithson's textual practice.

Smithson in the Field

Among the various coordinates of his 'fictional integrity', Smithson sites Lewis Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark*, Edgar Allan Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, as well as John L. Stephens's *Incidents of Travel in the Yucatan*. All three references are provocative and draw attention to the peculiar conflation of travel and writing that defines the 'geographic imagination' informing Smithson's pursuit of the fictive or 'consciously false'. Indeed, it is perhaps this *pursuit of fiction* that takes Smithson to the Yucatan in 1969 and causes him to write the *fictional pursuit* 'Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan'.

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[128] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 39.
[129] See Smithson's reference to Kermode in note above.
[130] Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 40.
[131] *Ibid.*, p. 42.
[132] Smithson, 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art', *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 91.

Ostensibly, the project involves the temporary erection of 'Mirror Displacements'; yet, the line of inquiry has more in common with the 'side-effects' this induces and is perhaps indicative of the contradictory position Smithson explores in his texts. A dozen mirrors measuring twelve inches square are repeatedly arranged (the essay documents that nine mirror-displacements are performed) in a variety of environments. The arrangements are then photographed and organised within a study that documents their 'effect'. The project, somewhat unavoidably, signals an antagonistic correspondence with Stephens's well known work, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*.[133] Jennifer Roberts suggests that 'in every respect, Smithson's work in Yucatan can be interpreted as an inversion or undoing of Stephens' operations'.[134] Yet what exactly these operations represent is unclear.

There are differing categories of opinion regarding Stephens' exploits in Yucatan. Roberts regards the project as common to the time: Stephens is engaged in doing what the indigenous population is incapable of doing itself; it is the explorer's duty to mediate and so protect 'a culture unable to manufacture the necessary perspective to differentiate its foreground from its background, its present from a past.'[135] Michael Schmidt, on the other hand, in his introduction to the reprinting of *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan* in 1988, identifies Stephens as a man in advance of the cultural attitudes of the time. Schmidt defines Stephens as 'an American writer out to see and discover rather than subdue and appropriate.'[136] It is perhaps fair however, in terms of Smithson's work, to consider the mirror displacements as being an operation that detects little value in making a distinction between categories such as 'see and discover' and 'subdue and appropriate'. Or even, for that matter, between writer and traveller. Smithson is perhaps above all concerned with what cultural geographers would come to term 'displacing the field'.

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[133] *Incidents of Mirror Travel in Yucatan* was a bestseller in America in the 1840s.
[134] Jennifer L. Roberts, *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, (London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 96.
[135] *Ibid.*, p. 98.
[136] See Michael Schmidt 'Introduction', in John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, (London: Century, 1988), p. 3.

For Smithson, negotiating the field is a form of textual practice.[137] Roberts' book, *Smithson and History*, fails to acknowledge the importance of the textual in Smithson's work and the subsequent importance of his textual practice: the relationship between observation, writing, authorship and mediation:

> For as much as Smithson's work may desire to attain the entropic transcendence of the historical flotsam from which it is built, the specific traces and history yet remain inscribed within it. Smithson's crystalline centrifuges... ingest historical matter and send it spiralling toward its entropic end.[138]

The relationship between history and historical matter, rather than transcendence, creates an ongoing form of production and waste. Indeed, rather than the direct form of experience alluded to by Roberts, Smithson positions himself in terms of how this experience is mediated. Mediation is the historical relation of his work in that an encounter with *The Spiral Jetty* (or a Mirror-Displacement) is constructed in terms of its absence. There is, in this sense, no 'ethic of presence'. Where, precisely, are the mirror displacements? It is Smithson's writing, his art of the mediated or his fiction (as the 'consciously false') that acts as the natural and necessary moment of historical intervention. Dismantled almost immediately, the mirror-displacements only exist as documentation. Both Stephens and Smithson, each to their own degree, realise that the substance of travel is the mode of its representation. Where Smithson deviates from Stephens' path of cultural purpose, is in his sense of experience made absent. As opposed to the 'encounter' of travel Smithson maps the 'non-encounter' of mirror-travel. It is their non-matter that makes them matter.

> Sight turned away from its own looking. Particles of matter slowly crumbled down the slope that held the mirrors. Tinges, stains, tints, and tones crumbled into the eyes. The eyes became two wastebaskets filled with diverse colors, variegations, ashy hues, blotches and sunburned chromatics. To construct what the eyes see in words, in an 'ideal language' is a vain exploit. Why not

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[137] If the Yucatan is the textualised landscape or 'field' we take it to be (not only in terms of the adventures of Stephens but also in terms of Smithson's interest in Hieroglyphs and the writings of Levi-Strauss) it might be of some use to note the texts (as indeed his travelogue does) Smithson carries with him into the Yucatan; namely, among other forms of 'guide book', the avant-garde novels of Michel Butor.

[138] Roberts, *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and History*, p. 139.

> reconstruct one's inability to see? Let us give passing shape to the unconsolidated views that surround a work of art, and develop a type of "anti-vision" or negative seeing.[139]

Brian Jarvis, in his notes on the geographical imagination, points out that 'the lenses may have altered considerably, but all subsequent observers have been obliged to observe American landscapes through some form of ideological eyeglass.'[140] Stephens' ideological eyeglass equates vision, or the experience of sight, with historical knowledge. Smithson's 'anti-vision', his record of a beguiling indifference, is in a sense far more concerned with what Norman Bryson terms 'visuality.'[141] According to Bryson, no visual experience is unmediated; seeing is akin to the reading of codes and reading is both mediated by and a mediation of culture. Stephens fails to identify this mediatory relationship between reading and seeing. In coming upon the mysterious remnants of Mayan artefacts, Stephens declares: 'One thing I believe is that history is graven on its monuments. No Champollion has yet brought to them the energies of his enquiring mind. Who shall read them?'[142] Obviously, Stephens means to say: who will read them if the 'Champollion' does not? He assumes immediately that the authority of his vision is an essential aspect of how difference is to be experienced.

Indeed, such an experience of sight is organised around certain historical and cultural values (as no doubt are Smithson's). From Stephens' perspective, the Spanish, too bent on the consolidation of power, wouldn't think to decipher the forgotten language, and the indigenous population itself is without his 'sense of history'; deciphering these signs depends ultimately on the energetic travail of American travellers. Smithson's mirrors, or ideological eyeglasses of non-vision, are, in this context, an attempt to displace Stephens' assumption that historical knowledge is a play on the experience of sight, so that while the heroic impulse of Stephens is to keep moving, Smithson's is perhaps the opposite – to account for 'a series of standstills'. By writing the field in this way, in

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[139] Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan', *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 130.
[140] Brian Jarvis, *Postmodern Cartographies: The Geographical Imagination in Contemporary American Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), p.2.
[141] See note above: Norman Bryson 'The Gaze in the Expanded Field' in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. by Hal Foster.
[142] Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, p. 73.

representing place, movement and sight have perhaps always been cultural equivalents. The observer wields a penetrative power over the observed as he (in its gendered operation) moves into, through, and then out of the field. Modern cultural geographers contend with this notion of fieldwork that is constructed as a form of 'manly myth-making'. As Matthew Sparke points out: 'masculinity, militarism, imperialism and science all come explicitly together in a fantasy of fieldwork in faraway lands'.[143]

Crucially, Gillian Rose and Judith Butler contest the binary that defines such a masculine paradigm of observation and control as the illusory distinction between 'material' and 'metaphorical space.'[144] For Rose and Butler, the role of the geographer (one who deals in the machinations of representation – maps, surveys, coordinates and so on) is over-determined by the masculinist tendency to distinguish between the masculine 'real' and the feminine 'unreal'. This is defined as a distinction between the observer and the observed and the subsequent distinction in location – a 'here' (that of critical authority) and an 'elsewhere' (the field):

> The reiteration of the distinction between real and non-real space serves to naturalise certain masculinist visions of real space and real geography, and to maintain other modes of critique ... 'outside the project'. It is an act of exclusion.[145]

Rose is concerned here with the use of metaphor as a geographic system: a definition of the metaphorical, as she sees it, that defines the representational operation of geography. Metaphor and geography relate in the way places are constructed, that is to say the way in which places are constructed through how they are described. Description (spatial metaphors or metaphorical space) is considered by geographers to be 'unreal', a representational construct that is distinct from the material or the actual geography of place; formed of dynamic social processes which resist representation.[146] Rose, however,

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[143]Matthew Sparke, 'Displacing the Field in Fieldwork', in *Body Space: Destabilising Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. by Nancy Duncan (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 215.

[144] See Gillian Rose, 'As if the Mirrors had Bled: Masculine Dwelling, Masculinist Theory and Feminist Masquerade,' in *Body Space*, ed. by Nancy Duncan.

[145] *Ibid.*, p.60.

[146] Here she refers to Neil Smith and Cindi Katz', 'Grounding Metaphor' in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, ed. by Michael Keith and Steve Pile (London: Routledge, 1993): Smith and Katz 'conclude that if

makes a case for the interconnectedness of place and representation in order to challenge what she considers to be a gendered binary between masculine ('concrete and dynamic') dimensions of real space and feminine ('fluid and imprisoning') qualities of unreal space. For Rose it is not metaphor *per se* that is problematic but the way in which metaphor is related to space: for 'these geographers, then, there is a real space to which it is appropriate for metaphors to refer, and a non-real space which it is not.'[147] This sense of language and its uses in relation to place is looked at more thoroughly in the next chapter which considers the figurative tension between metaphor, metonym and space as it is constructed in everyday language-use. In this context, it can be shown how Smithson's textuality is directly relevant to the experimental fictions of Harry Mathews as both practitioners situate themselves within the territory of place as a process of representation; a territory defined by the ways in which metaphorical and actual space blend as part of a challenge to the role of cultural description that defines, or constructs, a field it pretends to merely reflect. For now, it is important to note the way in which Rose is calling for a geography that takes into account the representational ambivalence of its own construction and why, in turn, it is pertinent to the discussion of Smithson's textual practice that attempts to rearrange the relationship between metaphorical space and the field of its metaphors. That is to say, how this critique of metaphorical space (and its uses) relates to Smithson's textual practice that is built into, and out of, a representational process of place.

Indeed, Rose's critique of metaphor relates directly to 'Smithson's undoing of Stephens' operations.'[148] The function of metaphor, where an 'unfamiliar meaning system – the target domain' is compared 'with another, familiar meaning system – the 'source domain' – in order to 'reinscribe the unfamiliar event, experience or social relation as utterly known'' is a site of power and naming.[149] Metaphorically, Stephens' 'mirroring' 'reflects' the cultural values of a particular time and place as a form of verisimilitude.

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spatial metaphors are to be a part of a radical critical project, it is this material or geographical or social space which must be their source domain, because its dynamism renders socio-spatial structures amenable to change; in contrast, spatial metaphors which refer to absolute space are regressive because absolute space serves to freeze and thus sanction the socio-spatial or theoretical status quo.' *Ibid.*, p. 57.

[147] *Ibid.*, p. 58.

[148] Roberts, *Mirror Travels: Robert Smithson and* History, p. 96.

[149] Rose, 'As if the Mirrors had Bled', p. 57.

Yet his mirroring produces a form of knowledge as truth: that it is the role of white men to interpret others unable to interpret themselves. To this it may be asked: does Smithson's imaginary or, more to the point, textual, fieldwork rearrange the power relations of this type of geography? Arguably, it goes further. Rather than a reflected verisimilitude, Smithson advocates 'anti-vision' – any distinction between the observer and the observed (the 'real' and its other, or real and unreal space) breaks down as a form of vision that fails to visualise. The textual practice, rather than documenting the otherwise unknowable, documents the construction of this failed visualisation. Smithson's fictive enactment of metaphor (his text 'Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan') activates the displacement of the tendency within the operation of fieldwork for making the unknown knowable. As the material and the metaphorical converge, 'the malady of wanting to make is unmade, and the malady of wanting to be able is disabled.'[150]

Indeed, Smithson's text as travel is pertinent to Judith Butler's critique of the geographer's tendency to distinguish between real and unreal space as it is discussed by Rose. Butler suggests that in being *repeatedly performed*, the distinction is naturalised.[151] However, the very necessity of this repetition, she contends, automatically undermines the value of what she identifies as a gendered binary. The norms of hegemony must be performed and 'performed repeatedly because their constituting citation of the subject and non-subject is never guaranteed.'[152] Smithson's mirrors, failing to reflect or 'show' anything other than themselves and their temporary intrusion upon the landscape, enact this site of repeated performance. The subsequent text, in Butleresque fashion, is a stand-in for the maligned disabling of this manifest repetition. Movement, observation and the very parameters of the field (the centre that is everywhere) are the equivalent of the tools of representation – the mirror and its supplementary account. While Foucault perceives a 'reflection' of himself in his mirrors, Smithson's mirror-displacements refract the surface of experience enough to suggest that

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[150] Smithson, 'Incidents of Mirror Travel in Yucatan', *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, p. 122.
[151] See Rose's discussion of Butler, 'As if the Mirrors had Bled', p. 58-62.
[152] Rose, *Ibid.*, p. 58.

'metaphor has been subverted from its explanatory prosaic function to become the re-creator of a reality it does not name.'[153]

> South of Campeche, on the way to Champoton, mirrors were set on the beach of the Gulf of Mexico. Jade colored waters splashed near the mirrors which were supported by dry seaweed and eroded rocks, but the reflections abolished the supports, and now words abolish the reflections. The unnameable tonalities of blue that were once square tide pools of sky have vanished into the camera, and now rest in the cemetery of the printed page – *Ancora in Arcadia morte*. A sense of arrested breakdown prevails over the level mirror surfaces and the unlevel ground. "The true fiction eradicates the false reality," said the voiceless voice of Chalchihuitlicue – the Surd of the Sea.[154]

As a side-effect of representation, the writing of Smithson's geographical imagination is organised, it might be argued, in terms of a mistake. Smithson fails to remove himself from his geography. It is in a sense the same mistake Stephens makes, except in Smithson's case the mistake is the compass of his operations. The irrevocable position of the author (the anxiety of the fieldworker) is acknowledged ironically through his self-conscious absence – there is no sign of the author. The type of positioning signalled by this ever-present absence is configured according to a 'dialectical' gesture Smithson defines as the 'site' and its 'non-site'. This mock binary (in the fashion of Butler's criticism), appeals to Smithson. Indeed, the manner of its collapse, the site and the non-site and their representational 'range of convergence', is perhaps Smithson's fictional gesture par-excellence.[155]

The fictional gesture is made explicit in his piece, 'A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects' (*Artforum*, 1968) which is in many ways a straightforward, even journalistic, account of the fashion for earthworks, in which Smithson makes explicit reference to Edgar Allan Poe's novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. He does so in order to demonstrate the nature of a conception of fieldwork that 'muddies' the naturalisation of a distinction between real and non-real, or site and non-site. In this piece, Smithson

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[153] See Foucault 'Of Other Spaces: Heterotopias', *Diacritics*, 16 (1986), pp. 22-7; for quotation see Harry Matthews, *The Case of The Persevering Maltese: Collected Essays* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press 2003) p. 167.

[154] Smithson, 'Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan, *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 123.

[155] See in particular, 'The Spiral Jetty', *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 152-3.

suggests that the cultural geographer's anxiety over fieldwork and representation has always been manifest in the operation of fiction, again broadening the scope of what is meant by the relationship between place and representation:

> Poe's *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* seems to me an excellent art criticism and prototype for rigorous non-site investigations. "Nothing worth mentioning occurred during the next twenty-four hours except that, in examining the ground to the eastward third chasm, we found two triangular holes of great depth, and also with black granite sides." His descriptions of chasms and holes seem to verge on proposals for "earthwords". The shapes of the chasms themselves become "verbal roots" that spell out the difference between darkness and light. Poe ends his mental maze with the sentence – "I have graven it within the hills and my vengeance upon the dust within the rock."[156]

In his book on the shifting critical and cultural reception of Poe's *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* (the text, provocatively defined in the manner of an art object, according to a system of framing), Ronald C. Harvey notes the post-structuralist approach to Pym that re-qualifies a text dismissed by many as Poe's least important work and no doubt mirrors something of Smithson's evaluation of the novel. According to Harvey, Pym appeals to scholars in the 1970s because:

> Its self referentiality, in the form of metaphors of scripting that effectively textualise the landscape, interrogate the nature of representation. At the same time its confused claims of authorship and grounds of authority among the multiple narrators places selfhood in a relative position to language. Modernist readings of Poe recognise that legibility, the very condition for reading the text, exists as a core theme within the book, with basic epistemological implications.[157]

As a novel re-negotiated and re-interpreted as being somewhere between accident and hoax, Smithson's allusion to Pym is demonstrative of the textual operation that defines his sense of fieldwork. The illegibility that defines his distinction between site and non-site actively displaces the field by alluding to the role played by reading in the form of everyday experience and perception, noted in the previous chapter in relation to the work of Kevin Lynch. It is not by accident that Smithson cites a novel very much in the genre

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[156] Smithson 'A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 108.

[157] Ronald C. Harvey, *The Critical History of Edgar Allen Poe's The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym: 'A Dialogue with Unreason'* (New York: Garland, 1998), p. 138.

of imaginary travel, adventure and the encounter of alien tongues, nor is it by accident that Poe makes so many of the textual errors that his contemporaries deride. Plot lines are left incomplete, characters disappear (and reappear even once they have been killed off), and personalities warp in and out of recognition. The novel itself remains radically incomplete as the apparent death of Pym the narrator leaves the meta-narrator and author, Poe (who is excused at the outset), to make the most of traces of narrative fragments. This mistaken machination of the narrator appears to organise the very nature of the narrative and, as with Smithson's writing, guides the nature of its operation.

In the introductory note the novel is framed and then re-framed in terms of a material textual encounter as Pym acknowledges the efforts of 'Mr Poe' and the part he plays in the writing and publication of the opening chapters in the *Southern Messenger*, a magazine Poe edits in 1936 until he is fired in 1937 for alcoholism. According to Pym, Poe 'proposed that I should allow him to draw up, in his own words, a narrative of the earlier portion of my adventures, from facts afforded by myself, publishing it ... under *the garb of fiction.*'[158] Writing, memory, experience and truth are each intensely fictionalised in the manner of a throwaway hoax:

> Among those gentlemen in Virginia who expressed the greatest interest in my statement ... was Mr Poe, lately editor of the "Southern Messenger"... He strongly advised me, among others, to prepare at once a full account of what I had seen and under-gone ... insisting, with great plausibility, that however roughly, as regards mere authorship, my book should be got up, its very uncouthness, if there were any, would give it all the better chance of being received as truth.[159]

The throwaway uncouthness of Pym's account as a literary side-effect is the condition under which Poe establishes a textual field within which he frames the peculiar reception of his text. Poe and Smithson, in this sense, have a lot in common; both authors arrange a fiction of the mediated – a decoy embodying the 'reception of truth'. Magazine publishing, authorship, and documentation are each used in order to textualise the perennial hoax that (as with *The Spiral Jetty*) at the centre of the fiction there 'exists' an

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[158] Edgar Allan Poe, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 4.
[159] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

experience defined only in terms of its irrevocable lack or absence. This absence defines the suspect legibility that impacts radically upon the text.

Indeed, the subject and theme of legibility is broached on many occasions in Poe's novel and in each event there is the suggestion that Poe understands 'reading' and 'seeing' to be mutual equivalents. Pym's repeated failure to decipher found hieroglyphs, and the blindness of the whaler's hold in which Pym attempts to read the torn fragments of a note scrawled in blood by his sea-faring companion, Augustus, undermine Pym's ideological eyeglass; he can reflect nothing but his own inadequacy, something that might aid an understanding of Smithson's sense of the fictional and 'anti-vision'. As if he is himself a mirror displacement all Pym is able to reflect is his tawdry failure to reflect. Rather than represented, experience is framed in terms of its strategy for interpretation. 'The imaginary and the factual, the fantastic and the verisimilar' blend into a 'poetics of geography' that explode the field defined in terms of a distinction between the real and the unreal, the site and the non-site. Instead, Smithson's textual operations, as with those of Poe's Pym, employ the waste products of this 'naturalisation' (of the field) and form a 'range of convergence'. The 'real' and the 'unreal' are muddied according to a 'course of hazards, a double path made up of signs, photographs and maps that belong to both sides of the dialectic at once'; both 'are present and absent at the same time.'[160]

This 'range of convergence', relegated to a footnote in 'The Spiral Jetty' essay, is characterised by the nonsensical play of the hoax as a mad text. It is no wonder that in the 'Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art' there is embedded, in the manner of the authorial acknowledgement of the subset Poe/Pym, the Bellman's map of Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*:

> He had bought a large map representing the sea,
> Without the least vestige of land:
> And the crew were much pleased when they found it to be
> A map they could all understand.[161]

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[160] See 'The Spiral Jetty', *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 153.
[161] Lewis Carroll quoted in 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art', *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 93.

That being: 'A perfect and absolute blank!'

Maps as Holes:

The Bellman's 'map' should help to further understand the nonsensical ploy of Smithson's 'dialectical' construct 'Site and Non-Site'. The map is a recurring discrepancy in Smithson's writing. His mapping of Passaic, New Jersey for instance, is 'negative.'[162] 'Passaic is full of holes' and so the maps Smithson uses in his collages (as illustrations 'embedded' in his writing) become, in a sense, the coordination of these 'holes.'[163] As with the Bellman's map in Carroll's *Snark*, the production or reproduction of its sense involves a disqualification of logic (nonsense) in the material correspondence of the map (the text) and the representation of experience (place):

[162] See: 'Negative Map Showing Region of the Monuments along the Passaic River', in 'A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey', *Robert Smithson: Collected Writings*, p. 72.

[163] *Ibid.*, p. 72. 'Passaic seems full of holes compared to New York City, which seems tightly packed and solid, and those holes, in a sense, are the monumental vacancies that define, without trying, the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures.' Using the map as a series of holes, Smithson attempts to 'read' the material monuments of absence that proliferate there – generally the detritus of the industrial/suburban landscape.

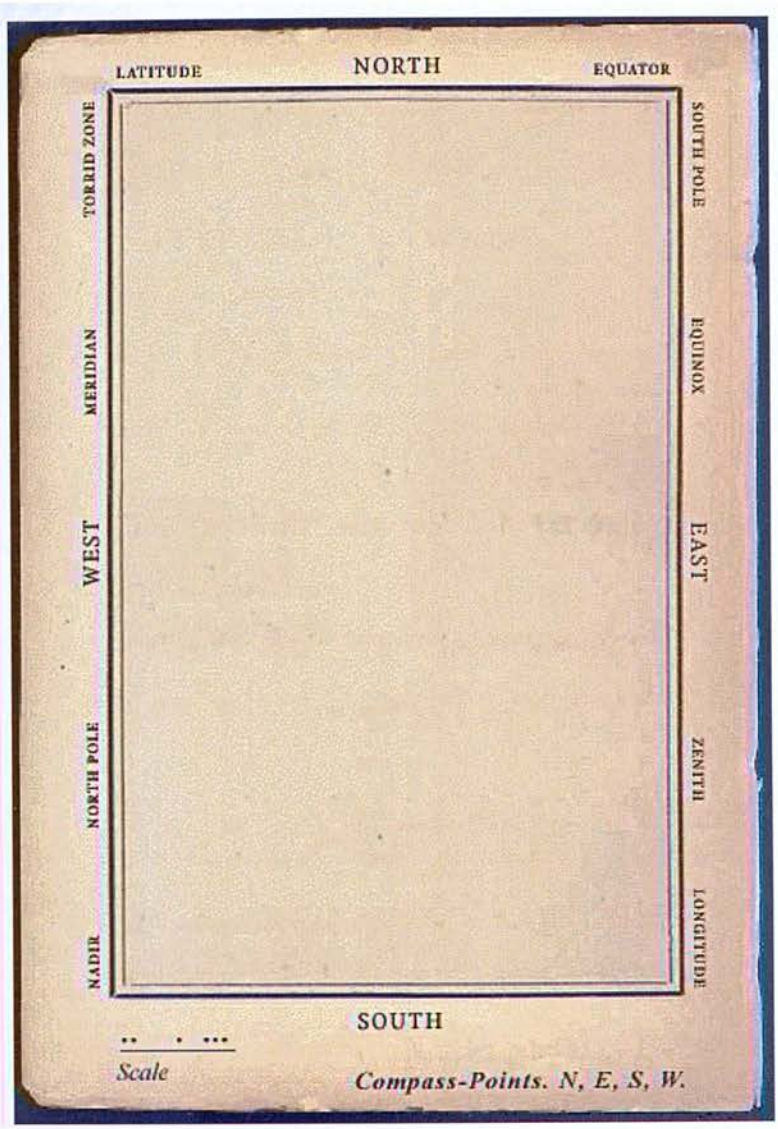

Fig. 2.3: *The Bellman's Map*

Carroll invents two versions of the ideal map. One is an 'absolute blank' the other is the equivalent of life; one that contains nothing, the other everything. Smithson notes them both, including a photocopy of the Bellman's map in his essay, 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art', as well as quoting from Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, where 'a German professor tells how his country's cartographers experimented with larger and larger maps until finally they made one with a scale of a mile to a mile':

> It has never been spread out, yet. The farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So now we use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well.[164]

The 'country' becomes its equivalent. Like the mirror, the map is informed by this notion of the equivalent, or at least the will to formalise a very particular relationship with space that positions the reader/writer inside and outside at once. In the case of Smithson's sense of mapping, one he openly borrows from Carroll, experience and reading are organised and re-organised around a fictional correspondence of positions (holes). According to these uncertain coordinates of correspondence, rather than placement (cultural, ideological, aesthetic or otherwise), the map functions in terms of the nature of its (material) displacement:

> From *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* of Orrelius (1570) to the "paint"-clogged maps of Jasper Johns, the map has exercised a fascination over the minds of artists. A cartography of uninhabitable places seems to be developing – complete with decoy diagrams, abstract grid systems made of stone and tape (Carl Andre and Sol Le Wittt), and electronic "mosaic" photomaps from NASA. Gallery floors are being turned into parallels and meridians. Andre... covered an entire floor with a "map" that people walked on – rectangular sunken "islands" were arranged in a regular order. Maps are becoming immense, heavy quadrangles, topographic limits that are emblems of perpetuity, interminable grid coordinates without Equators and Tropic Zones.[165]

Accordingly, each of Smithson's fictions acts as a map, but a map that operates in the manner of a mad text - a mapping operation conducted in terms of its ever-absent point of reference. Representation, for Smithson, is defined by this shifting play of absence, and figures heavily in his hoax-dichotomy of 'site' and 'non-site'.

Sites as Non-Sites

From around 1968, 'non-sites' are a prominent preoccupation in Smithson's work and often take the form of small floor-standing sculptures made to occupy gallery spaces. In the text, 'A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects', in which Smithson directly

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[164] Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, quoted in Smithson, 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art', *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 93.
[165] *Ibid.*, p.92

associates his fictional constructions with those of Edgar Allan Poe, he describes the production of a 'non-site'. As with the mediation surrounding *The Spiral Jetty*, the non-site is born out of an enigmatic sense of material experience. Visiting slate quarries in Pennsylvania in June 1968, Smithson (accompanied by his wife, Nancy Holt, as well as Virginia Dawn and Dan Graham) subjects himself to a landscape where 'all boundaries and distinctions lost their meaning in this ocean of slate.'[166] As with Pym's oceanic mist of unknowing, up is down and down is up: 'the brittleness of the site seemed to swarm around one, causing a sense of displacement.'[167] In response, and in the guise of a perverse form of fieldwork, he 'collected a canvas bag of slate chips for a small *non-site*.'[168] Balanced precariously between the outcrops of industrial materialism and the white gallery space, it is hard not to associate this nullified form of abstracted and yet material documentation with the disposable notion of written media. The map and its scale of representation might, after all, best exemplify the inept relation of 'site' and 'non-site'. As Smithson puts it:

> I have developed the Non-Site, which in a physical way contains the disruption of the site. The container is in a sense a fragment itself, something that would be called a three-dimensional map... it actually exists as a fragment of a greater fragmentation. It is a three-dimensional *perspective* that has broken away from the whole, while containing the lack of its own containment. There are no mysteries in these vestiges, no traces of an end or beginning.[169]

Later, in the near-redundancy of the footnote Smithson includes in 'The Spiral Jetty' text, he lays out the 'Dialectic of Site and Non-Site' in these terms:

Site	*Non-site*
1. Open Limits	Closed Limits
2. A Series of Points	An Array of Matter
3. Outer Coordinates	Inner Coordinates
4. Subtraction	Addition
5. Indeterminate Certainty	Determinate Uncertainty
6. Scattered	Contained

[166] 'A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects', *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 110.
[167] *Ibid.*, p. 110-111.
[168] *Ibid.*, p. 111.
[169] *Ibid.*, p. 111.

	Information	Information
7.	Reflection	Mirror
8.	Edge	Centre
9.	Some Place (physical)	No Place (abstract)
10.	Many	One[170]

That Smithson constructs a series of reference points that fail to correspond is not only signalled by the type of problematic binary of 'field' and 'representation', but also by the embedded inclusion of Carroll's 'absolute blank'. Framed in terms of an irrevocable absence as a site of disappearance or 'blank', coordinates such as 'place' and 'no place' form a collapsible binary ('an equation as clear as mud') in which the non-site (the map – a textual matter rather than the 'place' figured in the arguments of Marc Auge) can only ever exist as a hoax, a mistaken machination of an uninhabitable (un-representable) 'site'. What matters here are the by-products or side-effects of this fictional equation. The result is a littering of empty containers and redundant perspectives; 'texts', or 'containers' such as maps, photographs, and collections of rock are the entropic deposits that accumulate according to the form of its mediation – its true site of production. This is perhaps the most provocative aspect of Smithson's work. The oppositional status of his texts (in terms of the 'experience' of the earthworks) is derived from the aspect, as in Carroll's fictional map, of a failed correspondence that frames this employment of textual mediation. The map becomes an active displacement in its failure to correspond.

Mad Texts: Smithson, Artaud and Writing as Displacement

This inept failure of correspondence, as a blank text or as a site of absence and disappearance, is crucial and again raises the question of Blanchot's theories of writing as proposed at the outset. Of particular importance, especially considering his influence on the avant-garde activities of American artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, is Blanchot's essay on the writing of Antonin Artaud.[171] In this essay, Blanchot is particularly concerned with the 'correspondence' between Artaud and Jacques Rivière.

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[170] Smithson, 'The Spiral Jetty', in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 152.

[171] See Maurice Blanchot, 'Artaud' in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. by Michael Holland (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). Originally published in the *Nouvelle Revue Francaise*, 47 (1956), pp. 53-62.

Significantly, Artaud's work is framed by two series of letters, those of his correspondence with Rivière in 1923-4 and his letters, written not long before his death, from the asylum in Rodez where he is held for much of the Occupation[172]. Among a disparate, and elliptically broken body of work (much of which is lost or destroyed due to the very nature of Artaud's craft), Artaud seizes upon letter writing as a means of examining himself and the non-correspondence of writing.

At the heart of Artaud's correspondence with Rivière is an insolvent misunderstanding.[173] In 1923, when he is twenty seven, Artaud submits a handful of poems to the *Nouvelle Revue Française* of which Rivière is then the editor. Rivière rejects the poems, but they stir enough of the editor's interest in Artaud for him 'to wish to make the acquaintance of their author.'[174] Unable to accept, not necessarily their rejection, but certainly the susceptible matter of their existence, Artaud then attempts to account for his attachment to, indeed, the very materialisation of these poems in spite of their apparently 'defective' and 'abortive' shortcomings. An imbalanced correspondence ensues in which on the one hand Artaud is able to, within the personal remit of the letter, that is, from out of life itself, interrogate the nature of his writing, while on the other Rivière, somewhat inadvisably, attempts to reassure Artaud 'that the future will bring the coherence which he lacks' both poetically and mentally.[175] Indeed, what makes this process so enticing in terms of the discussion of Smithson's writing is the very value that is attached to the abortive and defective nature of these texts as a representative process in itself. The 'failure' of the submitted poems to either correspond with Rivière's sense of publishable poetry, or with Artaud's physical struggle with the nature of his own 'thought', is that which informs and defines entirely the status and the operation of Artaud's 'texts'. The obvious 'anomaly' that so intrigues Blanchot and is so vital for this thesis' interest in Smithson's peculiar form of 'fiction-making', is the manner in which the text, the very

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[172] John Ashbery notes the significance of this marking out of Artaud's career. 'The essence of Artaud appears first in the letters.' See, 'Antonin Artaud: Poet, Actor, Director, Playwright', in *John Ashbery, Selected Prose*, ed. by Eugene Ritchie (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), p. 26.

[173] See *Artaud Anthology*, ed. by Jack Hirschman (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1965). Lawrence Ferlinghetti's publication of this Anthology in 1965 widened Artaud's posthumous audience in America and became a popular source book for many American artists at the time.

[174] *Ibid.*, p. 7.

[175] Maurice Blanchot, 'Artaud' in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. by Michael Holland, p. 130.

poems that generated the event in the first place, are dissolved as matter might be into their flawed correspondence.[176]

That the poems disappear within 'the account of the experience of their inadequacy', as Blanchot puts it, is an odd form of experience to say the least, one well removed from any notion of the 'unmediated'. As with 'The Spiral Jetty' text or the account of the mirror displacements in Mexico, at the centre of the attempt at correspondence is an absent material encounter; a lost economy or even, an economy of refusal which creates a space that can only operate according to the integrity of its failure.[177] It is not merely the internal or internalising narratives of *The Spiral Jetty* (entropy, failure and running out, which are in a sense most compatible with Artaud's thought: its futility and despair) that should be of most interest (or indeed disinterest) to the reader, but the *material of its artifice*, in this case, the peculiar nature of *The Spiral Jetty*'s non-correspondence.

In his letters, Artaud discovers that he is able to write towards the inadequacy of writing; operating in terms of a series of mistakes and misunderstandings, he is able to mediate (organise material in terms of) the dubious economy of mediation:

> The unrelatedness to the object which characterises all literature is in my case an unrelatedness to life.[178]

It should be noted that Artaud's investment in the unrelatedness of representation anticipates and reflects a tension at work in place theory that differentiates, initially, between the real and the unreal, but also, as in the work of Marc Augé, goes on to distinguish between what he describes as 'relational and unrelational space.' Augé's conception of place (and specifically, what he calls, non-place) is looked at more closely in chapter four and is meant to follow on from these discussions of correspondence and

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[176] Blanchot emphasises this point: 'Was Jacques Rivière aware of the anomaly here? Poems which he considers unworthy and inadequate for publication cease to be so when supplemented by the account of the experience of their inadequacy. As if what they lacked, their failing, became plenitude and consummation by virtue of the overt expression of that lack and the exploration of its necessity.' *Ibid.*, p. 129.

[177] *Ibid.*, pp. 134-5: 'There speaks here a suffering that refuses any depth, any illusions and any hope, but which, by that refusal, offers thought 'the ether of a new space'.'

[178] Antonin Artaud 'Correspondence with Jacques Rivière' in *Artaud Anthology*, ed. by Jack Hirschman, p. 20.

'relationality'. Augé has in mind actual places (the inherently concrete or material places identified by Smith and Katz as 'real') that are rendered unrelational, as Augé argues, by the commodifications of 'Supermodernity' and as such are characterised as non-places. Place, for Augé, is symbolic and relational, non-place is unrelational and non-symbolic. But, like Rose who criticises this kind of binary as in itself, unsustainable, Smithson (and, as will be shown, Jeff Wall), situates his mediatory artwork at the blurred boundaries within relationality by underlining the non-correspondence that characterises the operation of representation. It is in this non-correspondence that places are constructed. Indeed places exist in relation to one another materially *and* representationally, and moreover, they do so to the extent that representation is often the material of the relation (that is the relation that connects one place and another as well as within the construction of specific places). As such, it is significant in terms of this argument to note the way in which the substance of Artaud's poetic is discovered, through his failed correspondence with Rivière, to be in the unrelationality of representation.

Indeed, Artaud's sense of the 'unrelated' is, so to speak, 'Snarked' by Smithson in his witty (near) non-reference to Artaud in his piece 'A Cinematic Atopia':

> If we put together a film encyclopaedia in limbo, it would be quite groundless. Categories would destroy themselves, no law or plan would hold itself together for very long. There would be no table or contents for the Table of Contents. The index would slither away into so much cinematic slime. For example, I could make a film based on the A section of the index in *Film Culture Reader*. Each reference would consist of a thirty-minute take. Here is the list of the take in alphabetical order: Abstract Expressionism, Agee James, Alexandrov Grigory, Allen Lewis, Anger Kenneth, Antonioni Michelangelo, Aristarco Guido, Arnheim Rudolf, Artaud Antonin, Astruc Alexandre. Only the letter A gives this index its order. Where is the coherence? The logic threatens to wander out of control.[179]

Smithson, in terms of Artaud's non-correspondence, conceives of cinema as the explosion of the book (from the contents table or 'beginning' to the index or 'end'); as material in the form of the dematerialising. He, in a sense, suggests that mediation might in fact be the dematerialisation of experience. Smithson decides to correspond with

[179] Smithson, 'A cinematic Atopia', *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 140.

Artaud in terms of an *imaginary index* in order to dematerialise any possibility of the textual organisation and control of the mediated. As a *guide* there is this lengthy dictionary definition:

> Index *in'deks, n.* the forefinger (also in'dex'fing'er), or the digit corresponding: a pointer or hand on a dial or scale, etc.: a moving arm, as on a surveying instrument: the gnomon of a sun-dial: the finger of a finger-post: the figure of a pointing hand, used to draw attention (print): an alphabetical register of subjects dealt with, usu. at the end of a book, with page or folio references: a similar list of other things: a list of prohibited books: a symbol denoting a power (*math.*): a number, commonly a ratio, expressing some relation (as *cranial index*, the breadth of skull as a percentage of its length): a numerical scale showing the relative changes in the costs of living, wages, etc., with reference to some predetermined base level: *-pl.* of a book usu. in'dexes; other senses indices (*in' di-sĕz*). *–v.t.* to provide with or place in an index: to link to an index, index-link. –ns. Indexa'tion, in'dexing a system by which wages, rates of interest, etc. are directly linked (in'dex-linked') to changes in the cost of living index; in'dexer. *–adjs.* Index'ical; in'dexless. *–v.t.* in'dex=link'. –in'dex-link'ing indexation; index number a figure showing periodic movement up and down of a variable compared with another figure (usu. 100) taken as a standard. [L. *index, indecis-indicăre*, to show.][180]

Through the index, textual mediation is made material in the world as an economy of relations. As such, both Artaud and Smithson are bound by the necessary paradox of their materialism: their texts are organised around the absence or disappearance of experience, and yet there remains the unavoidable probability that the world may only exist within the artifice of its mediation. As if 'embodying' the economic contingency of this paradox, the index is a textual coordination. Other than the mode in which it operates, however, it is distinguished by being somewhat immaterial. In 'expressing some relation', in 'showing the relative changes', in its 'denotation', and in its 'pointing' the index constitutes a motor-function of reference and control.

The indices of the Bellman's map are useful in this context and are returned to again, for similar reasons, in the next chapter when it considers the spatial practices of Harry Mathews. For now it is important to ask: what, in relation to the indexical ploy of

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[180] *The Wordsworth Concise English Dictionary*, ed. by G. W. Davidson, M. A. Seaton and J. Simpson (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1994).

Smithson and Artaud, is the economy that the coordinates of the Bellman's map coordinate?

> 'What's the good of Mercator's North Poles and equators,
> Tropics, Zones and Meridian Lines?'
> So the Bellman would cry: and the crew would reply,
> 'They are merely conventional signs!'[181]

The textualisation of the world ('Mercator's projection' being the 'projecting of a spherical map of the earth on a flat rectangle so that the parallels and meridians become straight lines, and the poles become the rectangle's top and bottom edges') is thrown into doubt by a map. But the lack of correspondence between texts and its all too obviously physical anomaly is bridged, as the word 'bought' ('he bought a large map representing the sea') might suggest, economically. The value of the 'absolute blank', or in other words, the manner in which the crew 'buy' the Bellman's textual discrepancy, is not, however, embodied in the exchange of mediation but in the status of the non-correspondence (the map) as a hoax or decoy. The absolute blank is a decoy both in terms of the narrative, veiling the erotic purposive-ness of the Captain, and in terms of reception and the textual coordination of experience.

> That was charming, no doubt; but they shortly found out
> That the Captain they trusted so well
> Had only one notion for crossing the ocean,
> And that was to tingle his bell.[182]

The use of the word tingle (rather than tinkle) suggests a nervous sensitivity in terms of pursuing some form of direction. The map is the denial of this physical receptivity; and the deciphering of the text, to make one's way in the material world, is endowed with the formality of high economic principle – the correlation of progress, productivity and being. Unless it is an 'absolute blank', unless the material of the text (its exchange-value) is its indefinite inadequacy, unless its non-correspondence becomes the compass

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[181] Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark and other Lewis Carroll Verses* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 14.
[182] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

of its operations, Smithson appears to be suggesting, through this index of referencing as a textualisation of the field, that the material of mediation is the means by which the very 'logic' of its cultural economy might in turn be resisted.

The paradoxical position of this form of non-correspondence, whether positive or negative, is indeed productive. On the one hand, mediation is activated by these strategies as a space of opposition and refusal. On the other, the act of mediation is characteristic of a wider cultural economy – the matter (rather than 'manner') in which the world is organised. Smithson goes some way to exploit this paradox by positioning his textual material in opposition to the experience or 'materialisation' of his earthworks. Landscapes, like texts, Smithson appears to be saying, materialise in the matter of reading. The emphasis on reading is crucial. It highlights the difference between mediation and representation as it is discussed in chapter one as being a process of absence made present in which legibility signals a field of navigation and control, but also points forward to the discussions in the next chapter which focus more closely on the space of reading as a territory of production and creative potential in the experimental novels and short stories of Mathews. Perhaps this is why Smithson chooses to cite *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, a text which operates in terms of illegibility and the indecipherable, as a kind of guidebook for the paradoxical economy of mediation. Certainly, it underlines the scope of what is meant by representation and illuminates important connections that draw on the fields of literature and art as a mode of representational place-making. It also identifies Smithson's texts as an important bridge between these fields as they open up the poetic potential of a textual practice that constructs texts according to the pervasiveness of mediation and representation inherent within the actual or direct experience of everyday life.

As a final example, before moving on to the textual practices of Mathews, it is worth considering briefly Artaud's sense of 'fieldwork' because, as John Ashbery notes, 'his contempt for writing and his refusal to submit to it unconsciously are consequences of his will to create nothing less than reality itself – not literature about it.'[183] As such, Artaud's

[183] See *John Ashbery: Selected Prose*, p. 24.

fieldwork, if it can be so described, like Smithson's coordinates travel as writing; or more to the point, it coordinates travel as non-writing. To this end, Artaud often has Poe in mind:

> If Edgar Poe was found dead one morning in a gutter in Baltimore, it was not because of acute delirium tremens but because of a few bastards who hated his genius and wanted to squelch his poetry, and poisoned him to prevent his living and displaying the strange, horrifying magic potion that flows through his work.[184]

In 1936, Artaud travels to Mexico in order to experience the rituals, dance and peyote of the Tarahumaras. In Artaud's account of these travels (that come to light some time later and only out of the letters from Rodez) he recalls a 'land of signs', an ancient landscape cast in the form of a metaphysical language 'in which the human form is hunted down from every side.'[185] Artaud attempts to coordinate himself in reading the landscape of signs as if it is an index of his suffering. In ready expectation of the consequences Artaud endures a vast, punishing text, beyond his own invention and yet so particular in its brutality that it can only be constituted by the experience of its nature as mediated. The displacement is identifiably textual:

> Once on horseback they put my hands on the reins and in addition to that they had to close my fingers on the reins, for it was only too obvious that I had lost control; I had not conquered by spirit this invincible organic hostility, where it was *me* that did not want to continue, in order to bring back from it a collection of moth-eaten imagery, from which this Age, thus far faithful to a whole system, would at the very most get a few new ideas for posters and models for its fashion designers.[186]

As he participates in that by which he is determined, Artaud seems to have positioned himself in terms of a coalescing of landscapes that coordinate a challenge to the 'subject' of mediation and the textual construction of place. How, according to the visual landscape of 'this Age, thus far faithful to a whole system', is it possible to read the 'nature' (the 'moth-eaten imagery') of 'place' as a system which coordinates vision,

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[184] Quoted in Ashbery, *Ibid.*, p. 31.
[185] See Antonin Artaud, 'Concerning a Journey to the Land of the Tarahumaras', in *The Artaud Anthology*, ed. by Hirschman, p. 69.
[186] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

narrative and being in these disruptive moments of the mediated and the textual? Is it to work according to the terms of this displacement? Within his fictionalisation of 'nature' (that the world might be made theatrical in its mapping or that it is to some extent, staged) Smithson's writings appear to respond to this challenge.[187] Smithson shows that writing is the simultaneous making and unmaking of textual materiality. For Smithson, in line with Blanchot, to theorise writing as 'that which does not exist' is to say something regarding writing, reading, speech and experience. It is perhaps to say that writing is the 'correspondence' of all these things and yet is none of them. This aesthetic conundrum is perhaps an integral part, indeed the very function, of Smithson's thought; and thus accordingly, an encounter (the notion of experience and its communication as the 'purest form of representation') that can only be organised textually. What renders this process of organisation provocative however, are the terms of its failure – its failure both as correspondence *and* as encounter. For this reason the subsequent Artaudian non-correspondence and non-encounter characterise the textual nature of Smithson's entropic deposits and draw attention to a notion of textuality that has far reaching implications for the study of the novel and the construction of contemporary fiction; implications that are considered in more depth in the following chapter.

[187] From the 'point of view' of Smithson's designation of the 'artist', nature, as codified by the American landscape tradition and especially photography, is denaturalised because it can only occur within the means of its documentation. By the time Smithson gets to Yucatan, over a hundred years after Stephens, the full extent of nature's artificiality has been recognised. '"Nature" is simply another 18th and 19th Century fiction', Smithson writes in his 'A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art', *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, p. 85.

Chapter Three

Where the Country is: Harry Mathews and the Fiction of Space

> Nobody could make his way through even with a message from a dead man. But you sit at a window as evening falls and dream it to yourself.
>
> (Franz Kafka, 'The Great Wall of China')

Most introductions to the work of Harry Mathews begin by acknowledging that Mathews is the only American member of Oulipo. Set up in Paris in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and Francois Le Lionnais, the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle (Workshop for Potential Literature) is committed to the ways in which formalist principles of mathematics can be applied to literature as a means of generating the potential for original writing.[188] Mathews is made a member of the group on the same day as Italo Calvino: Valentines Day 1969. He has remained a member ever since. Restating that Mathews is a member of the group each time he is introduced is in a sense an attempt to define the cultural location of novels such as *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, short stories such as 'Their Words for You' and books of poems such as *Armenian Papers*, as being beyond the boundary of American cultural orthodoxy. This seems to be part of the continuous rehearsal of the coordinates of contemporary American fiction. The otherwise invisible lines of the territory are drawn in order to establish the notion that Mathews's work is immediately 'elsewhere'.

Mathews has, since 1956, lived much of his life in Paris (he has indeed lived in numerous places). In enduring this somewhat self-imposed literary exile, he shares much in common with a rather well-established Modernist tradition of American writers abroad.

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[188] The principle of potentiality is important to the conception of the Oulipo: 'A Parenthetical point: the Oulipo is not a literary school. It is not even concerned with the production of literary works. It is first and last a laboratory where, through experiment and erudition, possibilities of writing under arbitrary and severe restrictions are investigated. The use of these possibilities is the business of individual writers, Oulipian or not.' Mathews, 'Translation and the Oulipo' in Harry Mathews, *The Case of the Persevering Maltese: Collected Essays* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), p. 79.

