

Illinois State University

ISU ReD: Research and eData

Theses and Dissertations

3-17-2016

Writing Resistance: Agency And Politics In The Postmodern And Contemporary Novel

Bradley Michael Poling

Illinois State University, bpoling@ilstu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/etd>



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Poling, Bradley Michael, "Writing Resistance: Agency And Politics In The Postmodern And Contemporary Novel" (2016). *Theses and Dissertations*. 538.

<https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/etd/538>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by ISU ReD: Research and eData. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ISU ReD: Research and eData. For more information, please contact ISUREd@ilstu.edu.

WRITING RESISTANCE: AGENCY AND POLITICS
IN THE POSTMODERN AND
CONTEMPORARY NOVEL

Bradley M. Poling

84 Pages

This project seeks to substantiate a key ambivalence at the heart of contemporary literature: what does it mean to “return” to politics? Critics of contemporary literature have outlined the new literary aesthetic, using social and political engagement as a key component in distinguishing the contemporary novel from its postmodern predecessor. This project, in response to this claim, will examine both the discursive and representation politics of two landmark postmodern novels, Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* and Don DeLillo’s *Libra*, while examining Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad* as a descendent of this literary lineage. This project argues that the techniques and language for representing political power has remained relatively stable throughout the last 50 years – with paranoiac characters, omnipresent surveillance, mystified power structures, evocations of the panopticon and ideological co-optation. Instead, the shift in political “engagement” exists in the shift from concepts of agency, with postmodern novels traditionally leveling and displacing agency, whereas Egan’s novel represents the shift toward reclaiming agency in the novel.

KEYWORDS: Postmodernism, Contemporary Literature, Thomas Pynchon

WRITING RESISTANCE: AGENCY AND POLITICS
IN THE POSTMODERN AND
CONTEMPORARY NOVEL

BRADLEY M. POLING

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2016

© 2016 Bradley M. Poling

WRITING RESISTANCE: AGENCY AND POLITICS
IN THE POSTMODERN AND
CONTEMPORARY NOVEL

BRADLEY M. POLING

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Robert L. McLaughlin, Chair

Ricardo Cortez-Cruz

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Robert McLaughlin for his tireless support and tolerance of my alluding the Jonathan Franzen constantly, and Ricardo Cortez-Cruz for his steady encouragement and keen eye for desperate abstraction in the face of impending deadlines. I would like to express my gratitude, as well, to the professors outside of my committee who have also offered critical insight and challenging questions to my project, and to my graduate cohort for their solidarity throughout the process.

B.M.P.

CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	i
CONTENTS	ii
CHAPTER	
I. DECONSTRUCTING THE “END”: POSTMODERN POLITICS AND THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL	1
II. WHEN “THEY” RUN THE SHOW: CONCEPTUALIZING AGENCY IN <i>GRAVITY’S RAINBOW</i>	17
III. FIGHTING THE ODDS: COINCIDENCE AND RESISTANCE IN <i>LIBRA</i>	37
IV. THE FUTURE IS NOW: FORGETTING THE EIGHTIES IN <i>A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD</i>	59
V. CONSTRUCTING THE FUTURE: AGENCY AND ENGAGEMENT IN THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL	76
REFERENCES	82

CHAPTER I
DECONSTRUCTING THE “END”: POSTMODERN POLITICS
AND THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL

We are in a new era of literature – or so critics and scholars are saying. Postmodern literature, the dominant aesthetic for half a century or more, is giving way to something new. Just as the postmodern era emerged from particular events in the twentieth century, the emergent aesthetic has its own key dates – the fall of the Berlin Wall, the terrorist attacks on September 11, the financial crash of 2008 – which draw the high-art representation of postmodern back to earth, towards the real. While critics and scholars since the 1980s have been predicting the collapse, or abandonment, of postmodern style, they are finally being validated with evidence of a new genre, identifiable in various “returns” – to realism, to character, to politics, to the social world. The prevailing crush of theories attempting to define this movement forms a consensus around the fact that the new dominant style, regardless of what we call it, suggests a new relationship in the novel between the world and representations of that world.