Yet the imaginary dislocations that characterise Mathews' work, as will be shown, seem to suggest that travel is also associated with traversing literary zones between the imaginary and the material. Since 1991 Mathews has lived in Key West in Florida, literally (and perhaps too conveniently, metaphorically) at the very outskirts of the American boundary. While these biographical notes may to some extent appear secondary they are important in terms of the chronological development of the conceptual considerations raised by Robert Smithson's writing in the previous chapter. Mathews' 'elsewhere' status is indicative of an inherently conceptual approach to writing that, arguably, has more in common with the practices of visual art than other standard conceptions of writing at the time. Smithson's preoccupation with the inbuilt oppositions of a textually constructed world is fully played out in the novel strategies of Mathews' fiction. The mediated refractions of an authorial point of view are often his primary subject. As such, this chapter will turn from the field of Smithson's 'anti-vision' to that of the novel and the short story, as it is after all with fiction and perhaps 'nowhere else [that we] are... so conscious of the dissidence between inherited forms and our own reality.'[189] For Mathews, as with Smithson, this dissidence is in many ways the space of writing itself.

Much of the early part of this chapter looks at the work of Mathews through the lens of other writers. This term 'other writers' is less unfortunate than it might at first appear; it means to refer principally to the work of writers Mathews has had some form of relationship with. This relatedness, whether personal, textual or both is an important aspect of any conceptual approach to writing that intends to discover and map the essentially doubtful and changeable qualities of language and communication. Through his relationships with other writers (translating the work, for instance, of Georges Perec), Mathews has developed certain theories of translation. Translation relates explicitly to questions of language, space and textuality and is focused on in this chapter in order to illuminate further aspects of the discussion of place in this thesis. To the same extent that Mathews' work is considered that of a writer, it should equally be considered the work of a reader and a translator.

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[189] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 130.

Space

Mathews is introduced to the Oulipo in Paris by his friend Georges Perec. Perec exerts a profound influence on Mathews. His inventive but resolutely formalist game-playing affirms the American's understanding of his craft as an attempt 'to re-imagine and reinvent the act of writing itself.'[190] Perec is perhaps best known for his novel *Life A User's Manual.* The standard English translation of *Life A User's Manual,* by David Bellos and published in 1987, includes two chapters translated by Mathews originally for the magazines *Grand Street* and *Fiction International.*[191] Perec has also translated much of Mathews' work into French, and the two enjoy a relationship of inter-textual sharing and exchange. The immediate experience of everyday life is an ineluctable preoccupation in Perec's work and it is perhaps Perec's unique sense of space that most affects Mathews. Both writers appear to be concerned with the ways in which writing can be used as a spatial practice. Perec, in particular, feels a deep-seated anxiety with regards to space and many of his conceptual techniques are symptomatic of an era preoccupied with re-evaluating just how the lived-spaces of experience come to be.[192]

> I would like there to exist places that are stable, unmoving, intangible, untouched and almost untouchable, unchanging, deep-rooted; places that might be points of reference, of departure, of origin... Such places don't exist, and it's because they don't exist that space becomes a question, ceases to be self-evident, ceases to be incorporated, ceases to be appropriated. Space is a doubt: I have constantly to mark it, to designate it. It's never mine, never given to me, I have to conquer it.[193]

Perec's father is lost at war. His mother exterminated. 'Perec once said he had been deprived not only of his mother and father but of their deaths. They had been taken away from him behind his back.'[194] An unresolved emptiness comes to characterise life and its objects. As a consequence space and loss (or space and death) are often synonymous in

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[190] Mathews 'Georges Perec' in *The Case of the Persevering Maltese: Collected Essays*, p. 270.
[191] *Grand Street* (Fall 1983); *Fiction International* (1985).
[192] 'Perec was the offspring of one of the greatest disasters in history... It was in reacting to the personal consequences of this disaster that Perec discovered his originality. Deprived of a family and a community he could call his own, he found in literature a medium where he could literally recreate his origins.' Mathews, 'George Perec' in *The Case of the Perservering Maltese*, p. 270.
[193] Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces*, trans. by John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 91.
[194] Mathews. 'That Ephemeral Thing', in *The Case of the Persevering Maltese*, p. 286.

his work. *Life a User's Manual*, in its final moments, is a studious inventory of all that appears to be happening in every room of a Parisian tenement house at the precise moment of the principal character's death. Spaces are made precious precisely because of what they fail to contain. 'My spaces are fragile: time is going to wear them away, to destroy them.'[195] To write is in a sense to reoccupy this unmarked territory so that space comes to characterise both the emptiness and the potential of writing. 'This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page.'[196] As with Smithson, space is for Perec an Artaudian dilemma of media and support: the nowhere of *inscribing* oneself. In order to overcome the thematic and emotional difficulty of space, space becomes a strategy.

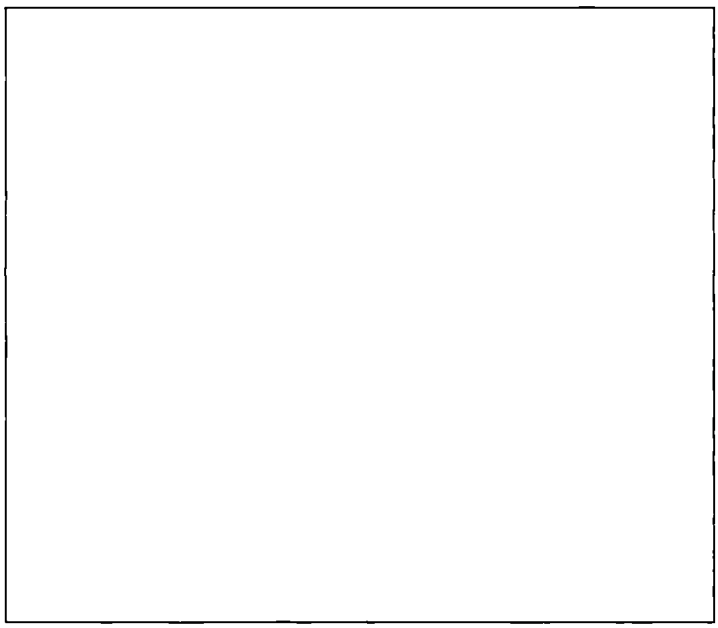

Fig. 3.1: Map of the Ocean
(taken from Lewis Carroll's *Hunting of the Snark*)

Perec's version of the Bellman's map as it appears in *Species of Spaces* is indicative of this association between writing, space and place. The non-correspondence of representation, its inherent emptiness, leads to a theory of description that moves through the absence now present in the text. For Artaud, this is impossible. In his correspondence with Rivière the poems, which act as the very material of representation,

[195] Perec, *Ibid.*, p. 91.
[196] Perec, *Ibid.*, p. 13.

have to de-materialise in order to assert any value, 'the few things that I have managed to submit to you being the shreds that I have managed to snatch from complete nothingness.' In contrast, the calliper's support torn and burned by Artaud is for Perec a site of passing through:[197]

> At one time or another, almost everything passes through a sheet of paper, the page of a notebook, or a diary, or some other chance support... on which... one or another of the miscellaneous elements that comprise the everydayness of life comes to be inscribed.[198]

The map as an 'Absolute Blank' may suggest itself as being a grand metaphor for placelessness. But it can do so only in becoming a metaphorical process defined by the profound association of nothingness and locality. Unlike Smithson's quotation (as shown in chapter two), Perec's version of the map is stripped of the Bellman's coordinates; the Longitude and Latitude that define the function as well as frame the necessity of the map are gone. Without these, its necessity is less obvious and the map is again a blank page rather than a blank space on a page. The entirety of the blankness, for the reasons noted above, was no doubt important to Perec (a blank is after all not the same as nothing); and perhaps more importantly, the location that the map would normally represent or exist in correspondence with awaits the creative act that is in fact its location. According to the dimensions of absence – paper and its regulations – life is inscribed. Events take place according to how they are described and they are described according to how they are read.

Mathews translates chapters twenty-seven and seventy-four of *Life A User's Manual*. Chapter twenty-seven immediately follows the pivotal chapter of the novel in which the reader comes 'to grasp more precisely what was in Barthelbooth's mind.'[199] Within the

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[197] This may be considered something of a 'French anxiety' beginning with Stéphane Mallarmé: 'The paper intervenes each time an image, of its own accord, ceases or withdraws, accepting the succession of others; and, as it is not a question, as it usually is, of regular sound patterns or verses but rather of prismatic subdivisions of the Idea, at the instant they appear and for the duration of their occurrence in some exact mental setting, the text imposes itself, variably, near or far from the latent guiding thread, for the sake of verisimilitude.' 'Preface' to *Un Coup de Dés* see Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, trans. by Henry Weinfield (Berkley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press), 1996.

[198] Perec, *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[199] Georges Perec, *Life A User's Manual*, trans. by David Bellos (London: Collins Harvill, 1987), p. 117.

crowd of names and stories that populate *Life: A User's Manual* the focus of its narrative rests with three of the apartment building's occupants: Gaspard Winckler, Serge Valène and Percival Barthelbooth. The three are connected according to Barthelbooth's life-project of completing 500 watercolours (under the tuition of Valène) of seascapes from around the world. These are to be turned into jigsaw puzzles (by Winkler) so as to be reassembled by the returned traveller at his Parisian home before the completed puzzles are finally "retexturised" back onto their original support and 'dipped in a detergent solution whence would emerge a clean and unmarked sheet of Whatman paper.' 'Thus no trace would remain of an operation that would have been, throughout a period of fifty years, the sole motivation and unique activity of its author.'[200] But the trace becomes the failure to complete the project. Barthelbooth dies fixing the final piece of a puzzle into place and Winkler's death is where the novel begins. The deaths of the two men frame the blank moment and define the theory of its description: the intensely paradoxical dilemma of the nothingness and simultaneously locatedness of space.

The chapters that Mathews translates are both concerned ultimately with the very material of description and the strategies of space that give way to it. In chapter seventy-four, the second chapter used to address the apartment building's lift machinery, an unknown protagonist is enthralled by the imaginary lands signalled but otherwise hidden by the promise of descending into the unknown depths of an abyss beneath the everyday lives of the building's protagonists. 'Sometimes he imagined the building as an iceberg whose visible tip included the main floors and eaves and whose submerged mass began below the first level of cellars...'[201] The miniature *Divine Comedy* is a diabolical list that threatens to spiral out of control as it descends lower and lower into the 'submerged mass'. The list seems to pass through descriptions of the various layers of industrial progress that have since become sediment in the urban imagination; until, in a penultimate gesture before reaching, 'at the very bottom, a world of caverns whose walls are black with soot, a world of cesspools and sloughs, a world of grubs and beasts', the

[200] *Ibid.*, p. 119.
[201] *Ibid.*, p. 358.

reader passes through 'the quarter of government offices'[202]. Again it is a space defined by writing, or at least writing and its erasure:

> ...its machine room full of crackling telexes and computers that spew forth by the second reams of statistics, payrolls, inventories, balance sheets, receipts, and no-information statements, its paper-shredders and incinerators endlessly devouring quantities of out of date forms, brown folders stuffed with press clippings, account books bound in black linen with pages covered in delicate violet handwriting...[203]

Chapter twenty-seven is equally concerned with the seemingly inherent tension between the space of description and the space of erasure. It documents the misfortunes of a now absent Italian family by tracing the history of a small pen and ink drawing done by Valène at the request of the apartment's then inhabitant, Emilio Grifalconi. The picture is commissioned once Grifalconi discovers his wife is in love with a man who has lived in the apartment building but has since been sent to convalesce in the mountains. The picture is a denial of this rupture, and Valène, like Baudelaire's appraisal of Constantin Guys discussed in chapter one of this thesis, has to paint, not from life but from Grifalconi's instruction: a 'translation of a translation'. 'He wanted the painter to portray him in the company of his wife and two children. The four of them would be in the dining room. He would be seated; she would be standing behind him in her black skirt and flowered blouse, her left hand resting on his left shoulder in a gesture of serene trust.'[204] This is the second description of Grifalconi's scene of desire. The chapter begins with an almost mirror-like original, except there it is a suspended element, a space of its own so that the chapter develops from within as if it were a series of rooms within rooms: 'It suggests some kind of petrified memory, like a Magritte painting in which stone may have come to life or life been turned to stone, some kind of image indelibly fixed for all time.'[205] But of course it is the imagining of a memory that has been fixed for all time. Samuel Beckett makes this point in his discussion of Proust: 'There is no great difference says Proust, between the memory of a dream and the memory of

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[202] *Ibid.*, p. 361.
[203] *Ibid.*, p. 360-1.
[204] *Ibid.*, p. 121-2
[205] *Ibid.*, p. 119.

reality.'[206] Yet the factual tone of the description fails to deny the doubtfulness of Perec's conception of space.

Underlining the role of Mathews as a translator is intended to act as an introduction to a conception of writing that has continuously considered reading to be a profound act of production. In translation, reader and writer are in many ways synonymous and Mathews has sought to define writing as a spatial practice that endeavours to locate, in reading, a space of creativity. *Life A User's Manual* is made up in this way of vignettes of minor historical importance attempting to put the spaces of human lives into a living context. For Perec, as for Bachelard, the living context of space is an interchangeable pattern of presence and absence; and like Grifalconi's drawing becoming a room within a room, the space of the novel reflects a very profound sense of the relationship between author and reader. The absence made present that defines Breton's conception of *Nadja* and its position within the Surrealist 'reportage' of everyday experience, as discussed in chapter one, is reflected in Mathews' role as translator. The artistry of translation demands that Mathews is first and foremost a reader of Perec's work. One authorial voice then mediates for another across languages and reassigns the traditional position of the reader as that of a producer of original (in this case English) texts. As will be shown, translation involves a complicated notion of local vernacular that remains increasingly vital in the development of Mathews' work.

Strategies: Reader as Participant

In an address given at Queens College in New York in 1982 Mathews concerns himself with 'the question of how to participate with your reader' and makes explicit the connection between space and translation.[207] The subject 'remains an urgent one' because the accepted relationship between author and reader is only ever an 'intuitive notion that the writer is "saying something" to the reader.'[208] Perec's located nothingness is important here. Saying nothing is never what it means; nothing should fail to be

[206] Beckett, *Proust* (London: John Calder, 1999), p. 33.
[207] Mathews, 'For Prizewinners', *The Review of Contemporary Fiction: Harry Mathews Number* 7.3 (1987), p. 9. Reprinted in Mathews, *The Case of the Persevering Maltese*, p. 3-20.
[208] *Ibid.* p. 9.

considered, as proposed by Artaud, as a lack or the absence of material. 'The writer cannot content himself... with providing something – he cannot provide "things" at all... If providing somethings will not do, the writer must provide nothings.'[209] Mathews has a specific purpose in mind and it is this purpose that makes the nothing he describes here so valuable to him:

> The nothingness the writer offers the reader opens up space – a space that acknowledges that the reader, not the writer, is the sole creator. Providing emptiness, leaving things out, gives the reader exactly the space he needs to perform his act of creation.[210]

What exactly this act of creation entails is more difficult to define as the creativity can be challenging. Reading work by Mathews is not always a simple affair. The purpose is to undermine the 'intuitive' sense of reception few are actually born with and to expose the typically desultory effects of a given society's customary codes of communication. For Perec, fiction was where life expanded even as it was condensed. The two descriptions that frame Mathews' translation of chapter twenty-seven of *Life A User's Manual* are identical in that the second returns to the reader what he or she already knows about Grifalconi's picture, but the description, while infinitely broader in implication is much shorter, with less visual detail, it is entirely emotional. In the first description the reader learns 'the man is sitting down' and 'the woman stands behind him'. It is given presentness, the quality of something witnessed in an actual moment. The second shifts its perspective in two ways. Firstly, it is what *will be* in the picture, according to Grifalconi's instruction, it is yet to exist and so no longer a part of the present. Secondly, Grifalconi's wife, Laetizia, is repositioned in a minute but again expanding way. 'She would be standing behind him... her left hand on his left shoulder in a gesture of serene trust.' The left hand on the left shoulder puts her directly behind him, whereas the near-intuitive assumption in the original is that she is behind but slightly to one side with only 'her left arm on his shoulder'. Of course, Valène may have reinterpreted the instruction, but it appears too direct. Even so, any such doubt surrounding the finished work defers itself to the 'emptiness' Mathews believes the writer should indeed provide the reader.

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[209] *Ibid.*, p13.
[210] *Ibid.*, p13-4.

The space has become rooms within rooms; even as on the page it has condensed, a field of meaning has opened up. By the time of the second description the reader understands the significance of Grifalconi's fabrication and every gesture is now unbearably loaded. The 'double left' of the second description means that the space has, literally, shifted. The reader, still a reader, is also viewer and re-creator.

The discussion of artistic practices in chapters one and two opens up the importance of Mathews' participatory approach. Smithson perceived vital parallels between the traditional conceptions of readership and viewing audiences. The point of view Smithson attempted to inhabit was inherently unstable because its point of production and its point of reception were indivisible. For Smithson, source material was defined by its sourcelessness and informed his writing in ways that can be brought to bear on the current interpretation and understanding of literary and aesthetic works such as Mathews' that attempt to distort further the impression that a fixed sense of production and reception inform a fixed sense of locatedness and place. Grifalconi's picture is constructed not from its material appearance but from two descriptions that do not match their source; it is made manifest by the quality (or inequality) of its fiction. Rather than the picture, its description appears to be a source material in itself, the source of an unspecified production. As will be shown, Mathews demonstrates a preoccupation with another paradigm of reception and production: the relationship between textual translation and its source material. All acts of language are, in a sense, acts of translation, though the variations in this rule (for instance the difference between speech and writing) should not go unnoticed. Translation, in the work of Mathews, incorporates very similar operations and as such is very much part of a spatial practice in writing that distorts the given distinctions of production and reception.

'Translation is the Paradigm'

In his address to the audience at Queen's College, 'For Prizewinners', Mathews demonstrates the condensed expansiveness of what he thinks should be meant by the term 'translation'. He presents his audience with a short story by Franz Kafka, 'The Truth about Sancho Panza'. The well-known story, no more than a paragraph, is less than ten

lines long and is introduced by Mathews as a 'complete and unabridged work by a modern master'. The story is read aloud in full.[211] It is worth noting that Kafka's two sentences reverse the process of literary production. Cervantes, no longer the creator of original characters, plots or settings, is nullified as his invention, Sancho Panza, is identified as the sole creator of the quixotic hero who then leads him on 'a great and edifying entertainment to the end of his days.' In Kafka's very short rewriting of a very long work of fiction, Don Quixote is an invention of the dutiful and sceptical imagination of his servant, Sancho Panza. The chivalrous romantic is a figure of necessity, keeping the everyman from the otherwise harmful pursuits of life lived in the real world and 'in so diverting from himself his demon, whom he later called Don Quixote.' Mathews notes all this and underlines Kafka's comment on 'realistic' fiction implicit in the text. While not describing the features of 'the most oppressive aspects of reality' as they appear in the world, Kafka has chosen instead to describe the 'realistic' motivations of the creative imagination. Sancho Panza's self-deception is the source of an expansive history of representation. If the reader is to take Kafka's proposition seriously, it is perhaps at the heart of all fiction and defines the history of the novel.

Rather than despairing, Mathews is encouraged. He reads his two 'translations' of Kafka's text. The first is an attempt to preserve 'the vocabulary and the phrasing' in order to better express the meaning of the original. Taking into account Kafka's lopsided prose, Mathews entertains the role of the translator as that of someone employed to edit the disproportions of writing in order to better 'translate' meaning. The two sentences, the first of which is long and meandering, the second much shorter, are reintegrated as five of equal length. It is almost as if the translator is expected to attempt to sew the text into the fabric of his or her destination language. The second translation has kept the two sentences intact but has employed the Oulipian method of N + 7. Both are worth quoting in full:

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[211] Without making any boast of it Sancho Panza succeeded in the course of years, by feeding him a great number of romances of chivalry in the evening and night hours, in so diverting from himself his demon, whom he later called Don Quixote, that this demon thereupon set out, uninhibited, on the maddest exploits, which, however, for lack of a preordained object, which should have been Sancho Panza himself, harmed nobody. A free man, Sancho Panza philosophically followed Don Quixote on his crusades, perhaps out of a sense of responsibility, and had of them a great and edifying entertainment to the end of his days.

> Without making any boast of it, Sancho Panza succeeded in diverting his demon from himself – the demon he later called Don Quixote. What he did was feed him a great number of romances of chivalry and adventure in the evening and night hours. As a result, this demon set out, uninhibited, on the maddest exploits; but since they lacked a pre-ordained object, which should have been Sancho Panza himself, they harmed nobody. Sancho Panza thus became a free man. Perhaps out of a sense of responsibility, he philosophically followed Don Quixote on his crusades and had of them a great and edifying entertainment to the end of his days.
>
> "The Tub about Sancho Panza"
>
> Without making any bobbin of it Sancho Panza succeeded in the courtship of yellowness, by feeding him a great numskull of romantics of chloroform and advertisement in the evil and nil housings, in so diverting from himself his demonstrative, whom he later called Don Quixote, that this demonstrative thereupon set out, uninhibited, on the maddest exports, which, however, for lack of a preordained objurgation, which should have been Sancho Panza himself, harmed nobody. A free manager, Sancho Panza philosophically followed Don Quixote on his cruxes, perhaps out of a sensitiveness of restaurants, and had of them a great and edifying enticement to the endlessness of his dead.[212]

N + 7 (or S + 7) was invented by Jean Lescure for the Oulipo.[213] The rule specifies that a text should be rewritten replacing every noun for the noun seven entries on as it is found in a dictionary. The proposition here is that rather than producing gobbledegook the rule induces a text that elaborates on the sense of the original. Mathews, as proof, reads both translations back to the audience. He then reads them again. Even though the first translation maintains the 'sense' of the original, the shifting of the syntactical structure has a more profound and ultimately damaging impact on its meaning than first thought. The second assumes meta-proportions and becomes an inventive 'commentary' on Kafka's story. It is both erudite and truthful: 'Calling one's demon a "demonstrative" fits – our demons, alas, compel us to demonstrate ourselves' etc.[214] The performance, he hopes, produces two unexpected developments.

> The first translation is growing steadily more boring; the second translation is making more and more sense... Little by little, the "meaningless" second

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[212] Mathews, 'For Prizewinners' from version reprinted in Mathews, *The Case of the Persevering Maltese*, p. 16.
[213] See *Oulipo Compendium*, ed. by Harry Mathews and Alastair Brotchie (London: Atlas Press, 1998), entry for N + 7.
[214] 'For Prizewinners', *The Case of the Persevering Maltese*, p. 17.

> translation is accumulating an appearance of meaning. I suggest that this is no accident, and that the meaning of the second translation has its source in the original.[215]

Of course, by pointing this out, Mathews is drawing attention to the anomalous relationship of 'source' and 'original' as well as 'sense' and 'meaning'. The original he is referring to is the ('exquisitely preserved') translation into English of Willa and Edwin Muir and not the 'other original' penned by Kafka in German. The source of meaning may be further displaced and is bound up in Kafka's complicated sense of myth and identity. In his reading of Cervantes the authorial perspective has become a reversed process of creation. Kafka has translated *Don Quixote* in order to prove that it is a novel Cervantes translated from the original – that by Sancho Panza. Sancho Panza, himself a fiction, is the 'manager' or harbinger of a much greater fiction, that is to say Kafka's experience of representation lived through the work of an enigmatic Sixteenth Century Spaniard.[216] Added to this is the 'source' disposition of Kafka's personal relationship to language: German being his written (and spoken) 'official language' and not that of either Hebrew or Czech.

In his short story 'Franz Kafka in Riga', Mathews further exploits the locale of Kafka's predicament in language.[217] As the story begins it appears to be simply the protagonist's account of his travels in Riga. On the high walls of the original fortifications of Latvia's capital city, the narrator is suddenly seized by a fit of vertigo. Intending to enjoy the view he is forced to crawl, insect-like and in a degrading manner, along the ramparts fearing for his life as a strong wind threatens to whip away his cap. Halfway through the story the reader is suddenly presented with an exact replica of this account. A friend has shown the protagonist a passage in Kafka's notes. Kafka, it appears, also went to Riga. His account is identical except for one difference. Rather than fearing for the loss of his 'cap' (as well as his life), the narrator describes fearing for the loss of his 'hat'.

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[215] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[216] 'Cervantes was almost certainly born in 1547' though the first part of *Don Quixote* was published in 1605, see the author's note to Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *The Ingenious Hidalgo Don Quixote de la Mancha*, trans. by John Rutherford (London: Penguin, 2000).

[217] This short story first appeared in Harry Mathews, *The American Experience* (New York: Atlas Press, 1991). All quotes taken from Harry Mathews, *The Human Country: New and Collected Short Stories*, (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2002).

Mathews' narrator is angered by the discovery and makes direct reference to this vernacular anomaly:

> I was angry that Kafka had rendered this experience with such unaccountable inaccuracy. In saying this, I am not referring to his hat, which had nothing to do with my feelings; or at least, nothing particular.[218]

The narrator makes direct reference to the anomaly, of course, by 'not referring' to it. And by saying that it has 'nothing to do' with his feelings is of course proof that it has everything to do with the 'unaccountable inaccuracy' that has so aggravated him. He, after all, chose to write it down, to make it plain, as it were, as part of an inter-generational and inter-linguistic plagiarism. Kafka's 'unaccountable inaccuracy' even as he had produced a description that is identical to the protagonist's, is thus centred on the word 'hat'. The word 'hat', rather than 'cap' has everything to do with the protagonist's feelings. The truth has been distorted. If it had been the account of a genuine witness, the words of an American abroad, he would have used the word 'cap'. Cap and hat, do not carry the same meaning. They are opposites; so much so, in fact, that the 'original' passage no longer makes any sense. The act of translation activates a special form of local vernacular.

Mathews' story is perhaps alluding to the same idiomatic idiosyncrasies of location that plagued Kafka's imagination. For Kafka, as for Mathews, 'translation is the paradigm, the exemplar of all writing'.[219] Those who lived in the Jewish ghetto in Prague where Kafka was raised spoke German, the official language of the Hapsburg Empire. It alienated Kafka from Czech speakers and also from the practising orthodox community that spoke Hebrew, a language he only learned later in life. Still, Kafka's relationship with a language perceived as being that of an elite cultural authority is complicated. Master and servant are two symbols at either end of a spectrum of fatigue for Kafka. Writing and experience involve continuous and almost sub-cultural translation. In his diaries, for instance, Kafka often alludes to Goethe and the limitations of a German prose-style wedded to the traditions of its 'master'. The force of Goethe's style fails to

[218] 'Kafka in Riga' in *The Human Country*, p. 113.
[219] From Mathews' short story, 'The Dialect of the Tribe' in *The Human Country*, p. 7.

make sense in terms of the intrinsic uncertainty that Kafka suffers. Translation as intrinsic or instinctive as it is in his writing is a form of continuous confusion and anxiety as both the source and destination of language distort and blur continuously. His often admiring analysis of Goethe appeals for a local vernacular that is lacking in the older writer's 'official' use of German:

> Goethe probably retards the development of the German language by the force of his writing. Even though [German] prose style has often travelled away from him... it returns with strengthened yearning and even adopts obsolete idioms found in Goethe but otherwise without any particular connexion.[220]

Mathews recognises this appeal to an idiom that connects with his own experience in the structure or syntax of Kafka's story (or 'translation'), 'The Truth about Sancho Panza'. 'I claim that the essential meaning of the story is produced by the contrast between the long, complex, almost teeteringly clumsy first sentence... and the short, forthright, satisfyingly balanced concluding sentence.'[221] This is important in terms of the relationship between writing and space. Kafka's syntax provides a form of space-making, a space in which the author substantiates 'the moment in which confusion gives way to clarity.'[222] It is undoubtedly a participatory moment; this is, after all, what Mathews' exercise in translation endeavoured to prove. The 'moment of discovery' is as much an act of reading as it is that of authorial creation. In the first instance, Kafka the author is Cervantes' reader who is Sancho Panza's reader and so on. From this point of view syntax is a form of space-making, the structure of a spatial practice, through and in which reader and writer are able to make unexpected discoveries: namely, that the two (reading and writing) are not opposites. The invention need never cease. As Mathews observes, 'here, as so often in Kafka, the nominal sense of the words gives only indirect clues as to what is really going on. Syntax and syntax alone delivers the goods.'[223] This is because

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[220] Kafka in *The Diaries of Franz Kafka*, ed. by Max Brod; trans. Joseph Kresch, Martin Greenberg and Hannah Arendt (London: Penguin, 1969), p. 152.
[221] 'For Prizewinners', *The Case of the Persevering Maltese*, p. 18.
[222] *Ibid.*, p. 18.
[223] *Ibid.*, p19. On this point, Walter Benjamin (who also shares an affinity with Kafka) is equally adamant: 'A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may

syntax provides the reader (as it does the writer) with a role that is not fixed by the simple binary: reception, on the one hand, as opposed to production on the other.

Source and Destination

The spontaneity and discovery of this spatial practice are complicated further by the seemingly contradictory Oulipian appetite for constraint. Making space in the syntactical games of 'Potential literature' is a question of 'uncertain possibility':

> Since the first reader is the writer herself, a truth-telling writer has to create the possibility of not yet knowing what the truth is, of not yet knowing what he or she is going to say. Non-writing artists seem to grasp this easily. Francis Bacon described his painting as "accident engendering accident".[224]

This sense of syntax, translation and uncertain possibility creates two initially contradictory outcomes. It establishes a spatial practice that provides what Mathews calls a 'home ground', a space in and through which the kind of connection Kafka finds wanting in Goethe's German is made available. At the same time, the kind of formal constraint that leads to Perec, for example, writing an entire novel without the letter e, while it might appear to 'discourage the kind of self-generating activity' of Francis Bacon's painting, 'guarantees that the unforeseen will happen and keep happening. It keeps us out of control.'[225]

Mathews uses the term 'home-ground' in his essay 'Translation and the Oulipo' in order to demonstrate the ways in which a 'destination' language becomes a terrain of shifting perspective thanks to the operation of the translator.[226] As a translator Mathews defines the act of reading as a way of generating his own authorial position within the work. The source text is first translated into the everyday, into the familiar, what he calls: 'late-

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be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator.' See 'The Task of the Translator', in *Illuminations*, p. 79.

[224] Mathews, 'Translation and the Oulipo' in *The Case of the Persevering Maltese*, p. 76.

[225] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

[226] 'When I translate, I begin by studying the original text until I understand it thoroughly. Then, knowing that I can say anything I understand, no matter how awkwardly, I say what I have now understood and write down my words. I imagine myself talking to a friend across the table to make sure the words I use are ones I naturally speak... Instead of being stuck in the source language, I am standing firmly on home ground.' 'Translation and the Oulipo', in *The Case of the Persevering Maltese*, pp. 77-8.

Twentieth-Century American vernacular'.[227] The opening sentence of Proust's *Swann's Way*, for instance, becomes: 'When I was a kid, it took me years to get my parents to let me even stay up till *nine*.' This is the 'home-ground', but rather than a site of certainty it is a point of critical abstraction. The translator can then move toward the foreign text from a new source as a returning tourist. In doing so, the translator re-maps the landscape of her 'native-English' as she goes. In this way, making one's self at home stands in for the given cultural assumptions attributed to 'home'. Mathews' allusion to painting is helpful here.

A 'home-ground' is then more concurrent with keeping things out of control than perhaps first thought. *A Void* (*La Disparation*) is perhaps the most famous occasion of constraint in modern literature, and yet, as Mathews argues, Perec adopts the rule (omitting the letter e from his alphabet) in order to achieve the necessary freedom he requires in order to create 'a vivid replica of his own plight – the orphaned state that had previously left him paralysed as a writer.'[228] Perec's desire for places that are fixed even as space is by definition a matter of doubt and uncertainty characterises the locatedness of absent experiences while provoking a strange local vernacular that renders the constraint or regulation something inherently 'out of control'. The novel's protagonists must speak in an entirely new and often unreasonable way. Sense, at the mercy of a degenerating logic, is profoundly deregulated according to the unknowable meaning of regulation and control. In one scene, a barman drops dead for fear of using the word 'egg' or, more to the point, 'oeuf'. Everyday communication signals an elaborate scheme of denial, omission and fabrication. So much so that normality becomes a continuous act of vernacular translation.

> Things may look normal and natural and logical, but a word is a faux-naif talisman, a structurally unsound platform from which to sound off, as a world of total and horrifying chaos will soon start to show through its sonorous inanity... A gap will yawn, achingly, day-by-day, it will turn into... a gradual invasion of

[227] *Ibid.*, p. 78.

[228] *Ibid.*, p. 81. *A Void* appropriates the formulae and plot techniques of the detective genre so that mystery reinforces mystery as one after another the central characters disappear, each too readily associated with the unspeakable absence of the central missing 'character'. As things disappear the value of their presence is intensified; things can assume a material quality denied or overlooked while merely apparent.

> words by margins, blank and insignificant, so that all of us, to a man, will find nothing to say.[229]

'Pan': its Usage and Abusage

The manner in which normality is defined by a continuous act of vernacular translation is played out in full in Mathews' novel *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*. First published in 1971, the novel is composed of a series of letters between the married couple Zachary McCaltrex, a librarian in Miami, and Twang Panattapam, a citizen of the imaginary South-East Asian country Pan-Nam. In essence the novel is the setting for an elaborate treasure hunt. While Twang burrows into archives in Italy, Zachary hunts for clues in and around Miami. Conducting the hunt from different continents becomes increasingly perilous and absurd as miscommunication and indirection are compounded by the various interests of international conduits of power endeavouring to beat them to the gold. Twang's peculiar hybrid English makes special demands on her correspondent, and on the reader: 'To raed this has need, not idees but a tenshn (to-trans-late of Twang),' as she explains in her first epistle.[230] The narrative is then generated by the precarious double movement of Zachary's interpretation of Twang's letters and the reader's continuous reinterpretation of Zachary's original and often distorted attempts. As such the narrative is defined by an incredible instability that communicates the inherent difficulty and limitations of what is usually meant by 'communication'.

The epistolary form of *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium* develops a theory of language defined by translation, movement and local authority. Rather than the more immediate difficulties – time, space and language – Twang discovers, half-way through the book, the true nature of their problem: the reader; or more to the point, her various

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[229] George Perec, *A Void*, trans. by Gilbert Adair (London: The Harvill Press, 1995), p. 16.

[230] Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odredek Stadium* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1999), p. 6. The 'odradek' is an imaginary object in Kafka's story 'The Cares of a Family Man'. The Odradek will again be discussed in the next chapter as part of another cultural quotation in the photography of Jeff Wall. For now, it is worth noting that the Odradek is principally a problem of translation; the proper noun is the relic of a certain idiomatic confusion: 'Some say the word Odradek is of Slavonic origin, and try to account for it on that basis. Others again believe it to be of German origin, only influenced by Slavonic. The uncertainty of both interpretations allows one to assume with justice that neither is accurate, especially as neither of them provides an intelligent meaning of the word.' ('The Cares of a Family Man', in Franz Kafka, *The Collected Short Stories of Franz Kafka*, trans. by Willa & Edwin Muir (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 427-8).

readers. She attempts to warn Zachary, in a secret letter, that their correspondence regarding the treasure is being intercepted and spied upon by those representing clandestine local authorities: 'For I know, since the middle november, the letters to you are be open.'[231] In this letter, which fails due to 'insufficient postage' to reach its target, Twang instructs Zachary to use code words in the next letter that will signal whether or not it is safe for her to travel to Miami. Zachary doesn't receive this letter, and out of frustration decides to go to Rome. Twang assumes his plans to travel are meant for the eyes of their secret recipients and is heartened by the fact that he has (arbitrarily) used the two code words 'dictionary' and 'Pogo O'Brine'. As a result the two travel past each other. Twang arrives in Miami just as Zachary makes it to Rome. They never connect and so the space of connection they discover in the movement of language becomes increasingly elaborate and devious.

Noting the essential movement of language, Walter Benjamin sees the 'task' of the translator as being a mode of change that is accountable to the subjective contingencies and circumstances of language and history. Language – in how it is used, understood and modified – moves continuously. Benjamin argues that 'bad' translations worked from a premise that denies this movement. In translation 'the original undergoes a change.'

> Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process. The obvious tendency in a writer's literary style may in time whither away, only to give rise to imminent tendencies in the literary creation. What sounded fresh once may sound hackneyed later... To seek the essence of such changes, as well as the equally constant changes in meaning, in the subjectivity of posterity rather than in the very life of language and in its works, would mean to confuse the route cause of a thing with its essence.[232]

More to the point, perhaps, it is the process of translation that underlines the inherent risk in any tendency to essentialise meaning or ignore local and historical usage. For Benjamin it is words and the various ways in which words can be used (rather than their meaning) that are 'essential'. This enables the resistance of any cultural attempt to

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[231] Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, p. 129.

[232] Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator' in, Illuminations, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999) p. 72.

essentialise transmission because the sense or meaning of the original text is, in translation, subject to the interchangeable movements of both the source and the destination language.

In *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, this moveable condition becomes vital to the grammar or syntax of the spaces in which Zachary and Twang forge a 'home-ground'. Not surprisingly, and for fear of certain local authorities, it is a place 'kept out of control.' As part of an open-ended question, for instance, that operates on the margins of the narrative Twang discusses the value and history of how and why her native language 'Pan' is characterised by its tendency for inflection. Pan is predisposed to its conditions of use in order to subvert colonial assumptions that attempted to control, not only information, but the movement and transmission of information between languages:

> Why, is Pan inflect? You ask. Once it was n't, then home the missions, be fore soldats and buyrs, monks mad for lingual avance. Yet, hlever, they forse not theyr language up on us, ownly show, the vantage of its struttures – of horse, we are preedisposed to these. They show howhow one word can to-be many, with a little twits, and we're reasn-like and order-most and the cort adops this eduhation. Yet in poor villages you hear the old way, in flectsible – they have leahs words such you call hualifiers? in place end-ings. Some times the leahs-words become new in italian-pan. Ex. gr. *Nob* was qualify-er makin of noun, a verb, so *lucrim* "food" and *nob lucrim* "aet", now you kno *lucri* is "eat" (as *lucrem* "I eat") and *nob* meen "for" hense *nob lucri* has now a sense "for to et." How ever, you must n't thingk all progress is be causa of occodont maniacs, we do our-own. So tichai meaned first "run-ing from" and now "in face of, confront with"; and like wise the antic sense is not oll losst, in my willage *tichai lai* is "in flight of mud" but in the capital "con front-ed of mud". This is mud-heavil, under the moonsoon.[233]

The 'missions... monks mad for lingual avance' refers, it is assumed, to Western missionaries from a historical period who, in advance of capital and war ('soldats and buyrs') sought to reorganize the local dialects into structures advantageous to their Biblical translations ('the vantage of its struttures'). These new structures were then opportunistically exploited by the locals ('of horse, we are preedisposed to these') and became a foil for a flexible local vernacular resistant to the foreign local authorities

[233] Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, p. 69.

gathered in their midst ('This is mud-heavil, under the moonsoon'). The new flexibility of words ('howhow one word can to-be many, with a little twits') becomes a precious commodity, one that to some extent equalises a process of exchange (or translation) that was otherwise intended to move solely in one direction. This is a technique Mathews employs in order to question the position of the text and its relationship to the mode of wider cultural productions which attempt to deny this kind of contingency or resistant locatedness. Mathews shares this conception of literary experience with Benjamin, one that distinguishes it from other forms of mediated experience.

> 'Is a translation meant for readers who do not understand the original...? For what does a literary work 'say'? What does it communicate? It 'tells' very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information. Yet any translation which attempts to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information – hence, something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad translations.'[234]

Distinguishing meaning and information from understanding is an important critical technique in terms of Mathews' work, and is perhaps what caused Eric Mottram to observe: 'If there is a politics in Mathews' poetics, it infers release from the end games and death games of enslaved mass societies.'[235] The way information moves is far more essential than any conception of information in itself and very rarely does information move freely or easily. Instead, and despite the commercialisation of supposedly smooth channels of access, the passing of information always involves what Chris Goode terms 'frictionless mobility':

> The notion of information which moves but does not change as it travels is both an aspiration common to most cultures in most epochs and an important specific fantasy ingredient in the composite American Dream. We know this, not least, from the unofficial motto of the U.S. Postal Service: 'Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.'[236]

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[234] Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', *Illuminations*, p. 70.
[235] Eric Mottram, 'Elusion Truths: Harry Mathews' Strategies and Games', in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction: Harry Mathews Number*, p. 168.
[236] Chris Goode, 'These Facts are Variously Modified: American Wiriters in an Information Economy' in *The Darkness Surrounds Us: Edinburgh Review* 114 (2004), p. 140.

As Twang and Zachary discover, the mail doesn't always get through and correspondence is often defined by the friction of its mobility. A crucial premise in any system of official language of localised authority stipulates (implicitly) that if something is misunderstood it is due to the quality of the reader or recipient and not the information being passed. In their letters, Twang and Zachary resist this cultural assumption. Understanding and meaning are so radically divorced that the distortion and infidelity in what they say comes to define the very nature of what is actually said. Goode likens this type of break-up to the feedback or distortion in rock music caused by the low fidelity and broken frequencies of electronic amplification: 'The continuing susceptibility of signals to noise, of data to distortion in transit, which in an industrial context represents a problem to be solved, has in oppositional subcultures become itself a carrier of information, an accepted index of non-fidelity to a prevailing ideal.'[237] As the complexities of her condition intensify, Twang's letters come to embody this non-fidelity as she attempts to further undermine the expectations of those who are spying on her correspondence. The inflection inherent in Pan, the structure if its duplicity, appears to provide a model; rather than disgust, Zachary attempts to discover a purer form of communication in their spiralling miscommunications as, paradoxically duplicitous, the use of words becomes defined by their inherent (but secret) flexibility. Indeed, the object of Twang's letters is often to say the opposite of what one is saying, not that Zachary realises this. Her key piece of advice – 'You must lie also, for they shall open your letters, as much' – is after all lost. Zachary has to find meaning in Twang's letters even as she deliberately writes the opposite of what she means. Representation becomes a device of deception so that what Twang is can only exist in the expression of what she is not:

> And always now I must fill the letters with lyings of many colour, be as twisty as the *bukhaï* tree. Yet, it's no matter, not the lies, not any things, are I. Remember, what is "me"? One is to inspect, so reflect: The eye, the observed form, are not "me". The hear and sound, are no "me". The tongue and the taste are not, the "me". The knows and the stink aren't "me". The body and the

[237] *Ibid.*, p. 141.

> touch are not "the me". To consider that those 6 personalizzed senses and their objects do not make a "me", this is the perception of inpersonality.[238]

Lying or untruths form, in the text, a 'sixth sense'; a faculty as primary as touch, sight, taste, smell or hearing in how the world is fully perceived. Infidelity to a prevailing ideal defines the epistolary mode of communication and informs a critical function in the protagonists' perception of the real. This is again related to translation and the alterations it performs on both the destination and the source language. As Benjamin points out, 'It is self-evident how greatly fidelity in reproducing the form impedes the rendering of the sense. Thus no case for literalness can be based on a desire to retain the meaning. Meaning is served far better – and literature and language far worse – by the unrestrained license of bad translators.'[239] Good translation involves an infidelity towards meaning, it is not the intended object that is transmitted but the mode of intention: to say two things at once, or in John Ashbery's phrase 'to say something and not say it' is what induces a form of communication far closer to the actual, rather than the official, experience of language.[240] On this point Mathews is explicit: 'From the reader's point of view, the existence in literature of potentiality in its Oulipian sense has the charm of introducing duplicity into all written texts, whether Oulipian or not.'[241] Twang's ability to fill her letters 'with lyings of many colour' in order to truthfully translate her feelings, however, does raise certain problems related to a particular conception of 'otherness'.

Undoubtedly the strategy is often unbearably divisive and contradicts fundamental perspectives regarding sincerity and persona. '"One must not watch oneself living," proclaims an ideal of sincerity.'[242] In this view, duplicity denies the cultural value of spontaneity and naturalness. 'If instead of feeling something spontaneously, you watch yourself feeling, the feeling will lose its integrity and become a cerebral invention: you

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[238] Mathews, *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, p. 131.
[239] Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', in *Illuminations*, p. 78.
[240] See 'An Interview with Harry Mathews by John Ashbery', in *Review of Contemporary Literature: Harry Mathews Number*. Ashbery confesses to envying music because of its ability to 'say something and not say it.'
[241] Mathews, 'Mathews' Algorithm' in *Maltese* p. 301.
[242] Robert C. Elliott, *The Literary Persona* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 60.

will no longer know what you really feel... You will have lost your sincerity.'[243] In contrast, the commodification of 'sincerity', as part of a holistic conception of the self, is very much characteristic of the terrain of Mathews' fiction and has everything to do with where his narratives take place.[244] To some degree, it points to a 'locus solus', an ethnographic impulse or an ethnographic conception of the self that, rather than merely being the study of otherness, becomes the study of how otherness is constructed (and also cancelled) in and through the ethnographic desire for precisely that kind of study. To watch one's self suggests a kind of doubled personality, one that denies the singular and consistent conception of the self reinforced by the ideal of sincerity. Rather than a 'personality' Twang alludes to 'the perception of inpersonality' [sic]. The misspelling suggests two words at once: the 'impersonal', which in common English usage often refers to an atmosphere or situation rather than a person, and 'impersonate' which suggests a kind of role-playing or theatre. Twang may be staging one version of herself in order to communicate another, and it is 'the otherness hidden in language' that Mathews most wants to tap: 'Beyond the words being read, others lie in wait to subvert and perhaps surpass them. Nothing any longer can be taken for granted; every word has become a banana peel.'[245]

'Otherness' is here more clearly located in the self rather than a conception of an exterior relatedness that otherwise denies a more intrinsic or more resistant duplicity. Twang wishes to resist singularity and Pan, Twang's native tongue, is a denial of the inherent authority in formal or 'official' language which attempts to fix the gap between its authorised and its actual usage. Rather than deny its validity, it actively seeks 'the otherness hidden in language': it endeavours to say two things at once. Firstly, Pan is

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[243] *Ibid.*, p. 60.

[244] 'The Dialect of the Tribe', for instance, is a short story concerned with the journals of Dr Ernest Botherby, an Australian anthropologist who attempted to 'transcribe Pagolak, the speech of a small hill tribe in northern New Guinea.' Botherby's book is called *Kalo Gap Pagolak* or "The Magic Translation of Pagolak". The text 'was an account of a method used by the Pagolak-speaking tribe to translate their tongue into the dialects of their neighbours. What was remarkable about this method was that while it produced translations that foreign listeners could understand and accept, it also concealed from them the original meaning of every statement made.' Thus, in translation, a Pagolak phrase could be understood without knowing what it means because, in terms of the kind of essential mechanisms pointed to by Benjamin, the story does not take place in New Guinea but in the movement of language, in the 'home ground' defined as a kind of 'Englishing'.

[245] 'Mathews' Algorithm', in *The Case of the Persevering Maltese*, p. 301.

invented. In 'translation', it is in effect made up of the elements of its destination language as a kind of Englishing. English is the destination and the source of Pan and so has to be reorganised in order to accommodate the potential of its various meanings. That is to say, Pan is a translation without a source language. Secondly, Pan is a comment on where and how language takes place and the role of literature as a form of place-construction. Like slang, Pan attempts to discover a territory of the everyday in fiction. For 'as long as literature is born out of the rift between everyday and formal language, instead of directing this rift as a question against itself, it cannot participate in the movement of language, which does not take place on paper but in slang.'[246] In a sense this type of literature is an attempt to discover the living alternatives available in words when any 'official' use of language is contrasted with its everyday 'other'. In order to exploit the location inherent in the usage of language, another important turn in Mathews' work is his interpretation of the proverbial.

A proverbial farce

> The innumerable tricks of bringing in a proverb at just the right moment and with a particular interlocutor are thus not taken into account.[247]

In this way, Michel de Certeau framed his critique of Levi-Strauss. The drawback, and at the same time, the success of Levi-Strauss' investigation of local myths is that the myth, unlike the proverb, is too easily extracted from its context. The proverb is more specifically involved in its use, that is to say, in a time and a place. When a proverb is invoked a specific context or locality is defined in terms of a wide range of possible meanings. This is, first of all, what makes Mathews' interest in proverbs so provocative; a living context in literature is vital to his conception of space and connection, defining a concept of writing based on the premise of participation. Secondly, it subverts further assumptions regarding cultural description and relocates the role of metaphor as a literary figure.

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[246] See Heiner Müller, *Germania*, trans. by Bernard & Caroline Schütze (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990), p. 112.

[247] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1984), p. 20.

Selected Declarations of Dependence is a book of miscellany published in 1977. Its central premise, as with much of the work that has been considered so far, is one of collage and constraint. Mathews confined his use of literary materials to the words of forty-six common proverbs. Using this vocabulary of some 185 words, the love story, 'Their Words, For You', accounts for much of the book and defines the range of its enquiry. As with *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, it is the location of experience within language that appears to be most at stake. Composed from pieces of broken proverbs in which often each distich is torn in half and reset in a new, unfamiliar near-nonsensical couplet ('Too many cooks wait for no man.' Or, 'too many cooks spoil the bird in the hand.'), the story attempts to re-master the 'sentencery' of experience and understanding. The 'love story' becomes a subversion of the habitual patterns of everyday language by reoccupying the 'pure mediation' of the proverbial (what Mathews referred to as 'perverbs').

A stitch in time,
A bird in the hand,
A silver lining,
Wait for no man

> And you can't save an omelette with stitches. You come on all shy with me, when the intention was to take a stick to a dog that had not harmed you. What good are silver words when you have as good as left me? Things spoil, burn, are buried – men for one – and words cannot make things new.[248]

This is no doubt the case even as the 'new', formed here from the oldness or re-usability of words, appears in the recognisable constituents of the now strange and unfamiliar. It is their use rather than words themselves which 'make things new'.[249] But how are they being used? Who is 'telling' this story and to what end? There are no protagonists in the traditional sense, no identifiable characters, yet 'Their Words for You' is a form of love story. As with Twang and Zachary, the nature of relationships is a continuous theme in Mathews' work and in its very mechanisms (its use of language as a kind of found

[248] All quotes taken from 'Their Words for You' reprinted in Mathews, *The Human Country*, p. 59.
[249] 'We say that there isn't any doubt that we understand the word, and on the other hand its meaning lies in its use.' Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe (London: Blackwell, 2001), p. 238.

material), 'Their Words for You' is explicitly concerned with the relatedness of use and meaning in language.[250] Rather than told in the first person singular the narrative is organised in terms of the interchangeability or the shared insistence of identity in language – instead of 'I' there is 'me' and 'you' ('But for me, the good is you').[251] 'Their Words for You' is about noone and for nobody in the same way that proverbs are told by everyone and belong to everybody.

Typically, proverbs come loaded with such allusions to ownership. 'They belong to no one and everyone' yet they draw on forms of universal authority as a kind of public verification of private anxiety.[252] They regulate and caution in that they are not the property of the user yet when they are used they reinforce that sense of displaced ownership. Their use is often considered the authorisation of a given predicament, a universal status quo. They represent a relatedness to language defined by ownership and come endowed with an authority that reinforces this relationship. Mathews, however, seeks a different form of relatedness, one that disrupts the order inherent in its function.

On the one hand, Mathews appropriates the kind of operation de Certeau celebrates in *The Practice of Everyday Life* that looks further than the assumed role of proverbs and considers them in terms of complex and contingent forms of inflection; in terms of the very moment of use. Proverbs do not always reinforce their inherent authority but explode it, again, by sheer duplicity, by saying two things at once in order to re-translate other or unofficial forms of understanding. Indeed, the proverb is often employed as a distortion, an ironic device of the disinherited, encountering yet again the reproduction of a certain social unavailability. The quick employment of a neat distich, as de Certeau points out, (one such as 'Out of sight, out of mind', or 'when the cat's away, the mice will play', or 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me') is a procedure of dramatisation and reinvention. Bound by an immediate context, the proverb

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[250] Most explicitly so in Mathews' novel, *Cigarettes* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1997) first published in 1988.

[251] 'Their Words for You', *The Human* Country, p. 58.

[252] See Welch D. Everman, 'Harry Mathews' Selected Declarations of Dependence: Proverbs and the Forms of Authority' in *Review of Contemporary Fiction: Harry Mathews Number*, p. 149; also on this subject see Barbara Smith, *On the Margins of Discourse: The Relation of Literature to Language* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 69-75.

is part of a place in the same way as it is the remote and localised production of a place. 'On the one hand, one is concerned with systems of signification, on the other, with systems of fabrication.'[253]

On the other hand Mathews seeks a different form of relatedness (one that disrupts the order inherent in its function) by remodelling the author as one who gathers or collects, similar to the way Benjamin (as will be shown in the next chapter) gathers quotations in order to reorganise the source and significance of experience:

> The true, greatly misunderstood passion of the collector is always anarchistic, destructive. For this is its dialectics: to combine with loyalty to an object, to individual items, to things sheltered in his care, a stubborn subversive protest against the typical, the classifiable.[254]

Collection is a form of ownership but one that is an expression of the inadequacy of ownership as a relation. As Benjamin points out, in its anarchic, misunderstood passion, it continuously declassifies the given or logical relatedness between things and shows the relation instead to be an illogical function of arbitrary association. By gathering and resetting proverbs, Mathews is able to appropriate the universal turn of phrase and strip it of any given meaning. As with Flaubert's 'Dictionary of Received Ideas', the inherent truth in any given statement is shown to be instead an arbitrary and contingent cultural production. Most important of all, it is in the metaphorical qualification of the proverb that Mathews renders authority a predicament of this new relatedness. The proverb transforms everyday experience into a metaphorical act, while the potency of this metaphorical act lends the proverb its 'formidable authority'. The act of collection as reordering, or reclassification, is part of a metaphorical turn, one that demonstrates the wider implications of metaphorical construction within the operation of everyday life. Rather than being 'the perception of fundamental connections and relationships' the proverbial metaphor is a veil for the inadequacy of such assumptions.[255]

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[253] De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 19.
[254] Benjamin quoted in Hannah Arendt's Introduction to *Illuminations*, p. 49.
[255] See Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (London: Routledge, 1981), in particular the chapter 'The Turns of Metaphor', p. 188-209.

Jonathan Culler attacks the value of metaphorical language as such and advocates an alternative figurative relation, metonymy, for precisely this reason. 'Though metaphors are said to be based on the perception of real similarities, even essences, they are to a large extent based on contingent cultural connections.'[256] When the assertion is made: 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks', it is not based on pure resemblance but on cultural assumptions or constructions regarding the 'nature' of dog-like behaviour. In the version of 'Their Words for you' – 'You will have been taught that you can't teach an old dog without breaking eggs' – the cautionary advice is based on unhappy coincidence, the accidental and contingent association of metonymy: 'my words were unlucky'. For Culler, metaphor evokes truth beyond the descriptive operation of language, the metonym in contrast, locates truth very much within the contingent and localised material of description.[257] This is something, as Fred Orton points out, common to contemporary American art and literary practices. It is, for Orton, intrinsic to the collage-like instincts of painters such as Jasper Johns: 'The connection between a metonym and the term it comes in place of is a contiguous one. The substitution is fortuitous, incidental, true-only-under-certain-conditions.'[258]

When Johns illustrates Frank O'Hara's book of poems, *In Memory of My Feelings*, the objects included in his etchings are not endowed with metaphorical potency, or, in other words, a truth that can be applied universally. Instead, the spoon and the fork and the distorted territory from which they materialise are metonyms for O'Hara's mouth, his voice and the cultural conventions hidden in speech. There, as in the work of Mathews, the metonymic relates to a particular and relational form of seeing and reading:

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[256] *Ibid.*, p. 201.

[257] By gathering and breaking up proverbs in order to reorganise the cultural assumptions that generate meaning, Mathews privileges metonym over metaphor. He does this by approaching language in the way of material. He takes words to be objects (the way, metonymically, a crown might stand in for 'monarch', or a sword and scales may stand in for 'justice') and recombines them with other objects. 'The burning fences made stitches in the lining of the sky. Red clouds dispose the night' ('Their Words for You', p. 76). What is assumed to be metaphorical 'content' is shown in fact to be the shape, or metonymic operation, of certain arbitrary connections: the reconstruction of a world.

[258] Fred Orton, *Figuring Jasper Johns* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), p. 10.

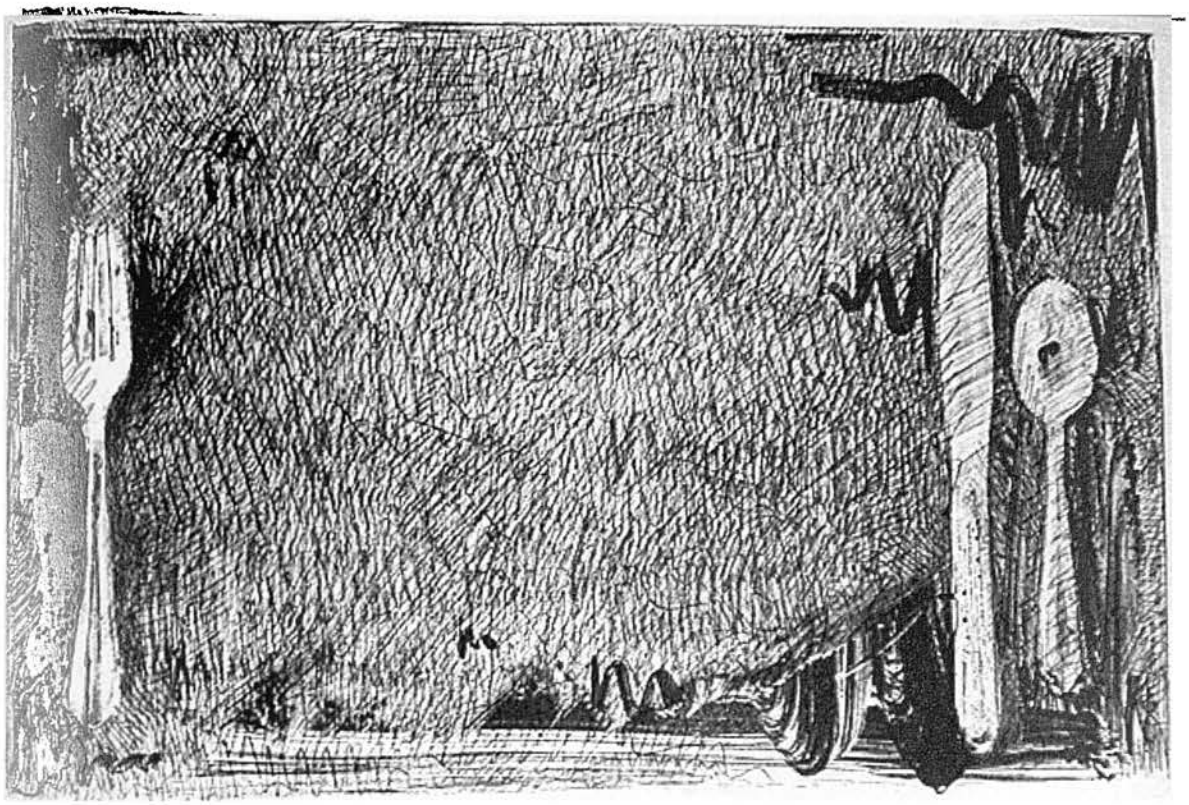

Fig. 3.2: Jasper Johns, *In Memory of My Feelings I*, lithograph on paper (1968)

The problem of metaphor versus metonym, then, is a question of imagery: it is a question of description or translation remaining faithful to the way the world is seen. Metaphor describes the indescribable by comparing it with what can be seen; it does this in such a way that the figurative comes to precede the literal and evokes a higher currency of exchange, one already well endowed with latent, universal meaning. The metonymic, however, is 'based, not on some hidden resemblance or analogy, but on a purely external relation.' The metonymic association or arrangement disorganises the nature of cultural description by making the process visible. It does not rely on what cannot be seen but on the way that what is seen is, in the end, made to be seen.

Where the Country is:

The difference between seeing and the way things are made to be seen relates to wider questions of modern storytelling, modern narratives of mediation and in particular the photographic image, and will be considered in more depth at the outset of the next

chapter. Indeed, this digression into the linguistic territory of metaphorical categories has a recurring significance for the study of place. Metaphorical constructions within the operation of everyday life are underlined in order to demonstrate how the 'real' and the 'metaphorical' are interrelated. This is the 'country', or territory, of Mathews' experimental prose, in which fictional spaces interconnect with spatial fictions, gathering various perspectives on the textual situation of the reader. According to the backdrop of cultural description from which it borrows (those official or proper uses of language and their deviations), Mathews' prose demonstrates the ways in which the construction of everyday life is very much a part of both fictions of space and spaces of fiction, indeed, the two resist easy extrapolation: one is not necessarily more real than the other.

There is still a great deal to be said on this subject. Once the operation of these problems has been considered in terms of the influences and pervasiveness of visual languages such as photography, cinema and advertising, the thesis will return to literary questions of space, language and the everyday. Cultural description, classification and how the language-use of literary fiction relates to everyday life will be looked at in more depth in chapter six, as part of the discussion of the novels of Ben Marcus. Marcus is a contemporary practitioner greatly influenced by Mathews' work. Yet this cannot be done without a preliminary consideration of the various forms of visual media culture, to include, photography (chapter four) and cinema (chapter five), which will further illuminate the nature of the representational process of place in America.

Chapter Four

Jeff Wall's Lightboxes: Representation and the Impossibility of Place

I work according to my feelings and my literacy. (Jeff Wall)

The storyteller: he is the man who could let the wick of his life be consumed completely by the gentle flame of his story. (Walter Benjamin)

If the diversionary and metonymic constructions of Harry Mathews' experimental prose draw attention to the cultural conventions governing the relationship between actual and metaphorical space, they do so in order to demonstrate that the 'real' and the 'metaphorical' are to be considered counterparts; indeed, as is noted there, the space of fiction is very much part of the fiction of space, one is not necessarily more real than the other. At the beginning of the Twenty-First Century this is still very much a visual condition. As much as it is about making the so called unsayable, sayable, metaphor is a way of making the so-called invisible, visible. At the end of the last chapter, it is shown that Mathews turns to metonym over metaphor because, it would seem, metonymic operations do not rely on what cannot be seen but on the way that what is seen is, in the end, made to be seen.

Here, Jeff Wall's photography is considered to be a response to this predicament in which representation and lived experience are so much a part of the same space, that is to say, in terms of the myriad ways in which place is envisioned. Wall develops a photographic practice that is undeniably literary, one in which the visual and the fictional come together as part of a mimetic process of place and representation, indeed, his photographs have been described as 'writing presenting itself as a picture.'[259] But, like Roland Barthes posing for the camera only to discover that he is acting in imitation of himself, it is a double mimesis: Wall's photography imitates the act of imitation in order to re-examine the cultural production of those places considered equally visible and

[259] Boris Groys, 'Life without Shadows' in *Jeff Wall*, ed. by Thierry de Duve, Arielle Pelenc and Boris Groys (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), p. 61.

invisible.[260]

This chapter will look in more depth at the contemporary visual languages alluded to in the previous chapter. It will do this in terms of the pervasiveness of modern media and the ways in which this pervasiveness has influenced modern conceptions of narrative and storytelling and the developing cultural anxiety surrounding, on the one hand, representations of place and on the other, the place of representation. The discussion is particularly relevant to this thesis because of how Wall's photographic constructions throw 'light on the relation between identity and the spaces through which identity is both produced and expressed.'[261] Jeff Wall's photography enacts a process of image-making conducted squarely in terms of the production of images, moving the scope of this discussion further into the representational territory of what is meant by place.

The Myth of 'Un-Relational Place'

The Storyteller (1986) bears all the hallmarks of Jeff Wall's trademark practice. It is an image of profound clarity and density of detail. Like the Surrealist reportage and the preoccupation with 'actuality' in the work of Walker Evans and James Agee, discussed in chapter one, Wall's photography employs the appeal of documentary. As with a recording, the image attests to 'photography's social function, the disclosure of truths about the structure of reality.'[262] The verisimilitude is intensified by the size and glow of the lightbox housing the transparent print. In *The Storyteller*, several figures in various postures of idle activity are arranged beneath a highway on an anonymous scrub of land. The 'storytelling' after which the image is named, that which Walter Benjamin calls 'communicable experience', is positioned in the lower left-hand corner of the scene where a woman on her haunches addresses two men seated around a smouldering campfire. The attention of the viewer is drawn away from the centre of the picture dominated by the X of the vanishing point where the road, the line of trees and either side of the ascending bank close in on the horizon, to the margins from where the significance

[260] See Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), p. 10: 'Once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing," I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image.'
[261] *Place, Politics and Identity*, ed. by Michael Keith and Steve Pile (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 9.
[262] Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism* (London: Pluto, 2000), p. 59.

or relevance of the image, no matter how muted, is being enunciated.

The Storyteller is an image of central importance to this thesis. Like the spatial practice of Mathews' fiction, the distance of the camera from its subject opens up a participatory space of reading. In *The Storyteller*, the representational act of place is enacted as a field of relations in which lived experience is conceived in terms of a displaced authorial position at odds with the authority of cultural construction. It documents at once the stories of space and the space of stories.

Fig. 4.1: Jeff Wall, *The Storyteller*, Transparency in a Lightbox, 229 x 473 cm, 1986.

The sense of *The Storyteller* depicting, as well as being, a relational space is at odds with much of the surrounding commentary. Since the publication of Marc Augé's, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, critics have been quick to assert that the 'dominant topographical type among Jeff Wall's pictures is the non-

place.'[263] Augé defines the non-place in these terms: 'If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place.'[264] Augé's work is important in how it attempts to turn the lens of anthropology away from the auto-exotic formulae of otherness and onto the lived spaces of anthropology itself. In doing so, Augé attempts to identify what he calls the various 'singularities' of the landscapes of 'Supermodernity', otherwise reduced to the characteristically over-familiarised and over-determined locales of 'homogenised global culture.' Yet in doing so he emphasises the descriptive dichotomy of place and non-place elevating the latter as somehow culturally emblematic:

> Non-places are the real measure of our time; one that could be quantified – with the aid of a few conversions between area, volume and distance – by totalling all the air, rail and motorway routes, the mobile cabins called 'means of transport' (aircraft, trains and road vehicles), the airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, and finally the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilise extraterrestrial space for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact with another image of himself.[265]

In terms of Wall's work, however, it is hard to accept such a strict distinction or duality between place and non-place, especially when considering an art form openly re-enacting a pictorial model of representation. Apparently measurable, those areas of life Augé identifies as non-places are, it would seem, places none-the-less. Augé's exuberant language betrays something of the symbolically loaded and historically relational qualities of the supposedly self-contained locations of 'Supermodernity'. In trying to deny non-places the qualities of abstraction identified as the relationship between metaphorical and material space (see chapters two and three of this thesis), Augé constructs a new set of abstractions that are ethnographically identifiable yet are also tinged with an air of determined inevitability. Augé's contention is that these places

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[263] Bernd Reiss, 'Constructing an Apparent Reality: Settings, Gazes, Paraphrases' in *Jeff Wall: Figures and Places - Selected Works from 1978-2000*, ed. by Rolph Lauter (London: Prestel, 2001), p 190.
[264] Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe (London: Verso, 1995), p. 77-8.
[265] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

(airports, motels, highways) are not practiced; non-places are spaces 'assigned to a circumscribed and specific position.'[266] They are closed and self-contained, meaning, unlike 'Baudelairean Modernity', they do not allow for the integration of old and new, or for the active participation of historical and cultural construction.

Many of Wall's photographs, it is true, are set in parking lots, on faceless city-streets, or at transport terminals and have thus been associated with Augé's work. Yet, rather than being simply devoid of what Augé identifies as the representational qualities of Baudelaire's modernism, these settings play an important role in how Wall photographs and conceives of contemporary living practice as the representational act of place itself: he looks for the practices of construction and representation that Augé argues have been drained from the fixed spaces of 'Supermodernity'. As this chapter aims to demonstrate, in depictions such as *The Storyteller*, Wall is staging, in all of its complexity and ambivalence, the representational act of place itself rather than the anthropological misnomer of non-place.

Telling the Story of Place

The tension between place and practice is a recurrent and regular theme in Wall's lightboxes. It is a representational tension. An explicit sense of setting informs a narrative impulse imported from the Realist tradition of picturing figures in a landscape in order to convey life as it is lived. Meanwhile, immediately reminiscent of advertising screens, shop windows and billboards, the lightbox itself echoes the spectacle of modern visual culture and the place of consumer exchange. Originally, Wall situated his work explicitly in terms of this landscape, installing his first lightbox in a shop window and subsequent work on the concourse of a bus station. The viewer came upon the work in passing, in moving from place to place. Even in the gallery, the sheer size of the lightboxes (*The Storyteller*, for instance, measuring two and a half meters tall and four and a half meters wide) establishes a human scale wherein the space of the picture threatens to blend with the space of the viewer. The last point is important as it suggests that place is as much about form as it is about subject. Wall attempts to reproduce in

[266] *Ibid.*, p. 78.

photography the human scale so highly valued in Classical painting. This type of formal displacement is clearly a kind of starting point for Wall. In both subject and presentation, displacement is part of a normalised condition, undermining the assumption that things and people have a proper place that can become improper. There appears to be a preliminary 'double displacement' that this kind of picture-making has come to embody; a double displacement that informs the way in which Wall is able to stage the representation of place.

Displacement is clearly a theme in *The Storyteller*. There is however an integral reflexivity that renders the displacement double. An initial reading of the picture might interpret Wall's 'topography of non-place' through the position of the Native American woman who appears to be speaking. According to this reading, the concrete highway, the snatch of grass and the power lines attest to the dislocation of North America's native peoples. The dispossessed gather with their stories in an anonymous no-man's land. The storyteller is estranged from the landscape of her story. Likewise, the photographer is documenting the loss of direct cultural signification, the loss of an oral tradition that once rooted people in a landscape and informed their embodiment of local and land-based tribal identities.[267] Yet there is a sense in which the storytelling is more directly aimed at the viewer. The act of communication has been frozen and in its place the viewer is presented with a densely detailed and artificially illuminated assemblage of data. The picture appears to anticipate the series of connections and associations that make up the initial reading of displacement. As such, the picture appears to be playing on the storytelling quality of photography in general, drawing the attention of the viewer from one part of the picture to another in order to articulate the cultural position of photography through a landscape organised in terms of certain representational experiences. Experience of this kind is informed by an inbuilt anticipation of its own reception so as to underline the already displaced relation of photography. In *The*

[267] This might be a romantic or nostalgic model of storytelling. What is important however is not that there should be some distinction between reader and listener and a subsequent re-enactment or longing for an oral tradition that may or may not have achieved some kind of authentic empowerment of place. Rather that the reader and the listener cross over, so that as an audience the textual reader is involved in the act or moment of production of fiction-making. (For Wall, this is achieved by importing storytelling techniques, rather than authoritative narrative techniques, that simultaneously tell the story of storytelling.)

Storyteller, the actual form of photographic communication is presented in terms of the subject matter as the setting of its own construction.

Wall's concern in *The Storyteller* with the experience of communication is undoubtedly informed by Walter Benjamin's essay of the same name. In a mechanical age of mass-communication and multimedia Benjamin notes the devaluation of experience, or more importantly the devaluing of its most direct form of communication, that which passes from 'mouth to mouth':

> The art of storytelling is coming to an end ... it is as if something inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.[268]

The ability to exchange experience has a great deal to do with Benjamin's sense of where the exchange takes place. He is quick to illustrate the problem in terms of a landscape:

> A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.[269]

An initial reading of Wall's image might identify a kind of continuity between the place of the story and the act of storytelling. That is to say, the *place* of the storyteller becomes the *place* of those who listen. The two, this might suggest, are synonymous: the act of storytelling (the act of Wall's Native American) is, in turn, an act of continuity. Or as Benjamin puts it, 'The storyteller takes . . . from experience . . . and he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.'[270] The lived-experience of place is endowed with a deep sense of cultural association, to the extent that place is constructed through the space of storytelling. Place is a site of cultural continuity and identity. At this point, Benjamin appears to anticipate Augé's Supermodernity and its de-personalised network of non-places. In the landscape or field of accelerated history the presumed loss

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[268] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 83.
[269] *Ibid.*, p. 84.
[270] *Ibid.*, p 87.

or displacement of the storyteller threatens the direct-communication and cultural continuity of place. Hence Augé's fears for the relationality of place which might, in effect, be epitomised by the directly 'communicable experience' of storytelling.

Yet this is perhaps a somewhat reductive account of Benjamin's position; one that fails to identify the field of relations that actively constitute the contemporary production of space. It also devalues what is most visible in the 'reality' of Wall's photograph: the crisp detail of the material conditions of the landscape. Rather than 'un-relational', the level of detail points to a series of associations and references that tap into a material form of modern experience rather than confirm the 'sensory-impoverishment' of non-place.[271] The high level of visualised detail also articulates another subtlety in Benjamin's essay. Rather than fear for the loss of direct experience Benjamin concerns himself with the now visible form of its mediatory construction. Whether it is newspaper print or the novel, television or radio broadcasting, the new form of communication displacing the storyteller is for Benjamin:

> A concomitant that has quite gradually removed narrative from the realm of living speech and at the same time is making it possible to see a beauty in what is vanishing . . . . The new form of communication is information.[272]

Many commentators on Benjamin's essay have concerned themselves with its undertones of nostalgia for a mythical pre-modern time in which an oral tradition powerfully bound people together. Michael Taussig compares the critical maturity of an essay such as 'Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' with the 'free-falling nostalgia' of 'The Storyteller'.[273] It is more likely, however, that Benjamin sees a critical form of potential in the cultural identification of what might well be an invented form of loss that has become culturally sanctioned. On this point, Peter Brooks is particularly astute: 'We should understand that the apparent nostalgia of his evocation of the oral tale and its teller

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[271] See again, Bernd Reiss, 'Constructing an Apparent Reality' in *Jeff Wall: Figures and Places - Selected Works from 1978-2000*, ed. by Rolph Lauter, p. 190: 'Non-places show the devastation, monotony and sterility of modern (sub)urban life – they are a symptomatic expression of sensory impoverishment and melancholy.'

[272] Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', *Illuminations*, pp. 86-88.

[273] See Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 250.

is in essence strategic: that he is not urging a return, even fictively, to a situation of storytelling which is gone for good (and which was perhaps always a myth), but rather waging a combat... against the situation of any text in the modern world.'[274] This strategy (in many ways, played out by Wall) has a great deal to do with the place of the storyteller within his or her vanished (or, as it were, vanishing) landscape; whether Benjamin means to mourn the loss of a healthier time of shared experience and meaning or to rediscover it in the present, remains unclear. What is clear is that he sees in the new technologies of reproduction a means of staging a process of narrative mediation which perhaps always existed and has become intensified by the wider situation of visual representation in the modern world.

The question Benjamin is asking then, is not whether technology changed the nature of experience but whether it changed the nature of how experience is communicated. After all, the nature of experience has perhaps only ever been subject to a certain mediation among actors. For Benjamin, the continuity suggested in the synonymous location of the story and the storyteller has always been the longing or desire embedded in all human speech: to act directly and without mediation. The storyteller transfers experience into the lived realm of the listener, so that where information exists in constant proximity, experience exists elsewhere. Continuity between the two is the activity of the storyteller made visible and real in the experience, or the lived-place, of the listener. However, all storytelling relies on an act of mediation; the modern landscape or place of its construction and its new sovereignty are Benjamin's critical concern: how this place appears in the act of vanishing.

Vanishing is at the heart of Wall's version of the information-driven landscape. How does the 'fragile human body' narrate itself or tell stories in a landscape defined by an economy of information? Wall visualises Benjamin's conception of the storyteller in terms of the living enactment of a shifting territory of mediated experience:

> In modernity's landscapes, figures, beings or persons are made visible as they

[274] Peter Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), p. 85.

> vanish into their determinations, or emerge from them - or more likely, as they are recognised in the moment of doing both simultaneously.[275]

Most visible in *The Storyteller* are the physical boundaries of the ground rising no further than the massive concrete road, the material landscape that might most determine the agency of the actors. Yet that which is most *invisible* to the viewer is the subject of the young woman's story. She becomes the written accents of speech with which the viewer substitutes direct experience for enactment and gesture.[276] She is the embodiment of Benjamin's information-driven form of communication; yet the information is incomplete. How for instance, can the viewer know that the storyteller can even be heard over the din of the road? While their determinations are so very evident, so very materially conceived, a place is constructed, or communicated, according to its lack of information: according to the appearance of its invisibility.

The Theatre of Quotation

Wall's first lightbox, *The Destroyed Room* (1978), appears as an installation in the window of the Nova gallery in Vancouver. A typical shop-front display is transformed into a scene of deep domestic disorder. The floor is littered with discarded clothes, cheap costume jewellery, and accessories while broken furniture is piled up amid smashed and ripped-out fittings. Amid the devastation however, the scene appears to be organised around the diagonal running through the composition. Indeed, the misplaced sense of a "chaotic arrangement" is perhaps most useful as Wall has meticulously organised each element of the apparent mess in order to re-enact, or as he puts it, 'reactivate' an early Nineteenth Century painting by Delacroix, *The Death Of Sardanapalus* (1827).

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[275] Jeff Wall quoted in *Landscapes*, ed. by Lynda Morris (Birmingham: Article Press University of Central England, 2002), p. 3.

[276] See Jacques Derrida, 'Of the Supplement' in *Of Grammatology*, trans. by G. C. Spivak (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 313-320.

Fig. 4.2: Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, Transparency in a Lightbox, 159 x 234 cm, 1978.

In paraphrasing Delacroix, Wall has removed the protagonists from the figurative spectacle of the painting. In a site-specific-like gesture (such as those Robert Smithson employs as considered in chapter two), the art object awaits the available activation of the viewer's presence as a form of real-time interference. This modern-day re-enactment has a variety of effects on the viewer. The drama of the scene, the cultural quotation and its appearance in the street all jostle the memory of the spectator and literally interrupt the routines of everyday life. And yet while it disturbs, *The Destroyed Room* depicts the nature of this disturbance: the scene is obviously staged, the spectator can clearly make out through the broken door and window the timber supports propping up the stage set. This early example of Wall's practice clearly demonstrates an initial conception of photography as a mixture of performance or theatre on the one hand, and the quotable gesture of received cultural conventions on the other.

Indeed, by consciously employing the quotable gesture of Delacroix's *Sardanapalus* Wall is imitating an earlier form of historical enactment that contributed to the establishment of the figurative drama of representation, or tableaux. Delacroix's historical imperative informs a narrative approach to painting that attempts to realise or stage the 'perfect moment' or hyperbolic event in which each narrative element is fixed

in a 'film-still' image of never-ending associations. As a late Twentieth Century cinema-goer, Peter Brooks highlights the theatrical impulse in Delacroix's painting:

> We have... a condensation and concentration of narrative actions into a perfect moment, one that, like the condensed image of the dream, is over determined in its narrative meaning. Here, narrative meaning asks to be read instantaneously, as in the theatrical tableau.[277]

Brooks characterises the 'perfect moment' of Delacroix's insistence on a kind of narrative quintessence, in which the theatrical tableau represents the totality of life, as a Hollywood production-still. Wall is influenced by the aesthetic of the production-still and his show of disorder and interruption plays on the vantage of Brooks' contemporary interpretation of Renaissance painting, partly it should be said, in order to address a post-conceptual problem of contemporary representation. Famously critical of the 'drama' of Minimalism and Conceptualism in which the art object is drained of its autonomy as a means of dramatising the conventions of cultural perception, Michael Fried declares that 'art degenerates as it approaches the condition of theatre.'[278] With no lack of irony, and in order to dramatise Fried's sense of 'degeneration', Wall, with a lightbox such as *The Destroyed Room*, turns to an earlier avant-garde theory of the stage by re-visiting Berthold Brecht's conception of 'epic theatre' and its use of 'dramatic quotation'.

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[277] See Peter Brooks, *History Painting and Narrative: Delacroix's "Moments"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 25.

[278] Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, (Chicago University Press: Chicago & London 1998) p 141

Fig. 4.3: Eugene Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, Oil on Canvas, 392 x 496 cm, 1827.

'Epic theatre' is a central theme in Brecht's theory of the stage. It is a self-conscious and reflexive form of theatre that continuously draws attention to the conditions of its production. According to Benjamin, 'perhaps the most open-minded approach to epic theatre is to think of it in terms of 'putting on a show'.'[279] The influence of Brecht's theory can be observed in much of late Twentieth Century American photography and cinema. The film director John Cassavetes, for instance, epitomises this impulse in his own *verité*-style filmmaking as a way of 'making a scene' and, as will be shown in the next chapter, the more recent work of Harmony Korine owes much to Brecht's sense of social performance and the 'alienation effect' of epic theatre. It is also important to Wall's hyper-real and constructivist photography where, as Benjamin makes clear: 'instead of identifying with the characters, the audience should... be astonished at the circumstances under which they function.'[280] Like Brecht's theatre, Wall's photography, both in terms of content and technique (indeed, these two distinctions are generally blurred), often draws attention to the conditions of its production.

Brecht's own conception of epic theatre, like Wall's *Destroyed Room*, is deceptively un-

[279] Benjamin, 'What is Epic Theatre?' in *Illuminations*, p 148.
[280] *Ibid.*, p 147.

epic. Characterised as the 'street-scene', Brecht employs 'an incident such as can be seen at any street corner: an eyewitness demonstrating to a collection of people how a traffic accident took place.'[281] While hinting further at the reasons behind Wall's initial tactic of positioning the lightbox in the shop window, Brecht's conception of theatre has as its principal function the dis-engendering of illusion. The 'demonstrator', for instance, 'must never go so far as to be wholly transformed into the person demonstrated', otherwise the situation becomes closed to the audience as it ceases to involve the various perspectives that may or may not corroborate those of the demonstrator.[282] A mixture of everyday performance, observation, participation and dialogue, the picture that the demonstrating eyewitness or 'demonstrator' paints is unduly subject to the wider construction of its context and his or her apparent sense of performance. Dialogical in this respect, experience is constructed (or re-constructed) in terms of repetition and mediation. The picture (presented by the orator who is presenting the tableau or scene as it is produced, at the scene of its production – the car crash at the junction) is imitative of its appearance in the world.

Brecht's street scene is in this sense a representational act of place that provides Wall with a model for photography. *The Destroyed Room*, after all, is very clearly not a destroyed room but a photograph of a stage set depicting a destroyed room. Within the cultural setting of the lightbox and its appeal to the artificial 'staginess' of an everyday scene of disorder, even crime, Delacroix's theatrical tableau has to be read in view (as it were) of its own production. What makes this important, and the reason Brecht's analogy appeals to both Benjamin and Wall, is the way it throws light on the cultural relationality of performance and representation, and how these impact on the relationship between observer and observed. For the photograph to appear as part of the condition of its own production as it does in *The Destroyed Room* the lightbox is re-situated in terms of a conventionalised mode of reception and production. Where the photographic image is analogous with the commercial art of association and habit, the relationship between the viewer and the image is otherwise naturalised as unidirectional. Instead, photography is

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[281] Berthold Brecht, 'The Street Scene: A Basic Model for Epic Theatre' in, *The Theory of the Modern Stage*, ed. by Eric Bentley (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 85.
[282] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

made analogous with performance and space, with a form of theatre that 'must stop pretending not to be theatre.' Esther Leslie points this out in her work on Benjamin, saying that, in order 'for photography to become a means of political and historical legibility, it needs to extend beyond mirroring and into the constructive.'[283] Simply mirroring the world isn't enough; photography must allude to the ways in which the world is constructed in its mirroring.[284] In this sense, Wall's *Destroyed Room* is almost ad-libbing Benjamin's Brechtian example:

> The most primitive example [of epic theatre] would be a family scene. Suddenly a stranger enters. The mother was just about to seize a bronze bust and hurl it at the daughter; the father was in the act of opening the window in order to call a policeman. At that moment the stranger appears in the doorway. This means that the stranger is confronted with the situation as with a startling picture: troubled faces, an open window, the furniture in disarray.[285]

Wall is probably aware of Benjamin's example of the domestic interior in disarray and it is tempting to see it as a prototype for his literary photograph, a second quotation building on the reference to Delacroix. It also characterises a particular sense of the audience and the moment of reception. Benjamin's stranger is in effect an incarnation of the viewer or audience suddenly implicated in the scene they have interrupted, doing away with the traditional or Aristotelian function of the theatre as a space of empathy in which the audience is made to identify with characterisations of their deepest fantasies, their longings and their regrets. Instead, 'the task of the epic theatre, according to Brecht, is not so much the development of actions as the representation of conditions.'[286] Benjamin is most interested in how this type of theatre relies on quotation in order to perform the representation of conditions; in other words the way in which the cultural representations of behaviour are a part of everyday life. Wall's use of quotation, in photographs that paraphrase paintings and scenes from literature, is equally concerned with the relationship between representation and everyday life and points to a particular conception of the cultural location or locatedness of photography.

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[283] Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, p. 60.
[284] As Wall notes, 'Depiction is an act of construction; it brings the referent into being.' *Jeff Wall*, ed. by Thierry de Duve, Arielle Pelenc, Boris Groys, p. 47.
[285] Walter Benjamin, 'What is Epic Theatre?' in *Illuminations*, p. 146.
[286] *Ibid.*, p. 147.

Photographic Literacy

In his essay, 'What is Epic Theatre?', Benjamin turns to its use of 'quotable gesture' in order to illuminate the sense of representation's cultural location. As well as the metaphor of the destroyed room, he also gives the example of Brecht's collaborative play, *Happy End*, in which an actress (as a Salvation Army sergeant) has to quote the song and gestures of her previous performance in a public house before a council of the Salvation Army. Taken out of context a gesture is stripped of its conventional attributes, destabilising the difference between what is considered culturally appropriate and its other. Continuously taken out of context, and re-drawn within the conditions of lived experience, the quotable gesture, as Benjamin sees it, demonstrates the way in which the actual and the symbolic are intimately related. Quoting an earlier gesture in a different context de-naturalises the gesture. It is a way of drawing the audience's attention to the actual conditions of theatre having, in turn, the uncanny effect of demonstrating, for Benjamin and Brecht, the actual conditions of life. Wall's twin uses of quotation and the city-street, in this early lightbox, are to this extent related to Benjamin's insistence on the use of quotation as a form of radical interruption.

Quotation for Benjamin is part of a photographic literacy (photography being the history of mirroring or quoting from the world), as much related to the reading of visual languages as it is to his conception of the relatedness of literature and life. 'To quote a text involves the interruption of its context,' Benjamin notes in terms of epic theatre and the quotable gesture.[287] He then adds to the textual analogy by comparing the actor and the typesetter: 'Making gestures quotable is one of the substantial achievements of epic theatre. An actor must be able to space his gestures the way a typesetter produces spaced type.'[288] Quotation becomes a literary or textual enactment of space where one place is confused with another. The groundbreaking essay 'A Small History of Photography', which begins to map Benjamin's social consciousness in terms of mass media and the production of photographic and cinematic images, immediately draws parallels between

[287] *Ibid.*, p. 148.
[288] *Ibid.*, p. 148.

the development of written representation (print media) and photography: 'the fog that surrounds the beginning of photography is not as thick as that which shrouds the early days of printing.'[289] By asserting the cultural value of photography in terms of print reproduction, Benjamin is not only noting the immeasurable impact of this new form of mechanical reproduction on society and culture as a whole, he is pointing towards the textual and visual economy (of mediation, experience and place) that characterises the post-1960s conceptual and site-specific work of Robert Smithson as considered in chapter two of this thesis. In that chapter it is shown how the artist is positioned in terms of the textual construction of the world; here Benjamin points to a cultural literacy defined as a technological or optical consciousness, the movement from a world of textual reproduction to that of the photograph and 'the envisioning of a realm previously invisible' and, arguably, Wall moves the debate on from Smithson precisely in terms of this 'optical consciousness':

> Benjamin's technical unconscious is born in the modern industrial society of the 1920s. A form of cultural representation based on the written word – novels, newspapers – switches to a new type of dominant representation or 'Anschauungsform' based on the cinematic and photographic image.[290]

Benjamin's 'technical unconscious' derives from what he considers the relationship between reality and photography. The photographic image reveals those elements of reality otherwise invisible to the naked eye, elements of reality previously hidden from consciousness are made perceptible. For Benjamin, photography 'transfigures the possibilities of what can be seen' and becomes a new way of reading the world.[291] The shift from the dominance of print technology to the reproduction of celluloid images makes clear just how intimately literacy and consciousness are, for Benjamin, culturally interrelated.

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[289] Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography' in *One Way Street*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1998), p. 240.
[290] Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, p. 70.
[291] Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', *One Way Street*, pp. 243-4.

Fig. 4.4: *After 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, The Prologue (1999-2000)*, (Transparency in lightbox, 1740 x 2505mm)

Wall enacts this interrelation of literacy and consciousness in his lightbox, *After 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, The Prologue (1999-2000).* Here Wall extends the sense (or consciousness) of literacy to the cultural construction of social visibility. The photograph is a way of showing the invisible. Rather than from direct observation its origins are in the pages of Ellison's novel. It is interesting that Wall selects *Invisible Man* as a source material for his photograph. Ellison worked as a freelance photographer while writing *Invisible Man* and uses photography as a metaphor for his vision of history 'as a form of subjective temporality – a constructed story, not a set of objective facts.'[292]

[292] *Cultural Contexts for Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*, ed. by Eric J. Sundquist (Boston: Bedford Brooks of St. Martins Press, 1995), p. 11. Sundquist also alludes to another cultural connection in the context of Wall's photography, p. 16: 'Although Ellison shares with a number of novelists of the 1930s an interest in photographic realism, he infused documentary fiction with a heightened sense that the writer's distortion of, and improvisation on, the observed world could bring out more effectively the moral and psychological density of its internal meaning.' For another perspective on Ellison's literary involvement in photography

Indeed, documentary photography has an ambivalent relationship with the visualisation of otherness, often constructing difference in the very manner in which it 'reports' on a world of facts. Like *The Destroyed Room, After 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, The Prologue (1999-2000)* has been staged as a visual quotation, a theatre of difference, of mimeses and alterity. On the one hand it is the cultural romanticisation of the alienated, on the other it is the visualisation of this cultural act of seeing the unseeable. The protagonist's invisibility is a material condition, culturally constituted by a system of difference that renders him 'unseen'; the photograph materialises the literary imagination of the novel (what Maurice Blanchot, as discussed in chapter two, calls literature's inherent disappearance) demonstrating that the invisible is made to be invisible as part of a set of very material (or visual) determinations.

Diagonals, Actors and the Material of Detail

Wall's sense of literacy should then be considered in relation to the material conditions of photography. Paraphrasing Moholy-Nagy, Benjamin suggests that 'the illiterate of the future will be the person who is unable to read photographs.'[293] What Benjamin perhaps fails to take into account is the extent to which the reading of photographs might become naturalised as part of the wider proliferation of photographic images now such an intrinsic element of the modern urban landscape. It is squarely within this landscape of naturalised operations, however, that Wall situates his own particular brand of photographic literacy. Wall is very much concerned with the materiality of photographs and the increasing sophistication of image reproduction. Wall's images are often a tapestry of hundreds of digital close-ups, shot on location over a period of time in order to achieve an intense density of detail. On encountering a lightbox such as *Invisible Man* or *The Storyteller* the viewer has to contend with a vast clarity of detail that, in itself, acts as the material of the image. This relates to Benjamin's 'optical unconscious' whereby 'photography, with is enlargement and slow motion, reveals' the detail of human life that 'secretly' determines its condition:

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see Karen Jacobs, *The Eye's Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001) in which she discusses the cultural and phenomenological visualisation of the body in the photographic prose of Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

[293] Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in *One Way Street*, p. 256.

> Photography reveals in this material the physiognomic aspects of visual worlds which dwell in the smallest things, meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams, but which, enlarged and capable of formulation, make the difference between technology and magic visible as a thoroughly historical variable.[294]

Inspecting the detail reveals the way in which the world is made up, not by magic, but by the material relations of technology and history. 'Photography brings objects closer... it lays out the world for intimate inspection.'[295] But Wall takes this further. In an image such as *The Storyteller*, it is not a question of inspecting the world, but of inspecting a photograph of the world; and, what is more, *The Storyteller* is a photograph of a fabricated world-fragment, a cluster of details parodying the materiality of facts drawn from memory, quotation and gesture, the material of everyday experience.

The emphasis on detail and materiality is intensified further by Wall's Brechtian-like use of actors and the contemporary translation of Benjamin's sense of quotable gesture into the scenes and settings of modern day life. Since Wall's initial lightbox, *The Destroyed Room*, which is conspicuously free of actors, Wall's later lightboxes such as *The Storyteller*, more often than not incorporate actors in mid-gesture. Indeed, in *The Storyteller*, Wall's Native Americans are positioned as a visual quotation of Edouard Manet's painting, *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*. Wall employs actors much in the same way a Salon painter would employ models, and photographs them over a number of days in order to reconstruct the scene taken from his own memory but mediated by reference to art history.[296] Again this relates to the discussion of documentary in chapter one and Baudelaire's 'Mnemonic art' in which the representational process of absence is identified as being intrinsic to the image and the cultural construction of place. Rather than being produced in one place, in order to be produced elsewhere, reception is the translation of a translation, the mediation of an absent reality materialised in the reality of the picture. This applies most explicitly to photography precisely because photography is

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[294] *Ibid.*, p. 243-4.
[295] Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, p. 59.
[296] The setting is local to Wall's studio in Vancouver, a place he passes regularly and is based a on scene he glimpsed in passing.

assumed to do the exact opposite. As Susan Sontag points out, a photograph is 'true in so far as it resembles something real, sham because it is no more than a resemblance.'[297] Wall appears to be interested primarily in this fictional quality of photography as a resemblance not only of what is real, but as a resemblance of a photograph of what is real.

Fig. 4.5: Edouard Manet, *Le Déjeuner Sur l'Herbe*, Oil on Canvas 208 x 264 cm, 1863.

Here, Wall's cultural mimesis (and its various layers of resemblance) is particularly explicit. The three figures around the fire are modelled on the figures at the centre of Manet's canvas. As well as being decentred, the other obvious change is the role of Manet's nude, fully clothed in *The Storyteller* and turned away from the viewer. The original gesture, in which the nude gazes blankly back at the viewer, an act of agency that, arguably, underlines the cultural tension of Manet's painting, is paraphrased in Wall's photograph as the vividly rendered act of speech or storytelling.[298] This historical and representational interplay of gesture is important. Wall considers Manet's work an important departure in the history of painting, 'the great age of painted drama' that

[297] Susan Sontag, 'On Photography' in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, ed. by Elizabeth Hardwick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 350.