It’s this perceived re-engagement with the world, however, that is compelling and troubling - critics have just begun to theorize the emergent shift in relation between political discourse in the novel and shifting social-political realities – but the consensus

creates more questions than answers. The emergent literary aesthetic has been given many names already – post-postmodern, post-humanist, late-postmodern, cosmodern– and each contains a particular vision for how we understand both future literatures and the postmodern era behind us. Each claim of a return to intimate characterization or social conscience also negotiates a new relationship between postmodern and contemporary literature, and these critiques of postmodernism, including John Barth’s “Literature of Exhaustion” and Jonathan Franzen’s “Mr. Difficult” risk a hasty filing of postmodernism into the past.

However, for the sake of clarity, I’ve opted to use “post-postmodern” as a default. I use this term not as an endorsement of a particular set of theories over the others, but rather as a catch-all for a group of terms that can be unified, if not by region or style, by the simple fact that they refer to fiction occurring after or during the decline of postmodernism’s tenure as the dominant literary style. It’s this capacious term, appearing in Stephen J. Burn’s book *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*, that provides a clear and essential outline for approaching the greater conversation about the contemporary novel. His theory of post-postmodernism, in short, posits that “post-postmodern novels are informed by the postmodernist critique of the naïve realist belief that language can be a true mirror of reality, and yet they are suspicious of the logical climax to this critique;” “from a political point of view, this means that the younger novelists more obviously address the idea of a real world beyond the problems raised by nonreferential systems of discourse” (21). Burn’s position reveals two key assumptions that underpin much of the recent criticism of contemporary literature: first, the postmodern predecessors which influenced these authors were apolitical, and to some

extent, apathetic, and second, contemporary literature – Burn mentions Richard Powers and David Foster Wallace alongside Franzen – constitutes an fresh acknowledgment of the “real world” that had been sorely absent in postmodern literature.

Burn’s sentiments are echoed by other scholars, particularly Christian Moraru, Mary K. Holland, Jeremy Green, and Adam Kelly. Moraru forwards his own theory for reading contemporary literature in *Cosmodernism*, arguing that recent literature constitutes “a particular way of seeing this world and ourselves in it . . . a new, ‘cosmodern’ cultural imaginary” (2). His theory places “the United States in ‘global perspective’ and, more narrowly, late 20th century and early 21st century American literary, cultural, and theoretical discourse in the worldly context of the ‘interpersonal,’ where the discourse lends itself to interpretation as a fable of relatedness” (4). It’s this perspective that allows for a restructuring of identity in the wake of postmodernism’s destabilizing effect, in which “identity is, to the cosmodern mind, rationale and vehicle for a new togetherness, for a solidarity across political, ethnic, racial, religious, and other boundaries,” making potential for new political action across previously unforeseen communities recognizable in the global context.

Holland, likewise, imagines new potential for literature in the “post-humanist” era, in which she declares that contemporary literature “displays a new faith in language and certainty about the novel’s ability to engage in humanist pursuits” that opposes the “disaffected irony and language games” that Holland attributes to postmodern fiction (1). Holland and Moraru, like Burn, rally behind the idea of a new connectedness fundamental to twenty-first century literature. Each theory presumes that, while readers, authors, and characters recognize certain freeplay in meaning-making structures, this

instability can be overcome through “constructing new avenues toward meaning and meaningful human connection through signification and mediation themselves” (Holland 2). The theories share a utopian rhetoric that, among other things, implies a new potential for the novel’s social engagement, but like Burn again, their theories are limited in the extent to which the potential of these novels is extrapolated or explored.

Adam Kelly, in “Beginning with Postmodernism,” offers an alternative and more specific aspect to ideas of new lines of solidarity. Like Burn, he sees in contemporary fiction a “renewed historical focus that takes the reader back deep into the past,” which offers an alternative to depthless simulacra by implying a full, human history behind the constructed world (393). Kelly argues that, by recognizing the progression through the twentieth century toward the information age, history can reclaim “continuity, where the contemporary information society that characters inhabit is seen as emerging from inhabitable historical and technological shifts over a long *duree*” (393). For his part, Green recognizes “changes in the public sphere, particularly as a consequence of technological innovation,” as a central and “ineluctable feature of the present” (*Late Postmodernism*, 12). While Kelly sees the potential in historicizing the information age, Green sees “late postmodernist fiction,” as he calls it, as a double of postmodern theory, in which the “postmodern present appears utterly unlike the past” (12). So even as critics attempt to forge and conceptualize social action in the new millennium, the anxieties of postmodernism still remains, and in particular, the anxiety of how to secure one’s place in time.

Green does implicate another factor that goes unacknowledged in Burn’s account of contemporary literature: the evolution of capitalism throughout the late twentieth and

early twenty-first centuries. Moreover, it's capitalism – and the various effects of capitalism, particularly globalization and mass media saturation – that remains both deeply enmeshed in the process of reinforcing a more generalized postmodernity and becomes the backdrop for many postmodern representations of the world. While Green accounts for the primacy of television and technology as a source of anxiety, it's the perceived decline of literature, corresponding with a decline of “informed reflection and active participation on the parts of individuals within a democratic society” that creates the opposition between the “isolated reader” and the “subject of consumption, of technoculture . . . condemned either as a dupe of mass culture or as the fragmented psyche of postmodern schizophrenia” (8). This technoculture, according to Green, produces a rift between these two types of character *and* citizen, producing a context which both agency and action are problematized as “yet another version of the autonomous liberal subject” (8). While Green doesn't overtly connect economic anxieties with the contemporary novel's political thrust, Jeffrey Nealon acknowledges that contemporary literature contains a “‘resistant’ function . . . under the dispositif of an emergent modern practice of power” (*Late Late Capitalism* 170). He relates the new “engagement” of the novel as a move to “reinvigorate those more ‘positive’ powers of the false and modes of engagement with that world and with literature's myriad positive critical connections to it,” identifying a new postmodern manipulation of language and use of de-naturalization (*Late Late Capitalism* 169-170).

The unifying assumption of these texts leaves critical questions unresolved, however. The insistence on a “reconnected” mimeticism describes what might be happening – I don't disagree that recent American novels do take on a much more

mimetic relationship with the world – but these critics describe very little of *how* this is happening and to what end. As Nealon and Green imply, new modes of engagement and a new resistance can come from the novel’s social position outside of cultural authority, but with that said, the new “positive powers” remain, like the global solidarity described by Moraru and Holland, nebulous at best. Moreover, the implicit critique of postmodernism in the examination of contemporary literature points to mimetic literature abandoning the pretense and ego of postmodernism as the foundational move in “re-engagement.” However, there’s plenty of evidence that declarations of postmodernism’s cynicism and apathy toward engaging a “real” world are overblown, making allegations of postmodern disconnectedness tenuous in the face of novelists like Ishmael Reed, Thomas Pynchon, and Robert Coover.

Linda Hutcheon, in 1985, had already undertaken a thorough examination of postmodern politics in the aptly named *The Politics of Postmodernism*, in which she offers two critical observations that describe the discursive tactics of postmodern fiction. First, she argues that postmodernism’s initial concern “is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life” as well as “to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ . . . are in fact ‘cultural’” (2). Second, the self-referentiality of this de-naturalization, through a “kind of wholesale ‘nudging’ commitment to doubleness or duplicity” is often used in parodic effect, in which authors rummage “through the image reserves of the past in such a way as to show the history of the representations” (4, 89). This process is “not ahistorical or de-historicizing” as “it does not wrest past art from its original historical context,” but Hutcheon does note that

these texts acknowledge that they “cannot escape implication” even as authors attempt to analyze and undermine power structures (89, 4).

This account of postmodern politics responds to Frederic Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, in which he theorizes an apolitical postmodernity, pointing out that “postmodernism here is not so much what Jameson sees as a systemic form of capitalism as the name given to cultural practices which acknowledge their inevitable implication in capitalism, without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it” (27). The inability to intervene is rooted, Jameson argues, in the fact that postmodernism forms can “no longer scandalize anyone and are not only received with the greatest complacency but have themselves become institutionalized and are at one with the official or public culture of Western society,” becoming part of the process of commodity production (4). Jameson’s argument, however, isn’t exactly outmoded - it still carries significant influence – and enjoyed the support of another famous scholar, Roland Barthes. Barthes, too, argued against the possibility of postmodernism’s political, famously stating that “where politics begins is where imitation ceases” (*Roland Barthes* 154). While Hutcheon makes a case for postmodernism’s political action from within a capitalist system, Jameson’s influence remains, underpinning theories of apolitical postmodernity that insist upon the prevalence of deconstruction and freeplay over meaning and referents.