[298] See for instance, Martin Jay 'Scopic Regimes of Modernity', in Hal Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, p. 8: 'Only much later in the history of Western Art, with the brazenly shocking nudes in Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe* and *Olympia*, did the crossing of the viewer's gaze with that of the subject finally occur.'

culminates in the late Baroque of Delacroix gives way to a modern conception of gesture. The flatness and disconnectedness of Manet's figures embody this reduced sense of dramatic gesture of what Wall calls the 'represented body':

> The ceremoniousness, the energy and the sensuousness of Baroque art are replaced in modernity by mechanic movements, reflex actions, involuntary, compulsive responses... these actions are not really gestures in the sense developed by older aesthetics. They are physically smaller than those of older art, more condensed, meaner, more collapsed, more rigid, more violent.[299]

The history of photography is related to this changing sense of gesture and informs the historical consciousness of photography. For Wall, the literally reduced character of physical gesture, its smallness, meanness, its "blink or you'll miss it" status, is paralleled by technological developments in image magnification, the enlargement of the close-up and its role within an increasingly widespread mode of cultural scrutiny. The slow-motion replay that can re-show the sudden gestures of a sportsperson, for instance, in mid-action becomes intrinsic to the consciousness of vision where what the audience 'thought' they had seen is confirmed or denied by the actuality of what is seen again and again. Wall describes this process of photographic knowledge as 'liquid intelligence', in contrast to the 'optical' or 'dry intelligence' reminiscent of Benjamin's 'optical consciousness', and is perhaps best enacted in *Milk* (1984):

[299] Jeff Wall, 'Gestus' in *Jeff Wall*, ed. by Thierry de Duve, Arielle Pelenc, Boris Groys, p. 76.

Fig. 4.6: *Milk* (1984) Transparency in lightbox (1870x2290mm)

In this composition Wall stages what he considers a vital relationship integral to the historical development of photography and the naturalisation of certain ways of seeing. The movement of liquid in nature, its bursting flow and spontaneity, is defined in terms of its cultural or technologically achieved appearance. 'There is a logical relation, a relation of necessity, between the phenomenon of the movement of a liquid, and the means of representation.'[300] Water has always been an elementary material in the way a photographic image is developed, yet the 'electronic and digital information systems' of 'video and computers will replace photographic film across a broad range of image-making processes', and thus 'the echo of water in photography evokes its prehistory.'[301] The construction of memory as part of this technological pre-history is important to Wall

[300] Jeff Wall, 'Photography and Liquid Intelligence', in *Jeff Wall*, ed. by Thierry de Duve, Arielle Pelenc, Boris Groys, p. 90.
[301] *Ibid.*, p. 90.

and seems to be a metaphor for the role of the increasing sophistication of image-reproduction as a whole. This also looks forward to a film like *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999) by Harmony Korine (discussed in the following chapter) that has a historical consciousness built into its very means of production precisely because of its use of digital video as a primary means of filmmaking. Film, and the mechanics of film processing, are no longer the primary material of film itself and have renewed the interests of filmmakers in the very texture of mediation and the production of images. The same is true of Wall's photography, and he, like Korine, makes the most of this shift in source material. The dry mechanics of photography are contrasted with the liquid flow of natural forms that it is able to bring to consciousness even as it moves away from its 'archaic' or 'organic' (watery) origins. The detailed gestures of the lone man crouching claustrophobically between the lens and a brick wall represents 'the character of [photography's] self-consciousness.'[302] The artificially staged gesture is part of a subject-matter that upsets the 'cool reflection' of a detached medium 'secured behind a barrier of perfectly engineered glass.'[303] Instead, within the landscape of modern technical representation, photography looks for an inbuilt 'historical self-reflection'.[304]

In *The Storyteller*, then, the paraphrasing of Manet's nude is in a sense an act of translation into this landscape of reduced gestures where the body is represented in the enlarged terms of a mechanistic impulse. Wall 'shoots everything in perpetual close-up', so that the print is made up of a tapestry of details magnified 'over and above its photographic enlargement.'[305] The gesture, reproduced with such clarity and accuracy, becomes part of a Brechtian performance, that drawing attention to the terms of its production. Wall's actors perform a 'gesture which knows itself to be appearance.'[306] The impulsive, the reflexive or the involuntary become increasingly loaded in a landscape where gesture 'means a pose or action which projects its meaning as a conventionalised sign.'[307] Within what is otherwise considered to be habitually

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[302] *Ibid.*, p. 93.
[303] *Ibid.*, p. 93.
[304] *Ibid.*, p. 93.
[305] Wall, 'Gestus', in *Jeff Wall*, ed. by Thierry de Duve, Arielle Pelenc, Boris Groys, p. 76.
[306] Jeff Wall, *Ibid.*, p. 76.
[307] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

constituted there is an unobserved practice, a spatial practice of performance and gesture. Taken out of context Manet's quotable gesture heightens the sense of existence performed and constituted within and as part of a field of cultural relations. As such, the cultural tension of Manet's nude, paraphrased by the 'storyteller' as what Michel de Certeau would call a 'speech act', relates to the way in which Wall positions his photography in terms of the contemporary space of representation. Increasingly sophisticated forms of visual media have produced a language of photography, a space of representation that is reoccupied by Wall's actors in order to reactivate the representation of space. Each pose attests to the value of visualising human gesture in order to re-appropriate the language of representation. The protagonists of *The Storyteller* perform the familiar or half-remembered information found within a form of cultural hierarchy, the hegemonic arrangement of high and low culture. Manet's masterpiece is thus taken out of context and made hybrid, its cultural capital traded on in order to confuse cultural clichés regarding the representation of space, by breaking down institutional assumptions about the ways in which a photograph can disclose 'truths about the structure of reality.'

This relates to key questions in this thesis already raised in consideration of Mathews' and Smithson's textual practices. By quoting the properties of high cultural productions, and as such appropriating the languages and codes of representation, Wall's photographs of everyday action and gesture are aligned with Mathews' interest in the fiction of translation and are also aligned with Smithson's conception of documenting the mediations of experience. To quote, to translate or to display as part of a language of documentation are ways of reconsidering the relationship between production and reception; this is particularly true of translation and quotation, as both transform reception into a model of deciphering, into a form of production in its own right, and so challenges given assumptions regarding the relationship between representation and place by making the two a part of the same ongoing process. Arguably Wall takes the problem further by moving it into a photographic (or explicitly visual) realm of the habitual and its relation to cultural consciousness. Staging the photographic gesture in a picture like *Milk* or *The Storyteller* draws attention to the territory or the locatedness of representation because of the way in which Wall stages (photographically) the inherent mediation of

seeing. Wall stages this (inherently spatial) story, or fiction, through the referential photograph by tying the single image in with the historical and cultural reality of image production more generally, and so produces a photography of place in which vision is organised in terms of the cultural consciousness of visuality.

Wall's very choice of Manet attests further to a preoccupation with space and representation. *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* is controversial in Paris in the 1860s because of the way in which it reorganised the relationships of social space. It achieves this, principally, by decontextualising the various genres of academic painting. The nude, the landscape, still life and courtly portraiture are brought together in a Bohemian muddle in order to undermine the way in which visual representation is valued in terms of how it reflects the mannered judgement of its audience (where the 'reality of the world of the picture is put in doubt'). Manet's use of space represents a reflexive awareness of the viewer, and challenges the way perspective is used to construct depth and certainty in order to reproduce the world pictorially in its own likeness and, more importantly, in order to re-stage the way in which the world is experienced.

Since Manet, critics have come to consider this part of an attack on 'absolute space'; an all-encompassing conception of space that is continuous and undeniable, a conception of space that, rather than being mediated by culture, is a force of nature into which human beings can extend themselves infinitely. Erwin Panofsky, for instance, is critical of the naturalisation of this conception of space, pointing to the symbolic form of perspective, 'not because it described the world correctly, but because it described the world according to a rational and repeatable procedure':

> The history of perspective may be understood with equal justice as a triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real, and as a triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control. It is as much a systemisation of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self.[308]

This naturalisation of a culturally constructed conception of space is challenged early on

[308] Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective and Symbolic Form*, trans. by Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 23.

in the Twentieth Century, for instance, by Cubism, Surrealism and Einstein's theory of relativity in order to demonstrate that the given conventions of space are often a form of cultural rather than natural phenomenon and help to expose, for cultural theorists of space and place, a metaphor of absolute space upon which a 'wider web of social, economic, military and cultural relationships have been modelled.'[309] Neil Smith and Cindi Katz, for instance, go on to say:

> It is not space per se that expresses power, but the thoroughly naturalised absolute conception of space that grew up with capitalism, and which expresses a very specific tyranny of power.[310]

In a sense, Wall borrows from Manet's early inroads into the problematic representational properties of space (that is to say not just the representation of space but the space of representation) in order to address his own late Twentieth Century (even Twenty First Century) experiences of how spatial experience is naturalised in photographic media.

For example, the spatial organisation of a picture such as *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, with its play on perspective and the point of view of the viewer, is further emphasised in Wall's repeated use of the diagonal. The concrete highway in *The Storyteller* and the torn line of disorder in *The Destroyed Room* each reproduce the formal diagonals of perspective used throughout the development of what has come to be identified with the modern picture plane. The vanishing point organises the terms of perspective, allowing the viewer to locate their own position in the field of objects before them. As Norman Bryson points out: 'the viewpoint and the vanishing point are inseparable: there is no viewpoint without a vanishing point.'[311] That is to say, perspective is a diagonal formalisation of order through which the relationship between lived and pictorial space is defined as the articulation of a readily available *weltanschauung* or 'worldview'. The openly constructed visualisation of the diagonals of perspective in Wall's work can thus

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[309] Neil Smith and Cindi Katz, 'Grounding Metaphor' in Michael Keith and Steve Pile (eds), *Place, Politics and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 76.
[310] *Ibid.*, p. 76.
[311] Norman Bryson, 'The Gaze in the Expanded Field', in Hal Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, p. 93.

be considered an attempt to restage the relationship between lived space and pictorial space.

Again, highlighting this relationship between lived and pictorial space in the formal organisation of the picture relates to the proverbial interventions and textualities of Mathews and Smithson who seek to explore the relationship between fiction and space by locating the relationship in how space (and its experience) are described. Wall takes the question of this spatial relationship even further in terms of the importance of vision in contemporary society. Rather than merely observed, Wall visualises the relationship between spaces of fiction and fictions of space through a third relation: what can be thought of as the 'rhetorical territory' of media visuality, which Wall builds into his historical conception of photography.

Indeed, modern media articulates the relationship of this space as if it represents a given, as a relationship based on a naturalised cultural understanding: a message that attempts to define those who receive it while receivers simultaneously attempt to define themselves in their response to the message. Wall's sense of the diagonal is partly an invasion of this 'rhetorical territory'. Indeed, having initiated his practice in terms of the city street (all be it the window of the art gallery), this may also point to why Wall has since prioritised the space of the gallery. It indicates a physical re-appropriation of representational space by moving the physical act of representation away from the street and into the official space of representation itself.[312] The art gallery is a particular type of geography, a metaphor of representational space as a cultural economy. Rather than collapse this distance, Wall reinforces it in order to stage the cultural conventions of representational space; that is to say the relationship between the activity of viewing and the activity in which space is articulated. This relates again to Benjamin's conception of a photograph as 'a zone of debate between people and their environment.'[313] *The Storyteller* alludes to

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[312] It should be pointed out that *The Destroyed Room* was always a lightbox, even in the gallery window. Even so, by being in the street '*The Destroyed Room* is Delacroix under the gaze of the flaneur and his low-life surrogates - the prostitute, the street criminal and derelict ragpicker. For each of them the violent tableau could hold distinctly different meanings.' See Thomas Crow, *Modern Art in The Common Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), p157.

[313] Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, p. 57.

the voices of this debate, displacing the literary conception of Wall's authorial voice. Here it is worth considering how the perceived legitimacy of an authorial voice is (literally) articulated in terms of what Wall calls 'cinematography.'

Cinematographic Truth

> There is a voice there, but it cannot be attributed to an author or a speaker, not even to the photographer. Cinematography takes this over from photography, but makes it a question of authorship again. Someone is now responsible for the *mise en scene*, and that someone is pretending to be everyone, or to be anonymous, in so far as the scene is lifelike, and in so far as the picture resembles a photograph.[314]

Wall often describes his practice as cinematography: 'The poetics or the productivity of my work [is] in the stagecraft and pictorial composition - what I call cinematography.'[315] Many of Wall's constructive techniques have already been noted: the use of actors for instance and the long location shoots. But this filmic instinct adds another dimension to the self-consciousness of his photography. In a photograph such as *Volunteer* (1996), for example, the use of black and white photography plays on the tendency to aestheticise the cultural authority, or authenticity, of documentary representation. The mural depicting the calm and tranquil condition of nature on the wall of the clinic's waiting-room is in actuality part of a film set that is itself painted in various tones of black, white and grey. The artificial reality of the film set thus intensifies (in its clarity of detail) the reality of the photographic image. The scene is organised and arranged, in reality, in terms of a representational experience that appears to supersede its living actuality. For Wall, this condition of cinematography draws attention to the questions of cultural legitimacy of authorial control, questions addressed in the discussion of documentary and actuality in chapter one as well as in the prose constructions of Robert Smithson and Harry Mathews in chapters two and three. For Wall, the authorial voice is part of an inner antagonism in photography, related to the cultural authority of the photographer's ambiguous presence.

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[314] Jeff Wall interviewed by Arielle Palenc, in *Jeff Wall*, ed. by Thierry de Duve et al., p. 22.
[315] See Wall quoted in Joyce and Orton. Though he also states that at least 'thirty percent' of his work is 'straight photography', see Duncan White, 'Jeff Wall: Hole in the Wall', *Pluk Magazine* 27 (2005), p.25.

Fig. 4.7: *Volunteer* (1996) silver gelatine print (2215x3130mm)

Throughout the Modernist tradition, the art object has been compelled to appear as a critique of its own legitimacy; its own place in a world of created objects or commodities of which it is at times an extension. Montage, a discontinuous collage form synonymous with Surrealist practice, undermines the notion of a complete world idealised in the 'tableau' of representational art. The desire for completion, wholeness or unity in the picture plane is seen as the desire to establish consonance or meaning defined as an unbreakable bond between the depiction and its beholder, a cultural instinct which for many loses its inherent legitimacy. Peter Bürger, for instance, as noted in chapters one and two, argues that the early Twentieth Century avant-garde (as exemplified by Surrealism, Dada and the films of Serge Eisenstein) considers montage to be an exemplary practice because it undermines the conventionally accepted legitimacy of

linearity as the principle of representational order.[316] For the avant-garde, linearity denied rather than faithfully represented the reality of experience. Benjamin's 'technical unconscious' perhaps best encapsulates this conception of experience as essentially disparate and fragmentary and as such champions montage as its truly faithful means of reflection. For Benjamin, montage is the 'incorporation into art of the fragments of lived experience', what Bürger calls 'reality fragments'.[317]

In cinematic terms, the form is perhaps epitomised by the Godardian cut-up, which endeavours to rupture the continuous surface of fictional filmmaking, bringing the outside into the frame and so challenging its status as a system of truth. Arguably, Manet's paintings at the outset of Modernism already attempt, in a similar fashion, to disfigure this essential attribute of representation; *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, for example, altogether stages an awareness of itself as a painting - a 'desire which is at bottom,' according to T. J. Clark, 'realistic'. Thus for Wall, 'by the middle of the 1970s, I felt that the Godardian look of this art had become so formulaic and institutionalised that it had completed its revolution.'[318] Benjamin and Bürger's insistence on montage as a politically motivated avant-garde critique of temporary discontinuity and the mental manipulation of time and space, hides an idealised conception of social life and runs the risk of suggesting that the normative condition of experience is something continuous or free of mental manipulation.

At the turn of the Twenty-First Century, discontinuity and the manipulation of time and space are inversely much more characteristic of the cultural norm. As a result Wall is ambivalent in terms of the political effect of photographic montage. His cinematography is part of 'a struggle around a different legitimacy', one that suggests an alternative conception of representational space.[319] Instead (and exemplified in his reactivation of

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[316] See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).
[317] See Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overcoming Conformism*, p. 117; Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 36.
[318] Wall quoted in Arielle Palenc's interview with Jeff Wall, in *Jeff Wall*, ed. by Thierry de Duve, p. 11.
[319] Wall is explicit on this also: 'Representational art, like mine, which rests upon a notion of the unbroken continuity of certain aspects of modern culture, must be looked at and experienced through a dialectical understanding of the suspicions that have been brought against the unification of the dramatic space of the

Manet), Wall chooses to stage (according to a deliberately cinematic language) an imitation of the continuous surface of the completed tableau, one that imitates the displaced condition of the pictorial tradition and the very nature of its anxious legitimacy conceptualised as a cinematically-conceived *mise en scène*. Rather than Godard, Wall is intrigued by filmmakers apparently interested in 'the preservation of the classical codes of cinema' and consider these codes to be a form of cultural constraint (reminiscent of Mathews' use of literary formulae such as the N+7 method that force the author to do what he or she wouldn't otherwise do and so challenge the relationship between truth and intention in artistic creativity), through which an auteur such as Buñuel, Pasolini, Bergman, Fassbinder and Eustache develop a radical conception of the art-form's historical condition.[320] Here, it is worth quoting Wall at length:

> What happened [in this type of cinema] was that the outside... did get inside, but in doing so it refused to appear directly as an outside, disruptive element [as with the jump cuts of Gordardian practice which meant to 'let in the outside, and break up the seamlessness of the illusionism']. It dissembled. It appeared to be conventional, appeared to be the same as (or almost) the conventionalised 'signs for the real' that make up ordinary cinema. Bunuel was of course a master at this. So, the new form of the threshold was not a drastically broken-up surface as in Godard, but a self-consciously, even ironically, even manneristically normalised surface. This is – or seems to be – a more ambivalent approach to the idea of critique and auto-critique than an openly contested one. This apparent ambivalence, this technique of mimesis and dissembling, this 'inhabitation' didn't satisfy everyone who demanded avant-gardist criteria of overt, antagonistic confrontation.[321]

The suspicions brought against the dramatic space of the picture, that challenge the cultural authority of the author, are thus played out as part of a cinematography that, as it were, inhabits the naturalised conventions of pictorial representation and works according to their inherent constraints of formula and audience expectation. Thus the shock of the protagonist's behaviour in a film like Buñuel's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* is generated by the conventional context of their otherwise formulaic or normalised (smooth or uninterrupted) presentation. The general practice of cinematography literally stages

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picture.' See 'Representation, Suspicions and Critical Transparency: Interview with T. J. Clark, Serge Guilbaut and Anne Wagner 1990', in *Jeff Wall*, ed. by Thierry de Duve, p. 119.

[320] Wall quoted in Arielle Palenc's interview with Jeff Wall, in *Jeff Wall*, Thierry de Duve et al., p. 11.

[321] *Ibid.*

mediation: the cinematographer controls, among other things, the lighting, lens choice, composition, exposure, filtration, and film selection for the director on the film set, and as such, mediates the drama of mediation, an inherently dramatic situation defined by the relationship between the authority of the author and the experience of the audience. So by employing the 'inner antagonisms' of the cinematographer's role in the production of movies, Wall imitates the cultural myth of authorial presence in order to stage a 'critical inconophobia' of representational experience. T. J. Clark misidentifies this imitation as something that merely reinforces the cultural domination and control of narrative representation:

> Could it be argued that what is happening here is that all these characters and situations are being de-realised and de-animated in order to be re-realised and re-animated as part of your own tableau, that finally the picture is one of the artist's means of control over things?[322]

In a sense, Clark detects in Wall's work the over-determined tendency for narrative order found in the American tradition of formal photojournalism. The formalistic Depression-era photographs of Walker Evans, for example, which have a profound influence on Wall, helped shape the way America sees itself at a time of social flux and disillusionment. In chapter one, it is shown how Evans' desire to document lives as they are lived, what is called the 'actuality' of photojournalism, informs the cultural consciousness and imagination of his audience. Photojournalism is usually considered a fragmentary act; the documentary photograph is a partial example of a greater whole and is to be considered in terms of a wider, unseen reality that can only be found 'outside' the picture frame. Yet with this type of authorial control Evans is able to perform a very specific form of storytelling, one in which the partial or fragmentary condition of the photograph becomes symbolic of a totality, a whole in itself. The cinematographic, however, *where representation is performed*, permits a different form of authorial presence, one which challenges the traditional position of the documenting art-photojournalist. In a picture such as *The Storyteller*, Wall is able to tell the story of this form of storytelling, its tendency to form totalising fragments, in which photographic

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[322] T. J. Clark in 'Representation, Suspicions and Critical Transparency: Interview with T. J. Clark, Serge Guilbaut and Anne Wagner 1990', in *Jeff Wall*, ed. by Thierry de Duve, p. 121.

verisimilitude denotes a wider form of social organisation.

Yet Wall inherits from the tradition of photojournalism a sense of place as a representational process that is key to this thesis, in that his interpretation of the totalising fragment of the documentary photograph, as with *After 'Invisible Man' by Ralph Ellison, The Prologue (1999-2000)*, demonstrates in its very form the manner in which a reality is constructed as part of a wider cultural process of representation where the real, the imaginary and the fictional converge somewhat seamlessly. This is reflected in how the picture becomes a theatre of the representative act. Through the double displacement of quotation and paraphrasing, authorial presence becomes a kind of cinematic presence that undermines the instinct for documentary-like photojournalism. Advancing on Delacroix's search for the perfect revelatory moment, this form of cinematography involves a dramatic organisation of space, but it also creates a geography of representation where the author and the viewer appear to occupy the same site of construction. Place is thus constructed according to the same uncertainty (legitimacy) as the picture. The cinematographer is the disembodied author, the disembodiment of order and control and as such the disembodiment of place. The knowable or audible communication of experience (to which *The Storyteller* and Wall's sense of a voice that cannot be attributed to an author or a speaker make their appeal) is exaggerated further through the literal disembodiment of language. The depiction does not speak of *something* it speaks of itself.[323]

This disembodiment of voice, language and authorial control is perhaps best evidenced in Wall's picture *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October, 1947* (1990). The ventriloquist's dummy is both a pun on authorial control and an obvious form of illusionism. The suspension of disbelief is childlike (represented by the 'audience' and further by the floating, helium-filled coloured balloons) but mildly sinister as the dated reverence of the children in the audience also suggests an element of fear. Fear perhaps on hearing, and in turn being addressed by, a familiar voice disguised as the (presumably)

[323] Foucault says something to similar effect: 'The speaking subject is also the subject about which it speaks.' See Michel Foucault, 'The Thought of the Outside', *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology*, ed. by James D. Faubian (London: Penguin, 1994), p 147.

wooden and mechanically-impeded voice of the otherwise inanimate; fear, also, of encountering the heightened sense of reality that the performance constructs. Indeed, the date, the interior and the dress in the picture jar with the modern technological quality of the image suggesting that again it is an image constructed not from direct experience or immediate observation but from memory (not Wall's however, so the title would suggest, as it is dated a year after his birth) and the cultural mediation involved in bringing the past into the present. Again, the technology of communication impacts upon, and distorts, the information as part of its presentation rather than posing as a passive delivery of observable facts.

Fig. 4.8: *A Ventriloquist at a Birthday Party in October, 1947* (1990) Transparency in a lightbox (2290x3520mm)

All of this can be derived from what is visible (the fear or discomfort suggested by the children's rigid posture, the collective gaze drawn towards the centre of the frame, the eerie-looking mannequin) yet Wall photographs this analogy of doubled speaking in

order to picture a certain invisibility: 'I can construct the gestures and appearance of the speaker and listener, and so can suggest that I also control the words being spoken and heard. But at the same time, it is obvious that I cannot, and that every viewer of the picture can 'hear' something different.'[324] The voice *in* the picture collides with the voice *of* the picture as the story of the photographer is displaced by the story of his subject matter. As such, it is 'something that can never be located in the picture, but it is what the picture is about, what it is showing somehow.'[325] Things are perceived in the photograph according to a visual language related to what has been discussed in the previous chapter in terms of literary language. Norman Bryson describes this type of cultural perception as 'visuality', something he contrasts with the 'unmediated visual experience' of vision. Visuality is an essentially mediatory experience: 'between the subject and the world is inserted an entire sum of discourses which make up visuality.'[326] As with language, perception is in this sense discursive. Wall's *Ventriloquist* is an attempt at some level to make visible the naturalised invisibility of Bryson's visuality. In the picture, 'that which is communicable *is* its language.'[327] That is to say the form of its language is radically integral and yet utterly absent. As Wall notes: 'talking...is itself an image of what is both included and never included in a picture.'[328]

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[324] Jeff Wall quoted in Arielle Palenc's interview with Jeff Wall, in *Jeff Wall*, ed. by Thierry de Duve et al., p. 10.
[325] Wall quoted in Lisa Joyce and Fred Orton, 'Always Elsewhere: An Introduction to the Art of Jeff Wall' in *Jeff Wall: Photographs*, ed. by Edelbert Köb (Köln: Verlang der Buchandling, 2003), p. 30.
[326] Norman Bryson, 'The Gaze in the Expanded Field' in *Vision and Visuality*, ed. by Hal Foster, p. 91-2.
[327] Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken, 1986), p. 317.
[328] Jeff Wall in Arielle Palenc, interview with Jeff Wall, in *Jeff Wall*, ed. by Thierry de Duve et al., p. 10.

Fig. 4.9: *Odradek, Taboritska 8, Prague, 18 July 1994* (1994) Transparency in lightbox (2290x2890mm)

Such scrutiny of the invisible arrangement of pictures is played out further in Wall's lightbox, *Odradek, Taboritska 8, Prague, 18 July 1994* (1994). The word 'Odradek' (as with its use in Mathews' novel *The Sinking of the Odradek Stadium*, looked at in the previous chapter) is found in Kafka's short story, 'Cares of a Family Man', and is the name given to an object of peculiar qualities that appears to possess both the animate characteristics of the enchanted material of a fairytale and those of a non-descript item of everyday uselessness. Wall has gone to great pains to visualise Kafka's Odradek, almost in defiance of the narrator's claims regarding its uncertain presence in life: 'closer scrutiny is impossible, since Odradek is extraordinarily nimble and cannot be laid hold of.'[329] The visual language of photography appears almost to supplant the literary

[329] Franz Kafka, 'The Cares of a Family Man' in *The Collected Short Stories of Franz Kafka*, trans. by Willa & Edwin Muir (London: Penguin, 1954), p. 428.

description which is itself an ambivalent aspect of Kafka's narrative. In appearance, the object is principally a condition of language and, as shown in chapter three, is introduced by way of an idiomatic confusion:

> Some say the word Odradek is of Slavonic origin, and try to account for it on that basis. Others again believe it to be of German origin, only influenced by Slavonic. The uncertainty of both interpretations allows one to assume with justice that neither is accurate, especially as neither of them provides an intelligent meaning of the word.[330]

Later, however, the dubious linguistic thread by which the object is attached to its name is very much a part of the object's actual visualisation: 'At first glance it looks like a flat star-shaped spool for thread, and indeed it does seem to have thread wound upon it; to be sure, only old, broken off-bits of thread are legible, not merely knotted but tangled together, of the most varied sorts and colours.'[331] The shifting legibility of Kafka's Odradek, as if conditioned by these material vagaries, is endowed with anthropomorphic characteristics ('the whole thing can stand upright on two legs') and, the narrator notes, for whatever reason, in coming upon the barely legible object, that 'you feel inclined to speak to him.' Indeed, Odradek (as if it were a person's name) is able to answer:

> 'Well, what's your name?' you ask him. 'Odradek', he says. 'And where do you live? ' 'No fixed abode', he says and laughs... Even these answers are not always forthcoming; often he stays mute for a long time as wooden as his appearance.[332]

This is perhaps what Wall is picturing, the mute communication of photography and how this type of mute communication is normalised by the visual relations it constructs. In the narrative, a certain behaviour is rationalised or made normal as part of the language of the Odradek. The unexpected becomes the appearance of what is expected as demonstrated by the narrator's apparent frustration over a mute piece of wood. As part of this uncanny encounter, Odradek is the material remnant of a peculiar relationship made normal even natural. Indeed it is the particular place of this naturalisation that Wall

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[330] *Ibid.*, pp. 427-8
[331] *Ibid.*, p. 428.
[332] *Ibid.*, p. 428.

dramatises. Odradek 'lurks by turns in the garret, the stairway, the lobbies, the entrance hall', and it is within the habitual and unconscious zones of everyday life through which one passes unthinkingly that the narrator comes to a specific form of consciousness:

> Am I to suppose, then, that some time or other he will be rolling down the stairs, with ends of thread trailing after him, before the feet of my children, and my children's children? He does no harm to anyone that I can see, but the idea that he is likely to survive me I find almost painful.[333]

Fig. 4.10: Detail of Wall's *Odradek, Taboritska 8, Prague, 18 July 1994* (1994).

The teenage girl descending the dark stairway is perhaps the mute embodiment of Kafka's infinitely repeated, and so, disembodied experience. Indeed, important for Wall is the locale of the Odradek. The picture again translates literary quotation, as does the work of Mathews with his allusions to the work of Kafka, into an alternative visualisation of place. It is a place of inheritance where domestic relationships are expressed by projecting symbolic or psychological forms of transition onto material objects. Odradek embodies, in its disembodied posture, 'The Cares of a Family Man' (or in another translation the 'Troubles of a Householder'), a father who 'sets his house in order', who is bound by a patriarchal relationship that organises the cultural passage from one form to another. As with a photograph, the object of this cultural accumulation will outlive its

[333] *Ibid.*, p. 429.

subject only to serve the mere appearance of reality: the longevity of an ongoing and arbitrarily constructed order. It is a mimetic construction in which an order repeats itself as it is copied or reproduced.

The language of this compulsion for mimetic construction, in which the place in the picture is squarely located in terms of the picture's production, is most provocatively enacted in the lightbox, *Mimic* (1982). The scene demonstrates a Benjamin-like understanding of mimetic practice in art. For Benjamin, as for Brecht, it is not enough to merely reflect the 'content' of social reality increasingly disguised by the naturalised language of vision. Instead, the mimetic art should reflect social practices 'and so switches to questions of agency and experience.' This is why the cinematographic arrangement or place of the photograph is important. 'Less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality... something must in fact be built up, something artificial, posed.'[334]

[334] Brecht quoted in Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in *One Way Street*, p. 255.

Fig. 4.11: *Mimic* (1982) Transparency in Lightbox (1980x2286mm)

Mimic, refers to both the practice of the subjects in the picture as well as to Wall's practice as a photographer. The central figure is mimicking the 'slant-eyed' stereotype of Asian physiognomy. He is also 'giving him the finger', mimicking a form of social practice that is divisive and de-personalising based not so much on individual relationships but on the expectations associated with social conditions defined by the various stratifications of race and class. The 'micro-gesture' represents a form of practice that is naturalised, automatic or impulsive, yet emblematic of these conditions. But there is another layer of mimesis that somewhat undoes the potentially over-determined nature of the gesture. The scene, using non-professional actors on location close to his studio in Vancouver, is reconstructed from an incident Wall witnesses in passing. Underlying the dramatic sense of antagonism is the suggestion that the central figure's confrontational gesture is being performed on behalf of the onlooker; in this case both the photographer

and the potential audience of the photograph. The gesture of the central figure is only meant to be, as it were, half-seen by the man he is following. Yet it is on full-display for the passing photographer. Thus a wider sense of social reception appears to be at the heart of the compulsion for mimesis. Photography and the technological means of reproduction, the naturalised form of seeing and displaying, of performing and acting, are to some extent translated into everyday life. The form and culture of mimesis (the street-photography that here inspires Wall) plays a vital and ambivalent role in its physical reproduction.

In this way, and firmly within the frame of his pictures, Wall is able to perform an act of mediation characterised by the technology not only of photography but of cinema. This is discussed in more depth in the next chapter. Harmony Korine like Wall, uses non-professional actors and 'real' settings, in order to create films that speak just as directly to the problems of place and representation as they are considered in this thesis. Here, it is worth remembering the extent to which Benjamin associates the cinema with the modern experience of everyday life. For Benjamin, the dominance of the lens in the Twentieth Century is a result of its naturalised imitation of the eye. As Esther Leslie notes:

> Film is an expressive mimetic medium which is formally adequate to a sense perception refurbished by industry... Benjamin is attentive to the way that a shock-imbued, disjointed form of unconscious perception, habitual in modern daily processes of work and leisure, is duplicated by the conscious perception required by film.[335]

Lens and eye inform one another as part of a process of naturalisation, where experience and representation continuously exchange resemblances. Wall's cinematic lightboxes denaturalise the mimetic nature of this process by staging its imitation according to the character of its formal and habitual mode of representation. If, as Peter Brooks suggests, Delacroix's paintings resemble film stills that 'attempt to give the potential spectator a sense of the essence of the action that will be played out over two hours,' Wall's lightboxes stage an equally cinematic play on experience and representation by mimetically reproducing the accumulation of dramatic elements (the instantaneous

[335] Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, p 115.

narration) of modern mediation or storytelling.[336] If imitation in art is to bring representation into the realm of experience and agency, Wall realises it will do so only in imitation of its own compulsion for mimesis.

The Message Illuminated

Artificial light is a vital element of this technological mimesis. It is worth remembering that, as well as bearing the resemblance of photography and the aura of cinema, *The Storyteller* and each of the lightboxes produced by Wall are primarily objects of self-illumination. Light, according to Lisa Joyce and Fred Orton, is 'the luminous imperative of seeing and understanding; and of what is good.'[337] In this idealised conception, the lightbox might be considered a technology of 'seeing', an act of illuminated mediation. The most common experience of the lightbox, however, is its use in outdoor advertising. The relationship is important. John Roberts notes that in employing the common technology of advertising, 'Wall's conceptualised realism attempts to link the representation of the 'everyday' with the dominant fictionalised experience of the 'everyday' within advanced media based culture.'[338] In the illuminated advertisement, light is less the imperative of sight, or seeing, as it is the imperative to be seen. The lightbox of advertising enacts a language of perception; it is as much about the reproduction of certain practices as it is about the brandishing of a particular cultural content: that is to say the content of the message is often the naturalisation of the way in which advertising messages are delivered.

The lightbox enacts, in this sense of cultural and economic brandishing, a way of articulating space: 'The role of advertising in modern industrial societies is to verbalise and to image the possible meanings of things and to facilitate the exchanges of meaning as they occur in social interactions.'[339] As an object that 'verbalises' meaning the advertising lightbox is, arguably, a powerful form of storytelling. Lightboxes arrest the

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[336] Peter Brooks, *History Painting and Narrative: Delacroix's Moments*, (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 1998), p 25.
[337] Lisa Joyce and Fred Orton, ''Always Elsewhere': An Introduction to the Art of Jeff Wall, in *Jeff Wall Photographs*, ed. by Edelbert Kob, p. 22.
[338] John Roberts, *The Art of Interruption* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 188.
[339] William Leiss, Stephen Kline, Sut Jhally, *Social Communication in Advertising*, (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 260.

attention of passers by. When Wall displays his lightboxes in bus stations and shopping streets he in effect equates the artistic myth of representation with advertising as a mechanism of common visual culture. Yet, shown here, the talking pictured in Wall's lightboxes is ambivalent, even mute; the content of its meaning is uncertain. What is made clear is the process of its production.

In this way, Wall's characters are often engaged in speech, it might be argued, in imitation of this special form of verbalisation that both speaks and fails to speak in advertisements. The advertisement fails to speak of its production, 'the thing seen is in fact a screen that obscures the material process of the object's production.'[340] This 'verbalisation' is part of the place of its performance, the way in which it articulates space. The place of the lightbox is constructed in terms of a fixed relationship of production and reception in which the commodity, endowed with a strange connection to the physical object it represents, is made mysterious. In this sense, the verbalisation of the lightbox acts as a stage upon which the mutual visibility and invisibility of commodity fetishism is produced; where seeing becomes more than the 'physical relation between physical things.'[341] This is why Wall, in a picture such as *The Storyteller*, attempts to stage so carefully the visible and invisible determinations of the experience and agency of his characters, all within the over-familiar and over-formalised conventions of the lightbox. The formal arrangement breaks down as the attention of the audience is drawn to, rather than directed away from, the form of its production. The representative enactment becomes a form of verbalisation, a targeted or direct communication of an illuminated representation (story or narrative) that could perform a story of everyday 'mass-experience'.

Benjamin, like Wall, is taken by the guise of this experience. Benjamin's *Arcades Project* often illustrates the way in which the fixed relationship of meaning fabricated by the verbalisation of advertising can break down as it, involuntarily, draws attention to the conditions of its production. Here, Benjamin anticipates the cinematic dream of the

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[340] Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin: Overpowering Conformism*, p. 115.
[341] Karl Marx quoted in Esther Leslie, *Ibid.*, p. 115.

advertising lightbox among the illuminations of the arcades of Paris and Berlin in which place and representation so radically converge:

> Many years ago, on the streetcar, I saw a poster that if things had their due in this world, would have found its admirers, historians, exegetes, and copyists just as surely as any great poem or painting... As is sometimes the case with very deep, unexpected impressions, however, the shock was too violent: the impression, if I may say so, struck with such force that it broke through the bottom of my consciousness and for years lay irrecoverable somewhere in the darkness... I had it once more. Here is what it looked like. In the foreground a horse-drawn wagon was advancing across the desert. It was loaded with sacks bearing the words "Bullrich Salt." One of these sacks had a hole, from which salt had already trickled a good distance on the ground. In the background of the desert landscape, two posts held a large sign with the words "Is the Best." but what about the trace of salt down the desert trail? It formed letters, and these letters formed a word, the word "Bullrich Salt." Was not the re-established harmony of a Leibniz mere child's play compared to this tightly organised predestination in the desert? And didn't this poster furnish an image for things that no one in this mortal life has yet experienced? An image of the everyday in Utopia?[342]

Benjamin seems to be signalling the significance of a representational activity that is vital for the understanding of Wall's pictorial project. Benjamin is actively re-inhabiting the site of reception. He realises that the content of any given advert is not the product or commodity it represents, rather, the actual content is a certain language of reception. The words 'Bullrich Salt' miraculously illuminated against the desert landscape have become so mysterious that their connection with the object they signify has been altogether lost. Benjamin's fascination lies instead with the language of visual communication and the space of representation that opens up, through which memory and consciousness bring him back to himself.

Similarly, Wall imitates the manner in which the 'content' of advertising is its 'practice'. Wall, in his lightboxes, is engaged in identifying the site of reproduction, the place of storytelling, and so rather than its content, Wall's pictures imitate the practice of commercial commodity culture perhaps because its true content is its mystification, or

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[342] Walter Benjamin *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 173-4.

indeed, the language of its reception. Wall, like Benjamin, situates his practice squarely in terms of such languages of reception and production. 'For Benjamin identity and location were inseparable: knowing oneself was an exercise in mapping where one stands.'[343] Part of this mapping involves a re-translation of the image-language of space. The relationship between the advertising image and the psychological and social condition of its reception is not a given, is not a fixed assumption. It is part of the practice of memory and experience; a process Benjamin comes to understand in much more depth through his appreciation of technologies such as photography and film.

The technological understanding of this condition is drawn from Benjamin's theorisation of 'aura'. Benjamin's fascination with photography, in particular the Surrealism of Eugene Atget, and the reproduced images of advertising, stems from the way in which 'it initiates the emancipation of object from aura'. Benjamin is ambivalent about the perceived 'loss' of aura at the hands of visual reproduction. As well as an essential quality of aesthetic experience, Benjamin seems to suggest that aura is (in similarly essentialised terms) a form of cultural value. It is important to recognise here that, for Benjamin, aura is a metaphorical device; one that allows him to articulate the rather elusive quality he considers an essential aspect of art: aura is 'a strange weave of space and time: the unique semblance or appearance of distance, no matter how close the object may be.'[344] Aura means that no matter how close, the object establishes distance.

Wall's lightboxes are to some extent informed by this historical condition of near-distance. Yet for Wall, rather than a metaphor for the experience of aesthetic enlightenment, aura has been made literal. The commodification of aura as part of the proliferation of media culture might otherwise be confused with some form of ideological delusion. In his literal renditions of this predicament Wall seems to be suggesting something to the contrary: commodity culture is not illusion, it is a material reality: 'circumstances appear to people as they really are.' Moreover, aura represents a form of cultural value, which perhaps accounts for Benjamin's ambivalence on the subject. The

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[343] *Place, Politics and Identity*, ed. by Michael Keith and Steve Pile, p.26.
[344] Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', in *One Way Street*, p. 252.

essential aesthetic quality of distance within nearness depends profoundly on a cultural industry that constructs aura in order to sell art. The artificial lightbox parodies this kind of cultural management, intrinsic to what is referred to elsewhere in this thesis as cultural description. This form of cultural description manufactures a value-laden economy of aura. For Benjamin, technologies of mass reproduction have the effect of allowing for a certain scrutiny of this culture almost, as it were, from within. Conceptual art like Wall's often trades on the system of meaning in terms of the cultural production of the aura. Indeed, in doing so, lightboxes such as *Morning Cleaning* (1999), in which a certain form of reality is drawn from the iconic aura of the Mies van der Rohe Pavillion in Barcelona, re-appropriate and re-translate the auratic system of value as being something as managed and controlled as it is reproduced.

Fig. 4.12: *Morning Cleaning* (1999) Transparency in Lightbox (1807x3510mm)

Impossible Place?

Wall's cinematography, then, is one of resemblances: it resembles the orchestration and control of production and reception as 'verbalised' in the 'organised predestination' of advertising. His photographs are also the resemblance of photography. Relocated to the site of continuity and storytelling, questions of agency, experience and representation are acted out within the very field of their mysterious mediations.

These questions are considered further in the following chapter as part of a closer look at the contemporary cinematic operations of place in the films of Harmony Korine. Wall's sense of cinematography incorporates a range of perspectives that include literary techniques, the verbalisations of mass media as well as the filmic perception that characterises everyday cultural reception. The films of Korine, which are often quite different in their stylistic approach in comparison to the unified cinematography of Wall's work, nonetheless offer an interesting take on the issues raised in Wall's photography. Contrasting in its level and intensity of noise and distortion, Korine's practice, like that of Wall's, demonstrates a preoccupation with the stories of storytelling. Korine also employs non-professional actors and stages his films away from the prefabricated sets of Hollywood, instead locating his representational practice in terms of local community networks and the various ways in which these networks are mediated and performed. Moving on from Wall's still images, the films of Korine, as will be shown, draw out further the relationship between the actual place (the manner in which places are experienced or practiced) and the construction of place as a process of representation. Indeed, Korine situates his work in landscapes reminiscent of those 'documented' in Wall's lightboxes (on the edge of highways, in front yards, on buses and so on) and while in many ways different (they perhaps draw out the distortions of this representational process *as a distortion* rather than as a beguiling smoothness), the verbalising (or talking) images of Korine's films take the discussions of Wall's mute verbalisations further into the territory of place and representation as they open up a new kind of cinematic or filmic consciousness, reorganising established conceptions of how cinema and the cultural (or photographic) imagination relate.

In moving on to Korine it is, again, worth contending with the misnomer of non-place, for when Joyce and Orton (after Augé) employ the term in order to characterise the locations represented in Wall's lightboxes they merely employ the same process of recognition and availability commonly used in the construction of place.[345] Instead, the impossibility of representing place is at the heart of Wall's representative enactment, or storytelling. This is perhaps the subject of a lightbox such as *The Storyteller.* Increasingly, the problem of storytelling in modern visual culture is antagonised by the dream of direct experience and availability characterised by visual commercial culture and in particular the illuminated advertisement. Why has Wall chosen to tell the story of Native American displacement using such a recognisable form of mass communication and consumerism? Perhaps because he identifies modern consumer culture with the displacement of local communities; or, perhaps and in light of this discussion, because representation itself is a form of figurative displacement, a topographical disquietude informed by the discontinuous negotiations of an incomplete geography.[346]

Wall's lightboxes interrogate with some immediacy the very landscape of their representative form: 'a media culture that depends radically on the image.'[347] As has been shown, Benjamin makes the crucial distinction between information and communication. In response, Wall maps the peculiar diagonals of communication, arguably in an endeavour to shift the cultural description of direct experience. The storyteller, like the cinematographer, must disappear within her undeniable presence, as it were consumed by the flame of her story, if a place is to appear truthfully before the

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[345] Joyce and Orton suggest that 'Wall would have noticed that transparencies mounted in lightboxes are the most common way of displaying advertisements in the 'non-places' of 'supermodernity'.' Lisa Joyce and Fred Orton, "'Always Elsewhere': An Introduction to the Art of Jeff Wall, in *Jeff Wall Photographs*, ed. by Edelbert Kob, p22.

[346] The notion of representation as geography is important: it points to a topography that is both spatial and temporal, but also residual. Residual to the extent that the informative mode of representation, one that employs disconnected or isolated images or signals, always begins elsewhere so that the information is such only because it resembles that which the subject already knows. This representational pattern of consciousness constitutes a geography, the nature of which should not be thought of as exclusive to the imaginary, or as the negative condition of a determined placelessness. On the contrary, the lived experience of place is determined by the same process of storytelling and patterns of information. One might consider whether this representational pattern or geography attests to the impossibility of any so-called place existing as such beyond or outside the nature of its representational qualification.

[347] Wall quoted in Dirk Snauwaert, 'Interview', in, *Matthew Barney, Tony Oursler, Jeff Wall*, ed. by Christiane Meyer-Stoll (Munich: Sammlung Goetz, 1996), p. 92.

viewer (or reader). Wall suggests that this is now nothing but an impossible dream; the place in the picture is, after all, nothing but the picture.

Chapter Five

"Making a Scene": Harmony Korine and the Spaces of Cinema

The fantastic doesn't exist; everything is real. (André Breton)

Having considered the cinematographic techniques of Jeff Wall's photography, it is now necessary to turn to cinema itself in order to further explore the various ways in which artists and writers visualise the representational process of place. Harmony Korine is a contemporary filmmaker whose practice has much in common with the approach of Wall. He too employs non-professional actors, casting members of his own family, himself and 'local celebrities' found in and around the communities in which his films are set. Korine's work also references an avant-garde tradition that stems out of early Twentieth Century and late Nineteenth Century Surrealism and Naturalism. Like Wall's, Korine's work is to some extent an interpretive meditation on the documentary aesthetic which informs the cultural perspective of much of the work considered throughout this thesis. Most importantly of all however Korine, like Wall, sources the manner in which everyday, lived experience is constituted in terms of a sophisticated and pervasive media landscape. Neo-Realist-like portrayals of the lives of marginal suburban communities are mixed in with fragmentary and elliptical references to celebrity pop culture. While this democratic impulse has various implications, here it is highlighted in order to emphasise how the various incantations of American place as a form of local experience are constructed in terms of their de-localised communication. For Korine, like Wall, places are produced as they are performed; rather than merely reporting on or mirroring an existing condition, he employs a form of filmmaking that dramatises the local construction of the representational condition of place.

In particular, this chapter aims to demonstrate the peculiar nature and significance of the cinematic departure constituted by the films *Gummo* (1997) and *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999), both written and directed by Korine. While Korine's position within the New York tradition of independent filmmaking has become increasingly established it is

necessary that there should be some critical account of how avant-garde cinema and the Post-war tradition of *cinéma-verité* are brought to bear in his work.[348] This chapter will interrogate how and to what extent films such as *Gummo* and *Julien Donkey-Boy* destabilise current assumptions about cinematic materiality and narrative, as well as aural and visual subjectivity. In looking closely at Korine's involvement in Lars Von Trier's 'Dogme 95 Manifesto' and his collaboration in the making of Larry Clark's film, *Kids* (1995), this chapter positions the films of Korine in terms of a critical counter-current in American filmmaking, one that challenges the cultural orthodoxy of Hollywood but also reactivates the vital beauty and unpredictability of cinema.