The question, then, is not whether or not literature in the twenty-first century has engaged, critiqued, and represented reality – it’s unlikely that fiction has ever stopped doing this – but rather, in the move away from a high-postmodern style, have post-postmodern texts differentiated themselves from postmodern texts in their engagement of

socio-political circumstances surrounding the writing of the novel? Rather than discussing the move away from postmodernism, I'm suggesting, instead, a discussion of contemporary literature that seeks to illustrate the lineage back to postmodernism helps demonstrate an evolution of style rather than a revolution. Burn, for instance, argues that "post-postmodernism explicitly looks back to, or dramatizes its roots within, postmodernism," noting that allusions in Franzen's and Wallace's novels show how each author contextualizes his work in relation to a postmodern context¹. Politically, however, the Jamesonian tradition has produced a rift that allows for a simpler qualification of contemporary literature as fundamentally different – a qualification that scholars should be careful to make.

Sensing the dismissal of postmodernism's influence on the present, critics have jumped to the defense of the old guard. Holland, for instance, argues that postmodern fiction has been "mischaracterized" as "unable to represent or care about the things that literature has traditionally cared most about: human relationships, emotional interaction with the world, meaning" (*Succeeding Postmodernism* 2). Robert McLaughlin takes a similar stance in "Post-Postmodern Discontent," in which he further explains that "despite their wordplay, their awareness of the conventions of narrative fiction, their anticipation of readers' expectations . . . in short, their continually breaking the fourth wall and refusing to let us suspend our disbelief – [postmodern authors] care deeply about the world" (59). McLaughlin, furthermore, points out that rather than language decimating all referents in postmodern fiction, authors are instead "pointing to

¹ Burn specifically cites Chip Lambert's email, exprof@gaddisfly.com, from Franzen's *The Corrections*, as an example of this "dramatization" of postmodern roots, alongside Wallace's reference to the "M.I.T. language riots" (19).

themselves trying to point to the world” (58). This defense works to redirect criticism of postmodernism, from the whipping-boy of aesthetic play to the more productive intersection between aesthetics and representation.

The dismissal of postmodernism, besides allowing for an easy opposition with recent literature, risks undermining and discrediting nearly half a century of political discourse in the novel. The politics of postmodernity and contemporary literature, as they differ, are critical for specifically theorizing the shift in the process of representation in these novels. Instead of highlighting the difference between each aesthetic, we must think beyond simply the abandonment of parody and similar postmodern devices in contemporary literatures. While critics have argued for distinctive techniques in each movement – whether it be complex personal histories (Burn), an intentional and unironic narrative voice (Holland), or a global, denationalized perspective (Moraru) – the effects of these techniques should take significant precedence in the discussion of socio-political engagement, and in the wake of postmodernism, the seriousness of that engagement.

If, as the aforementioned critics argue, postmodern literature isn't so entirely apathetic to social and political realities, then how do these narratives utilize the tools of fiction to affect the reader? While the aesthetics and techniques employed throughout the past half-century have been thoroughly discussed, it's the impact of these techniques, the way in which the author represents the world and the characters' agency within it, that plays an equally significant role in the politics of the novel. By examining narrative treatments of agency and action, it's possible to better understand what a shift toward “engagement” actually entails. If the contemporary novel truly constitutes a shift from the discursive strategies that Hutcheon describes toward a vaguely constructed concept of

“engagement,” then it’s safe to assume that the strategies for representing the world have changed as well. The use of parody and de-naturalization may not be the dominant mode of critique any longer, and it’s not a stretch to understand the ways in which excessive use of parody can be read as apathetic detachment. Nor is it unlikely, as dominant techniques shift, that the contemporary novel forms a different relationship with concepts of agency, totality, and freedom.

Charting the difference between social novels in postmodern and contemporary settings, then, requires a two-fold approach: while the techniques with which the author represents the world have a critical effect on the reader, the reader should also be aware of the ways in which humanity is represented under various stylistic regimes. If the critics positing the emergence of a new dominant aesthetic see, like Burn and Holland, an increased focus on character, particularly characters that readers can understand and identify with, then what’s unacknowledged here is the ways in which the shift to a different mode of representing reality mediates the world outside of the text - and the consequent shift in the “social” thrust of the novel. Therefore, narrative judgment becomes paramount in order to qualify the end to which the increased character focus, for instance, is employed². This isn’t to say that author intentionality becomes central, but rather, a focus on narrative begs the question: if postmodern novels are antimimetic and elusively noncommittal to meaning, what kind of worldview does this produce? And, if contemporary novels have reversed this trend, what kind of social and political possibilities are being created in this representative rebuttal?

² James Phelan, in *Experiencing Fiction*, outlines narrative judgment as “the point of intersection for narrative form, narrative ethics, and narrative aesthetics.” As a narrative unfolds, Phelan argues, the author’s discourse is comprised of a series of judgments from “the audience in its developing response to the characters’ changes” (7).

To chart this progression in representation, I'll look at three novels, each at a particular moment in the evolution of postmodern and contemporary fiction. My analysis will feature Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), Don DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010). *Gravity's Rainbow* represents a particular pinnacle of postmodern parody and excess, with hundreds of named characters, while Egan's novel could fit comfortably within Holland's or Burn's schema for contemporary literature, with complex character histories and a focus on interpersonal relationships, via the inclusion of narrative shifts and PowerPoint slides. The publishing dates of these texts are important, as well: Pynchon's novel follows on the heels of the United States' discontinuation of the gold standard, in 1971, which Jameson listed as "the end of the great wave of 'wars of national liberation' and the beginning of the end of traditional communism" and modes of governance and social organization outside of capitalism (xxi). DeLillo's 1988 novel arrives at the end of Reagan's presidency and years of neoliberal economic policy, with the tech boom on the horizon as well as a backdrop of consumerism, economic austerity measures, and U.S. military domination (*Late Capitalism* 5). Egan's novel, on the other hand, reflects a new era of economic and political insecurity, both defined and encapsulated by the Sept 11. terrorist attacks and the 2008 financial crash. Nealon draws the comparison between 1987's Black Monday crash and 2008, with each crash indicating a new height of "privatization of wealth on a massive scale" that enacts a "socialization of risk on an almost unimaginable scale" – and it's not difficult to see 1971's oil crisis and Smithsonian Agreement, taking the U.S. off the gold standard, as another part of this trajectory ("Periodizing the 80's" 54).

What I hope to make clear about both literary and historic trajectories is that the perceived break between postmodern and contemporary literature is recognizable but not total. As the timeline makes clear, the conditions surrounding postmodernity, namely “late capitalism,” have, like the literature during that time, undergone an evolution but perhaps not a revolution. These authors, I’ll hazard, are immersed in a certain kind of American/Western society governed by the rules of late capitalism, neoliberalism, and globalization. Therefore, just as 9/11 and the 2008 financial crash signal have a particular importance in the aesthetic and narrative shifts in post-postmodern fiction, the revolutions (or lack thereof) in the sixties deeply impacted Pynchon’s novels, just as the neoliberal economic policies of the eighties shaped DeLillo’s portrayal of the college town Blacksmith in *White Noise* and Dallas in *Libra* – even as the authors write back to the 1940s and 1960s, respectively.

By examining the way these authors propel the characters through their narrative world, we, the readers, can assess the “systems” constructed in each novel and the impacts of these systems on the characters. The characters’ responses to their systems – each novel distills American sociopolitics into a convoluted but unique structure - addresses key ambivalences in the contemporary theories of the post-postmodern novel, as well as Hutcheon’s political postmodernism. Hutcheon, for instance, acknowledges that “the postmodern has no effective theory of agency that enables a move into political *action*,” working instead in the style of linguistic-turn ventures – destabilizing meaning without offering any alternative theory to fill the void of meaning (4). The contemporary theories, especially those positing a new (and vaguely formulated) social focus, risk reproducing this characteristic of postmodern theory by offering only limited

examinations of agency and action in the novel. It's necessary for critics – including myself - to theorize the very idea of political action that may be emerging as literature evolves out of postmodernism into a new dominant aesthetic, so as to fully account for the questions of political engagement that come with claims of reasserted political discourse.