This chapter will also consider Korine's literary experiments. These include his novel *A Crackup at the Race Riots* (1999) and his book-length collaboration with conceptual artist Christopher Wool, *Pass the Bitch Chicken* (2001). The reflexive and constructive nature of Korine's approach means that he is able to work with various media. The textual deviations are particularly relevant here as they reflect the interdisciplinary preoccupations of this thesis and demonstrate the way in which artists have had to cross aesthetic boundaries in order to articulate the shifting predicament of contemporary locatedness. Korine employs an experimental form of writing that is at the heart of his filmmaking. This writing, as will be demonstrated, is related to the literary images of Jeff Wall and the spatial syntaxes of Harry Mathews. In these examples the representational act of place is constructed according to a certain spatial grammar as part of a language of space. This spatial grammar doesn't have a value in itself; what gives it value is the way in which it is used. Concern for the representational qualities of language-use no doubt informs Korine's approach to cinema more generally. As an anecdotal, yet indicative example, the published version of the screenplay for Korine's film, *Julien Donkey-Boy*, for example, is accompanied by the 'mistakist declaration' in which one of the statements reads:

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[348] See Robert Sklar, 'The Case of Harmony Korine', in *The End of Cinema as we Know It*, ed. by Jon Lewis (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 261: '*Gummo* was the most reviled film ever associated with the post-1990 American Independent film movement.'

> grammer means more when words are mispelled and used incorectly in the proper sense of the word.[349]

The 'proper sense' is a set of largely arbitrary rules around which given elements of meaning are organised; it is things in their 'proper place'. For the theorist Michel de Certeau, a proper place is a place from which things can be considered as such; a position of cultural authority; 'a spatial or institutional localisation' in which the author can 'command a clear view' of his or her subject.[350] Korine's 'mistakist' grammar, like de Certeau's common-place language of everyday life, goes some way towards rejecting this proper sense and focusing on the local spaces of improper language-use. The 'aerial view' idealised by the proper sense (and made somewhat inherent to conventional Hollywood cinema) is sacrificed, most tellingly, for a close-up, eye-level *verité*-style that is perhaps the most demonstrative element of the spatial syntax found in Korine's filmmaking.

'There will be facts that are no longer truths': the *Verité* Tradition

The *verité*-style is perhaps the most provocative element of Korine's cinematic practice, and Korine makes it clear that the films of John Cassavetes have a profound impact on his approach.[351] Like Cassavetes, Korine is inclined to cast friends, non-professional actors, relatives and himself as performers in his films. Most importantly of all, Korine embraces the 'direct' cinema or documentary-like techniques that exert such an effect on Cassavetes because of the way in which they problematise the distinction between fiction and reality in film. The new documentary-film makers such as Shirley Clarke operating in New York after World War Two and in the wake of Italian Neo-Realism, initiated new

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[349] Harmony Korine, *Collected Screenplays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 170-1.

[350] Michel de Certeau makes this point most clearly in terms of the philosophical writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'Wittgenstein examines a play of regional and combined syntaxes whose foundations, coherence and overall significance depend on questions that are pertinent, and even essential, but cannot be treated in their 'proper' place because language cannot become the object of a discourse. 'We do not command a clear use of our words.' Rarely has the reality of language – that is, the fact that it defines our historicity, that it dominates us and envelopes us in the mode of the ordinary, that no discourse can therefore 'escape from it,' put itself from the distance from it in order to observe it and tell us its meaning – been taken seriously with so much rigor.' Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1984), p. 10.

[351] See Geoffrey MacNab's interview with Korine, 'Moonshine Maverick', collected in *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jim Hillier (London: BFI, 2001), pp. 194-199.

and vital ways to interrogate and record the changing aspects of modern reality.[352] However, for Cassavetes and the advocates of *cinéma-verité*, the most provocative of the advances made in the field of documentary-making is not the idealistic recording of 'truth', but the cinematic insight into how everyday life is being performed. This becomes the defining principle of Cassavetes' approach to fictional filmmaking: rather than being presented by or acted out before the camera, a reality is produced through the very procedure of its enquiry. It is the beginning of a documentary-like or factual cinema bound by its own preconditions, the most important of which being that its 'factual' nature is invariably subject to the mode of its production.[353]

Larry Clark, the director of *Kids*, is also heavily influenced by the *verité* tradition. In *Kids*, which is written by Korine, Clark employs a documentary-style that attempts to present the viewer with apparently 'real-life' evidence from the murky scenes of modern American childhood. Harmony Korine writes the script at the age of twenty, before being introduced to Clark in 1994.[354] *Kids* is a graphic portrayal of urban teenage existence defined by alcohol, drug-use, under-age sex and HIV. Casper and Telly (the 'virgin-surgeon') are two teenage boys that navigate the humid streets of Manhattan as Jen, a previous conquest of Telly's, discovers she is HIV positive. She struggles to catch up with Telly before he puts himself and other teenagers in further jeopardy. The film's documentary-like style develops a strategy that suggests an intimate knowledge of a specific sub-culture, its tendencies, values and codes of expression emphasising the proximity, but also the paradoxical unavailability of its subject. According to the film historian Erik Barnouw this is, in many ways, a vital aspect of the documentary film: 'its

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[352] Shirley Clarke, Lionel Rogosin and Morris Engel are documentary-makers who use scripts, rehearsals and repeated improvisation. All have a profound influence on Cassavetes. It should be noted that Cassavetes never termed his own work *cinéma-verité*. See Raymond Carney, *American Dreaming: The Films Of John Cassavetes and the American Experience* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), p. 28-30.

[353] For a useful definition of *cinéma-verité* see M. Ali Issari and Doris A. Paul, *What is Cinema Verite?* (New Jersey and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1979), p. 15: *Verité* filmmakers 'are anti-fiction, anti-scenario, anti-actors and opposed to all the other impedimenta of conventional filmmaking. They make films of real people in ordinary life situations... no direction is permitted... because the filmmaker is interested only in the event as it actually happens... no formal plot... no preconceived dialogue.'

[354] See Peter Biskind, *Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance and the Rise of Independent Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), pp. 200-215 for an overview of the relationship in terms of the film's production and the commercial development of Miramax.

ability to open our eyes to worlds available to us, but for one reason or another are not perceived.'[355] However, Clark's attempt to create a resonant impression or portrait of urban childhood tends to confuse the documentary viewer's expectations of identification and consolidation with a notion of 'childhood' that traditionally appeals to a Peter Pan-like desire for return. The documentary aesthetic appeals to a restorative conception of childhood, through which viewers are able to situate themselves in terms of an unmediated and somehow sub-social condition of imaginary innocence.

In his directorial debut Korine puts a considerable distance between himself and the topography of Clark's *Kids*. If the potency of Clark's fictional presentation of childhood is in making one place available to another, Korine attempts in *Gummo* to reorganise childhood narratives into a collage of unavailable displacement. Rather than restorative, the disconnections documentary filmmaking might otherwise account for or master are emphasised as part of the very texture of the film. More literally, the representational and culturally mediated relationship of childhood is relocated to Xenia, Ohio. Xenia, Ohio is a place of popular local legend, 'famous' for the tornado that destroyed half the town in April 1974 killing 33 people:

> Xenia, Ohio. Xenia, Ohio. A few years ago a tornado hit this place. It killed the people left and right. Dogs died. Cats died. Houses were split open and you could see necklaces hanging from branches of trees. People's legs and neck bones were stickin' out. Oliver found a leg on his roof. A lot of people's fathers died and were killed by the great tornado. I saw a girl flying through the sky and I looked up her skirt. The school was smashed and some kids died. My neighbour was killed in half. He used to ride dirt bikes and his three-wheelers. They never found his head. I always thought that was funny. People died in Xenia. Before dad died he got a bad case of the diabetes.

This is the voiceover that prefaces *Gummo*, told by Solomon (who 'looks like no other boy in the world . . . He almost looks like a cartoon character. When you look at him, it's hard to believe that he's a real person') in hushed tones over a liquid frenzy of images.[356]

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[355] Erik Barnouw, *Documentary: A History of the non-fiction Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 3.

[356] See Harmony Korine, *Collected Screenplays 1*, p. 78. The script for *Kids* remains suggestively uncollected.

A sequence of stock or library pictures, first hand footage of tornadoes, as well as hand-held footage shot on location by Korine himself, introduces a place where the fictitious and the actual bleed into their pre-existing distinctions. *Gummo*'s cast is made up largely of locals and semi-professional actors. Scenarios, dialogues and framing all appear, to some degree, found. An atmosphere of foreboding banality is layered into the landscape through elliptical interviews and passing conversation. Stories bubble to the surface anecdotally as if by accident so that the background constantly intrudes on the foreground material. Specific activities and behaviour suggesting relationships among the main characters are in this way consistently impeded upon within a textured reality. However, 'despite . . . the *verité*-style camera work, [Korine] is not making a neo-realist drama-documentary about the plight of the urban poor in the Midwest. The title itself suggests that the writer-director is not entirely in earnest: Gummo was the little known Marx brother.'[357] Moreover, the film is not in fact shot on location in Xenia, Ohio but the run-down suburbs of Nashville, Tennessee where Korine once lived.[358]

What then is Xenia? As a collection of dreams, visions, voices, interviews, anecdotes, rumours, sound effects, jokes, boredoms, eccentricities and songs, Xenia appears as a series of situations and encounters ranging from the mundane to the absurd in which the factuality of place blurs with its representational activities. The status of local legend is built into an aesthetic of found material. Local myth is borrowed from and incorporated into the act of filmmaking in the same way that it informs those fictional aspects integral to everyday experience. This is reminiscent of Smithson's textuality and his use of local narratives and documentary storytelling. The site of *The Spiral Jetty,* The Great Salt Lake in Utah, and its apparent 'freak of nature' quality is accounted for by local myth through various vernacular tales. One of these narratives locates the lake's origins in a great whirlpool created by a hidden waterway that connects it with the salt waters of the Pacific Ocean. Places are thus experienced as they are constructed through

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[357] Geoffrey MacNab, 'Moonshine Maverick', in *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jim Hillier, p. 194.
[358] See Robert Sklar, 'The Case of Harmony Korine', in Jon Lewis, *The End of Cinema as We Know it* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 265.

representational narratives and Smithson, as with the *Wizard of Oz*-like tornado of Korine's Xenia, builds this as a model of production into his mediatory artwork.

It is Xenia, as a territory of representational constructs as much as a 'real place' (like the Great Salt Lake), that provides Korine, in this sense, with a setting for *Gummo*. Rather than a straightforward source, *Gummo* is set in Nashville's suburbs as a copy of Xenia's already fictional actuality. *Gummo* is certainly 'scripted', 'acted' and 'set' in the conventional sense, but the camera responds with an ambivalent awareness suggesting an anxious (yet, inherently mediatory) distance from itself as a tool for fiction-making. In one scene, Tummler, a second teenager who partners Solomon as the film's central protagonists, gives a hysterical teeth-chattering rendition of a Marx brother skit. The scene is important as it underlines the film's peculiar notion of the relationship between practice and place. The performance, within the wider performance of the film, represents a mock appeal to the invention of Xenia:

> It's murderous what's going on with people today. One fellow comes up to me on the street right here in Xenia and says he hasn't eaten in three days. I say, 'Force yourself.' Another guy comes up and says he hasn't eaten in a week. I say, 'Don't worry, it tastes the same.'

Tummler's performance betrays the influential presence of the camera. The found cliché of his sideshow jokes, as familiar as they are predictable, depend on the deranged energy of their delivery. Tummler has an audience (Solomon) and it is this relationship (now integral to the film's construction) that generates the subsequent self-characterisation. Solomon can be heard saying in a voiceover accompanied by distorted stills of Tummler in various poses: 'Tummler sees everything. Some say he's downright evil. He's got what it takes to be a legend. He's got a marvellous persona.' As in the Cassavetes dramas or the 'documentary' films of Shirley Clarke that respond to Italian Neo-Realism, there is an acknowledgement that characters do not present themselves; they perform themselves. 'Certainly, there is nothing we see on the screen which has not also happened in 'real life', but 'real life', in this case, means in front of the camera and through the camera. Cassavetes and his friends do not use the cinema as a way of

reproducing actions, gestures, faces or ideas, but as a way of *producing* them.'[359] Xenia, unlike the New York youth sub-culture in *Kids*, is not true before the film: Xenia is true in the film. In other words, Xenia, both in its 'real-life' local-legend status and in how it is constructed in *Gummo*, is a place born out of, or produced as part of, representational practice, where the real is the condition of the way in which reality is performed.

Tummler and Solomon, as the film's central protagonists, are unlikely lead characters. If Xenia is the depiction of childhood as a landscape of displaced unavailability, then the centre ground, traditionally occupied by the fears, doubts, wishes and desires of characterisation, is to some extent emptied out. Rather than playing to what Brecht and Benjamin consider the relaxed empathy of the audience, Tummler and Solomon remain disidentified, always at the boundary of their awkward role as actors in a film. In order to identify a discernible plot or storyline in *Gummo*, however, commentators might point to Tummler and Solomon. Both appear out of the ordinary, Solomon's cartoon-status has already been noted while Tummler is cast as 'part-trash, part-Bible', and they receive the lion's share of scripted dialogue. The two boys set about killing stray cats in the neighbourhood, selling the carcasses to unspecified buyers (a Chinese restaurant is mentioned) and buying glue with the proceeds. The way in which the camera appears to be in pursuit of the two boys is not unlike the following of Casper and Telly in *Kids*, only in *Gummo* the camera's pursuit is interrupted by the type of fractured landscaping of scattered elements of contextual narrative so that the general movement becomes less of a deliberate documentary device and more of an episodic blur.

Tummler and Solomon are further removed from Clark's characterisation by their lack of purpose and urgency. When they come upon Jarrod, a would-be competitor also killing and selling cats, they are more interested in Jarrod's catatonic grandmother. Later in the film, Tummler and Solomon break into Jarrod's dingy house and turn off his grandmother's life-support machine. Again there is an integral reference to their sense of performance that plays on the reality of their actions. They break in wearing matching

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[359] See Sylvie Pierre, Jean-Louis Comolli: 'Two Faces of *Faces*', in *Cahiers du Cinema 1960-1968: New Wave, New Cinema, Re-Evaluating Hollywood*, ed. by John Hillier (London: Routledge, 1986), p. 326.

Dolly Parton masks and remain woodenly unceremonial in their duties. Solomon claims she smells like 'baked ham'. Tummler flicks the switch, noting as he strokes her hair, 'She's always been dead. She's been gone for a while.' The continuity of plot from one episode to another is endowed with a degree of accident and underlines the ambivalent attitude towards the access and availability suggested in the camera style. The jumps and cuts of Xenia's displacement literally break up the characters' sense of interiority; what remains is their peculiar behaviour and the few words they say, as if, like the dormant grandmother, there is no interior to occupy. This is where the documentary genre is signalled most critically. The camera acts as a mirror where, on the one hand, a certain reality is reflected, while on the other Tummler and Solomon, gazing back at themselves, act out the role of reluctant insiders.

This mirroring signals a telling distinction between the two films, *Kids* and *Gummo*. The 'truth' of Clark's directorial position is perhaps lost in the heavy narrative organisation, while Korine's sense of displacement in many ways echoes a Brechtian attitude in his mirroring of the 'real' and is directly related to the cinematography of Wall's photographs and their sense of 'epic theatre', in which they draw the attention of the audience toward the nature of their own construction.[360] Korine, like Wall, uses this constructivist technique in order to interrogate the way in which the real, within a sophisticated culture of pervasive media representations, is constructed in how it is mirrored.

An episode from each of the films serves to underline the point. During a vital scene in *Kids*, as Jen is moving through Manhattan hoping to catch up with Telly and inform him of his HIV status, the camera lingers on her reflection in the taxicab's rear-view mirror. In *Gummo*, the fourteen year old Solomon performs a straight-faced dance and weight routine to Madonna's 'Like A Prayer' before a wall-sized mirror in the basement of his mother's cluttered and disorderly house. In *Kids*, Jen's reflection acts as a central point of narrative organisation. Amid the high-contrast, warts-and-all presentation of teenage

[360] See Brecht's 'Alienation-effect' in Bertold Brecht, 'Short Description of a New Technique in Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect,' in *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader*, ed. by Michael Huxley and Noel Witts (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 102.

despondency her reflection represents the beautiful image of recognisable stardom (Chloe Sevigny). On the other hand in *Gummo*, where Sevigny also appears, Hollywood is personified as a disruption. In an earlier scene, Sevigny's cool brand of celebrity chic is ironised as bedroom fetish or fantasy. Indeed, one critic associates her 'narcissism, knowing sexiness and gazing into the camera' with the films of Andy Warhol, where the persona and performance of 'stardom' determine the camera's mimetic preoccupations.[361] Similarly as Solomon performs for the mirror, Linda Manz appears, amid a cast of largely unprofessional actors as Solomon's mother. There is an awkwardness before their reflection as he refuses to smile even as she (jokingly) holds a toy gun to his head. Her familiarity coupled with Madonna's star-status trigger another pattern of recognition for the viewer (or listener) that renders the mother as estranged and out of place as the boy's behaviour. This achieves what Brecht calls the 'alienation effect'. It involves a reflexive use of gesture in which the 'actor achieves the A-effect by being seen to observe his own movements.'[362] Framed in such a way, the mirror deregulates the organisational relationship of camera, performance and audience parodying the 'truth' or 'reality' of the *verité*-style camera work. It is the unreal that is privileged in the mirror's reflection, not the real constructed in *Kids* through Jen's 'realistic' and empathetic movement toward her inevitable end.

This narrative inevitability is the traditional meta-narrative of growing into the authoritative position of adulthood alluded to in the final moments of *Kids*.[363] The final role of the documentary camera is to record a naked boy's confused appeal to the viewer. Surrounded by the near-corporeal fallout of an August day and night in Manhattan, and having raped Jen while she is comatose on the sofa, Casper, in apparent and sudden

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[361]Michael O'Pray, 'The Big Wig', in *American Independent Cinema, A Sight and Sound Reader*, ed. by Jim Hillier, p. 22.

[362] Bertold Brecht, 'Short Description of a New Technique in Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect,' in *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader*, ed. by Michael Huxley and Noel Witts, p. 104.

[363] See Freud: 'When an adult recalls his childhood it seems to him to have been a happy time, in which one enjoyed the moment and looked to the future without any wishes; it is for this reason that he envies children. But . . . it seems childhood is not the blissful idyll into which we distort it in retrospect, and that, on the contrary, children are goaded on through the years of childhood by the one wish to get big and do what grown-ups do. This wish is the motive of all their games.' 'Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood', in *The Penguin Freud Library Vol. 14: Art and Literature*, ed. by James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 219-20.

shock demands of the camera, 'What happened?' This direct appeal has the effect of awarding the viewer with an authoritative ability to look back, to look into and possess, and is reminiscent of the traditional narrative scheme of childhood texts. Indeed, it is worth emphasising the representational typography of childhood alluded to in a film such as *Kids* as it has very particular implications. It is a conception of childhood acting as a typography within which Eric Barnouw's restorative definition of documentary (in which a lost or unavailable realm is made open to an outsider audience) is played out in full. It is much more of a conventional landscape than the subject matter might have the audience believe. It privileges a particular relationship between observer and observed that reinforces a conception of childhood 'defined as something which exists outside of the culture in which it is produced... the child is innocent and can restore that innocence to us.'[364]

Thus the factual posturing of the documentary lens runs the risk of reflecting a particular agenda. Jacqueline Rose challenges the position of continuity resonant in 'the idea of a primitive or lost state to which the child has special access.'[365] The conception of childhood as part of a narrative continuity essentialises a culturally mediated relationship with childhood and equates the world of the child with a lost natural condition somehow outside of culture. 'The child is. . . something of a pioneer who restores these worlds to us, and gives them back with a facility or directness which ensures that our own relationship to them is, finally, safe.'[366] Although Korine's camera also alludes to the documentary he is able to blur the boundaries Clark only manages to reinforce in failing to draw attention to the authoritative position restored to his audience.

Clark's documentary style now seems misdirected when considered in terms of the aggressive narrative organisation within which it is framed. Bell Hooks, in an early review of the film, sets out a critical context in which she defines the hegemonic code of white heterosexual aspirations motivating Clark's characterisations. For Hooks, 'It

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[364]Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan or the Impossibility of Children's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 44.
[365]*Ibid.*, p. 30.
[366] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

becomes evident that this is a narrative about the organisation of white teenage male desire around phallic power. The power to dominate and penetrate.'[367] While this criticism may be to some extent reductive, it should point to underlying problems with the use of documentary techniques. Most notably, the narrative impulse in *Kids* (alluded to by Hooks), achieves coherence through the conventional trope of female beauty which becomes a form of organisation and control within the film's apparently disparate *mise en scène*. Clark's looking-glass (in which Jen's self-directed gaze passively mirrors the gaze of her audience), although superficially subversive, is a totalising moment of Hollywood realism – its self-imposed certainty restoring the position of an audience that understands how the construction of something desired produces an orbit of coherence and control. The mirror reflects the aggressive internalising strategy at the centre of Clark's narrative:

> When you're young not much matters. When you find something that you care about, then that's all you got. When you go to sleep at night you dream of pussy. When you wake up it's the same thing, it's there in your face, you can't escape it. Sometimes when you're young the only place to go is inside. That's just it, fucking is what I love. Take that away from me then I've really got nothing.

Telly's desire for penetration and control, to move inside and look around, might be seen as making manifest the system of expectation promoted in the myth of documentary availability and exchange; inside and outside are exchangeable positions the viewer can enjoy and openly inhabit. The camera merely pursues a character whose motivations are clearly articulated and outwardly expressed. In this way, traditional forms of documentary make the movement between inside and outside a relatively straightforward relationship of power as the two positions remain distinct and clearly defined. Yet Korine's perspective as a director develops a different form of interiority that challenges the authorised or 'proper place' of the audience, seemingly sanctioned in Clark's interpretation of his script. The *verité*-like reflexivity of the characters apparently performing themselves confuses the distinction between interiority and its outward expression. The disparity in the two settings, Xenia and New York, plays this out. Traditionally the project of *cinéma-verité* differs from documentary in how it challenges

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[367] See Bell Hooks, 'White Light', in *Sight and Sound*, 6.5 (May, 1996), p .12.

the moral and psychological autonomy of characters established by the filmic process of individual identification with the viewer. The interdependent relationship between characters, situations and determining environmental forces is communicated by each of these filmic elements being 'placed' together within the unpredictable reality of a living context. Thus, in order to locate Korine's work properly, it is important to refine the distinction between the two representational landscapes of Xenia and New York. Xenia's apparent unreality is far more pervasive and yet its realism, the sense in which it resonates with the lives it represents, registers at a variety of levels when compared to that of Clark's New York.

By way of clarifying the distinction, 'Xenia', according to Norman Bryson, are a pre-genre decorative form of Roman still-life painting and mark an unlikely parallel with the shifting sense of interiority developed by Korine, adding another layer of mediatory fiction to the representational territory of a film like *Gummo*.[368] The history of still-life painting, according to Bryson, begins within the closed walls of Rome where Xenia are painted as a kind of wallpaper. He turns to the Greek Sophist, Philostratus, who teaches in Athens and later in Rome in the Third Century A.D. for scarce evidence depicting the existence of such phenomena. The evidence is in written form; contained in the Sophist's work *The Imagines*, and consists of highly detailed descriptions of the paintings. Bryson is interested in how the language of the Sophist's descriptions supersedes the otherwise non-existent still-life paintings. 'The Xenia essentially come to us as a ruin.'[369] This ruined or textual condition emphasises what Bryson sees as the cultural context of any given depiction of the real. He demonstrates that what is important about the depictions of the lost Xenia, and as such the most important aspect of still-life painting generally, is not the depiction of objects, but the description of sight informing the moment of depiction:

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[368] See Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990).
[369] *Ibid.*, p.5.

> What *The Imagines* . . . describe are codes of viewing in a remarkably pure form: protocols, expectations and generic rules governing the viewing of pictures . . . Philostratus is educating his readers in the properties of viewing.[370]

The still-life has always been an attempt to copy directly, or represent the evidence of human activity. Bowls of fruit, furniture, tools, the elements of interior lives, the rooms people inhabit (though absent from the scenes themselves) all figure commonly in each single rendition organised around the basic materials of everyday life. Thus for Philostratus, Xenia act in the way of domestic spaces; moreover, they are spaces produced in how they are read by the viewer. Lives are left behind in them and Philostratus takes great care to examine the kinds of lives they are. Xenia represent interiors within interiors and the more faithful they are to the reality depicted within, the greater the degree of fiction.[371] Moving from wall to wall, the Xenia in a room can become increasingly complicated as the detail in their imitation sharpens. Often the paintings mimic the view from windows bringing plush gardens inside as if the walls are transparent. In this way, 'representation absorbs the house,' and so, whenever able to move inside, it remains unclear exactly where the viewer might be: he or she may still be outside.[372] The representation of the house and how it informs the production of the American suburban home is a question raised again and again by the films of Korine and is looked at in more depth both here and in the following chapter which considers the fiction of the model dwelling in Ben Marcus' experimental novels. For now, it is evident that Bryson's form of Xenia are indicative of the interiority that is developed as part of Korine's technique. A clearly-defined 'inside and outside' is challenged as the *verité* reflexivity emphasises the way in which codes of seeing are organised in terms of a desire to move inside.

The Xenia in *Gummo* allows Korine to stage problems and procedures of seeing that are similar to those identified by Bryson. Many of the scenes, including the grandmother's bedroom, are framed in the way of still-life paintings and begin their movement from the

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[370] *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.
[371] Bryson notes 'the elaborate changes of ontological register as images pass through different levels or degrees of reality, away from a primordially given real and towards an increasingly sophisticated set of fictions within fictions.' *Ibid.*, p. 36.
[372] See Bryson, *Ibid.*, p.36.

real streets, front lawns, yards to the non-real (dialogues, action, scenarios) of fiction. It is not clear where the conventions of fictional filmmaking end and the factual recording of everyday life begins. Material of the everyday clutters each of the interior spaces. Rooms are flooded with unwanted objects, the disused and ephemeral seem to pile around the characters so that they stumble and navigate, rather than pass through each room. Materiality in its very abundance, however, distorts the organisational aspect involved in the lives narrated by still-life images. The information normally signalled by a precise array of objects is literally lost in visual-noise. Korine may or may not be aware of the Xenia connection, but he is certainly conscious of the reading involved where images are most openly cast as space and the representational activity this procedure enacts. A viewing relationship is established as the supposedly real (or that which might be considered 'actual' as in the documentary or *verité* Realist tradition) 'is invaded by a principle of . . . fiction.'[373] The audience is active within such a space, in the same manner as the characters; but instead of being co-ordinated through space according to 'properties of viewing' or 'codes of recognition', both appear lost in the clutter of signs. The viewer is involved with the very materiality of cinema:

> The mobile, eccentric movements of the documentary camera and live omni-directional sound recording are superb examples of how apparent technical crudities could be converted into stylistic insights. They allow a filmmaker to create and record a polyphonic, layered reality, in which three, four, five or more simultaneous events or interactions might be registered successively to be pieced together by the viewer.'[374]

The documentary aesthetic as it is considered in this thesis in terms, firstly, of Kevin Lynch and Walker Evans but also in terms of Robert Smithson's textuality and the lightboxes of Jeff Wall, here becomes for Korine, a form of distortion *as* distortion. While Wall, for instance, looks to play on the seamlessness of documentary

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[373] *Ibid.*, p.23.

[374] See Raymond Carney's discussion of developments in camera and sound technology in documentary film making, in Raymond Carney, *American Dreaming: The Films of John Cassavetes and the American Experience* (London: University of California Press, 1985), p. 29-30. Also Jean-André Fieschi, 'Slippages of Fiction', in *Anthropology - Reality - Cinema: The Films Of Jean Rouche*, ed. by Mark Eaton (London: BFI, 1979) for a discussion of cinematic materiality.

verisimilitude in order to intensify the 'staginess' of his photographic resemblances, Korine emphasises the fragmentary brokenness of documentary storytelling that the narratives of plot-formula otherwise deny. The territory of *Gummo*, for instance, is the distortion of representation that enacts or constructs the cinematic as well as everyday reality of Xenia. Korine's story of storytelling is not one of beguiling or unsettling smoothness (the uncanny of cultural naturalisation) but is instead a story of distortion and noise. The 'mistakist' side effects of representing spaces as spaces of representation that Korine, as with each of the practitioners considered so far, defines as being integral to the myth of documentary is played out as a form of polyphonic and surrealist cultural feedback.

'Noise Accompanies Every Manifestation of Life'

This polyphonic and layered reality is reminiscent of what the Futurist Luigi Russolo calls the 'art of noise.'[375] Seeing and hearing through noise is evidently a crucial aspect of Korine's film making. *Kids*, by way of contrast, where attention of the viewer is rarely drawn from the progress of the film's central characters and where interruption is rarely more than a not un-familiar and generally brief postponement in inevitability, is far less noisy, less 'polyphonic' than *Gummo*. The cutting up of footage and the juxtapositions of seemingly random voice-overs are distorted further as they mingle within a soundtrack gravitating between death-metal and birdsong. When the visual stimulus is reduced to the seeming simplicity of Tummler and Solomon riding downhill on their bicycles, the scene is accompanied by the blaring rumble and fuzz of Nifelheim's track, 'Hellish Blasphemy'. Although apparently random, *Gummo* is littered with a series of quips and musical motifs (such as a repetitive and tuneless accordion) that thread their way through the disparate accumulation of noise. Is this what Xenia sounds like? Are these the sounds that Xenia makes? It is as if the viewer is confronted with a peculiar kind of dissonance produced when the real and the unreal collide and rub together. Tactically, the audience must now pick out voices from in amongst the local noise. A method of abstraction, as Douglas Kahn points out, 'noise can be understood in one sense to be that

[375] See Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noise: Futurist Manifesto, 1913*, trans. by Robert Filliou (New York: Something Else Press, 1967).

constant grating sound generated by the movement between the abstract and the empirical . . . The process of abstraction itself, what is lost, is thereby involved in the diminution of noise.'[376] The awkward and often quirky (obviously scripted) dialogue, again reminiscent of the use of characterisation in John Cassavetes' films, carries within it an unfamiliar form of sensitivity.

This dialogical sensitivity is important as voice becomes a strange mode of orientation within Xenia's sensory field of noise. The characters speak out of an empirical process, characterised as the part-invention of Xenia, but also as a way of articulating the sensory locale found within the desensitised landscape of media representation. In a way that is reminiscent of Jeff Wall's use of speaking subjects in his photographs, Korine taps a deauthorised language of visual representation as *Gummo* incorporates what appear to be various impromptu and found snippets of conversation. Often these play over the more organised visual arrangements. The disembodied speech, coupled with the gestural awareness of actors performing their lines, creates an anarchic dissonance. Often the profane voices are those of children. Korine's comment on the use of children as non-professional actors in his films is useful:

> I had heard those kids cursing around... at the Craft service table. I had never heard kids talk like that, you know, little babies. I asked their parents if I could put them in the movie... it's real as far as it's really happening.[377]

For many the scene is shocking, and it is clear that the children are speaking in order to provoke. They do this by subverting the 'proper place' of language. There is a sense that the children's verbal profanity belongs to an adult world, that their use of language in this way transgresses, and unsettles boundaries built into the codes of communication that inform an epistemology of expression and experience. This is achieved through a mixture of alterity and mimesis. The children are 'acting up' or 'making a scene' that trades on their assumed otherness; they are not of the adult world, and yet they are able to dress themselves up in the practices of their elders. Korine intensifies the dressing-up by

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[376] Douglas Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), p. 25.

[377] Harmony Korine quoted in Daniel Kraus, 'Complete Harmony', *Gadfly Magazine* (January - February 2000): http://www.harmony-korine.com/paper/int/korine/completeharmony.html

removing the immediate context. He only uses the soundtrack, and the sound is mixed in such a way that the voices become discernible only once the audience tunes in. An aural sensibility that almost automatically listens for meaning in noise is, in this way, attacked by the children's profanity. Cut over the top of various documentary-like landscape-shots of Xenia's local community, place and speech are 'observed' as being intimately interrelated. But instead of Benjamin's idealised storyteller, who in clear and somewhat sacred tones communicates the cultural continuity of space, Korine employs the 'acting up', or the profane performance of children who 'want to get big and be like adults'. In *Gummo*, the speech production of space, through which places are spoken, is a distorted mixture of mimesis and difference that performs the reality of local experience even as it appears to air examples of its 'authentic voice'.

Korine's use of found material of this kind is reminiscent of Bürger's 'reality fragments' as discussed in the previous chapter and reiterates the importance of Korine's connection with Surrealism and the avant-garde. This processing of noise suggests, in particular, an affinity with Surrealist cinema. As Kahn goes on to point out: 'The interpolation of noise was a means by which meaning could be generated from abstraction and thus corresponded directly to Surrealism's larger project of bringing realms of reality hither to guarded or unknown into mimetic practice.'[378] Under the heading 'Seeing or Believing' and among the jumble of images, jokes, dialogues and rumours that form Korine's novel *A Crackup at the Race Riots*, there is scrawled into the text:

> There can be no film without love, love of some kind. There can be novels without love, other works of art without love, but there can be no cinema without love.[379]

Korine's sentiments echo those of André Breton:

> What is most specific of all the means of the camera is obviously the power to make concrete the forces of love which, despite everything, remain deficient in

[378] Kahn, *Ibid.*, p.32.
[379] Harmony Korine, *A Crackup at the Race Riots* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), p. 29.

> books, simply because nothing in them can render the seduction or distress of a glance or certain feelings of priceless giddiness.[380]

In having their gaze returned, cinema is valuable for the Surrealists because love and its 'priceless giddiness' exist in the feeling of sight. Love in the Surrealist sense, and in the sense that Korine is hinting at, resonates both in the process of abstraction described by Kahn and throughout the interiors of Bryson's 'Xenia'. Breton's conception of love, mirrored by Korine, establishes a relationship between cinema and written texts that is based upon various levels of deficiency: one achieves what the other fails to achieve and so on. Love, in this sense, suggests that for Korine the representational process is relational and he extends this conception of the representational process to his literary experiments, as well as to films such as *Gummo*. The real, then, is a relational conception, that is to say, it exists in its abstraction, in its diminution, in how it is perceived. The sense of an object's reality exists in how it is perceived, perception is a culturally mediated relation and thus the object exists in this relationship of mediatory fiction and nowhere else. It suggests that Korine is interested in a certain kind of realism, born from a Surrealist attitude, whereby the noise of his Xenia, his moving still-life, is brought to bear by its reappearance in representation. As Kahn notes: 'Instead of inhibiting communication, where noise exists so too does a greater communication.'[381]

Kahn makes this assertion in terms of handwriting and points to the possibility of an alternative relationship between cinema and written texts such as the novel. In handwritten script, unlike in printed script, another layer of information (or misinformation) intrudes, so that within the act of reading, more than a given combination of words is communicated. In the difficulty of deciphering the eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of the hand Kahn suggests that the reader might detect hidden allusions to the writer's personality, mood or the immediate circumstances that determine the moment of writing. Luis Buñuel, the Surrealist filmmaker, despised his own handwriting perhaps because it represents this type of self-betrayal. Korine's note on

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[380] Andre Breton, 'As in a Wood,' see *The Shadow and its Shadow*, ed. by Paul Hammond (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2000), p. 74.
[381] Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, p. 26.

cinema and love, in contrast, appears in the novel as a handwritten note (presumably his own) penned in shaky lowercase characters. The notational form suggests something unfinished and ephemeral while at the same time referencing the filmmaker's hand as an ironic gesture of authorial control.[382] Partly disguised as childish intervention, and without the presence or permanence of typed script, the authorial control of the hand is there and it is not there; it automatically undermines itself as both something and nothing.

This use of graphology, at once communicating something and nothing, is worth considering in terms of the word play and translational devices discussed in chapter three. Harry Mathews explores the shifting terrain of literary communication in the way of a translator moving information between (often made up) source languages and a (subsequently unfamiliar) destination language. As such, he produces prose that often fails to 'look like English', revelling in the distortion and noise that is inevitably a by-product of his approach. Indeed, it is often the various by-products, the very noise or distortion of the message, as it were, feeding back, that may or may not carry the most meaning as his fiction endeavours 'to say something and not say it'. This induces a form of communication far closer to what may in fact signify the 'actual' experience of language. The handwritten entries in Korine's novel attest to a similar preoccupation with noise and messages feeding back and illustrate something of the literary legacy that informs his filmmaking.

This legacy is most obviously signalled, and most seriously undermined, in those parts of Korine's novel entitled 'rumors'. The rumours are listed numerically, categorically even, into unarguably bureaucratic arrangements; wordplay, noise and errant meaning combine with the iconic personas and unlikely activities of various incantations of established high and pop culture, in order to blur the factual with the openly made-up. Indeed, Korine's rumours cash in on the cultural capital of household names. Like the found material of everyday life in *Gummo*, the factually artificial narratives that organise celebrity culture

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[382] See Jean Claude Carriere's Forward to Luis Bunuel, *An Unspeakable Betrayal: Selected Writings of Luis Bunuel*, trans. by Garret White (London: University of California Press, 2000). Salvador Dali famously signed his name in the corner of numerous blank pieces of paper as a means of quelling the noise and chaos of the blank page. For each of these artists, noise is the material of form.

and manufacture a star system that appears to operate autonomously or free of authorial regulation (and indeed, becomes an awkward disruption in *Gummo* when Manz, Sevigny and Madonna 'appear') are re-appropriated in order to refract the form of their own construction:

> Tom Petty has a dirty fish tank.
> Walter Benjamin used to light firecrackers when no one was looking.
> Jackson Pollock had a foot fetish.
> John Ford snorted cocaine and liked to fuck obese black women.
> Dostoyevsky liked to watch his wife shit. He would take notes on her facial expressions.
> Isadora Duncan once scolded a homeless man for having a swastika tattooed on his forearm.
> Flavor Flav is a classically trained pianist.[383]

Rumour plays a role, in Korine's novel, similar to the proverbial in Mathews' work. There the proverb is an important tool in the way it transgresses authorial control and in how it functions explicitly in terms of its uncertain origins and the shifting contexts of everyday use. Like the proverb:

> Rumour is elusive and transitive, anonymous and without origin. It belongs to no one and is possessed by everyone. Endlessly circulating it has no identifiable source. This illegitimacy makes it a powerful tactic, one that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls a truly subaltern means of communication.[384]

Such characteristics appear to be indicative of Korine's approach to texts and define the textuality of a novel like *A Crackup at the Race Riots*. Like Benjamin's 'Storyteller', both cinematically and textually, Korine tells stories according to the narrative principles that mediate everyday life. The rumour is a useful textual tactic in achieving this type of disruption. The textual noise of the rumour is endowed with the powerful effect that Spivak identifies because of the way in which it reorganises the relationship between information and communication. Following on from the discussions in the last chapter where, as Benjamin notes, 'the new form of information is communication', information

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[383] Harmony Korine, *A Crackup at the Race Riots*, pp. 70-3.
[384] Rosemary J. Coombe, 'The Demonic Place of the 'Not-There': Trademark Rumours in the Post Industrial Imaginary', in *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, ed. by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (London: Duke University, 1997), p. 251-2.

is not fixed in meaning, instead, it is subject to the conditions of its movement, to the manner in which it is delivered and received. Korine's narratives are organised principally in terms of industries of mediation, in which information endeavours to maintain the appearance of frictionless mobility. Like Mathews, Korine makes the friction of media-storytelling the material of his stories.

Rather than reinforcing a fixed relationship between the reception and production of cultural meaning, rumour appears most meaningful (as a tactic) in the way its various forms of use compromise the construction of meaning as part of the performance through which places are produced. In this sense, rumour is like the pun. The pun is a verbal ploy intrinsic to much of Mathews' experiments and which again helps situate his and Korine's work in terms of the literary and visual avant-garde traditions of Proto-Surrealism and Modernism. Raymond Roussel and Marcel Duchamp, both influential in this sense, often employ puns in order to undo the automatic arrangements of language and its uses. Octavio Paz, writing on the latter, elegantly accounts for the pun and its relationship with meaning: 'The Pun is a miraculous device because in one and the same phrase we exalt the power of the language to convey meaning only in order, a moment later, to abolish it the more completely.'[385] Similarly, Homi Bhabha says of rumour: 'The discursive figure of rumour produces an infectious ambivalence, an 'abyssal overlapping', of too much meaning and a certain meaninglessness.'[386] To mix meaning and meaninglessness in this way, rumour, like the pun, and the proverb, acts as a self-destructive form of conveyance crossing what is real with representations of the real.

This relates most explicitly to the notion of place as a process of representation. Indeed, as well as literary, Korine's practice also enjoys a certain local heritage. This is not to say, however, that the literary and the local are so easily delineated. On the contrary, and when relating rumour to themes of place and representation and the question of cultural mediation, rumour has been known to play a subversive role of resistance in the field of public consciousness dominated by the representational discourse of corporate branding.

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[385]Octavio Paz, *Marcel Duchamp or The Castle of Purity*, Trans. by Donald Gardner (London: Cape Gollard Press, 1970), p. 6.
[386] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 202.

Rosemary Coombes, for instance, cites the infamous rumour that the food produced by certain fried chicken retailers is laced with chemicals that sterilize African American men, or that certain clothing manufacturers, 'targeting' urban consumers, are sponsored by the Ku Klux Klan, or that a trans-national corporate conglomerate that owns many familiar household cleaning brands is in league with Satan. The impact these rumours have upon the businesses involved, Coombe suggests, is profound: many go out of business, re-brand or completely transform the nature of their corporate 'visibility'. Indeed it is the nature of this visibility that makes Coombe's argument most provocative. It is the invisibility at the heart of corporate visibility, she suggests, that appears to invite the spread of rumour: 'these anonymous appropriations have the effect of pulling invisible companies into the public limelight'.[387]

Church's Fried Chicken, the target of the sterilisation rumour, for instance, is a chain of fast-food restaurants highly visible in black neighbourhoods but hardly known in white areas of the same Southern states. The manner of this type of corporate positioning in which chain-stores appear, seemingly overnight, 'with few other connotations to attach to the company's mysterious 'presencings' [other than] its disembodied trademark,' open up the space for a rhetorical territory (as noted in the previous chapter and the discussion of 'non-places') within which an equally disembodied form of discourse, namely rumours that spread like wildfire, flourish.[388] The rhetorical territory opened up by rumour is an important part of the cultural consciousness that Korine taps into, in his textual and filmic practices. De Certeau characterises rumour, or these febrile 'models of practice', as an 'art of speaking'; as with the way spaces are produced in the practices of children 'making a scene' in *Gummo*, or like folktales and proverbs, and as an effect of these rumours, 'the stylistic effects – devices and 'figures', alliterations, inversions and plays on words – also participate in the collation of these tactics.'[389] The stylistic effect of the rumour is a kind of 'turn' and, for de Certeau 'turns' 'inscribe in ordinary language the ruses, displacements, ellipses, etc., that scientific reason has eliminated from operational

[387] Rosemary J. Coombe, 'The Demonic Place of the 'not-there': Trademark Rumours in the Post Industrial Imaginary', in *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, ed. by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, p. 269.
[388] *Ibid.*, p. 260.
[389] See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 22-4.

discourses in order to constitute 'proper' meanings.'[390] The stylistic inversion of rumour, for Korine, plays on the effect of meaning. Slippages in the system of meaning that undermine the 'proper' 'presencings' of the corporate landscapes that invite the spreading of what Coombes (after Bhabha) calls 'demonic rumour', blur literary device with everyday tactic, spoofing the representational claims of authenticity by employing rumour as a model for a textual and visual modes of communication in which reception is an active site of production.

The activity of reception is also the subject matter of Korine's book-length collaboration with the conceptual artist Christopher Wool. Photographs taken by Korine become the subject of an ongoing exchange as the images, passed back and forth, undergo a process of layering, drawing, overprinting and photocopying. Receiving and resending becomes a form of production. Repeating images reappear almost as vestiges, as various forms of cancellation and distortion (smearing, dripping, bleaching) which produce a series of broken reminiscences in different, often quite subtle, degrees of disintegration. Again *Pass the Bitch Chicken* raises the question of reading and legibility.[391] In chapter one of this thesis, legibility is considered in terms of city design and the immediate perception of a 'readable' city landscape; and in chapter two, Robert Smithson's evocation of Edgar Allen Poe's character Arthur Gordon Pym, who has to navigate a series of illegible landscapes that he continuously fails to read, becomes paradigmatic of an aesthetic approach that questions the idealised assumptions of legibility and readability. Similarly, Harry Mathews' prose challenges the spaces of reading. Practice of this kind considers the ideal of legibility to be an intrinsically fraudulent device and not an ideal conception of things as they are, rather, the desire for legibility, the will to make clear, is to cheat or to lie (this obviously contrasts with Wall's position, but there is a certain illegibility built into the mute communications of his speaking protagonists).[392] In producing a very

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[390] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[391] Harmony Korine & Christopher Wool, *Pass the Bitch Chicken* (Berlin: Holzwarth Publications, 2001).

[392] A good example of this avant-garde position may be found in Frank O'Hara's brief essay 'Notes on Second Avenue' in which he gives, 'because you requested it, a more detailed identification of the subject matter' of his poem 'Second Avenue'. But as he points out, the exercise is not to 'make clear', but to 'make clearer' as the 'philosophical reduction of reality to a dealable-with system' only 'distorts life' in its attempt to render it legible. Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems* ed. by Donald Allen (Berkley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1995), p. 495-7.

material form of illegibility, *Pass the Bitch Chicken* is not written, as such, yet it is still very involved in the question of reading and reception:

> Korine and Wool are revelling in the raw aesthetic of visual noise, and in the collisions of chance and control, elaboration and reduction, violence and rehabilitation. Possible readings proliferate so abundantly that the nature of the reading encounter itself is changed.[393]

Pass the Bitch Chicken can be characterised as a collaborative exchange breaking down, giving way not just to a proliferation of possible readings but to the possibilities of reading itself, and takes further the textuality of Smithson's documentary essays and the non-correspondence of Artaud's epistolary encounter with Jacques Rivière that acts as an analogue (in chapter two) for *The Spiral Jetty* as a form of failed existence in representation. As in Smithson's work, *Pass the Bitch Chicken* presents the reader with the material of erasure or cancellation (in that, making absent is a form of presencing itself). This relates, again, to the discussion in chapter one that identifies representation as a form of absence and the formal organisation of that absence (presence). The substitution that this formal organisation involves is what is meant by mediation. Representation is taking away, mediation is adding in. Taken together, this process forms the cultural presence of media representation. The ghost figures that appear in the pages of *Pass the Bitch Chicken* (the residue of family snapshots and posing couples), however, rather than being made to appear in the photographic image seem to be caught or dissolving in the very absence that is integral to the production of photographic images. Sontag's assertion noted in the previous chapter that the photograph is 'true in so far as it resembles something real, sham because it is no more than a resemblance', perhaps misses the point being made here by Korine (and in a sense by Wall as well): that the unreality of this sham-resemblance is in itself a kind of materiality that is made real in the manner of its practice: that is to say in how it is received as a form of cultural production.[394]

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[393] Chris Goode, 'These Facts are Variously Modified: American Wiriters in an Information Economy' in *The Darkness Surrounds Us: Edinburgh Review* 114 (2004), p. 143.

[394] Susan Sontag, 'On Photography' in *A Susan Sontag Reader*, ed. by Elizabeth Hardwick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983), p. 350.