My analysis, then, seeks to uncover the shift in each novel's representation of the world, and the ways in which these representations yield new conceptions of agency and possibilities of action, even as neoliberal ideology and socioeconomic anxieties continue to increasingly normalize as "business and cultural orthodoxy" ("Periodizing the 80's" 56). A new cultural imagination - of agency and resistance - can explain both the criticisms of one-dimensional (nonagential) characters in postmodern fiction, as well as begin to explain the root of an increasing focus on political resistance in twenty-first century novels. Therefore, in the treatment of protagonists, from Pynchon's Slothrop and DeLillo's Lee Harvey Oswald to Egan's Benny Salazar, we can see each character push the boundaries of his respective system, evading the *modus operandi* of those respective systems.

To make clear both postmodernism's capacity for representing agency, and the impact of this representation on contemporary fiction, this project will begin with an analysis of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* with a particular focus on Slothrop's narrative throughout the novel. While this novel's politics are hotly contested, I'll argue that Pynchon's mapping of the fringes of society in the novel highlight the places in which he sees the potential for evading the disciplinary controls of such a totalizing global government. Moreover, his Allied powers represent a quintessentially postmodern vision

of Foucauldian discipline and totalitarianism: the system is both crushingly bureaucratic and panoptic, with no head to attack, seemingly no outside of the system from which to attack the inside. Slothrop, nonetheless, finds the outside of the system in typical Pynchonian fashion, with various absurd types coming to his aid along the way. The enigmatic disappearance of Slothrop, however, becomes a central ambivalence in the novel. In a system that co-opts all resistance, he finds a way to discontinue his participation – even his participation in the narrative. However, Slothrop's dissipation is both melancholy and inconclusive: Pynchon gives little evidence that Slothrop has embraced an ideological resistance, nor achieved a victorious escape. Even so, while many critics will argue that Slothrop drifts through the novel with very little of his own volition, his disillusionment with American military and growing awareness of Pavlovian conditioning push him to attempt an escape from constant surveillance and policing. *Gravity's Rainbow*, then, embodies both the strengths of postmodern politics and the blind spots, demystifying the processes of capitalistic military-industrial monopolization while offering a bleak vision of a constantly shifting resistance at the fringes of society.

The third chapter focuses on DeLillo's *Libra*, particularly as a text at the turning point between postmodern and post-postmodern expressions of resistance and agency. DeLillo parodies the ridiculous bureaucracy of government, implementing the techniques outlined by Hutcheon, but his narrative turns towards a postmodern-inflected mimeticism. This mimeticism is not to be mistaken with realism or a renewed faith in representation, but rather, DeLillo moves away from Pynchonian absurdity and totality to show a different relationship between the social world and its inhabitants. The world itself, particularly Dallas's austere and practical downtown business center, is not

rendered overtly ridiculous (like Pynchon's *Casino* Hermann Goering), but instead, DeLillo focuses on language as the disciplinary and manipulative structure, manifesting less overtly subtly in physical space but just as forcefully in ideology. This difference produces a profound effect on what is *possible* for Lee within the text; while it's easy to see him guided through the text by CIA and Kremlin cronies, the Pavlovian qualities that forcibly control Slothrop are much subtler in *Libra*. While DeLillo has plenty to say about capitalism and military-industrialism, ideological manipulation becomes the force behind Lee's homicidal tendencies, as DeLillo twists the American Dream into the force that drives Lee's desire for notoriety. The effect of this conception is that Lee becomes both victim and villain, with both the agency to pull the trigger and the symptoms of the social malaise, in which Lee can only anchor his identity to that of other shooters through simulcral reproduction. So, this chapter seeks to make clear that, while the Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* imagines a military-industrial scheme that levels autonomy and agency while colonizing everything outside its control, DeLillo's vision of autonomy and agency within his system is much more open. While the CIA, as this novel's articulation of "Them," pushes Lee to kill, agency is given unto each actor, each plot, and chance itself, as the perfectability of both plot and system are thrown into question.

The fourth chapter discusses Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, and with it, the place of political discourse in post-postmodern. Through this progression, it becomes clear that Egan, unlike Pynchon and DeLillo, imagines a more direct and oppositional resistance to the capitalistic impulses embedded in society. The novel employs postmodern metatextuality and multimodality, while, as Burn suggests, relaying full and detailed character histories to the reader. Unlike DeLillo's history of Lee, however, these

characters react to their political system in a way unique from Pynchon and DeLillo's novels. Moreover, the progression into the twenty-first century yields a complete politicization of personal life, and Egan uses the music industry to euphemize the struggle for autonomy and authenticity in a political system that easily co-opts resistance. By concluding her novel with a concert that both produces art and evades commoditization, Egan's characters Benny Salazar and Scotty Hausmann resist social and political manipulation without leaving the system itself, or opting-out. By articulating counter-cultural behavior from within the system, Egan's characters turn the tools of the economy against itself, finding an audience for their art without moving themselves to the margins of society.

In light of the famous Zizekian phrase, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism," what I hope to make clear is that, as the postmodern novel moves toward the contemporary moment, the representation of sociopolitical structures shifts towards a tense balance between agency and totality (Fisher 2). While contemporary theories largely imagine a split from postmodernism in the new millennium, the ideas of a return to "serious" political discourse can be traced from within postmodernism itself. As the neoliberal policies established after World War II become normalized with time, the implication may not be as extreme as Zizek says. Rather, while Pynchon sees limited opportunities for agency, what I will make clear is that the shift in representation corresponds with new strategies for resistance and action.

CHAPTER II
WHEN “THEY” RUN THE SHOW: CONCEPTUALIZING
AGENCY IN *GRAVITY’S RAINBOW*

Gravity’s Rainbow has, time and time again, been used not only as the prime example of postmodern fiction, but as a surrogate for postmodernism itself. The novel embodies the “self-conscious, self-contradictory, self-undermining” style of postmodernism with the additional qualifications of difficulty, narrative complexity, and a healthy avoidance of easy answers and narrative closure (Hutcheon 1). Pynchon teases typical narrative features, if only to toy with readers’ notions of what the novel should do, and constructs a vast bureaucratic structure of multinational and governmental organizations that test the limits of corporatization and each reader’s patience. The breadth and density of the novel didn’t stop it from becoming a bestseller – instead, the greatest challenge for clarity in *Gravity’s Rainbow* may be the constraints of genre upon the novel.

The response to *Gravity’s Rainbow* contains echoes of the larger debate over postmodern politics. Critics and scholars agree that the novel does *something* with its political rhetoric, but the consensus regarding what the novel accomplishes, what it attempts to portray, and the extent to which any of the novel’s constructs can be understood beyond abstraction have all been hotly debated. *Gravity’s Rainbow* is often

associated with the strand of postmodern fiction that, in a Derridean tradition, subverts the stability of language and with it, political utterances. This tradition, however, has always suited John Barth or (early) Robert Coover more than Pynchon himself, but despite the novel's dense array of historical references – World War II, the Hereros, the V-2, and so on – this chapter will still work to establish *Gravity's Rainbow* as firmly entrenched in political signs, references, and discourse. With the contemporary context in mind as well, demystifying the politics of *Gravity's Rainbow* takes on a two-fold approach: it's necessary to construct a best-fit reading Pynchon's politics, and, beyond that, to contextualize these decisions within the schema of contemporary literature, to understand more specifically how far contemporary literature has moved away from this mode of representation.

Perhaps no scholar represents the (sometimes agonizing) process of teasing out the ambivalences between political and apolitical than Samuel Thomas. His influential 2007 book *Pynchon and the Political* oscillates between both distinctions, envisioning a coherent political discourse in Pynchon's later work while excluding *Gravity's Rainbow* from this discourse. He does, throughout his process, articulate the rationale behind seemingly disparate theories of politics. Borrowing from Robert Boyers, Thomas argues that politics “cannot be serious or effective if it is nothing more than the mobilization of anti-credal, promiscuously ‘open,’ deconstructive enthusiasms” (Boyers 232). Deconstruction, in light of this, is rendered apolitical: although, as Hutcheon might argue, it plays an important role in de-naturalization, Thomas sees the legitimacy of political engagement in the context of action. The act of deconstruction, for Thomas, doesn't qualify as political; instead, the political depends on “socially reproducible practice – a

habitable space, an underground civic entity, a micro-political flourishing, which operates according to a shared purpose in spite of its heterogeneity” (118).