Pass the Bitch Chicken also takes further and challenges the multiple perspectives of actuality in Walker Evans' collaboration with James Agee and the anxiety of the documentary aesthetic as it is considered throughout this thesis (Evans' and Agee's sense of actuality is defined as the relationship between actual experience and the representation of actual experience).[395] It challenges the positioning of this type of representation in how it reveals the inherent disharmony of 'actuality' (arguably, Evans and Agee do identify this disharmony but here the disharmony or distortion is presented *as such*). The production of actuality is always elsewhere. The actuality of *Pass the Bitch Chicken* is in the relationship (or non-relationship) between the images and the reading encounter which fails to recognise itself as reading. Going from page to page, the reader (rather than 'reading') enquires after each subtle adjustment, inspecting the substance of blacking-out. As with all reading, however, it involves following black marks on a page and is a book, in this sense, that crosses a territorial divide in which the production of writing meets with the production of images (photography giving way to cinema) as a kind of visual distortion or textuality.

Indeed, Korine's use of photographs in this textual context is provocative. It incorporates the historical and cultural consciousness of photography made available in Wall's sense of 'Gestus' and 'Liquid Intelligence' by bringing to mind the modern digital image that arguably, begins to reverse the historical condition of photography, away from limitless reproduction and towards a consideration of the material texture, or residue of a process that otherwise (in denial of this historical consciousness) poses as being smooth or without friction. The advertising image, for instance, that intends to be more than a photographic image, is challenged by this sense of materiality in the way it draws attention to the material of the photographic advertisement as cheap reproduction rather than an essentialised message. Here the materiality of mediation, as with Smithson's textualisation of *The Spiral Jetty*, takes precedence, and leads into a discussion of

[395] This sense of actuality has a further dimension looked at more closely in the following chapter where the relationship between observer and observed in ethnographic documentary is considered as a textual practice. That is, in how the practice of observation influences the behaviour of those being observed and how this in turn impacts on the representation of observation.

Korine's second film, *Julien Donkey-Boy* (1999), a film which prioritises the material of the textured reality of video and how this materiality can draw out further the problem of seeing in noise.

A King at Night: *Julien Donkey-Boy*

By way of introduction and in encountering perhaps the most definitive example of this cinematic and literary 'seeing in noise', it is necessary to consider Korine's second film as writer and director, *Julien Donkey-Boy*. In one of a series of still images, a kind of montage technique also used in *Gummo*, Julien's voice is audible as we find him working in a home for the blind:

> JULIEN: Come here, come here, come here. See from here, I can see all the way, I can see all the way across from New York City almost all the way across to Los Angeles.
> BLINDMAN: Oh man! The big time, baby!
> JULIEN: I can see all the way to the other side of America.
> BLINDMAN: Whoa!
> JULIEN: All the way over to the West Coast. I can see right over from the East Coast to the West Coast.
> BLINDMAN: Oh man, oh man. Thanks man, for telling me man, damn!

Julien Donkey-Boy maps the striking circumstances of one family's life organised around mental illness. Like *Gummo*, it is a film pieced together as a kind of cinematic portraiture constructed as the presentation or assemblage of evidence, rather than the 'telling' of a story. Julien is schizophrenic, a young man drawn from Korine's own family life.[396] He lives at home with his brother, sister, father and grandmother, his mother having apparently died some time before. An interior world appears in segments and broken sequences as each member of the family goes about his or her daily business forever in the shadow of their tyrannical and dogmatic father played by Werner Herzog. Julien's sister Pearl, played (again) by Chloe Sevigny is heavily pregnant, Chris, his younger brother is training hard to be a wrestler under the watchful eye of their father, while their grandmother (played by Korine's own grandmother, Joyce Korine) is a wandering

[396] Korine's uncle suffers from the same condition. Ewan Bremner who plays the role of Julien was introduced to and spent time with him as the film was made.

presence throughout the suburban house. Again there is a documentary-like register, the sense that the reality of an otherwise hidden place is being made available, but here the *verité*-style is employed as a means of blurring the distinction between 'real' and 'fictional' communities. Again, the influence of John Cassavetes is evident, but it is also relevant to consider the influence of the ethnographic filmmaking of the French director Jean Rouch. Rouch's conception of *cinéma verité*, like the actuality identified in other branches of the documentary tradition, is not concerned with filming 'a reality objectively recorded by the camera but one provoked by its active presence':[397]

> Whereas Rouch stages this process of fiction making and becoming within 'real' communities, Cassavetes filmed communities that were fictional to begin with. But even on this point our distinction is easily unsettled. As well as acting in five of his own films, Cassavetes continually used as actors in his films his wife, his children, his parents, his in-laws, and family friends, in short, networks of family and community groupings that both precede and are constructed through the act of filming. In the films of Rouch... performance is what comes between cinema and real life. It is what both enables and disturbs the distinction between these two terms.[398]

Julien Donkey-Boy operates in precisely this territory. The community network and family structure of Korine's home-life that precede the film are constructed within it as he attempts to reproduce (in the way of Jeff Wall's photographs, reconstituted from memory) the nature of its condition.

This approach is intensified, moreover, by the rules governing the film's 'Dogme 95' status. Dogme 95 could perhaps be considered the contemporary manifestation of Rouch's reflexive ethnographic filmmaking. Composed by the Danish directors Lars Von Trier (*The Idiots*, 1998) and Thomas Vinterberg (*Festen*, 1998) the Dogme 'manifesto' is an attempt to 'purify filmmaking of its excess and untruth'. One of the 'ten commandments' in the manifesto specifically states that all cameras must be hand-held, almost demanding that there be the natural intimacy of documentary filmmaking. Other rules in the Dogme include the use of real locations rather than sets, a ban on

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[397] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 77.
[398] George Kouvaros, *Where Does it Happen? John Cassavetes and Cinema at the Breaking Point* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 79.

special effects and props, no soundtrack other than music produced in the scenes themselves, no lighting other than natural light or artificial lights found on location and everything must be shot on 35mm or digital cameras. All of these variants are already a part of Korine's aesthetic, but crucially emphasise the empirical nature of his filmmaking and the form of abstraction it achieves. Both Korine and the Dogme 'brotherhood' concern themselves with the essential paradox of this type of realism or documentary-like naturalism.[399] The arrangement or coherent organisation of a film is achieved not through an obvious plot or narrative development but through a type of real-life or empirical witnessing (often disturbing, often strange) of what is otherwise *unreal* if not for its appearance in the visual texture of cinema.

When Julien, who has already demonstrated unpredictable and dangerous patterns of behaviour, helps a blind man 'see' across America, Korine is directly signalling a tradition of the 'blind' in avant-garde cinema. Notably there is the case in Werner Herzog's film *Kasper Hauser* (1974) where Kasper, a character in many respects similar to Julien, has a vision of a blind guide leading a caravan through the Sahara Desert. 'A compass is of no help in the Sahara; the blind Berber guide instead finds the way by tasting and smelling the sand.'[400] This type of characterisation is a circular comment on seeing and orientation in modern narrative filmmaking. In 'seeing' this way Julien is re-reading the real for the blind, but also for the audience. As with the question of legibility in *Pass the Bitch Chicken* and the codes of seeing built into the conception of Xenia in *Gummo*, the attention of the audience is drawn to the manner in which a reality is constructed according to how it is read (or in this case 'seen' by a blind man in how he reads the description offered to him by the visual authority, or reading, of Julien).

Beyond the window is the familiar Manhattan skyline, its available proximity reversed with an effect (not necessarily achieved in *Kids*) of alienation carried in its imaginary transaction between Julien and his friend. Like Solomon and Tummler, Julien maintains

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[399] Yet there is also an essential antagonism within this relationship. Korine breaks many of the rules while making *Julien Donkey-Boy*. Chloe Sevigny, who plays Pearl, for instance, is not 'in reality' pregnant and the music, or soundtrack is not obviously a part of the organic location of the filmmaking.

[400] See Renate Gerulaitis, 'Recurring Cultural Patterns: Werner Herzog's film 'Every Man for Himself and God Against All, The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser', in *Journal of Popular Culture* 22.4 (1989), p. 61.

a precarious position within his landscape. His characterisation might again suggest centrality, the subject around which a family portrait is organised, but again the camera work is disruptive, its mirroring capacities mimicking Julien's peculiar perception of the world in how it is delivered. (Indeed, Julien is decentred further by the attention-seeking behaviour of Herzog's character in the film).[401] One further mirror scene demonstrates the characterisation of Julien's displaced relationship with himself and his environment. Here Julien threatens himself with a rifle:

> Stop moving, shut up. Listen, you're a dead man sonny, don't ever come back like in 1980 and you ate like a cancer. You killed the Jews you killed the hippies you killed all the mother's titties, you killed fucking cancer, you came back in the 1980s dressed as a sheriff. What're you doing, what're you doing? Answer me answer me answer me. . . . Hey this is Julien, King Julien. How you doing, King Julien? Hey my good friend how you doing? Hey, this is Adolf, Adolf. He ate my mother's titties.

Like Solomon's voiceover in *Gummo*, the script might suggest a confused internalisation of familial loss. The death of a parent precedes each film. But in moving the critical drama to the outside of each scene Korine invokes a different form of portrait; certainly a form distinct from the codes of viewing that make Clark's characters so familiar. Phallic agency, heterosexual potency, or self-confirmation instead of orientating the narrative, become *Julien Donkey-Boy*'s broken axis of confusion and disorientation. Incest and abuse haunts any purposive movement, as it becomes slowly apparent that Julien's sister Pearl is pregnant with his child.

This type of characterisation is 'aiming' at a reality elliptically rather than episodically:

> The character becomes a kind of viewer. He shifts, runs and becomes animated in vain, the situation he is in outstrips his motor capacities on all sides, and makes him see and hear what is no longer subject to the rules of a response or an action. He records rather than reacts. He is prey to a vision, pursued by it or pursuing it, rather than engaged in an action.[402]

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[401] It is worth noting the influence of cinematographer Anthony Dod Mantle who worked on each of the Danish Dogme films as well as *Julien Donkey-Boy*.

[402] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: Athlone Press, 1989), p. 3.

Werner Herzog describes his characterisation of Kaspar Hauser, based partly on historical fact and partly on popular legend, in terms of displacement. 'He is not an outsider: he is the very centre, and all the rest are outsiders.'[403] Like Julien, Kaspar Hauser is a centre but he is not a centring agent, or a centralising character, in the tradition of an orienting hero; he is the very instability in any such desire for coherence and control. These are the types of character that almost personify cinema in the way evoked by Deleuze. Having grown to adulthood in a cellar, Kaspar Hauser finds it difficult to make any distinctions between himself and his environment. And so again there is the noise ('Don't you hear that horrible screaming all around you? That screaming, men call silence?'), the distortion created as the main character fails to integrate or naturalise in terms of a local authority that violently rebukes the bizarre spatial behaviour and bodily disorientation of Kaspar. The distortion collects in the abstraction of his 'visions'. Regulating the unregulated – while cultural currency for an audience encountering a film like *Kids* – is instead made manifest in the brutality brought upon Kaspar as he moves further from innocence (the pastoral imagery that litters Herzog's portrait) and closer to social inclusion, language and reason. In this sense, reality is a regulation of space, defining all participation in how it is organised, abusing any form or shape of unpredictability Kaspar might assume.

Korine's, like Herzog's, interest in this type of 'outsider' behaviour is manifest in his depictions of childhood, mental health disorders and blindness.[404] It is not necessarily that this behaviour is somehow sub-social, unmediated, or somehow 'closer to nature', a form of behaviour and human expression that 'eludes cultural conditioning', but that it activates or trades on wider representational codes of reception. It is the received codes of social norms that determine and characterise 'freak' behaviour as such. The

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[403] Herzog quoted in Renate Gerulaitis, 'Recurring Cultural Patterns', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 22.4 (spring 1989), p. 62.

[404] Herzog's portrayal of Kasper Hauser might be related to a perhaps more misguided Surrealist conception, led by the painter Jean Dubuffet during the 1940s (and which involved André Breton, Jean Paulhan and Michael Wapie among others), of searching for works of 'art', made predominantly by the mentally ill, that are 'free from all cultural conventions as well as from fashion tendencies.' This work, as much, it should be said, about a culture of collecting as it is about artistic production, has become known as 'l'Art Brut', or 'Outsider Art', the main collection of which is housed in the Musee de L'Art Brut in Lausanne in Switzerland.

materiality of Korine's cinema underlines the part played by cultural perception and the construction of cultural description because of its disjointed attack on the accepted legibility of film. Indeed, Julien's role in a hospital for the blind makes this dramatically evident. Seeing and being seen, or what might be termed the construction of sight, are at the heart of Julien's destructive relationship with himself. It is not that he occupies cinematic (or social) space but that his behaviour generates space through its relationship with reception, undoing the representational norms of social and cinematic experience.

The spatial tendencies of an authoritative camera, when perceived in this way are characteristically destructive: 'Herzogian realism demands that the texture and matter of the film products themselves bear the same signs of life, namely the signs of an eruption or violence that should visually tear the placid surface that classical cinema usually represents as life itself.'[405] Antonin Artaud, who like Breton saw beauty in the convulsive, defines cinema as 'the epidermis of reality' that aims to 'destroy itself' and helps emphasise the connections between Surrealism, Herzogian naturalism and the materiality of Korine's films.[406] Julien encounters himself in ways reminiscent of Artaud in his notes on cinema, suicide and Van Gogh. That is to say, with a deep suspicion. 'Life appears to me merely as consent to the apparent legibility of things and their coherence in the mind. I no longer feel like the irreducible crossroads of things.'[407] As Julien inhabits an increasingly material form of seeing, so he is further removed from his own material form, challenging himself in the mirror, doubting the reflected identity he finds there. In many ways he becomes an object among objects, so that the surrounding film (his environment after all), like Bryson's and then Korine's Xenia, is unable to collect in him.

In another scene, in which Julien has a telephone conversation with his sister Pearl, this relationship between self, space and representation is played out in full. The scene cuts between Julien, who is in his underwear and is somewhat agitated, and Pearl on either

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[405] Timothy Corrigan, *New German Cinema*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 129.
[406] See Antonin Artaud, 'On the Seashell and The Clergyman (Cinema and Reality)', in *Artaud; Selected Writings* ed. by Susan Sontag & trans. by Helen Weaver (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 152.
[407] Artaud, 'On Suicide', *Ibid.*, p. 157.

end of the telephone line. The close-cropped framing does not clarify the nature of the physical distance between the two: they may merely be in separate rooms in the family house. Julien addresses Pearl as his mother and Pearl, making no attempt to disguise her voice, pretends to be his mother speaking to Julien from beyond the grave. It is a moving and ambiguous scene as it is not clear how aware Julien is of the game, whether the two are playing along, or whether Pearl's intention is therapeutic or something more devious. At one point Julien, growing increasingly excited, wishes she was back with him as with when he and his brother were young, and hints again at an absent trauma which remains outside of the film:

> Mom... remember, Chris was just a little baby? He killed you in the hospital, when he killed you in the hospital, Mom, when they took you away in the hospital and they killed you dead, you remember, Mom, Chris was just a little baby boy.

At this point, sensing his agitation, Pearl changes the subject. As part of her performance Pearl tells Julien that she is now working as a dentist and enquires about his teeth 'Are you brushing daily?' Julien's disjointed outbursts and Pearl's role as his dentist-mother create an odd assemblage of mis-communication and Artaudian disembodiment. Rather than physical or direct communication that moves from mouth to mouth, the dentist-mother-and-son performance redraws the relationship between space, representation and self. This again underlines the storytelling motif that connects Korine's work with the photography of Wall, and indeed, each of the practitioners considered in this thesis: all are, in one way or another, concerned with telling the stories of storytelling within a field of cultural storytelling that is the representational territory of contemporary American place. Each practitioner interrogates the implications this has for the material of communication and connection.

Indeed, in *Julien Donkey-Boy*, the telephone, as a symbol of long distance communication and connection, becomes instead an act of local distortion through which Julien's speech can be channelled and controlled. The scene underlines an inherent tension in this type of filmmaking aesthetic: that rather than a way of being or

embodying, personhood is instead a device for representation. Pearl attempts to connect with Julien, not by being a person but by being the representation of a person. She thinks this will help: it is closer to Julien's condition (as when Julien refers to himself in the third person) and is perhaps closer to reality (or at least his version of reality). But it also dramatises the cinematic construction of the real by drawing attention to a Brechtian relationship between people and objects (such as Julien and the telephone), emphasising the way in which there is a given cinematic or theatrical relationship between performance and props. Props are often used to reinforce the sense of a character's authority and control, classically, for example, in the way a sure-shot Hollywood hero is able to control a gun. Here the relationship between actor and prop, as part of the question of space, representation and self, is more uncertain and reflexive.[408]

For Roland Barthes this relationship with objects is a question of social authority regarding behavioural norms: 'There are objects wherever you look . . . This is man's space; in it he measures himself . . . There is no other authority in his life but the one he imprints on the inert by shaping and manipulating it.'[409] In *Julien Donkey-Boy* this 'imprint' of authority is jokingly put to one side (literally) as Julien's brother, Chris (Evan Neumann) practices wrestling a rubbish bin in the street outside his house. Chris is

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[408] Buñuel notes, with a certain amount of reverence, a similar tendency in the work of Buster Keaton: 'There was such a complete harmony between Keaton, the objects and situations he bent to his will and the techniques he used to describe these that no one noticed that technique: 'Just as living in a house we remain unaware of the calculus of resistance of the materials that go to form it'.' Buñuel quoted in Paul Hammond *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema* ed. by Paul Hammond (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2000), p. 6. There is also a scene in *Julien Donkey-Boy* which speaks directly to the question of the filmic relationship between actor and prop: the father, played by Herzog, is responding at meal time to Julien's poem (made up of four words: 'Morning, chaos/Noon, chaos/Eternity, chaos'): 'I don't like it because it's so artsy-fartsy. See I like the real stuff. I like something like the end of Dirty Harry... There was this shootout, Dirty Harry has this bad guy cornered. I mean he was a real, real bad guy. And there's this tremendous shootout, they're really exchanging lots of fire, they're shooting bullets at each other and they keep missing. And at the end the bad guy somehow drops his gun. And Harry hovers over him, and now Harry, I mean he's really full of contempt, Harry's standing there, he's totally full of contempt, and he says to him: 'We've wasted many of our bullets, do you think there is still a bullet left in your gun?' And he says to him: 'You know, now you've gotta ask yourself a question: "Do I feel lucky?"' Then, at that moment, the bad guy lunges for his gun, raises it, and it just goes 'click'. He hasn't got a bullet left, and Harry blasts him away, just blasts him into the river, blasts him in, knocks him off his feet and blasts him away... So that's, that's the good stuff. I truly like that. I don't like the artsy-fartsy thing, I think I hated his poem.'

[409] Roland Barthes, 'The World as Object', *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontag (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 64.

bound by a competitive spiral of inadequacy as his father (Herzog) tries to cultivate in him the way of a 'winner':

> I don't want all this plastic in my garden. And do you feel like a winner? . . . That's not an opponent. You've got to be tougher, real tough. You've got to out-gut them, out-tough them, out-wrestle them, out . . . plastic them.

The rubbish bin is challenged at the precise moment of having any significance or metaphorical quality – as emptiness, waste, expulsion – it is, for the demanding father, even less: plastic. Herzog's character appears to echo the sentiments of Barthes: 'plastic hardly exists as a substance.'[410] Yet, throughout *Julien Donkey-Boy* and *Gummo*, the representational quality of an object shifts as the subject re-encounters him or herself. Bryson notes that Xenia, for example, are 'a form of image making . . . committed to the deletion or erasure of the depicted object at the exact moment when depiction takes place.'[411]

In *Gummo*, this erased depiction is encountered at its most extreme as men take it in turns to wrestle with a kitchen chair. Korine points out that he is not in the room when the scene is filmed so that it becomes the height of *verité*-style immediacy and performance.

> This idea of a man fighting a chair means very much to me. The outcome is central because what would happen if the chair won?[412]

Here it is possible to see how Korine blends various cinematic traditions. Luis Buñuel saw in Neo-Realism the potential for capturing this type of reality where household objects move between the real and the metaphorical of everyday space. His brand of Surrealist cinema attempts to go one better, 'raising the commonplace act to the level of

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[410] Barthes, 'Plastic', in *Mythologies*, ed. by Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1973), p. 98.
[411] Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, p. 59.
[412] Korine interviewed in *Projections 11: New York Film Makers on New York Film Making*, ed. by Todd Lippy (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 269. Comment on chair reads further: 'What would the man feel if the seat cushion of the chair got the better of him, of if he got tangled up in its legs and felt that his opponent, although not necessarily alive, had been too worthy an adversary? I imagine the man's self-worth would diminish if the chair stood there bent and laughing.'

dramatic action.'[413] For Barthes the subject governs himself in the way he governs the relationship between objects. Yet Korine's protagonists somewhat unmask this sign system of authority that lays bare the behavioural interdependence of character, audience and film. The dysfunction that characterises the relationships between the members of Julien's family is translated into the imaginary relationship between personhood and object. Props that are usually loaded with authority and control become the mishandled elements of the social network being constructed as it is performed. The material of the household – the kitchen chair, the rubbish bin, the telephone – are utilised, it would seem, more in terms of their representational qualities (or lack of) than in terms of their given function.

In Korine's films, then, the material of everyday life is disconnected from the received or socially derived practices more commonly associated with these objects. The essential property of quotidian material is made uncertain. This is a concern looked at in more depth in the next and final chapter. There it will be shown how the novels of Ben Marcus develop a similarly haptic attitude toward the representational devices of domestic space and the materiality of everyday life. In Marcus' novels, as with Korine's films *Julien Donkey-Boy* and *Gummo*, the suburban American house provides a setting within which the real and the representational blur. The house is a place in which the imaginary and the representational process ascribed or associated with the performance of habitual routines and daily life takes on renewed forms of cultural value. The house is a representational system, or an organised arrangement of boundaries; it is a domestic setting according to which family members play prescribed roles. As such, Julien's violent outbursts, and his self-destructive behaviour could be said to arise as a result of his hidden transgression of these boundaries and roles (again, the suggestion is that Pearl, his sister, is pregnant with his baby). Julien's behaviour disrupts the totality of the house and, in turn, reorganises the production of cinematic space and materiality.

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[413] Luis Bunuel, quoted in *The Shadow and its Shadow: Surrealist Writings on the Cinema*, ed. by Paul Hammond, p. 139.

In this sense, Julien occupies a specifically representational role. His performative character, that is to say the way he performs himself (in front of the mirror (and camera), on the telephone, in the school for the blind) and the 'alienation effect' of his act, mean that he re-inhabits the territory of everyday visual noise. He threatens to disappear amid its confusion as the coherence of his subjectivity or, in other words, the empirical authority that his position, in more traditional forms of cinematic characterisation, might provide, breaks down repeatedly. This informs the texture or materiality of Korine's films. Indeed, the surface of the film often ruptures with fragments of Julien's self-harm and abuse. He slaps himself, bites himself and pulls his own hair in fits of an Artaudian scale of self-destruction. But the camera is not removed, or coolly objective as if he is being clinically observed. It is tight to the subject, often claustrophobically close. These fits of self-abuse often occur in private, in the bathroom for instance, behind locked doors where Julien is alone. What is more, in these scenes Julien talks to himself so that repeated phrases mix with a kind of chanting and singing that can give way to screams and manic outbursts. There is a sense that he is trying consciously to control himself. Self-control seems to be associated with acting; it means to maintain a representational position within the representational sphere of the house. As such, Julien is required to play a role, one that maintains the appropriate relationships between space, behaviour and language and at the same time demonstrates the ways in which these boundaries and relationships break down.

The texture of this ruptured materiality relates again to the novel and the textual practice of place. For while the films of Korine go to great lengths to reoccupy the representational process of place in this way, it is perhaps in his novel, *A Crackup at the Race Riots*, that the representational and spatial uncertainty of Julien's characterisation is signaled most clearly. And is perhaps what makes the reconsideration of textuality, as discussed in the following chapter in this context of visual representation, cinema and uncertainty, all the more vital. Collected in the novel are a series of suicide notes penned by anonymous or unidentified protagonists. Apparently fictional the suicide notes signal the use of a deranged epistolary device that again undoes the notion of correspondence in representation. The notes range from the final confessions of 'a failed midget writer' to

those of an elderly thief who dreams 'about jumpin' into that annoyingly loud machine that turns branches into sawdust chips. Wouldn't that be a fuckin' kicker, my dirty ass in pieces all over the neighbor's front yard?'[414] The fifth note is simply a collection of quotes attributed to various satirists:

> Suicide note #5:
>
> There are many who dare not kill themselves for fear of what the neighbors will say. – Cyril Connolly
>
> No matter how much a woman loved a man, it would still give her a glow to see him commit suicide for her. – H. L. Mencken
>
> If I were not afraid my people would keep it out of the newspapers, I should commit suicide tomorrow. – Max Beerbohm
>
> Suicide is belated acquiescence in the opinion of one's wife's relatives. – H. L. Mencken
>
> More people commit suicide with a fork than with any other weapon. – the Bible
>
> See you later,[415]

As with all of the notes, there is no signature. But the supposedly appropriated language, the voices of literary personas or celebrities, provide the author with a borrowed language, a kind of stage costume, through which self and representation give way even here at the most acute moment of self-determination. The suicide notes are a pivotal illustration demonstrating the manner in which everyday space and spaces of representation mix the literary with the real. As with the proverbial turns looked at in chapter three or the failed correspondence between Artaud and Rivière that acts as a model for Smithson's textuality in chapter two, and, as with the interiors and community networks of *Gummo*, or the isolated rooms of *Julien Donkey-Boy*, everyday life ('what the neighbours will say') and the use of language as part of the construction of place become a rich source for new approaches to the anxieties of representation that characterise the territory of this thesis.

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[414] Harmony Korine, *A Crackup at the Race Riots*, p. 107.
[415] *Ibid.*, p 104

From the *verité* -novel, *A Crackup at the Race Riots*, it is now important to turn to other textual interventions in the field that coordinate the relationship between reality and representations of the real in new and important ways. To this end, the novels of Ben Marcus are key. Like the suicide notes in *A Crackup at the Race Riots* or the *verité* realities of storytelling in *Gummo* and *Julien Donkey-Boy,* Marcus' work is firmly situated in terms of the wider 'American areas'; that is to say, the living representational constructions which coordinate the various machinations of place, language and everyday life in America at the turn of the new Millennium.

Chapter Six

"The American Areas":
Place, Language and the Construction of Everyday Life in the Novels of Ben Marcus

> It is significant that such-and-such a sentence makes no sense; but also that it sounds funny. [...] i.e. language is not merely a means of communication.
> (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*)

> The Reading Wizard, a machine that scans and summarises books to determine their themes and content, determined that this book was "a documentary account of the role of the mouth in the art of deception and failure, with a specific focus on children who have been buried alive."
> (Ben Marcus, *Notable American Women*)

> For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. (Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Black Cat')

The novels of Ben Marcus involve a contemporary vision of the wild yet homely narratives alluded to here by Edgar Allan Poe. Marcus' first novel, *The Age of Wire and String*, relates most clearly to the materiality of Korine's textual practice, as well as the textualities of Smithson and Mathews, in how it confuses observer and observed. Also, and indeed crucially, *The Age of Wire and String* is related to the wild and the homely constructions of reality as they are found in Korine's filmmaking (as well as how they are found in a tradition of cinematic visualisation more generally). This is because a novel such as *The Age of Wire and String* (or for that matter *A Crackup at the Race Riots*) blurs fiction with empirical observation, cultural description and documentary and as such needs to be considered in relation to visual culture and the various visualisations of reality that are so much a part of the realities of everyday life.

As this final chapter will elaborate, space exists as an activity of communication in which the novel (like film, photography or the art work more generally) has to position itself.

As with the construction of places such as Xenia in *Gummo*, or the suburban interiors of *Julien Donkey-Boy*, *The Age of Wire and String* is a novel in which the fictions of space are blurred with the spaces of fiction. The novels of Marcus are thus considered explicitly in order to add weight to the argument that reality is not merely represented in various forms of storytelling but that a certain form of reality is constructed via the various representations of storytelling. Indeed, Marcus' textual practice (exemplified by *The Age of Wire and String*, which Mathews describes as a collection of 'sustained and varied linguistic displacements [that] rigorously reinvent our society and provide it with a mythology both ancestral and brand-new') stands out from other practices of the contemporary period because of this particular concern with the story of storytelling and how this process of fiction-making informs the cultural construction of reality.[416] Marcus is also important to this thesis because his experimentalism opens up new questions concerning a wider cultural commodification of the relationship between material culture and the imaginary implicit in the discussions of rumour in the previous chapter (as well as in the discussion of proverbs in chapter three and in the discussion of advertising in chapter four). As such *In the Territory* now returns to the questions of description and taxonomy (see chapters two and three) by building on the new perspectives of film, photography, commodification and the wider stories of storytelling (developed in chapters four and five) and their relationship to the representational territory of everyday life as communicated in Marcus' particular brand of textual practice.

Cultural Description and the Novel: *The Age of Wire and String*

The 'wild and homely' textuality of *The Age of Wire and String* (homely in terms of how the American sense of home is constructed through representations of American homeliness), redraws the lines marking out the boundaries of house, home and the 'surrounding American areas.' It does this, principally, by displacing the act of cultural description that in itself defines the nature of these boundaries. Almost as a case in point, the novel begins by describing itself:

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[416] See Mathews' blurb on the inside cover of the Dalkey Archive edition of *The Age of Wire and String*: Ben Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998).

> This book is a catalogue of the life project as prosecuted in the Age of Wire and String and beyond, into the arrangements of states, sites and cities and, further, within the small houses that have been granted erection or temporary placement on the perimeters of districts and river colonies.[417]

Divided into eight archetypes the text is presented as 'a collection of studies'. Each study or fragment offers an eyewitness account of what everyday life is like in (or during) 'The Age of Wire and String'. In a sense, each chapter (such as 'Dog, Mode of Heat Transfer in Barking' from the Animal archetype or 'Hidden Ball Inside a Song' found in the Persons archetype) is a field-recording that acts as an indicative illustration 'that might serve to clarify the terms obscured within every facet of the living programme.'[418] The 'terms', those unfamiliar fragments of the phraseology local to this hidden place, are then lifted from obscurity at the end of each archetype as part of an appendix or glossary that presents the reader with a dictionary definition of terms such as 'Subfeet Walking Rituals' as employed in the Society archetype or 'Frusc' as used in the Weather archetype. Having to describe itself in this way might suggest that the book is not automatically a novel. It positions itself as an extended documentary project, social observation or commentary, a kind of ethnographic study. There is what ethnographic writing often terms an impulse for a kind of 'participant-observation', much in keeping with the spatial preoccupations and perspectives of artistic and intellectual traditions as they are observed in this thesis.[419] Marcus' work, like much of the work considered here, is analogous to questions of documentary, and as such these questions are a key component of Marcus' textuality. This is why *The Age of Wire and String* is best considered in light of the various critical and disciplinary perspectives drawn on so far. In this context it is possible to further explore the representational process of place as it is at work here, and how the territory of representation and place is defined not just in terms

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[417] Ben Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String* (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), p. 3.
[418] *Ibid.*, p. 3.
[419] See for instance Victor Buchlin's introduction to *The Material Culture Reader*, ed. by Victor Buchlin (Oxford: Berg, 2002); *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, ed. by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1997) which in mapping 'the present disorderly theoretical moment' notes the shift in recent times away from anthropological collection and presentation towards an ethnographic writing that emphasises the more ambiguous role of participant observation.

of texts and reading but in terms of the various media of observation, description and construction.

According to its conventional model (in the empirical or positive sense), any given (or in this case, ethnographic) description is usually of something. To describe a person place or thing means that a person place or thing is apprehended as being in existence (in some sense 'there' or 'other') before it can be described. *The Age of Wire and String*, as both setting and title, seems at the outset to be reversing this model. The language of its empiricism is again concerned with something quite unfamiliar or esoteric, a culture otherwise wilfully hidden in how it is officially described by 'professional disclosers'. As James Clifford writes, description has long since become the true subject of ethnography: 'What has become irreducibly curious is no longer the other but cultural description itself.'[420] Otherness, from Clifford's perspective, becomes a model of description; difference is constructed in how otherness is described. *The Age of Wire and String* plays on this literary premise to the extent that the age of wire and string, as such, appears to exist only in the terms of its description. This is reminiscent of Smithson's textualisation of *The Spiral Jetty*, or Wall's photographs of storytellers performing or, indeed staging, the act of photography. Like those reflexive stories of storytelling *The Age of Wire and String* opens up a rhetorical territory that is not just *about* the cultural construction of material reality but situates itself as if it is a part of the process of a cultural reality in production. This has real implications for this thesis as it begins to demonstrate the ways in which culture (in particular material and visual culture) is related to the imaginary via the act of representation and description.

Certain familiar markers are present in *The Age of Wire and String*; those citations that mark out the spaces of everyday life. There are, for instance, place names (Ohio, Montana, Utah, California), there are the names of people (Walter, John, Thompson), and forms of behaviour and habit (walking, eating, swimming). There are vehicles and animals and there are roles and positions within society such as 'father', 'wife', 'son' and 'husband'; terms that organise those relationships defining roles of personhood and

[420] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 147.

behaviour (gender, age, family), what Henri Lefebvre calls 'relationships that define social practice, that is, habitation, and which are indicated or signified by objects of everyday use.'[421] These words seem to singularise or 'house' a panoply of pre-given stories or narratives. Marcus appears to be using this found code to form a syntax that is spatial. He takes from what Michel de Certeau calls a world of 'proliferating metaphors – sayings and stories that organise places through the displacements they describe.'[422] As code words they are re-appropriated (collected and catalogued) in order to decode models of difference formulated in a given language of description, so that names and things ('the objects of everyday use') are remodelled in the syntactical arrangements of how such relationships are described.

House

The model of difference provided by the suburban house, already raised in terms of Korine's film *Julien-Donkey Boy*, provides material for much of the novel's setting. 'The House' section is divided into five fragments that document various aspects of the historical circumstances of the house in *The Age of Wire and String*. Together they form a broken description of its structure, both in the material and cultural sense, which appear to be constituted according to various practices. These practices are characterised as being (what sounds like) 'work' or 'building', but the labour that the house and housing involves is signalled by an unlikely arrangement of verbs: 'sleeping', 'chasing', 'scratching', 'wiring' and 'making shade'. The materials employed are equally out of place, to include: air, grass, wire and skin (as well as the more familiar wood, glass and brick). In addition, the opposite practices of making and destroying appear to be inextricably linked, so that the material and labour from which the house is constituted appear to be of the same material and labour that continuously threaten the condition of the house:

> Although shade is mistrusted by many occupants, and has rarely been selected as a primary weapon, it must not be overlooked as a key defence against objects

[421] See Henri Lefebvre, 'Preface to the Study of the Habitat of the Pavillon' in *Key Writings*, ed by Stuart Elden, Elizabeth Lebas & Eleonore Kaufman (London: Continuum, 2003), p 123

[422] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans by Steven Rendall (Los Angeles & London University of California Press, 1984), p 116.

> that might burn in to take the house from the air, in secret agency with the wires of the hallowed sun.[423]

By being predisposed to them, sun and shade (part of the immediate environment) are in a sense the primary materials out of which the house is constructed. Yet the essential properties of objects and materials are the subject of uncertainty and mistrust as are the essential properties of received practices. The confusion over sleep and dreaming (key practices of the house and housing), for instance, is tied in with the confusion over destruction and building. Sleeping, often a productive exercise ('forms of sleeping also calm the sky. Wealthy landowners hire professional sleepers to practice their fits on key areas of the grounds... Freelancers take their dream seizures near the door, and storms are said to be held in abeyance.'), is considered at other times to be threatening, injurious and destructive. Here, for instance, is the construction of the house-like 'gevorts box':[424]

> Archaeologists divide the time of this culture into the house maker and the house destroyer periods; in the latter period, participants turned increasingly to nonuseful and abstract houses, eventually constructing the penetrating gevorts box, of which one thousand wooden units were made during the Texas-Ohio sleep collaboration, 1987. Gevortsing has subsequently become known as any act, intention, or technique that uses negative house imagery during the dream experience as a device to instruct inhabitants to sleep-kill or otherwise destroy themselves, their walls, windows, doors, or roofs upon waking, until a chosen version of the culture has been sufficiently driven from their home.[425]

Much can be drawn from this example. Firstly, the 'abstract houses' and 'wooden boxes' bring to mind the pre-fabricated tract housing common to the suburban developments that spring up throughout America during the post-War housing boom and come to characterise contemporary suburban development (the same suburban tract housing Dan Graham hones in on in his magazine piece, 'Homes for America', discussed in chapter two). Dolores Hayden associates this trend with the production of what she calls 'dream houses', and may indeed relate to the above 'dream experience' of the gevorts box.[426]

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[423] Ben Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*, p. 53.
[424] *Ibid.*, p. 55.
[425] *Ibid.*, p. 51.
[426] Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream, Gender, Housing and Family Life* (New York Norton, 2002).

The formulaic model home is not only built quickly and cheaply but the process is endlessly repeatable across vast tracts of land consumed by rapid urban sprawl. Hayden notes that this type of housing means, among other things, that the 'climatic and cultural connections' between habitation and the local environment are drastically altered.[427] Local building materials, or designs that respond to local weather conditions, are shunned in favour of universalised materials and designs so that 'ordering the domestic sphere' becomes much less than the 'direct expression of personality or culture'.[428] Material, environment and practice are, in this sense, displaced as a means of constructing the (air-conditioned) 'dream house'.

'Dream' is thus associated with the reproduction of a model experience or what Marilyn Chandler calls a 'habit of mind'.[429] Inhabitants are removed from the labour of construction (the process of building their own homes) by a form of ideal representation. That is to say the image of the ideal house precedes its construction and becomes in a sense part of the material out of which habitation is organised: such model housing is designed in order to 'reflect patterns of life' while at the same time it is meant to 'configure life in certain patterns'.[430] What Gaston Bachelard calls the 'dream geometry' of the house is replaced with habit and industrially conceived patterns.[431] In *The Age of Wire and String* confusing habit of mind with dream renders occupants susceptible to the 'negative house imagery' of the gevorts box. The 'material culture' of *The Age of Wire and String* appears then to be constructed out of the relationship between objects (in the way of a local climate as well as building materials and practices), whether dreamed or experienced, which define the essential qualities of those objects and the practices they habitually tend to signify.

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[427] *Ibid.*, p. 142.
[428] *Ibid.*, p. 142. Hayden is especially concerned with the way in which buildings, as part of the new suburban sprawl, are positioned in disregard of local sunlight and weather patterns.
[429] Marilyn R. Chandler, *Dwelling in the text: Houses in American Fiction* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), p. 48.
[430] *Ibid.*, p. 48.
[431] See in particular 'House and Universe' in Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by John R. Stilgoe (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994).

Secondly, a definition of the gevorts box is clarified, as it were, in the glossary to the house section as denoting a means by which the 'occupant' receives messages within the living space. These messages are literally inscribed on the walls and floors, characterising the practice of domestic life as being primarily an act of reading; a way of internalising inherited codes of habitation. In the glossary definition they are associated explicitly with written language, the room or house is likened to a text: it is the relaying of 'an imperative through inscriptions on the walls and floors.'[432] The messaging evokes common analogies between architecture and writing: 'A house, as any architect will verify, is a text with its own peculiar grammar, syntax and way of communicating and generating meaning.'[433] Or elsewhere, 'every newly built house or freshly furnished room is a fiction of the life intended to be lived there.'[434] But both analogies point to a single moment in time, an original event that fixes the nature or pattern of the lives to be lived thereafter, as if these patterns will then be conformed to without deviation. In *The Age of Wire and String* these messages are connected with a sense of resistance. The gevorts box and its messages of behaviour represent something to be resisted as, after all, the content of its message 'instructs inhabitants to sleep-kill or destroy themselves.' Reception is not organised as a form of passive internalisation, it is instead characterised as resistance and interpellation – perhaps why, in invoking practices of construction and building, there is such an emphasis on violence and destruction.[435]

More to the point, the evocation of the living space in terms of messages being received and worked upon underlines the principal theme in Marcus' work and suggest exactly why it is so valuable to this thesis. The theme is this: to inhabit is to occupy a set of stories or narratives; a set of habitual codes of language characterised as messages

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[432] Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*, p. 63.
[433] Marilyn R. Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text*, p. 23.
[434] Philippa Tristram, *Living Space in Fact and Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 1.
[435] Beckett in his work on Proust notes a similar form of violence and resistance in dwelling: the 'agony of habit' and 'suffering of being: that is, the free play of every faculty' (Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (London: John Calder, 1965), p. 19). Habit is something one does without thinking – thinking, by contrast, the free play of every faculty, is associated with suffering. Habit, recognised as such, becomes agony. Hence the association of these practices with the body: 'Can we substitute a better feeling or a more effective pain? Should a plan of action be moved from the end to the middle or the beginning of life? Are the right people in the right places? Is this house preventing something, somehow?' (Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*, p. 62.)

received in how something is described. These can be appropriated and re-appropriated but commonly precede the activities of habitation – they are often inherited as gendered spaces of production and reproduction in accord with roles of personhood such as male/female, husband/wife, father/mother. The inscribed messages of the domestic setting organise relationships that define the roles and behaviour of everyday life, they are what Henri Lefebvre calls, 'the inscription of these facts in habitation'.[436] These 'facts' indicate that which is socially constituted such as age, gender and familial relationships. The names differentiating living spaces (rooms such as kitchen, bedroom, living-room) point to a grammatical organisation of space that inscribes, as it does in the gevorts box, habitation.

Christopher Tilley, in his work on material culture and metaphor, draws attention to this syntactical arrangement in various cultures underlining 'the role of the house in providing a coherent language with which to organise reality.'[437] The house is characterised as a system of language, of cultural description, metaphorical naming and the organisation of domestic roles. 'The house... provides a context for the metaphorical understanding of things and actions in relation to other things and actions.'[438] As such the house can be considered indicative of the ways in which place (immediate, local experience) is constructed according to the rules that govern the relationship between language and space.[439]

The third point to be made regarding this example relates to how these messages of the house and the syntactical arrangements of spaces are read. The initial reading is done by archaeologists: 'Archaeologists divide the time of this culture into the house maker and the house destroyer periods.' Their role is literally to divide time. From afar, they define

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[436] Lefebvre, *Key Writings*, p. 124.
[437] Christopher Tilley, *Metaphor and Material Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 41.
[438] *Ibid.*, p.49.
[439] As Lefebvre notes: 'The manner of inhabiting, the mode or modalities of habitation are expressed in language' in *Key Writings*, p. 125. Marcus' work is situated in terms of these rules and their expression where the narratives of everyday life can be found within the significations of material culture. As a sociologist of space, Lefebvre underlines the notion that it is vital to study the relationships inscribed in everyday language, generally subordinated by 'sociologists', as it designates the ways in which habitation is described or expressed and is in a sense (as part of the act of description) how it is constituted in space.

the difference between making and destroying even as the ambiguous reception of the house messages and the unspecific and arbitrary references to dates suggest that the actual experience of this binary appears to be less easily demarcated. There is a tension between the official cultural description and immediate observation that is reflected in the resistant language of the narrative. The novel shifts continuously between the position of observer and observed: two poles of representation that provide the information relevant to each archetype (in this case the archetypal 'House'). Archaeologists generally employ archetypes in order to categorise the evidence of their observations, the archetypes provide a model of description that is authoritative and automatic. The description of a house, for instance, can be given in terms of the archetypal house (in this case the model dream house or gevorts box). The house is defined in terms of a pre-existing definition. Any act of observation is controlled by the archetype and the product of its relation or system of reference. To observe is to measure against the archetype so that description and observation are inextricably linked. The very nature, then, of what is visible depends on whether it can be described. If it can only be described 'in terms of' or 'in relation to' then presumably that which does not fit with the archetype will be rendered invisible. *The Age of Wire and String*, organised in terms of archetypes and (all be it, unfamiliar) categories of description, is principally concerned with the elements of everyday life that are made invisible, hidden or secret as soon as they are described. It achieves this by continuously shifting perspective between observer and observed and, as such, speaks directly to the key questions raised in this thesis.

Observation: Laws of Seeing

Interestingly, the act of observation, or seeing is often considered dangerous and destructive, even taboo: 'The outer gaze alters the inner thing... by looking at an object we destroy it.'[440] And later:

> Occupants, if any, must train their attention outward (bog); they must never be seen watching themselves or looking at any other objects within the house (heen viewing, forbidden, punished by expulsion to lower house).[441]

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[440] Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*, p. 3.
[441] *Ibid.*, p. 58.

The first example, in the first person plural, comes from the novel's opening 'argument' and seems to be calling for a kind of unmediated gaze in which 'the object must be trained to see itself.' The second is from the fragment 'Views from the First House' (again from the house archetype) and constitutes part of a binary between the house and the first house or 'heaven container'. The heaven container provides a model for the house and all things: 'In ancient America and earlier, it was considered one of the four basic objects, a substance from which all things were composed.'[442] Yet what differentiates it from other houses is a law of vision stipulating that occupants of the heaven container look outwards while 'occupants of a house are instructed always to LOOK IN (strup), to examine the contents within a house (Chakay) and derive instructions and strategies from these.'[443] There is a kind of double looking – one is local and the other removed or objective.

The taboo regarding sight and observation is derived from this anomalous relationship between an immediate or local perspective on the one hand and a totalising world view on the other. The implication is that the archetype (the heaven container) is never actually seen (it is looked out of) yet is known and understood, and, more to the point, provides a model for how to view that which can be seen even if it is not understood. J. D. Peters calls this predicament 'seeing bifocally', a confusion of near and far, and notes the way it characterises the contemporary experience of society within an economy of representation. The prevalence of mass media in everyday life, he argues, means that direct experience contradicts the sense-making activities of the coherent and graspable vision offered up by the 'totalising images' of multi-media:

> Modern men and women see proximate fragments with their own eyes and global totalities through the diverse media of social description... Institutions of the global constitute totalities that we could experience otherwise only in pieces, such as populations, the weather, employment, inflation, the gross material product or public opinion. The irony is that the general becomes clear

[442] *Ibid.*, p. 58.
[443] *Ibid.*, pp. 58-9.

> through representation, whereas the immediate is subject to the fragmenting effects of our limited experience.[444]

Peter's argument may account for the taboo of sight and observation in *The Age of Wire and String*, in that observing without recourse to a model of description risks contradicting the received information of sight. In parallel with *The Age of Wire and String*, he employs the weather as an example: 'I may see blue skies, but the satellite picture on the TV news tells me a huge storm is on its way.'[445] Immediate or direct experience is contradicted by the bigger picture, while local observation concurrently threatens the totalising narratives of satellite reports. In the novel, weather is another archetype into which half-a-dozen of the fragmentary chapters are organised, and to a certain extent it explores this modern tension between near and far sightedness.

It is tempting for readers of *The Age of Wire and String* to consider the preoccupation with weather as a metaphor for the atmosphere generated by people and their various relationships. 'Human Weather' is defined in the glossary as 'Air and atmosphere generated from the speech and perspiration of systems and figures within the society.'[446] But, perhaps more provocatively, weather is also associated with a tension between self-representation and the control of representational mechanisms. Wind, for instance, is associated with the mouth; in some instances it is spoken: 'wind of certain popularity is rebroadcast' by 'water machines', and 'roof lenses which project and magnify the contents of each shelter onto the sky of every region in the society.'[447] There is, for instance, a 'temperature law': 'rules of air stating that the recitation or revocation of names will for all time alter the temperature of a locality', and a 'storm calendar' that regulates 'the dispersal, location, and death of every wind and rain system in existence.'[448] Here the world-view of the satellite is part of a wider cultural description that combines weather patterns with information systems in order to regulate or make sense of what is seen. In *The Age of Wire and String*, however, weather becomes most

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[444] John Durham Peters, 'Seeing Bifocally' in *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, ed. by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, p. 78-9.
[445] *Ibid.*, p. 81.
[446] Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*, p. 95.
[447] *Ibid.*, p. 96.
[448] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

meaningful when it enacts a distortion of this representational relationship: 'human weather' differs from 'animal storms, it cannot be predicted, controlled, or even remotely harnessed.'[449]

Weather, as an archetypal arrangement of description and observation, becomes a metaphor for a field of representation within which place is constructed according to the movement of information between local and global perspectives, that is to say, between the point of view of observer and observed. Again it is possible to demonstrate the anxiety concerning representation that has come to characterise the study of place in this thesis. Place is a process of representation: 'Part of what it means to live in a modern society is to depend on representations of that society.'[450] In a sense, the totalising narratives of global media are as immediate or local as the 'lived experience of face-to-face communities.'[451] They provide what Peters calls an indexical verifiability, whereby the experience of everyday life can be checked against 'embedded representations of social totalities.'[452] Yet, immediate experience often contradicts the nature of received information – such as the observation of a bright blue sky at a time when one is meant to be experiencing wind and rain. Consequently, 'local knowledge... is constantly undermined as a guide to living in the modern world. My embodied experience belongs to a smaller orbit than that of the 'information' I receive.'[453]

Marcus plays on this displaced sense of local knowledge in the face of social totalities through the double meaning of 'observe' and the contradictory play on sight and verification. Acting as both observer and observed, protagonists in the novel translate the rules of looking that define the house into local wisdom (or what Peters calls 'local knowledge'): 'We begin with confirming the shape and development of our lives, then verify the sequence of our feelings and pain. When we are wise we spend ninety percent

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[449] *Ibid.*, p. 95.
[450] Peters, 'Seeing Bifocally' p. 78.
[451] Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, 'Culture, Power, Place', in *Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology*, ed. by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, p. 9
[452] Peters, 'Seeing Bifocally', p. 78.
[453] *Ibid.*, p. 81.

of our time in the house.'[454] And later: 'Members which have viewed the destruction, duplication, or creation of shelters... are required to sign or carve their names or emblems onto the houses in question, and are subject to a separate, vigilant census.'[455] Observation is evoked in its double meaning: on the one hand observation is to ascertain facts, while on the other it is to comply with custom and ritual, it is to heed or to carry out in practice. The local 'embodied experience' referred to by Peters is what appears to be most at stake. It risks becoming the habitual practice of verifying the archetypes of cultural description. Local seeing is circumscribed by the custom and ritual of a somehow inherent totalising perspective. Consequently the presentation of these practices, the embodiment of any given habitual experience, becomes a form of hiding:

> REPRESENTATIONAL LIFE: Life that strives as well as it can to be quick, to present the body (if at all) as infrequently as it should appear to any vigilant observer – in the crowd, in the home, as well as within the open areas of land, among the animals. This life minimizes use of such devices of living as emotional coloration, connotative gesture, words, and imagination, including waking up, opening the eyes, and chewing, if food is found within gnashing range of the mouth.[456]

In this example, local embodiment appears to be something that resists verification. The 'devices of living', those gestures that express or are 'representational' of the human condition, are duplicitous and difficult to read. To appear is to hide, which is to say that self-representation is to hide within what can be observed. The premise here is that seeing is not the same as observation. Seeing, unlike observing, may deny the authority of verification. *The Age of Wire and String* as a novel arranged in the way of an 'indexical verifiability' (in terms of categories, glossaries and definitions), somewhat parodies the 'bifocal' arrangement of cultural description identified by Peters, and presents the reader with local information that refuses to be verified by general totalities. It is the act of sending messages without the verification that 'makes the messages mean'. 'Certain weather is not recognised by the land it is practiced on.'[457]

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[454] Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*, p. 60.
[455] *Ibid.*, p. 63.
[456] *Ibid.*, p. 77.
[457] *Ibid.*, p. 95.

Diagrams: Visual Languages

Marcus explores the theme of non-information in his collaborations with visual artists and, in particular, his use of diagrams. In 2005 he collaborates in a group exhibition at the Whitney Museum in New York entitled *Remote Viewing: Invented Worlds in Recent Painting and Drawing.* Marcus' contribution is a wall-sized diagram that confronts visitors as they enter the exhibition and purported to offer a route around the space while compiling and connecting relevant information about the 'content' of the paintings and drawings on display (see Appendix B.). The theme of the exhibition is identified as landscapes of information: 'Eight artists create new worlds existing between abstraction and representation as they grapple with the overwhelming abundance of information that pervades contemporary life.'[458] Marcus, as writer and artist, interprets this predicament as a kind of filtering, what he calls a 'zone of translation'. Rather than beginning with a blank canvas or a blank page, the artist or writer operates in terms of a field of representation(s), an economy of information within which the acts of production and reception are blurred. This blurring of production and reception is a common theme among the practitioners considered in this thesis. From the collecting of Surrealist reportage, to Robert Smithson's field notes, through to Harmony Korine's use of non-professional actors, the everyday is explored as a territory of representational procedures. By working strictly within the arrangements and delimitations of the territory these practitioners attack the notion that meaning is produced in one place in order to be consumed elsewhere. The thesis focuses on those writers and artists such as Marcus who approach the experience of reading and viewing as itself productive and as that which constitutes the way place is constructed locally in everyday life as it resists representational procedures.

Marcus' diagram works, if it 'works' at all, on similar assumptions, acting as a test-site 'testing the results of remote viewing'.[459] It involves a visual language that is familiar and everyday – a rhetoric of the user's guide or field manual; a set of operating instructions. Crudely drawn and including a mixture of hand-written and typed notes,

[458] http://www.whitney.org/www/exhibition/catalog/remote.shtml
[459] See diagram in Appendix B. received as part of correspondence with the author.

the diagram appears to be an embryonic organisation of information, one that makes preliminary, even speculative connections. A kind of 'mind-map' illustrating a cognitive procedure, it seems to present the viewer or reader with a visual guide and set of explanations. But it is hard to discern what is being 'visualised' by the 'language' of the diagram, there is something uneasy or unnerving about the order it purports to articulate. Marcus has said about his use of diagrams:

> I like the organisation of a diagram, I like the way it seems to reveal something... It seems as if it is going to tell you something even if upon scrutiny it won't... I like that as a metaphor for what one does with language in writing.[460]

The cultural assumption that makes the visual rhetoric of a diagram appealing is that this type of language does not produce anything new but works in terms of what is given. The operations of production then exist in how the diagram is read or acted upon. Gilles Deleuze identifies something similar in Francis Bacon's use of diagrams. According to Deleuze, the painter does not approach the canvas as inherently 'blank', instead the blank canvas is defined by pre-existing 'figurative givens... more or less virtual, more or less actual.'[461] For instance, the 'correct' organisation of a face precedes portraiture. It is already present. Bacon discovers in this presence a diagram (or graph) along the lines of which he is able to alter the position, say, of the mouth in terms of the 'virtually-actual' head. In this way the mouth can 'be elongated stretched from one side of the head to another'.[462] Using the diagram allows the painter to 'scrub, sweep, or wipe the canvas in order to clear out locales or zones' and rearrange the given information already embedded in any language of expression.[463] This is what is important: Bacon, in his diagrammatical practice, works with given information (photographs, largely) and attempts to discover how the connections between one thing and another go from being something arbitrary to something automatic (and back again). In the activity of the

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[460] See Interview with the author in Appendix A.
[461] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. by D. W. Smith (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 70.
[462] *Ibid.*, p. 70-1.
[463] *Ibid.*, p. 70.

diagram there is a pointing (the arrow is a common symbol in Bacon's work) to the places constituted by or hidden within the relational mechanisms of information.[464]

The diagram, in this way, uncovers or exposes such mechanisms of cognition and association by identifying (literally pointing to) the otherwise ambiguous relationship between one thing and another. For Bacon it produces a kind of distortion, as unlikely associations are brought to the surface. What the distortion reveals are the mechanisms of information that endeavour to control an arbitrary relationship as something automatic. In other words, the movement of information depends on certain mechanisms of reception, disguised as a space of habitual relations; what in Marcus' diagram is hinted at as an 'imagery and sentence-cleansing area'. The content of the message hides the mechanism of its movement: it tells the receiver that to receive messages in this way is normal or habitual. It is something already known; it is unproblematic, smooth, uninterrupted. The content of the message is frictionless mobility. Television viewing, for instance, is often characterised as habitual, or as a passive and unobstructed information feed. Joshua Meyrowitz identifies this presumption in media studies as part of the preoccupation with media 'content' and the characterisation of media reception as intravenous viewing. The viewer at home is syringe-fed information as the mechanisms of reception are subsumed into the habitual behaviour of everyday life. This attitude, Meyrowitz points out, 'views electronic media merely as new links among pre-existing environments'.[465] Instead, media information, he argues, should be considered as something that creates 'new social environments with new patterns of social action, feeling and belief.'[466] For Meyrowitz the content of media messages and the mechanisms of reception are inextricably linked. In other words, the ever-present economies of information, so much a part of everyday life, create new relationships which operate beyond the simple binary of delivery and reception.

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[464] 'The diagram has introduced or distributed formless forces throughout the painting, which have a necessary relation with the deformed parts, or which are made use of as, precisely, "places".' *Ibid.*, p. 110.
[465] Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behaviour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 15.
[466] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

New Perspectives: Fiction, Sculpture and Commodification

The arrangement of these relationships and the diagramming of media reception are played on in the 'Golden Monica' fragment of *The Age of Wire and String*, and point to the ways in which such concerns are present throughout Marcus' work. The 'Golden Monica' fragment describes 'the phenomenon of the intruder or mad invader, who enters the American house in order to extinguish himself in the presence' of the family.[467] The family, arranged diagrammatically by 'wire or rope', is made to 'acquire the status of audience.' A member of the family breaks free from the arrangement convinced he or she is responsible for the suicide, internalising what he or she has witnessed as an act of murder for which he or she is now undeniably responsible. The scene might be interpreted as an allegory of television-watching in which the family, arranged around the media spectacle in the comfort of their own, home is captivated by the transmission of media signals. Yet, in the 'Golden Monica' fragment, the relationality of the media is complicated by the form of its reception. The sense of its production (that is to say, the location of a sensory or cognitive source) is displaced:[468]

> The acts of doing and watching are interchangeable here. It is the genius of the perpetrator of the monica to shift volition onto his audience. The spectacle is arranged to emanate from whoever watches it, where seeing is the first form of doing. The audience is deceived into a sense of creation for the act it has witnessed.[469]

For doing and watching to be interchangeable suggests that sight is itself a cognitive process of arranging material diagrammatically. Observation and the archetypes of description are shown to suggest that seeing is the activity of making sense. It is 'the first form of doing'. Marcus appears to be commenting on the cultural relationship within this arrangement of seeing and making that the audience comes to embody. It is a cultural act of comparison, a code or logic of being; what Clifford calls 'a movement of metaphorical comparison in which consistent grounds for similarity and difference are elaborated.'[470]

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[467] Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*, p. 47-8.
[468] See Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 202: 'cognition itself is essentially a process of seeing something as something.'
[469] *Ibid.*, p. 49.
[470] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, p. 146.

Here it is possible to demonstrate how an interdisciplinary approach asserting the connections between various literary and visual practices as they are examined in this thesis can shed critical light on the relevance and far-reaching implications of these textual techniques. It is the relationality rather than the 'content' of cultural messages that coordinates the material and the imaginary. And indeed, it is the relationality (the cultural relationship between description and how reality is constructed through given techniques of description) that is the 'content' of cultural messages; and is what is most challenged in Marcus' work. This distinction (between the content of messages and the assumed relationships between producer and consumer) is crucial as it helps locate (and so in turn, challenges) the conventional boundaries of the field of representational relations that are the territory of this thesis. The boundaries are inherently shifting and are defined more coherently by the relationships of communication than by what is being communicated. It is the nature of these relationships that is in many ways the subject of Marcus' fiction.

The cultural position of this kind of literary perspective is perhaps more in keeping with the preoccupations of visual art practice than it is with those found in conventional novels (though it could also be applied in these areas) and perhaps demonstrates why Marcus finds gallery practices, as well as artistic collaboration, appealing. By employing diagrams and collaborating with visual artists Marcus has been able to move his work deeper into this field of representational relations that he begins to 'filter' in *The Age of Wire and String*. For this reason, it is worth considering his work in terms of a more specific American tradition of art-making and objecthood as it is represented by certain Post-war sculptural and collagist practices that interrogate the material of this type of representational relationality. By doing this it will in turn open up certain ideas of writing (or fiction-making) as a form of sculptural handling in order to venture a new perspective on cultural commodification and how it relates to the novel and textuality.

References to writing in *The Age of Wire and String* often take on a tactile character building on the visual and informational preoccupations in his work: 'We Frederick [write] with a tool, a stylus, our fingers' and 'certain Braille codes are punched into the

cloth.'[471] Emphasising the way protagonists touch and handle the fabric of language associates writing with manipulating and modelling material. Literally handling the relationality of cultural givens, the cloth and fabric of communication, has much in common with the tradition of collage and assemblage out of which developed (via Minimalism) the later site-specific work of Robert Smithson. Marjorie Welish, for instance, characterises Robert Rauschenberg's use of recycled elements scavenged from the detritus of modern material culture as a 'reckless handling of place', meaning that place and the representational evidence of place are provocatively interchangeable in how they are 'handled'.[472] Similarly Jasper Johns characterises his work with the found elements of everyday life as a way of using 'things the mind already knows.' In the tradition of this work, place, like Bacon's diagram, is culturally constructed according to the given organisation of information. Rauschenberg's Combines incorporate, among other things, cloth, window frames, stuffed-animals and cardboard turning sculpture into a strange form of cultural association whereby the artist can reconfigure the found narratives of an 'environment in which a person's relationship to things is more stimulating than the things found in it.'[473]

Marcus 'handles' cultural associations of found everyday objects and the narratives they signify as part of a similar process using place and environment as a mixed field of production and reception.[474] In *The Age of Wire and String* this is characterised as 'The Style of Space' and refers to the channels of commodification that seek to control cultural associations and the (often metaphorical) connections between one thing and another:

> The distinctive way space opposes us, useful because it frames and highlights the space our hands would make. Space being mobile and persons being static, the spatial style is more energetic, animated and even pictorial. True spaces, not

[471] Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*, p. 136.
[472] Marjorie Welish, 'Texas, Japan, Etc. Rauschenberg's Sense of Place', in Marjorie Welish, *Signifying Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 28.
[473] *Ibid.*, p. 28.
[474] In the Weather archetype of *The Age of Wire and String* the 'style of space' is defined as something haptic or tactile that relates to 'handling' as a kind of communication: 'The proper use of space is to find out the things we have not said, and how our hands might make sure they stay that way.'

> falsified by our occupation, are as rare as true words and cannot be acquired through the routine channel of desire, nor may accidents deliver them for use.[475]

That there might be 'space our hands would make' is reminiscent of the sculptor modelling material or the collagist assembling various suspended elements in order to activate spatial strategies of communication. To conceive of space as having an 'energetic, animated and even pictorial' 'style' suggests that space is to be considered an operation of communication, a way or means of communicating. Rauschenberg considers this style of space to be a 'random order', 'a combination of law and local motivations' and so uses collage and assemblage to reflect the way the street is experienced as a field of space and communication where, for instance, branded 'trucks mobilise words' with 'sound, scale and insistency.'[476] For Michel de Certeau the style of space (the relationship between space and language) is the narration of 'spatial stories', the practices and behaviours that communicate Rauschenberg's random order: 'every day, they traverse and organise places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories.'[477] This is an essential quality of space, de Certeau argues; it cannot exist without the practices that generate communication: 'Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalise it.'[478] Protagonists in *The Age of Wire and String* redirect these spatial trajectories, the practices hidden in the habitual routines of commodification, in the way they 'handle' space in order to divert 'the routine channels of desire'. Space exists as an activity of communication in which the novel has to position itself.

The perspective of Marcus' work is anticipated in the site-specific sculpture that advances on the spatial discourse of collage and assemblage. Hal Foster, writing on the sculpture of Richard Serra, identifies the critical shift in focus in site specific sculpture as being from the object to the subject: 'from ontological questions (of the essence of a medium) to phenomenological conditions (of a particular body in a particular space as the

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[475] Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*, p. 94.
[476] See Rosalind Krauss, 'Perpetual Inventory' in *Robert Rauschenberg*, ed. by Branden W. Joseph (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), p. 99-105.
[477] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 115.
[478] *Ibid.*, p. 117.

ground for art).'[479] As with Marcus' 'Golden Monica', doing and watching are interchangeable; so much so that any encountering of an object (as in the sculpture of Carl Andre or Donald Judd) is intended to activate a simultaneous encountering of the subject, or self, and his or her role as a viewer. Sculpture becomes a process in which the position, both physically and culturally, of the viewer is the subject of the work. Emphasising the relational aspect of materiality, sculpture is thus re-considered in terms of a field of relations and social referents, a process of identification operating in terms of public space. Rosalind Krauss characterises it as 'the transformation of sculpture from a static, idealised medium to a temporal and material one.'[480]

Marcus is undoubtedly operating in terms of this field of relations and considers language and syntax to be similarly material, even sculptural. Yet, in order to understand his work properly in terms of visual representations of experience and place, it is important to emphasise the role of mediation in the sculptural practices identified here and how, as modern mechanisms of commodification have become increasingly sophisticated, mediation itself becomes a form of cultural material utilised in this type of writing and sculpture. Beyond the site-specific art of the 1960s and 1970s more current artists such as Matthew Barney, whom Marcus sites as an influential contemporary, have become interested in the way the relational operations of space developed in the work of Robert Smithson (as discussed in chapter two) have become increasingly mediated.

Here, it is worth returning briefly to why Smithson selected the Great Salt Lake in Utah as the site for *The Spiral Jetty*. The lake is a geological anomaly, an enormous internal sea, and is commonly regarded as a 'freak of nature' by local communities. The Lake's implausibility has been accounted for by various myths which provide Smithson with the form of his sculpture: 'One such [settler's] myth was that the lake had originally been connected to the Pacific Ocean through a huge underground waterway, the presence of which caused treacherous whirlpools to form at the Lake's centre.'[481] This local

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[479] Hal Foster, 'The Un/Making of Sculpture', *Richard Serra*, ed. by Hal Foster (London: MIT Press, 2000), p. 177.
[480] Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), p. 282.
[481] *Ibid.*, p. 282.

vernacular reading of the landscape mediates space and in imitation of this process, 'Smithson incorporates the myth into the space of the work... Smithson creates an image of our psychological response to time and the way we are determined to control it by the creation of historical fantasies.'[482] It was this sense of bifocal mediation (both near and far – the immediate fragmentary sense of local experience and the totalising narratives of a satellite perspective or world-view) that Smithson uses in order to position the artist within the field of representation in which the process of place is both experienced and constructed. Using film, text and sculpture Smithson invades and occupies (not unlike Marcus' 'Golden Monica') the territory of mediation unsettling the roles and relationships of production and reception.

Matthew Barney's more recent *Cremaster Cycle* draws on this (often overlooked) tendency in Smithson's site-specificity to incorporate the mythologies of local vernacular as part of a paradigm of culture as fiction. Barney, like Marcus, recycles the geography of mediation readily available in cultural, psychological and biological metaphors. The *Cremaster Cycle* is a series of five films made between 1994 and 2003 loosely modelled on the biological process of human gene differentiation that coordinates cultural and natural models of difference. The scale of the *Cycle*, its 'polysemic thematic structure' incorporating sculpture, installation, a vast cast of characters, various locations and over ten hours of cinema, is in proportion to the pervasiveness of media representation so much a part of the cultural materiality of everyday life.[483] Like *The Age of Wire and String* it is fashioned from a network of esoteric connections between a string of recurring and suggestively found narratives. Gene differentiation, gender patterns, Mormon mythology, the Chrysler Building, honey-bees, Masonic ritual, Gary Gilmore, thrash metal, Rem Koolhaas and Richard Serra all act as narrative motifs that take centre stage throughout the *Cremaster* films.

Although the primary form is cinema, Barney is otherwise known for his sculpture, diagrammatic drawings and installation work, suggesting that each of these rolling

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[482] *Ibid.*, p. 283.
[483] See Nancy Spector, 'Only the Perverse Fantasy Can Still Save Us', in Matthew Barney, *The Cremaster Cycle* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2003), p. 25.

cultural referents are manipulated by Barney in the way of sculptural material, forming counter-narratives to the historical processes of production already prefigured into each strand of its narrative system. There is also a certain amount of textual and cultural appropriation. Gary Gilmore's mythology is lifted, for instance, from the secondary mythology of Norman Mailer's novel, *The Executioner's Song* (1979). This is perhaps what makes Barney's work most relevant to the present discussion. Barney seems to model his approach on the mediational qualities and complexities of cultural commodification, emphasising, through the lavish theatrical textures of his work, the role played by fiction and mediation in the representational process that coordinates experience and space.

Barney demonstrates this most explicitly in his use of cultural icons such as celebrity personas and landmark locations. In terms of place, Barney seems to be interested in certain vernacular referential systems that articulate the relationship between popular culture and myth, a 'style of space' that communicates 'spatial stories'. Like Marcus who employs familiar place names, the *Cremaster Cycle* is set in a series of identifiable locations. The Bronco's Stadium of Boise State University, the Bonnefield Salt Flats of Northern Utah, the Rocky Mountains, New York's Chrysler Building and the Guggenheim Museum are all included in a conceptual map determining the shape of the five films.[484] The locations are redefined according to strange practices (again, as with *The Age of Wire and String*) of making and production (or building). The sports stadium, as one example among many, houses a Busby Berkley dance routine involving zeppelins and cheerleaders performing the patterns of embryonic chromosome separation, literally enacting public space as a (sports) field of representational difference.

The scene epitomises the way in which the cultural construction of place involves the consideration of metaphor in relation to social action. The American football stadium is a socially sanctioned space for otherwise unsanctioned or regulated behaviour, a space with metaphorically defined boundaries (the football field is often invoked as a space of

[484] 'Pre-selected for their symbolic valences, these diverse locations form their own constellation, the outline of which metaphorically traces the cyclical path taken by an organism in conflict with itself.' See Nancy Spector, *Ibid.*, p. 19.

'battle'; a war of possession and territory). The stadium's metaphorical potency or currency has been traded upon at sporting events in America throughout the Twentieth Century by the corporate positioning of the Goodyear Blimp. Tethered as a syntactical extension to the arena, the 'Wingfoot' logo is meant to articulate (speak metaphorically of) 'the characteristics of Goodyear products': swiftness, zeal, fleet-footedness.[485] In *Cremaster 1* a version of the Blimp (standing in for the 'suspended' embryonic stage of development where the foetus is neither male nor female, 'it hovers in a realm of gender indeterminacy') hovers above proceedings and Goodyear (characterised as a platinum blonde Hollywood starlet) organises (with diagrams and gestures) the dance of the X and Y chromosomes beneath. The god of trade and commerce, Mercury is also a messenger and Goodyear here appears able to divine the codes of chromosome formation to the dancing troupe (chorines) on the sports field beneath. In this extended sequence, Barney appropriates not only the branding of corporate America, but also the process of cultural reference whereby metaphor and commodification are intertwined.

Here Barney's work is directly related to Marcus's handling of cultural association and the distinction, as noted above, between the content and relationality of media messages. Commodity culture does not operate in terms of altering the nature of objects (as is suggested by the notion of the art object being commodified) but altering the relationship between the object and its audience. In other words, commodity culture does not control material it controls the material of relationships, the movement of information as the substance of this material. Thus, the appeal of metaphor: 'Though Metaphors are often said to be based on the perception of real similarities even essences, they are to a large extent based on contingent cultural conventions.'[486] As such, commodification employs metaphorical figures in order to make habitual the contingent and arbitrary as a means of controlling supposedly given cultural connections between practice and meaning (the way in which classical sporting romance, for instance, is automatically connected with automotive products).

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[485] See: http://www.goodyear.com/corporate/history/history_origin.html (quoted in Neville Wakefield, 'The Cremaster Glossary', *Ibid.* p. 114.

[486] Jonathon Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 201.

Barney and Mathews are thus both concerned with the ways in which metaphor regulates spatial practices and how the metaphorical arrangements of space and place provide a syntactical blueprint for everyday life. Tilley makes this assertion in terms of Native American heritage (another implicit reference in parts of the *Cremaster Cycle*) and the way metaphor organises the activities and psycho-cultural valences of social space. Here the landscape is an ongoing mediation of metaphorical arrangements as 'the land stalks people with stories' and the oral narratives of place create a 'moral imperative', providing a law of doing and understanding that is historically and culturally a vital aspect of place and experience. The metaphorical process is particularly explicit in the way places are named:

> For the Apaches place names are like pictures... detailed literal descriptions of particular topographical locations picking out, pinpointing and describing visible details. They have the capacity to evoke full and accurate images of the place to which they refer... [They] form parts of oral narratives localizing events and activities in the landscape... [Place names inform] a personal and cultural appropriation of the world.[487]

Marcus and Barney both identify the relationship between personal and cultural appropriation, metaphor and commodification as a vital source for the creation of new literary and visual languages. Place names such as Idaho and Ohio mark out a conceptual map of personal and cultural significance. As Tilley makes clear, hidden in the singularised American place-name is a syntax, a whole sentence such as 'water floats downward on top of a series of flat rocks' or 'white rocks lie above in a compact cluster'. In Marcus' work, given place names become 'abstract repositories' for the production of meaning mediated, in this way, by the cluster of cultural associations of the name, or in other words, that which is already 'known' about a place.[488] The word 'Boise' (signifying the location of Barney's sports field of representation and commodification) for instance is defined (fittingly in terms of making, construction and habitation) as the

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[487] Christopher Tilley, *Metaphor and Material Culture*, p. 180-1.

[488] See interview with the author in Appendix A: 'When I arrive at some of the places that I have taken and used, they really seem kind of innocuous to me. They are generally places I know little about. It's... about my real inability to have a lot to say about what the word means. It becomes a really nice vessel. It's just a repository for me. It's a generic place name, sort of the reverse of doing an ultra-specific thing with a known place. Instead it's a question of taking the place and making it seem almost like an abstraction. It's very appealing to me.'

'site of the first Day of Moments, in which fire became the legal form of air... Never may a replica, facsimile, or handmade settlement be termed a Boise.'[489] The relationship between language and place is a workable material. Marcus underlines this point in relation to Barney's work:

> When I work I'm incapable of using the stock footage or the basic materials that would let me get on with my story. The story ends up being the remaking of this basic stuff. In one of Matthew Barney's films, the one about Gary Gilmore [*Cremaster 2*], there's that scene at the gas station where he even rebuilt all of the pumps. You know what I mean? So everyone else would just pull into a gas station but he thought: someone made these once and now they're iconic objects in our lives – why don't I make my own? And I think that's more fascinating to me than using all of the accepted objects in order to get somewhere better with a narrative.[490]

The 'iconic objects' of everyday life and the commodified vernacular landscape are not just a backdrop but primary material in this kind of work, rich with characterisations, relationships and narrative. For Marcus and Barney the languages of writing and sculpture, as part of what Tilley calls an 'ocular-centric society', are inextricably associated with these cultural practices.[491] The sense that both Marcus and Barney are working in relation to commodification and the cultural production of place is intensified by the way in which they position the 'cultural authority' of the artist. Barney evokes paradigms of the commodified art object by casting well known authors and artists as celebrity versions of themselves.[492] He also 'stars' as 'himself' throughout the narrative, as the 'Entered Apprentice' performing certain ritualised tasks and initiations. Similarly, Marcus cites his own name in *The Age of Wire and String*:

> Ben Marcus, The: Figure from which the antiperson is derived; or, simply, the antiperson... It has been represented in other figures such as Malcolm and Laramie, although aspects of it have been co-opted for uses in John. Other members claim to inhabit its form and are refused entry to the house.[493]

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[489] Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*, p. 94. Also 'Ohio': 'OHIO: The house, be it built or crushed. It is a wooden composition affixed with stones and glass, locks, cavities, the person... There will never be a clear idea of Ohio.' (p. 61.)

[490] See interview in Appendix A.

[491] Tilley, *Metaphor and Culture*, p. 21.

[492] Richard Serra and Norman Mailer both appear in this capacity.

[493] Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*, p. 76.

Rather than a person, the name of the author comes to stand in for a kind of celebrity persona, one that 'signifies a spectacularly bogus character.'[494] Yet the theme of persona is related to the nature of personhood and is important in terms of place and the way that place (as a representational field of space and language) is performed. Persona has a variety of connotations; it is linked to performance, representation and the social construction of personhood; to take on a persona is to don a mask, to play roles, to assume a character, to represent and to enact relations in a given place characterised as a field of representation. A persona is historically associated with the mask and 'the mask, which was originally a mythic representation, comes to signify a social personality', a means of performing space. In this sense, Marcus' evocation of 'himself' as a mask or persona 'from which the anti-person is derived', suggests that the position of the author (as narrator and creator) is an implicit aspect of this representational field and needs to be considered in terms of the cultural 'authority' of the author.

The initial question of the novel and cultural description is important here. Reminiscent of culturally unreliable texts such as Bronislaw Malinowski's *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*, the role of 'Ben Marcus' as a participant-observer is identified as being part of a network of representative processes, the product of that which Clifford calls 'a garrulous, overdetermined cross-cultural encounter shot through with power relations and personal cross-purposes.'[495] Marcus' work is defined by this contradictory relationship between on the one hand, writing and cultural description, and on the other the

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[494] See Robert C. Elliot, *The Literary Persona* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 30: 'Given the enormous number of meanings taken on over the centuries by the term *persona* and its cognates, any generalisation about the term must be suspect – any generalisation except this one: the most striking characteristic of the term is its polysemous nature, the contradictory range of its reference... For C. G. Jung the persona is 'only a mask of the collective psyche... fundamentally, the persona is nothing real.' Kant, on the other hand, constructs his whole system of ethical thought on the foundation of his concept of person and personality. Personality frees man from the 'mechanism of nature', writes Kant; it 'elevates man above himself as a part of the world of sense'; in it is the root and the origin of duty. As against this lofty concept consider the Twentieth Century usage: 'She is a Hollywood (or TV) personality' here the word signifies a spectacularly bogus character.'

[495] In terms of Malinowski's cultural unreliability see: Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, p. 97: Malinowski's 'Diary is an inventive, polyphonic text. It is a crucial document for the history of anthropology, not because it reveals the reality of ethnographic experience, but because it forces us to grapple with the complexities of such encounters and to treat all textual accounts based on field work as partial constructions.'

production of 'an adequate version of a more or less discrete "other world" composed by an individual author'.[496] Finally, the discussion of Marcus' work has to consider writing and the cultural constitution of the self or person within the everyday spaces of what de Certeau terms a 'scriptural economy'.

A Scriptural Economy: Blueprints, Recipes, Field Notes, Manuals and Maps

The written evidence is incomplete... (Lefebvre)

In Marcus' second novel, *Notable American Women*, part of the novel is entitled 'Blueprint' and, beginning with the line: 'I am probably Ben Marcus', goes on in the form of an instruction manual to define the nature of the book (its (probable) plot, cast of characters, setting, narrative purpose and so on) and how the book should be put to use by the reader.[497] The Blueprint section is part of a series of textual models in Marcus' oeuvre that can be associated with what de Certeau calls the scriptural economy of everyday life. These include the (already noted) diagram, fieldwork, the recipe, instruction manuals or blueprints and maps. There is a sense that literary and artistic narratives have to be positioned (or position themselves) in terms of scriptural economies of writing that 'produce' information in a transformative process akin to industry in which materials are transformed into products. 'The page is a transitional place in which an industrial inversion is made: what comes in is something "received", what comes out is a "product".' [498]

In de Certeau's conception of the scriptural economy the text represents an authorised position in the community; it is the voice [sic] of authority, the written source of power, the letter of the law. 'Scriptural practice has acquired a mythical value over the past four centuries by gradually organising all the domains into which the Occidental ambition to compose its history, and thus to compose history itself, has been extended... [It is] the multiform and murmuring activity of producing... society as a text... a text that has

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[496] *Ibid.*
[497] Ben Marcus, *Notable American Women* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 2002), p. 45.
[498] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 135.

power over the exteriority from which it has first been isolated.'[499] By invoking this 'myth' of writing (a fragmentary process that takes on a symbolic totality) de Certeau attacks the authority of writing, its legal formation of expert scribes and their expert readers, the role of cultural description and its subordination of oral traditions. Marcus' authorial position seems to articulate a similar attack. The rest of the glossary entry for 'Ben Marcus, The' in *The Age of Wire and String* reads:

> False map, scroll, caul, or parchment. It is comprised of the first skin. In ancient times, it hung from a pole, where wind and birds inscribed its surface. Every year it was lowered and the engravings and dents that the wind had introduced were studied... When properly decoded (an act in which the rule of opposite perception applies), it indicates only that we should destroy it and look elsewhere for instruction.

The likeness with de Certeau's work is striking: 'The law constantly writes itself on bodies. It engraves itself on parchments made from the skin of its subjects. It articulates them in a judicial corpus. It makes its book out of them... living beings are packed into a text... The reason or [logic] of a society 'becomes flesh'.'[500] Writing, by inscribing on bodies the law (or corpus) of its constitution, creates what Pierre Bourdieu calls a 'habitus', a 'second order principle of regulation' whereby members of a society internalise the rules and codes of everyday life as part of practices that may superficially appear spontaneous and unregulated. 'The habitus contains within it a set of un-analysed implicit rules which determine the way in which the subject takes up and appears to manipulate the explicit rules prevailing in a social environment... the improvisations on rules are themselves 'regulated', but by rules unknown to the agents themselves.'[501] De Certeau is critical of Bourdieu's conception of the habitus because it prioritises the role of the expert observer characterised as a 'scientific interpreter', a mediatory expert who 'can come and install himself, armed with the interpretive master key' that will decode the significance and meaning of social actions on behalf of the habitus.[502] Any kind of decoding on behalf of 'the other', de Certeau argues, at least 'partially constructs' the

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[499] *Ibid.*, pp. 133-4.
[500] *Ibid.*, p140.
[501] Bourdieu quoted in Jeremy Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and Its Other* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 152.
[502] *Ibid.*, p. 151-2.

condition of that which it describes. This argument is important for Marcus' work. Marcus appears to be equally ambivalent in terms of cultural authority. As the false map (of Ben Marcus, The) instructs: 'That we should destroy it [the false map] and look elsewhere for instruction', suggests that the novel is a textual enterprise that is not only inherently unreliable but openly fails to isolate itself from the 'exteriority' it purports to describe. Cultural authority and the social constitution of the self are not 'written' as part of a distinction or demarcation from what is 'other' but as mechanisms or models of difference; the authorial distinction is part of the construction of otherness.[503]

Part of Marcus' diagram for the *Remote Viewing* exhibition refers to a 'vent for filtering landscapes', or at least, a drawing of what looks like a cross between an air conditioning unit and a hand-held generator is positioned beside a hand-scrawled note referring to various sections of the familiar but strange household object. The machine can be situated in terms of what de Certeau cites as the avant-garde literary tradition of non-productive (or 'celibate') writing machines of authors and artists including those fabricated by Alfred Jarry, Raymond Roussel, Marcel Duchamp and Franz Kafka.[504] The 'vent for filtering landscapes' seems to be a kind of language machine through which language passes and images are made. There is an opening for language ('sentences enter here') and part of the machine is referred to as a 'scenery generator', yet there appears to be no output except a 'particle exhaust' and built-in precautions against collision (a 'rubber bumper' on the reverse). The machine is in some sense non-productive and seems to point to a general relatedness rather than give any clear indication of how this object should be used and in what way it contributes to an understanding of modern material culture. An apparatus or technology with no clear use is reminiscent of avant-garde preoccupations with process, rather than finished-products. Marcus' diagram, like those of Duchamp, is in a sense a map for the contingent position of the artist and points to the ways in which space and language relate to the everyday production of places.

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[503] 'De Certeau emphasises that the interpreter does not passively absorb the traces of the other, but 'operates' on them in such a way as to redistribute them.' *Ibid.*, p. 15.
[504] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, p. 150-1.

If sentences are the material filtered by the non-productive 'vent for filtering landscapes', the idle 'scenery generator' might be considered a kind of 'field-recording' device for stalling the operation of cultural description. De Certeau notes the role of 'recording' voices in contemporary culture and how it relates to an 'illegitimacy of speech' in the scriptural economy.[505] 'Today [the "voice of the people"] is "recorded" in every imaginable way, normalised, audible everywhere, but only when it has been "cut" (as one "cuts a record"), and thus mediated by radio, television or the phonograph record, and "cleaned up" by the techniques of diffusion.'[506] De Certeau is primarily concerned with cultural distortion: what he calls 'noises off' stage that disrupt the 'soundless' notion of historical production. In his work, Marcus has appropriated certain devices of recording in order to re-transcribe, as it were, the yet-to-be 'cleaned up' voices of cultural distortion – these 'noises off' – in an attempt to relocate the communicative properties stripped out of the 'cuts' of media diffusion, 'the all-vowel world hidden within American dialects and weather'.[507] The non-productive recording device invokes a figure of field-recording and the ethnographic observer-participant redirecting the relationship between writing and speech, a textual position in which 'voices return... like the Freudian repressed, to upset an aesthetic construction and to blur the 'proper' distinction between observer and observed. The onlooker is not secure in a detached position of contemplation. He is shown instead to inhabit an ambivalent, violent realm of seduction and fascination.'[508]

In *The Age of Wire and String*, for instance, Marcus borrows from the fieldwork of the folklorist Stith Thompson. Arranged in the 1950s, Thompson's vast *Index of Folk Motifs* is appealing to Marcus less for its colonising sense of codifying an organic or oral folk tradition, but more because of the strange 'accidental' language produced by the endeavour to record and categorise oral folk traditions.[509] The *Index*, generating

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[505] '"Progress" is scriptural... Orality is defined by (or as) that from which a "legitimate" practice – whether in science, politics, or the classroom etc – must differentiate itself. The oral is that which does not contribute to progress; reciprocally, the "scriptural" is that which separates itself from the magical world of voices and tradition.' *Ibid.*, pp. 131-2.

[506] *Ibid.*, p. 132.

[507] Marcus, *Notable American Women*, p. 65.

[508] Ahearne, *Michel de Certeau: Interpretation and Its Other*, p. 73.

[509] Robert Coover introduced Marcus to the *Index of Folk Motifs* while studying with Coover at Brown University (see interview in Appendix A).

sentences such as 'corn from body of slain person' or 'deceptive drinking contest: hole for water' creates a reservoir of syntactical arrangements derived from the distortion of recordings done 'in the field'.[510] The fictional device, for Marcus, is conceived in the cultural distortion generated by the conventional relationship between an *informant* and a *recorder* or, more to the point, the observer and the observed. The truth of a place is thus activated somewhere in between, in the space of the language it endeavours to produce and the arbitrary syntax of its recording and categorisation. Employing the material of its distortion, this type of practice undermines the role of recording in the scriptural economy.

To make this clear it is worth considering the confusion of eating and speaking in Marcus' work and the scriptural practice of the recipe. In the 'food' section of *The Age of Wire and String* the reader is given a new definition of the recipe:

> Food Map of Yvonne, The 1. Parchment upon which can be found the location of certain specialized feminine edibles. 2. Locations within a settlement in which food has been ingested, produced, or discussed. 3. Scroll of third Yvonne, comprised of fastened grain and skins. This document sustained the Yvonne when it was restricted from the home grave.[511]

The conflation of map with recipe again highlights a preoccupation with the relationship between language and space. The recipe or the 'food map' stands in for writing as a cultural mechanism whereby an order devised elsewhere is purposefully recreated (word for word) within the domestic setting. The recipe combines description and instruction with cultural act.

The recipe is also insinuated in *Notable American Women.* 'Better Reading Through Food' follows the 'Blueprint' section and documents the mechanics and results of a 'person-shaping' language diet. It is a 'diet' that enables the reader to detect 'the vowel

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[510] Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977); Thompson describes 'folklorists' going into the 'field and recording tales and songs from the lips of informants. . . A recorder must learn to abbreviate and record as quickly as possible.' See Stith Thompson, 'Problems in Folklore', in *An Introduction to Research in English Literary History*, ed. by Chauncey Sanders (New York: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 255-7.

[511] Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*, p. 42.

world hidden within American dialects and weather [...] because the Marcus family, through elaborate trial and error, bloodshed and heartbreak, believes that food plays an important role in how words enter the body, and what these words come to mean.'[512] The narrator describes a genealogy of eating, where the narratives of habitual behaviour are internalised like fluids and solids:

> The notion of Thompson Water™ probably derives from the early American Pantomime Water (Shush), a liquid used to teach children how to behave in the home. [It] was administered to me like baby formula and subsequently taught me how to stand and walk, to run, to read, to call my mother's name, and to sing using only mouth-carved breath.[513]

Natural functions are 'handed-down' in the same way that stories or lessons are handed down. Instinctive development is made synonymous with the exchange of narratives of daily routine, regulation and ritual (eating three times a day). The correct liquids and solids contain 'the source code of any task'. This is key: these narratives of doing are part of the everyday world in the same way that food and water are necessary for 'healthy' development; that is to say, narratives and storytelling are part of the world in the way that objects are part of the world: as a set of relations (like a family and its eating habits) rather than as things in themselves. As with the recipe, the novel has to be situated in terms of these social narratives of order and control according to which narratives of regulation are internalised. As a novel, *Notable American Women* situates itself explicitly in terms of this everyday geography of learning:

> I have field tested this book with control groups under the influence of varying food-combination/absorption strategies, with and without water in varying climates and stress conditions, and I believe there is a clear-cut way to optimise the reading experience, an eating programme to best dispose the reader's body toward a story.[514]

To 'field-test' a book is indicative of the kind of textuality being argued for here. The disposition of the reader's body in *Notable American Women* is localised: this is the

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[512] Marcus, *Notable American Women*, p. 72.
[513] *Ibid.*, p. 69.
[514] *Ibid.*, p. 71.

account of a particular person in a particular place, a kind of disclosure or confession.[515] The recipe or food scheme of 'Better Reading Through Food' is part of a local vernacular implied by the strange figures of speech and the built-in warnings against foreign interpretation: 'I cannot say definitively that readers will survive the project I propose for them.'[516] It is a kind of collage of found and local evidence that is not unlike Mathews' use of untranslatable local vernaculars. The unreliability of the narrator, the uncertainty of the source language undermine the desire to familiarise the strange and unfamiliar. A kind of 'ethnographic surrealism': 'it would not explain away those elements in the foreign culture that render the investigator's own culture newly incomprehensible.'[517]

Mathews writes poems and stories that look much like recipes. He is an influence on Marcus and it is clear that both authors purposely position their work in a similar relation to language, space (place) and the everyday. Mathews' short story, 'Country Cooking from Central France: Roast Boned Stuffed Shoulder of Lamb (Farce Double)', for instance, is a story of 'judicious substitution' in which the travelling narrator attempts to transport the local delicacies of La Tour Lambert ('a mountain village in Auvernge, that rugged heart of the Masif Central') to anywhere other than the immediate locality of its origin.[518] 'Farce double' mixes instruction with inanity: 'Cut paste midway between bands, roll these strips into cylinders, and slice the cylinders into sections no larger than a small headache.'[519] The pursuit proves painfully farcical as so much of the recipe's execution depends on strange local rituals, a lifetime of experience and ingredients unavailable anywhere other than the mythically non-existent La Tour Lambert.

The approach is reminiscent of what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as the Rabelaisian series of eating and drinking wherein the logic 'eat to live' is reversed as 'live to eat' and local

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[515] 'Better Reading Through Food' begins: 'My life has been lived under the strategic nourishment of The Thompson Food Scheme, a female eating system (FEAST) devised by an early Jane Dark deity construct named Thompson, who later became an actual person, though not a good one. The food regimen I have followed was further modified by my 'parents' to suit their early experiments with silence and voluntary paralysis, not to mention the person-shaping projects they constructed on myself and my sister, who died for other reasons.' p. 65.
[516] *Ibid.*, p. 71.
[517] Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, p. 147.
[518] Harry Mathews, *The Human Country: New and Collected Short Stories*, pp. 19-36.
[519] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

vernaculars are employed in order to upset the habitual codes of language and practice. In one scene from the third book of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* two monks discuss the ritual practice of food preparation. Most notably, the practice derives from a figure of speech ('a slice of ploughman, salted til the ninth hour'), or a proverbial saying that puts each in its proper place:

> "You like vegetable soup, but I prefer mine with bay leaf, with perhaps a slice of ploughman salted til the ninth hour." "I understand you," replied Friar John. "You drew that metaphor from the stockpot of the cloister. You call an ox that ploughman who is ploughing, or has ploughed. To salt for nine hours means to cook to a turn. By a certain cabalistic institution of the ancients, unwritten but passed from hand to hand, our good spiritual fathers, having gotten up for matins, would in my time go through certain important preliminaries before entering The Church. They spat in the spitteries, vomited in the vomitoria, dreamed in the dreameries, pissed in the pisseries. And all so that they might bring nothing unclean to the Divine service. Having done all this they moved devotedly to the Holy Chapel – for that in their jargon was the name they gave to the convent kitchen – and they devotedly saw to it that from that moment on the beef was on the fire, for the breakfast of our holy friars, brethren in our Lord."[520]

Like Rabelais, Mathews and Marcus explore the way the syntax or local vernacular of space creates specific places. In language (where the figurative blends with the non-figurative as metaphorical space blends with actual space) places are not only differentiated but enacted. Rabelais is most amused by the everyday jargon of the monks which conflates (among other things) kitchen with Holy Chapel. The novel (or story as recipe) is positioned as a means of decoding the 'parlance systems' (in this case 'monastic jargon') of everyday spaces as they are conceived in the everyday language of ritual and instruction: to spit in the spitteries, or to vomit in the vomitoria etc.[521]

In 'French Country Cooking', it is the narrativity of the recipe that Mathews most exploits in order to position the text in this Rabelaisian relation to life. It is perhaps not

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[520] Rabelaise quoted in Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Forms of Time and Chronotope in The Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 183.

[521] 'Age of Wire and String, The: Period in which English science devised parlance system based on the flutter pattern of string and wire structures placed over the mouth during speech.'

too much to suggest that the recipe could stand in as the model narrative-style of traditional story-telling. A recipe is an organising principle in real time and space, a method laid down for achieving some desired end. There is a near-automatic narrative quality (beginning, middle, end; direction, purpose, satisfaction) that defines the recipe: *Recipĕre* is the root of the word recipe, which means to take or receive; a recipe is a rule of promise, purpose and satisfaction. This rule of promise and satisfaction is one, moreover, that privileges the mouth (the proof of the pudding is in how something tastes). In the recipe taste has been translated into a kind of universal principle governing the endeavour to read on, to read correctly. Only by being read correctly and in turn correctly internalised (literally and without interpretation) will the recipe produce that which tastes 'good' (good taste of course, already being directly attributable to the correct balance and proportion of separate elements made to fuse and mingle in the mouth in the prescribed manner). More importantly, perhaps, Mathews and Marcus (in their generally unconventional narrative styles – the absurd reality of Mathews' recipe is that it cannot be executed and thus frustrates the recipe's essential narrative exercise of final satisfaction) evoke the recipe in order to demonstrate (in terms of fiction) the reciprocal position of the reader, the text and the habitual narratives of everyday life. Again there is the sense that Marcus' novels, like the work of Mathews, Korine, Wall and Smithson, blur the spaces of fiction with the fiction of spaces in order to stage the representational construction of place that is part of the everyday activity of reading and deciphering a territory of stories and representational narratives – what de Certeau identifies as a 'scriptural economy'.

Rabelais has in mind the recipe that is 'unwritten but passes from hand to hand'. Indeed, as a text, the automatic narrative of the recipe confuses writing and speech. As this thesis aims to demonstrate: place is constructed according to the rules governing the relationship between language and space. While the mixing of visual and textual language upsets the grammatical setting of place construction, so too does the mixing of writing and speech. De Certeau's theory of everyday life attempts to get beneath the workings of a scriptural economy that privileges writing over speech. Likewise, *The Age of Wire and String* with its multiplicity of voices, its various fragmentary perspectives

and its emphasis on re-wiring the circuits of cultural and grammatical definitions, undermines the inherent authority of the text in the scriptural economy.

Writing the Mouth:

Finally then, the novel achieves this in how it repositions itself in terms of speech. While Mathews emphasises everyday speech acts such as the proverbial or the duplicity of local vernaculars that undo the codes of official language use, Marcus employs a kind of ethnography of the mouth; speech is a kind of mouthing where meaning is un-tethered from the material of what is said.[522] Late in the novel, *The Age of Wire and String* is described as the 'Period in which English science devised a parlance system based on the flutter pattern of string and wire structures placed over the mouth during speech.'[523] For Marcus, the 'judicious substitution' of Mathews' recipe-prose, in which the reader is encouraged to engage with a spatial syntax that de-authorises or un-Englishes the destination language, is extended as part of a syntactical law of naming and doing. At the local level of the mouth 'the name has the object on a string, so to speak; and if the object ceases to exist, the name which has done its work in conjunction with the object, can be thrown away.'[524] Or, as in the Food archetype of *The Age of Wire and String*:

> The chief legal problem connected with hidden food is that of title. A scavenger cannot acquire title to chicken that he has discovered abruptly, and therefore he cannot transfer title even by barter to an innocent dining man who has requested a stew.[525]

The mouth, and its dual role of eating and speaking, is thus directly associated with the cultural properties ('the legal problem') of naming and definition. Food and words, which are in a sense the principal currency of the mouth, become somewhat interchangeable. Language as matter must induce a kind of tactile response that upends

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[522] Part of *Notable American Women* is called 'The Name Machine'. It lists and defines the various names attributed to the narrator's sister: 'The names defined here derive from a bank of easily pronounceable and typical slogans used to single out various female persons of America and beyond. A natural bias will be evident towards names that can be sounded with the mouth.' *Notable American* Women, p. 89.
[523] Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*, p. 135.
[524] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970), p. 123e.
[525] Marcus, *The Age of Wire and String*, p. 39.

the relationship between words and feeling. The tactility, like de Certeau's conception of writing as the law inscribed on bodies, is legalistic as well as learned. Ludwig Wittgenstein notes at the outset of his *Philosophical Investigations* how Saint Augustine recognises the tactile correspondence between words as they are spoken and that which they signify as being part of the learning or training that enables the (legal) mouth to differentiate (among other things) words from food:

> When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out... [As] I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires.[526]

The role of food in *The Age of Wire and String* is not unlike its role in the activity of a pre-vocal child learning to identify food and then how this learned association between food and the material of words continues into later development. Learning, as Augustine notes, can be reduced to a training of the mouth. The mouth is where meaning is made as one learns to use the proper name in its proper place. In an essay on his childhood experience of the books by Dr Seuss, Marcus describes an early appreciation of (learning) the mouth and its shape-forming activities. During a period of deafness (attributed to, he reasons, his mother reading to him lines such as 'the bustard, who only eats custard with sauce made of mustard', in which 'the cadenced madness of Seuss was literally deafening, a force so exclusive it denied me other sounds') Marcus learns a kind of lip-reading that develops into what sounds suggestively like an ethnography of the mouth:

> If I had to choose, I'd give up so called landscapes, sunsets, flowers, sky, bodies, anything notoriously beautiful or hideous, for all of the completeness of watching a mouth, just the sight of a mouth and what it does, given that the mouth renders other scenery ridiculous, swallows up the entire category of what can be seen. It is ultimately the only thing to see, and a mouth in the act of shaping out the Seuss lexicon is the premier vision.[527]

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[526] Wittgenstein, *The Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G.E.M. Anscombe), Blackwell: London (2001), p. 3

[527] Ben Marcus, 'Chemical Seuss' in *Conjunctions* 28 (Summer 1997), p. 167-8.

To study the mouth in this way (as with an ethnographer in the field) is to study the act of description. Marcus writes not from how the world is observed but from how it is mouthed, a participant-observer (as with the ethnographic figure of uncertainty and unreliability), where 'the only thing eyes are good for is to look at the mouth', watches as places are constructed in the language of cultural description. To see the world is already to act in terms of its description, to watch the mouth is to recognise that things are not so much 'seen' as they are spoken. The mouth is the lexicon or locality of premier vision because it is the local site of naming, describing and categorisation. For there to be 'the completeness of watching the mouth' brings into view the near essential nature of description, that something can only exist according to how it is described. The key element in this primary form of description is the name, or in other words, the primary shapes made by the mouth are names.[528] Writing the mouth de-authorises the scriptural economy that devalues speech. It means that writing is able 'to maintain its relation to the place of production'.[529] As Marcus would have it:

> For life to be possible, language must pursue what is not. Seuss is a hero to me because he made manifest the rampant power of naming, proving that you can name a thing into being as well as name something right out of the world. Objects have no anchors, let's go after them all and send them into the ether, clear the world of what we already know.[530]

[528] But names come endowed with an injurious quality. Having established the material nature of language (words are substituted by food, wind, rain and knives: 'the mouth, or word hole, that carves language out of wind') where, as Marcus writes, 'words are harder than things', is to assert, again in resistant relation to the proverbial, that 'language is physical enough to wreck a body'. Naming is perhaps the most abusive act in language. Judith Butler asserts this notion in her discussion of name-calling and interpellation. To be called a name is to suffer interpellation, that is, to be disturbed by speech. Yet this act of inscription is also one of agency. 'Could language injure us if we were not, in some sense, linguistic beings, beings who require language in order to be? Is our vulnerability to language a consequence of being constituted in its terms?' See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 3.

[529] Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, trans. by Tom Conely (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 217.

[530] Ben Marcus, 'Chemical Seuss', p. 168.

Concluding Notes: Beyond the Territory

To end with Marcus' notion of writing the mouth is not really to end. Writing the mouth relates most pertinently to a tradition of Speech Act Theory that develops out of the writings of Bakhtin in the 1930s, John Austin's work in the 1960s, and running through to Judith Butler's more recent work on the performative and interpellation in everyday language situations.[531] This tradition would provide a rich vein for future applications of the representational process of place as it is explored in *In the Territory*. Butler's notion of interpellation is particularly relevant. She revisits Althusser's ideological illustration of the policeman hailing the suspect ("You there!") in the street, in order to investigate the 'act' of the subject's response to being hailed namelessly:

> Interpellation is an act of speech whose context is nether true nor false: it does not have description as its primary task. Its purpose is to indicate and establish a subject in subjection, to produce its social contours in space and time. Its reiterative operation has the effect of sedimenting its positionality over time.[532]

Butler's concern with interpellation is important in terms of other key aspects of the thesis, especially Mathews' use of proverbs and the proverbial as fictional motifs in textual practice. Mathews' prose demonstrates the ways in which the construction of everyday life is very much a part of both fictions of space and spaces of fiction, indeed, the two resist easy extrapolation: one is not necessarily more real than the other. Butler's interpellation suggests something similar and is also relevant to Korine's use of rumour and the speech acts of everyday life that subvert the language culture of modern commercial landscapes. It might also represent a way of taking further the discussion of Wall's photography that stages the type of reiterative operation Butler identifies as being integral to the way in which the everyday is produced and reproduced through the performance of speech: the construction of place within the places of representation. The speech act is a kind of storytelling, and Wall's photographs, such as in *The Storyteller*, which stage the stories of storytelling, do so in ways that extend beyond the aesthetics of

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[531] John Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).
[532] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 34-5.

photography, when considered in the context of Butler's conception of the speech act and in how it is explored in *In the Territory*.

Indeed, this is the territory: each of the practitioners considered here is selected because of the way in which the form of their practice reaches beyond the immediate confines of genre, discipline or form. Place, in this sense and in the way it is articulated in the various practices explored in *In the Territory*, signals a particular predicament in the relationship between culture and imagination. Thus Butler's concern with speech as being part of the everyday and fictional constructions of fact, where 'its purpose is to indicate and establish a subject in subjection' or a person in a place, also alludes to ideas of personhood and cultural responsibility. These themes could also be drawn out further in terms of the construction of persona alluded to here, particularly in chapters three and six.

In addition to this, Butler's notion of 'sedimenting' as part of a 'reiterative' performance is reminiscent of Smithson's 'Sedimentations of the Mind' that are both the material and the imaginary settings of representation through which not only *The Spiral Jetty*, but the experience of *The Spiral Jetty*, are constructed. Again, Smithson's textuality is key: his essays, reports and surveys not only describe a reality, they describe a reality in the act of its construction. This sense of place as a reality constructed in, or through, representation is crucial and is why *In the Territory* employs a distinctively interdisciplinary approach, encompassing different forms of textuality considered explicitly in terms of trends in urban design, documentary-photography, sculpture and film. It does so in order to account for the question of representation in this wider context of practice and experience. The relationship of these practices to the social and cultural means of production and communication is what renders the interdisciplinary approach of this thesis most necessary. Still, Butler raises another important perspective implicit within much of the discussion here. Rather than emphasising the textuality of this sedimenting, her conception of performative acts that produce the 'social contours of space and time' within a 'context' that is 'neither true nor false' but a mixture of fact and fiction, could be refracted still further through other contemporary forms of sound and performance art.

Indeed, Butler's sense of the speech act as interpellation, which examines the way that the social act is inextricably tied into the specific linguistic setting, offers much in terms of taking these ideas of the representational process of place further, especially in terms of the construction of gender and race. As Butler points out: 'Racist speech works through the invocation of convention; it circulates, and though it requires the subject for its speaking, it neither begins or ends with the subject who speaks or with the specific naming that is used.'[533] The construction of race, of the identification and delimitation of otherness, is bound up in the stories and language uses of place. Indeed, most pertinent is the way 'cite' and 'site' merge in Butler's theory of the speech act, as a means of constructing cultural authority:

> In a sense, the police cite the convention of hailing, participate in an utterance that is indifferent to the one who speaks it. The act 'works' in part because of the citational dimension of the speech act, the historicity of convention that exceeds and enables the moment of its enunciation.[534]

To cite in this way is to draw on the spatial stories (the sites) that are intrinsic to the representational process of place as it has been examined in this thesis. Again, it is possible to see further ways in which the representational process of place might be used in order to open up new extra-literary categories of application. Place, in how it is conceived in this thesis, implies both an imaginary and a material condition. It is an ongoing production, a process of representation with social and cultural implications for both literary and art practices that endeavour to maintain a relationship both with the places of their production and the production of their places. For instance, as with Marcus' fiction in which the mouth is where meaning is made as one learns to use the proper name in its proper place, there is a tradition of performance and sound art that interrogates the territory between cultural description and enactment (or embodiment) that would be worth considering further in this context of place-construction.

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[533] Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 36.
[534] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Embodiment and enactment are important to performance artists who interrogate, in particular, the construction of gender through the spatial stories of everyday life. Whether the kinds of practices looked at in this thesis are in themselves part of a gendered paradigm is an intriguing question and would be worth exploring through the contemporaneous work of female American practitioners such as Mary Kelley, Laurie Anderson and Yvonne Rainer, among others. However, as shown in the interrogation of the distinction, in chapter three, between 'material' and 'metaphorical' space as being 'masculine' and 'feminine' respectively, descriptions of supposedly gendered practices, in themselves, often risk reinforcing conventional stereotypes.

More rewarding in terms of the representational processes of place and performance art (as well as questions of space, language and the everyday), might be investigations that follow on from the themes of disability and mental illness identified particularly in the work of Harmony Korine. In Korine's film, *Gummo*, there is a scene in which two deaf people are arguing at a bowling alley. It is a fascinating moment (not least because of its rarity in American cinema) in which the audience witnesses what Michael Davidson calls: 'a kind of 'deaf performative' – a form of speech that enacts or performs rather than describes – its meaning contained not in the content' of, in this case, the couple's words (the exchange, is loud *and* indiscernible, interrupting the surrounding and 'conventional conversations'), 'but in the results the performance achieves in shaking' what Davidson calls the 'oralist bias' of the audience.[535] Taking this further, it would be interesting to look at the work of deaf performance artists who open up questions of disability, representation and space, in order to 'extend the concept of a 'deaf performative' to describe the work of deaf language-artists for whom the use of speech and vocalisation is a kind of scandal and who utilise that scandal to critical ends.'[536]

Historically, and culturally, it would also be interesting to interrogate an avant-garde fascination with disability and mental health in terms of avant-gardiste conceptions of space and the everyday. For instance new perspectives on Breton's *Nadja*, as looked at

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[535] See Michael Davidson, 'The Scandal of Speech in Deaf Performance', in *Ubuweb*, 'Ethnopoetics: Discourses': http://www.ubu.com/ethno/discourses/davidson_hearing.html

[536] Michael Davidson, 'The Scandal of Speech in Deaf Performance', *Ibid.*

in chapter one, challenging Breton's textuality constructed, it could be construed, in terms of the relationship between a 'disturbed woman and an avant-garde writer'.[537] A cultural history of the avant-garde fascination with mental health would include re-evaluations of famous dualities such as 'Freud and the neurotic' or 'Deleuze and the schizophrenic'; both the 'schizophrenic' and the 'neurotic' being cultural characterisations represented by the individual suffering from a condition, rather than, the characterisation of a condition *per se*. A cultural/historical evaluation of what the French call *l'Art Brut* (roughly translated as 'Rough Art' or 'Outsider Art') could also throw new light on perspectives relating to the influence of Surrealism on contemporary conceptions of representation, space and the self. Originally a Surrealist project searching for works of 'art' made predominantly by the mentally ill, works described provocatively as being 'free from all cultural conventions as well as from fashion tendencies', *l'Art Brut* is as much about a culture of collecting as it is about artistic production, could open up fresh questions surrounding intention, mediation and the museum and could be applied to a specifically American tradition.

Indeed, it is an American tradition that would involve a history of disability in representation from early American 'freak shows' through to modern day projects of 'social inclusion' and 'self-representation' such as the 'Creative Growth Art Centre' in Oakland, California which 'serves physically, mentally and developmentally disabled adult artists, providing a stimulating environment for artistic instruction, gallery promotion and personal expression'.[538] It would also challenge distinctions between public and private space. Korine, it should be reiterated, sets much of *Julien Donkey-Boy* in a home for the blind and partially-sighted as a way of exploring the cultural habitations of sight. Mixing the domestic interiors of the suburban home with navigations of the home for the blind again upsets representations of the 'model' family (as is also discussed in chapter six). This type of institutionalised re-arrangement of public and private space may also have interesting implications in terms of the question of disability, space and the everyday. It could be extended to forms of 'motor-function' and the 'habitual' that

[537] This is Ian Walker's phrase, see Ian Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams: Surrealism and Documentary Photography in the Interwar Years* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 53.
[538] See The Creative Growth Art Centre: http://www.creativegrowth.org.

are built into the representational performances of place. Indeed, in this context of 'able' and 'disabled' bodies, questions of space, experience and the subject could be still further explored, particularly in terms of 'accessibility' in urban design, architecture and the 'virtual spaces' of the internet.

Indeed, the internet is in itself another aspect of the territory that would be worth investigating. As this thesis suggests, the nature of the modern day reading experience (or textuality) is developing rapidly. While it is something this thesis does not discuss explicitly, the rapid development described is also represented by the internet and its new-found prevalence in how everyday life is negotiated; that is to say, principally as an *activity* or *practice* of reading. 'Blogging', live streaming, mp3 technology and 'podcasting' are, in many ways collapsing notions of space and place and creating new perspectives on the fields of representation as they are considered here. Dan Gillmor idealises it thus:

> Tomorrow's news reporting and production will be more of a conversation, or a seminar. The lines will blur between producers and consumers... everyone, from journalists to the people [they] cover to [their] sources and the former audience must change. The alternative is just more of the same.[539]

Yet here, Gillmor is at least partially constructing this sameness as he describes the way in which it 'must change'; the problem with this type of forecast being that it assumes 'the former audience', as he describes it, made up of 'once mere consumers of news... is learning how to get a better, timelier report.'[540] The argument developed in *In the Territory*, in contrast, and as with Benjamin's conception of 'The Storyteller' in the information-driven landscape, is that rather than undermining presumed conventions of reception and production, new technology merely makes the predicament more visible. 'We' never simply swallow what 'we' are told; Gillmor's 'former audience', should perhaps be translated: 'former media'; confusing the two risks turning cultural assumptions into crude historicism.

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[539] Dan Gillmor, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism By the People for the People* (Sebastopol, California: O'Reilly Media Inc., 2004), p. xiii.
[540] *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

There are, then, serious implications for the internet and place, especially in terms of the cultural commodifocation of the imagination discussed in chapter six. It is the relationality, rather than the 'content' of cultural messages, that coordinates the material and the imaginary. And indeed, it is the relationality (the cultural relationship between description and how reality is constructed through given techniques of description) that is the 'content' of the cultural message; and is what is most challenged in Marcus' work as well as in terms of the development of the internet. Despite the hype, the World Wide Web in many ways, risks being merely another space for advertising and commodification in general; new ways of expressing old assumptions regarding media reception and production. Nonetheless, the internet deepens the complexity of mediation and representation in everyday life and opens up further questions regarding the construction of place.

Indeed, the relationship between place and representation, at once everywhere and nowhere, is by its very nature unavoidable. A recent advertisement shown on British television runs with the banner line: 'You've seen the films. Now visit the set.' A territory of backdrops from the Hollywood Hills to the Grand Canyon, from the Rockies to the Manhattan Skyline, offers potential visitors to the United States the American setting in all its guises. America, the message seems to be, is continually and unavoidably visited in the movies; it is a place known already to an audience of perpetual tourists. The traveller is promised various possible sightings (the advertisement is for *SeeAmerica.org*); yet 'seeing' is the condition of (a particular) production and its forms; it trades on a currency of cultural imagination as involuntary memories cascade, re-booting places somehow near-forgotten yet undeniably part of memory and experience. These too, it seems to suggest, are the boundaries of the territory. The fabric of movie-going is the material source of immediate experience; the scenery of cultural identity acknowledged as being the work of set-makers, prop-masters and lighting technicians.

In the Territory is concerned with the ways in which contemporary American literature and art are informed by the kind of mediated place-construction the advertisement for

SeeAmerica.org arguably embodies. It is concerned with a practice that does not, however, regard itself as being outside of this condition. Place-construction is meant to signal an interchangeable pattern of narrative and permanence. As such, place, reframed in terms of 'actuality', is conceptualised as a philosophy of description, challenging the convention that there might be, on the one hand representations, of places and, on the other, actual places. The territory is, in this sense, a moving image: made up and in the process of being made up. In its various incantations, it is a photograph as much as it is the thing photographed, or it is a painting as much as it is painting. It is a vocabulary, writing, a power of naming; it is to describe and be described, a dilemma of observation and description, of seeing and being seen. As with a way of speaking, or a form of dress, territory is where place and representation, not without friction and not without the cultural and historical tensions out of which it is produced, exist synonymously. Indeed, the territory is characterised by what John Ashbery calls the negotiation of 'fugitive lands': a landscape of moving identity in one sense, and of the movement of identity in the other. As if also addressing an audience of potential visitors to the imaginary and material settings of the contemporary American landscape, he writes:

> Then we realised what should have been obvious from the start: that the setting would go on evolving eternally, rolling its waves across our vision like an ocean each one new yet recognisably a part of the same series, which was creation itself. Scenes from movies, plays, opera, television; decisive or little-known episodes from history; prenatal and other early memories from our own solitary, separate pasts; events yet to come from life or art; calamities or moments of relaxation; universal or personal tragedies; or little vignettes from daily life that you just had to stop and laugh at, they were so funny, like the dog chasing its tail on the living room rug.[541]

Ashbery's use of first person plural illustrates one of the principal preoccupations of this thesis. By draining any given distinction between reception and production, responsibility for the poem is as much with the reader as it is with the author. As with Butler's sense of interpellation, who is speaking and how they speak is an uncertain act of citation and site. What matters is where they speak and its sense of 'location'; that is to say, 'creation itself', where 'the setting would go on evolving eternally.' Place is a process of

[541] John Ashbery, 'Description of a Masque', in *A Wave* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1984), p. 27.

representation and is not a condition in any way settled upon. On the contrary, in the interdisciplinary work considered here, the responsiveness (rather than a defined response) is ongoing. The territory is everywhere and nowhere at once; a moving point of view. The author's relationship with his or her subject (an 'actual place') and the author's relationship with the reader ('representation') appear interchangeable. In its ideal conception it becomes a 'communicative space.' A place inhabited at once by all parties as a kind of dialogue, place is a process of representation, the stories of storytelling, a site of continuous production and is one with many forms of ongoing application.

Appendices:

A) **'Fiction and the Art of Collaboration: New Imaginary Lands' An Interview with Ben Marcus, April 2006**

B) **Ben Marcus, 'Diagram' for *Remote Viewing: Invented Worlds in Recent Painting and Drawing* (An Exhibition at The Whitney Museum of Modern Art, New York, June-October, 2005)**

A.

Fiction and the Art of Collaboration: New Imaginary Lands
An Interview with Ben Marcus, April 2006

[Ben Marcus is the author of the novels *The Age of Wire and String* (Knopf, 1995) and *Notable American Women* (Vintage Contemporaries, 2002). In 2002 *The Father Costume* (Artspace Books, 2002) was published in collaboration with the artist Matthew Ritchie. Ben Marcus has collaborated on various other projects including a series of lithographs made by the artist Terry Winters in 2004 entitled *Turbulence Skins*. He currently runs the MFA in creative writing at Columbia University in New York.]

1. Fiction and the art of collaboration

DW: You have collaborated on projects with visual artists, most notably *The Father Costume* with Matthew Ritchie and *Turbulence Skins* with Terry Winters. How important is artistic collaboration to you?

BM: I think it's interesting. It allows me to do a sort of writing that I might not do for print publication to a reading public. It's taken my work to a different audience and it's also let me think of the writing of sentences as a more purely artistic act than it might be possible for it to be if you were writing for a mainstream publisher. I have always, maybe wrongly, fantasised that an art viewing public is actually interested in the artistic possibilities of the medium that it is looking at. And I know that some of the reading public is interested in the artistic possibilities of language but lots of the reading public is not. My natural instincts with sentence writing are to explore aspects of syntax, grammar and meaning that could be very arduous for a typical reader and yet they interest me, and I think I've told myself that working with artists for some sort of limited production or for a different audience would give me a complete green light to do exactly what interested me without any anxiety about 'audience'. Yet in a way there's something facile to that response because it's not as if there is no audience and it's not as though a visual art audience isn't demanding in different ways. I think catering to any kind of audience has its traps but maybe through my misunderstandings I've allowed myself to believe that I can completely pursue my deep instincts about sentence writing without any anxiety about whether or not anyone will ever care. When I write for a publication I do want to reach people.

In your attitude to syntax and grammar do you think there's something visual in what you're doing with artists that you wouldn't have done otherwise?

It's not the visual aspect at all. It's the culture that approaches visual art versus the culture that approaches books. The problem with this kind of distinction is that in, say the world of poetry, or any kind of marginal literary world that has totally divorced itself from commercial interests there is this kind of artistic freedom that I'm talking about. But I've been more comfortable working with visual artists because lots of my artistic instincts as a writer are conceptual and I end up feeling a sort of connection with visual artists and some of their concerns. Sometimes, say in the more marginal literary poetry world which is working very intently sentence by sentence, there is something too forbidding or impenetrable about it to me and I think I'm interested in maybe the sumptuous accessible (or sort of apprehendable) aspect of the painters I've worked with. I don't know that I want to go down the total rabbit hole of writing abstract texts in a world that publishes abstract texts and reads it. Whereas in the visual art world there seems to be a genuine interest, at least in small doses, of a kind of writing that is much more complex and not for mainstream consumption. It's as though I've found a way of getting people's extra attention.

Do you feel that working with artists in this way has moved your writing onwards or influenced your work in ways you hadn't expected?

I don't know. No. It's a vehicle to pursue an interest. I'm not that good at charting its overall effect, I'm not a decent sort of anthropologist of my own artistic trajectory and that has frustrated some interviewers. I suppose if anything, I've done a lot of collaborations and not enough writing for the book-buying world: the world that is interested in narrative and the literary traditions or the way one situates oneself as a practitioner now. I'm more interested in fitting myself and my interests into a world of narrative fiction, whereas I feel if I were to collaborate with another artist, it's become a little too easy for me, or it's not something I'm dying to continue doing in great amounts. Did you see the Whitney show last year that I collaborated in?

No.

It was a group show called "Remote Viewing". There were eight painters including Winters and Ritchie. I did the 'curatorial wall'. I did an enormous 14' by 5' high text with drawings.

You did the drawing?

Yeah I did the drawing. It felt a bit like the culmination of lots of interests because I got to do the sort of writing I would do in an art book but then I also did drawing and diagramming and much more visual work.

I didn't realise you do drawings yourself.

Yeah I had to.

You hadn't decided to until then?

Well the museum approached me about doing the catalogue text for this show and I said I would but that it would be fictional. I wasn't going to write an essay and I think they expected that. Matthew Ritchie in conversations with the curator wanted the show to be a little different so it wasn't just another group show of eight painters. They called me in and we started to play around with the idea of some false curatorial or fake documentary gesture that would encompass the show in some distorted way. It would seem to present data out of the show or would reveal it but would ideally only make it more mysterious. At first I was just going to have a little corner to do something but it grew until I had the front wall. It was funny to be at the show and watch because lots of people would get off the elevator and it was a big square room with a big wall and you would just go around and through the show. Some people stopped and realised this wasn't actually legitimate. It was interesting to have this thing cloaked within such a familiar context.

It almost blocked the entrance to the show?

Well in a normal way when you go to a gallery there's a wall you have to read and I don't know what kind of a museum-goer you are but sometimes one just doesn't feel like reading it. But there were also drawings and I made a big diagram of the show and translated the imagery from the show into drawings. My problem now is that I don't have a copy, it doesn't exist. Or at least, it just moved to St Louis.

How do you feel about it disappearing like that?

It was an interesting thing to navigate because some of the artists in the show were worried about what my role actually was. Was I an artist in the show, or was I a curator? And they were very protective because they wanted to feel, well we're in a group show with these painters and who's that guy? A couple of people were very supportive but I had never really encountered the art world in that sense – that it was very protective and I think people had a lot of issues with it even if in the end people seemed pleased with what I did.

Did that kind of protectiveness come into the way you had collaborated before that? Could you say something about how you would actually work together?

Working with Matthew [Ritchie] was perfect in that he and I think very much alike and we had a lot of fun. We talked about tons of things and would make up topics. We shared so many interests and we were both so good-natured about the project that in fact we went through a bit of a disaster with the publisher. There were lots of problems and challenges but not at all involving our collaboration. To me, of everything I've done, it was one thing that really felt like an actual collaboration. It was something I probably would have never written had it not been for the sorts of conversations we had. With Terry it wasn't that much of a collaboration. My sense of it was that he wanted some of

my text on his images. He was going to draw what he was going to draw and I was going to write what I was going to write. It wasn't really about coming up with some abstract ideas that fascinated us or some problem. With *The Father Costume* I was really interested in hypothetical and conditional tenses and the space made in grammar of what might have happened but didn't. How that can still be charged with meaning even though it's completely made up. This led to lots of conversations about physics and time with Matthew that were very stimulating to me. With Terry we really didn't do any of that. He spoke a lot about how he wanted it to look and I didn't really feel as if I was going to have much input into that. I didn't feel badly about it. I felt that I had written a text and that he was going to dash it all around his imagery. He would send me prints and say why don't you write on this one? I would put hand-written stuff in and it was kind of fun. But as an artefact I don't really feel that responsible for it.

Both Ritchie's and Winter's work is quite diagrammatic in style and I was wondering if writing and making diagrams are closely associated for you?

I think they can be. It depends on the writing project. I like the organisation of a diagram, I like the way it seems to reveal something. There is something about it visually that seems as if it is going to tell you something even if upon scrutiny it won't.

Or that it's instructive?

Yeah, it's meant to break down information, it's meant to take a topic and disperse it into its parts and reveal its interior and I think I like that as a metaphor for what one does with language in writing. I've made diagrams. There was some art catalogue that I made a diagram for, I was supposed to write on somebody's painting and I sort of diagrammed it. It's a really cool form. There's a website called *Diagram* [http://thediagram.com] that does pretty interesting stuff and I have a couple of friends who are artists and work strictly with diagrams. It's an interesting form and I think there's a lot of possibility in it.

And more generally how do you think visual art has influenced you?

I guess it has influenced me in this cultural sense of what it is now to be a visual artist. I think that I respond to that sense of freedom even while recognising that the art world has it's own complications. But I guess I sense that visual artists are able to attack their ideas very directly and to really make vital, engaged work that represents their deepest artistic instincts. In the writing world, I think if you do that you marginalise yourself in the most extreme way.

In the art world I suppose it's easier to be anti-art than it is in writing to be anti-writing and get away with it?

Yeah, and you know in the writing world it's not even common or acceptable to refer to writing as art – as an art form.

That we are having to make this distinction even now feels strange.

Did you read my essay in *Harper's* last October?

Against Franzen? Yes I did.

There was a little bit about it there in that writers who stray from the accepted norm are not seen as artists who have done something of value but rather as hostile, indulgent, self-serving narcissists. Whereas in the art world it's quite a plaudit if you suddenly do something no one's ever done before. I think I'm being reductive about all of these distinctions, it's not so neat, there are examples to the contrary but I get a lot of energy and exhilaration out of looking at the work of conceptual artists and painters. It keeps me in mind of what I want to do - that there are still possibilities.

I was wondering if site-specific, public or land-art had had any influence on you?

Absolutely. I saw the Smithson show at the Whitney.

What do you think of Smithson?

I think he's completely fascinating, completely crazy and ambitious. I really like his little drawings and I really like his little fake plans. The arcana of his bigger projects are really quite beautiful.

How do you think the art world is informing fiction today?

I don't know. I don't see a lot of examples of it. I feel like the novel as it is being practiced in its most notorious form is directly out of literary tradition and is creating incremental shifts here and there but it's really squarely planted in literature. Of course there were times when the novel was learning from painting but I don't know that it's learning from it now. I don't think that in the world of the novel there's a really strong drive to re-invent the novel, to turn it inside out. I don't see the same identity crisis. It is very popular in painting to worry about what painting is, to try and re-think it all, to try and scrap it all and start over, to have all of those apoplectic reactions to the form and the form's relationship to the culture. I think that in terms of the big novel, the world of Ian McEwan, Zadie Smith, Salman Rushdie and Philip Roth, that anxiety is not really evident. But if you read somebody like David Markson, he is clearly very interested in those questions but very few people are reading him. He wouldn't be spoken of in a high art sense and he really should be. Because of his commercial marginality he's not going to be considered a groundbreaking artist of language. It's a different dialogue.

Your work, like Markson's, is trying to turn the novel inside out in certain ways.

But I wouldn't say it is in some conscious sense, I'm just trying to make it something interesting to me and I think that can be said of a lot of writers. To me the method and means of making narrative are taken on faith by lots of these people and they are really not interested in rethinking it. It's difficult to pick one practitioner and say that this has

really advanced what is possible in the novel. It seems we celebrate a novel when it's done very well and in the manner that other people have done it.

The way it's expected?

Yeah, and I think a lot of this is connected to the way people read and people's ability as readers. It's much easier to stand in front of a painting for five minutes than it is to read a David Markson novel.

Can I ask you about this project with Jasper Johns? I hear rumours of it.

Yeah. I don't know what's going on with it. It's probably both of our faults and I think I'm the bottle-neck right now. I think I'm supposed to send him something. I wrote something a long time ago and he asked me if I wanted to do something. He's done lots of prints of hands and I've done something slightly connected to that and we've visited a couple of times and talked about it but it's sort of languishing.

How did you meet? Did he approach you?

He wrote me a letter after reading *The Age of Wire and String* so I went to his house in Connecticut and the idea of a little book came up. He's collaborated with lots of people. He showed me his collaborations with Beckett, which are just incredible.

So there was a connection between the two of you? He saw ways that your work related?

You would have to ask him that. I was always very intimidated around him. You know, the great artist. You're summoned to his house and he's surrounded by people. He has an entourage of people and he's fascinating. He showed me new paintings. There were those twenty-minute silences...

Part of the 'Blueprint' section of *Notable American Women* reads: 'Sometimes the word "and" reads as a distress call between two words or objects which can often have no relation without it.' This seems to suggest something of Johns' sense of collage and association. Do you agree?

That's your job right? It sounds good. The sentence just seemed interesting to me.

But generally there seems to be this ongoing sense that Johns' interest in collage and association and his use of objects and naming are relevant to you.

Sure I would agree with that. I'm certainly interested in his work. The hesitation is just linking it to that sentence in my novel and why I wrote that sentence. You know what I mean? Writing that sentence wasn't my endorsement of collage. That's what I want to say. It's not that I don't like collage, I really do. It's that consciously, my intention would not have been that. Probably you could pick out a lot of it. I think abstractly there

is a lot about the relationship between things or suggesting relationships between things where we might not have thought they existed. That is always something I look to assert structurally. I try to see if I can find something interesting in doing that, and so I guess you could say it is an enactment of a principle of collage and that the sentence is inadvertently a kind of motto. But I don't want there to be the suggestion that I put a motto in my work about my feelings about collage.

The Age of Wire and String and *Notable American Women* seem to want to undermine their own status as books or novels.

They do?

Well, I'm thinking, again of 'The Blueprint' section of *Notable American Women* that refers constantly to itself as an object, or as a book.

I guess that's a big question: is self-consciousness in literary writing an undermining gesture or is it part of the tradition in literature. If you look back, lots of narrators used to address their readers. But I don't know if that automatically means that those books are trying to undermine their status. I think there are other things it could be accomplishing. My first book in particular seemed to draw lots of attention to that question. What kind of book is this? Is it a novel? Is it stories? All these kinds of questions about genre. Maybe something in the way the book was written did that. But that wasn't necessarily an interest of mine – that I wanted every one to wonder that. I think that metafiction, fiction that is about itself or self-consciousness had a resurgence in the 60s and now it's really back again. Lots of writers are interested in that kind of territory so to me it doesn't automatically mean that the book is looking to undermine itself. I think it's just an interesting rhetorical territory.

2. New Imaginary Lands

Johns, like Rauschenberg, seems to have been concerned with the signs and objects that mark out American place, famously in his *Map* and *Flag* paintings. Similarly I wanted to ask you about the location of your novels. 'Ohio' for instance, as the name appears in both *The Age of Wire and String* and *Notable American Women*, seems more located in the word 'Ohio', how it sounds etc, than in the place? Would you agree?

Yeah, completely. But then what I would ask you is: what is the relationship between a word for a place and the place? Because, being interested in the word 'Ohio', which I am, it's not a coincidence that it's the word 'Ohio'. It certainly does refer to things. I could not have done the same things with a made-up word.

It is a very interesting sounding word.

Yeah, but I think that, when I arrive at some of the places that I have taken and used, they really seem kind of innocuous to me. They are generally places I know little about. It's

not just about the acoustics of the word but about my real inability to have a lot to say about what the word means. It becomes a really nice vessel. It's just a repository for me. It's a generic place name, sort of the reverse of doing an ultra-specific thing with a known place. Instead it's a question of taking the place and making it seem almost like an abstraction. It's very appealing to me.

Is it a kind of nowhere?

Well it isn't for a lot of people and I think if it were a nowhere I would make up a word and it would clearly not be anywhere. It's a re-appropriation. It's about taking something that people might normally assign to something else and using it for your own purposes. I guess that's Surrealism right? I think when I write I look for things that are extremely enigmatic and sometimes they can be completely plain and dull. Things that I can't really claim any knowledge of – they seem to become repositories available for me to use.

I read somewhere that you have never been to Ohio, is that still the case?

I think I may have driven through.

So in terms of it being a real place, does the mid-West stand in for some kind of imaginary interior?

Well writers before me – Borges for instance – would do the 'imaginary land' and so you can't do that any more. But yet I think the way my writing-mind works is to not want to attach myself too much to the banal, everyday world. So it's a way of having an imaginary land, but revisiting it and getting someone to hopefully re-approach the imaginary land but from a very banal entry-point. It's sort of a reversal of the imaginary land. It's about changing the name of some made up place and using a familiar name.

Even people who haven't been to Ohio will have a 'familiar' idea of what it is like.

Yeah, and I don't know how a French reader reacts to this stuff. I think it's different. And it's the same with names of women in *Notable American Women* – I am essentially disclosing some of my private pleasure with names of things that seem funny to me or appealing and making them into these big archetypes.

Does it relate to the idea of an 'elsewhere'; George Saunders for instance, often locates his fiction in terms of the theme park?

I think it definitely is an elsewhere. I think in my mind it's not a specific place. It frees me up a little bit as on the one hand I'm assigning ultra-specific location and yet I think the reader is pretty clear that this isn't the real Ohio. It's futuristic except it's not set in the future. I am conscious of some of the ways writers have worked before with invented material and I'm trying to put my own touch on it. It seems, if you invent a place and then invent a word for it it's too obvious; it's too much of a signpost that this is a strange

idea. But if it's a strange thing how can it be a place that people go to all the time? That seems more interesting to me.

There's that moment in your essay about Dr Seuss where you say there is no elsewhere or location in his fiction and that this disturbed you in terms of what was everyday or familiar. To me what is really interesting is that your work is very much rooted in everyday meanings – the 'uncanny' is the familiar becoming strange, and as you say, you are doing almost the reverse.

Yes and I don't want to distinguish between the worlds that I take from. I take some from the banal and some from the invented and mix them so it is not clear what is invented and what isn't. I like that mixture: the suggestion of plainness being mixed with something completely exotic and not being able to detangle the two.

To me the everyday is quite fictional in any case.

Sure, I think it is. Though I suppose that's maybe not the best word for it. I guess what interests me is that there is so much that can be taken for granted when one writes. The way landscapes look or locations that end up in books merely as supporting material, as backdrop or ballast. And sometimes when I work I'm incapable of using the stock footage or the basic materials that would let me get on with my story. The story ends up being the remaking of this basic stuff. In one of Matthew Barney's films, the one about Gary Gilmore, there's that scene at the gas station where he even rebuilt all of the pumps. You know what I mean? So everyone else would just pull into a gas station but he thought: someone made these once and now they're iconic objects in our lives – why don't I make my own? And I think that's more fascinating to me than using all of the accepted objects in order to get somewhere better with a narrative. Probably, if only I did that maybe I'd be happier, but I end up much more aware of all the building blocks of what can go into a sentence. I can't get past it. That is the territory in which I work. That's the place, I guess you could say, and that means reinventing people's names or the State of Ohio and using really simple things in ways that they haven't been used before in order to accomplish a lot of different things.

That might have much in common with Johns's work and Pop, it seems to me, and his approach to everyday objects. In particular I wanted to ask you about metaphor. I find it difficult to read your work metaphorically because, as you say, you are dealing with material things. The references to weather and wind, for instance are to do with language and the atmospheres of relationships and all these interesting things, but for some reason I want to read them as somehow standing in for something rather than being metaphors. I mean I don't want to simply say: Ben Marcus writes big metaphors about language...

Well that's good. The weather interest traces back to an unpublished novel I wrote called *Secret Weather* when I was a student. It's terrible – terribly done, but I thought what's the most boring thing there is to talk about? Weather. And so I thought, I'm going to try and find an interest in it. I think at that point it was an attempt to avoid sentimentality or not to take objects of concern that are objectively regarded as valuable or emotional. To

take objects that had very little emotional value and to try and find emotion in them. Of course, I was wrong in a way because it's not as if weather is not dramatic. But my conception of using it was again to acquire a topic that I could faithfully state really interests me. I wasn't a student of weather, I didn't care about it at all and that was exactly what I needed. I wouldn't have a problematic relationship with it. It wouldn't be hard to use in any way I wanted to use it. It could be whatever I wanted it to be. When I needed an emotional effect. It was like building my own tool which I could then use. But once I'd started to write about weather a lot it just became something my hand did. If you play music and you use a lot of chords it becomes hard to shake them from your repertoire. Writing about weather and later things like cloth, these banal objects, really became difficult for me to shake. They became a surrogate to me, they were my tropes, the things I used to in order to make meaning.

How much of an influence did Stith Thompson's *Folk Motif Index* have on *The Age of Wire and String*?

Robert Coover showed me that when I was his student. I thought it was incredible, I was really jealous of it and I took lines from it. I was particularly interested in the summaries and the encapsulation of stories, which I would take and rewrite my own versions of. There would be folktales connected to these but I would only be reading their categorisations. The language of the categorisations on the one hand seemed kind of clinical, yet the content was so insane. I think that was something I was already quite interested in: the rhetorical act of an imbalanced relationship between the language and its content; the cold language and the warm content. There was a lot in Stith Thompson that was really exciting to me.

Again I suppose it relates to the locations of these stories as that's what he was documenting.

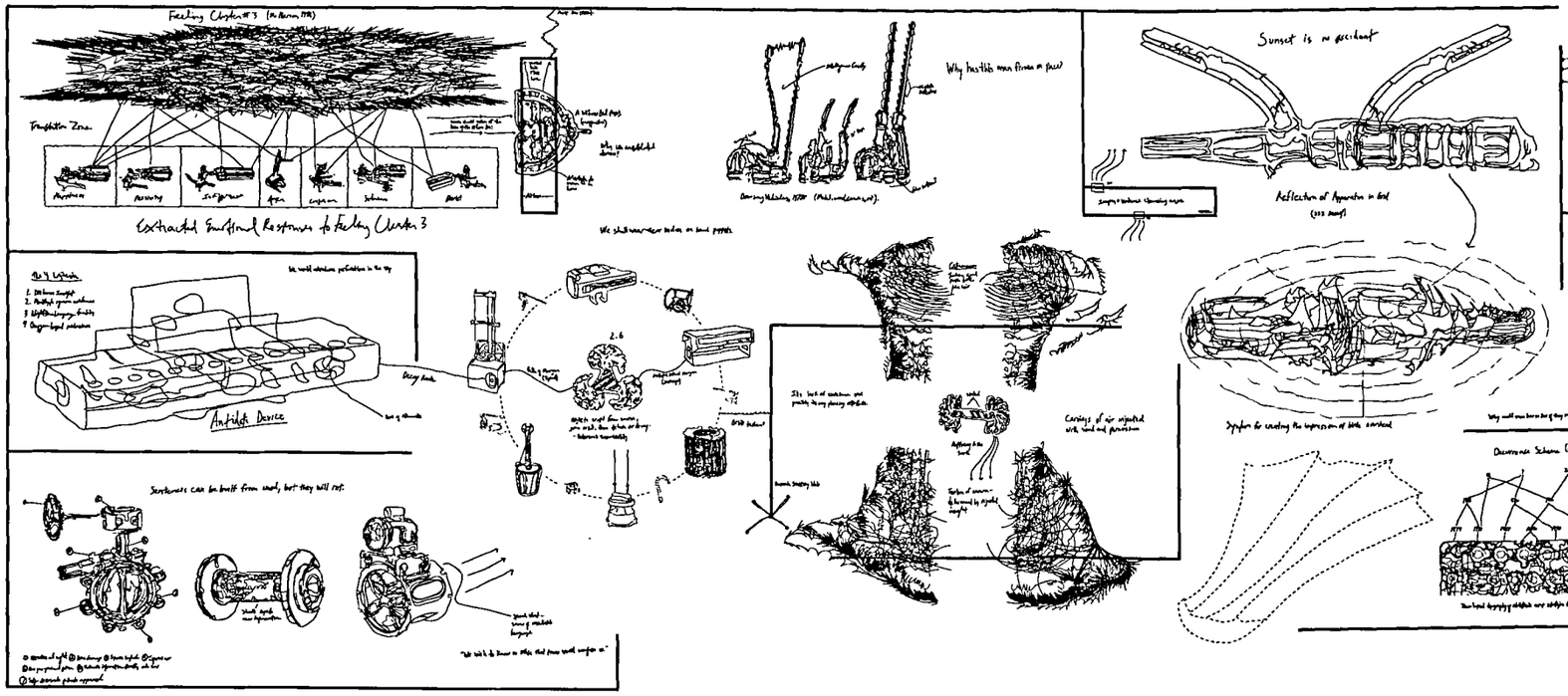
He was documenting lots of things, not just the locations, but what happens in the stories. You know, 'Cat eats bird's head for breakfast spits it out', there are lots of lines just like that. And page after page of what that cat has eaten and what then comes out of the cat and grows into something else. There are hundreds of those stories with variations. I loved that this would have been done at all, that anyone would have thought that the word-inference could have been organised in this way. I was really enthralled with that. I think I pulled out a couple of tiny seeds of some and made my own versions without bothering to look up how they had actually been enacted because there would never have been the little summary if it weren't for the folktale. Yet there was definitely an artistry in creating those summaries, they're little acts of poetry but they're not being presented as anything remotely artistic – it's encyclopaedic. I love that kind of accidental artistry. The beauty in some of those lines made me want to retranslate them and get the story back but I didn't need to know what the story was. I don't know how he did it.

How do you think space functions in your work? The recurrent and ambiguous theme of 'house' in both the novels and your collaborations seems to suggest that space is not a given?

I think it would fit into what I was saying, as being something elemental, frequently taken for granted that to me seemed like fictional space to use. If I forgot what I thought I knew about what areas I wanted to use as a territory for imaginative investigation or some conceptual work, what could I then do with it? So I see it as a very basic material that shouldn't really be second-guessed because once you do, you go down this incredible rabbit-hole. Once I started thinking of language as this thing that you could shape in the air and I saw that the space between people could contain things it felt fairly ripe to me. I guess it's a sort of territory available for re-assignation and reinvention.

B.

Ben Marcus, 'Diagram' for *Remote Viewing: Invented Worlds in Recent Painting and Drawing* (An Exhibition at The Whitney Museum of Modern Art, New York, June-October, 2005)



Peterson's Forensics

An informational dowsing procedure, when used as an insight machine, is demonstrated here to suggest one way of testing the results of remote viewing. This particular informational forensics, which employs a system of decipherment devised by W.L. Peterson, uses forked hearing, smallwork divination procedures, and room sensors to attempt a decoding of the core mythologies, both constructed and discovered, that might belong to the worlds depicted by the information atmospheres available in these rooms.

***Peterson's decipherment* method isolates sometimes microscopic elements of images, dilates and translates them, and then submits them to an analytical interpretive process called the Rogers Sequence, first administered by Roberge Kramer. The technical drawings were accomplished by a McPherson-certified group of illustrators who worked with a strict relationship to the available data, and each illustration was subsequently *tested* for resonance with a Wixx Error Device. To supplement this process, grids, charts, maps, and timelines are provided, diagrammed according to Peterson's Criteria, and tested with the Fleering Process.**

Credits:

Illustrations:
Wendy Schwartz, Paul Bulmer, Lawrence Hobbs, Forsythe Logan, Peter Hanson, Claire Brooks, Cheryl Alberts

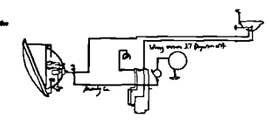
Translations:
Edward Hannelin, Martine Berger

Recordings:
BBB Fleetner BBB Stanley

Language:
Sandy Marsden, Emily Friedkine

Tests:
Randy Shanks, Harvey Wilson, Thorsen Ripley

Wiring:
The Beverly Company



"Now we know that all disappearances are accomplished with perverse intent, we find yearning at birth would serve us."
—W.L. Peterson

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