While Thomas heads-off any valorization of deconstruction as a substantial political act, his model also closes off many possibilities for political engagement that may seem obviously political. In fact, Thomas’s definition of political discourse is so narrow that despite the breadth of his analysis (across multiple decades and many novels), his own rhetorical observations are excluded by Boyers’s definition, even if the observations fit a wider concept of politics in the novel. Thomas, for instance, offers the “matrix model” as a theory of resistance, which “enables us to recover some sense of agency” (96). Within this model, “renegade users are able to use the matrix to their own advantage – setting up covert economies and communities, ‘glitch programmes’ which flit in and out of virtual and material spaces” (96). This model has clear parallels to *Gravity’s Rainbow*: Slothrop’s various escapes are aided and abetted by outsiders who function according to this logic, using the tools of “Them” against... them. These “fugitive” politics, however, lack the institutional framework that Thomas’s definition demands. These enclaves “have not yet yielded a fully visible system of ethico-political action, let alone any kind of ‘binding’ political institution through which such action could be legitimately mediated” (Thomas 110).

What *exactly* is political, then? The W.A.S.T.E. system, from *The Crying of Lot 49*, fulfills the criteria of mediating, institutional structure through which “users” can resist the co-optation into a mainstream, totalitarian system (Thomas 125). Ironically, the difficulty in reconciling withdrawal and resistance isn’t remedied here. Rather, W.A.S.T.E. “demonstrates how withdrawal can become a displaced form of resistance

under the most extreme circumstances, how the two categories dissolve into one another. It is a conscious choice” (Thomas 125). This notion of conscious resistance proves useful as a baseline definition for resistance. However, Thomas concludes that *Gravity’s Rainbow* doesn’t successfully fuse these concepts of withdrawal and resistance, despite offering the matrix model as a compelling theory for understanding describing the characters on the margin in Pynchon’s novel. The lack of sustained “socially reproducible practice” means that, in this context, the novel cannot be suitably political.

Other critics, however, do not impose the same restrictive definition of politics on their examinations of the novel. Robert Lacey, unlike Thomas, finds no issue with the “promiscuously open” deconstruction in the novel, and notes instead that it’s through allegory that “[Pynchon] teaches his readers about the modern organization of power and its terrible inhumanity” 4). He defends Pynchon’s style, too, arguing that “all the breathtaking pyrotechnics on display [stylistically] in Pynchon’s fiction should not prevent interpreters from mining his work for some kind of stable meaning” (4). Despite the differences between Thomas’s and Lacey’s approach, Lacey ultimately argues for a political resistance that’s reminiscent of the matrix model. Preterition, according to Lacey, becomes an opportunity-of-sorts for freedom. The marginal and passed-over “are the fortunate few who have received a kind of grace” and “attain a modicum of freedom in late modernity . . . by eluding the clutches of the system, by effectively disappearing” (7). This reading, however, doesn’t resolve a key issue posed by Thomas: Can existing on the margin be political by its very nature? And, moreover, can the matrix model produce resistance?

Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger, in their book *Gravity's Rainbow, Domination, and Freedom*, constitute a near opposite to the apolitical readings of *Gravity's Rainbow*. They argue that, if Slothrop is “seen as a literary character inscribed largely according to realist conventions, and defined by his particular traits and peculiar dilemma,” then it’s possible to see “Tyrone Slothrop’s best (or only) choice is to resist Their plot. . . by giving Them, or it, the finger and fleeing” (203). Herman and Weisenburger dedicate significant time to Slothrop’s utterance of “fuck you” at the Casino Hermann Goering, using this moment as the centerpiece of their agential reading. This utterance isn’t merely a “subjectless sentence” but rather a “pure epithet expressing hostility, rejection, dismissal, resistance, [and] abjection... an all-purpose spell” (Herman and Weisenburger 209). This utterance doesn’t become another instance in which Pynchon uses “rhapsodic ‘fine writing’ to smudge the coherence of his meaning or to into descend into “the empty terminus of broken meaning” (Wood n.p.). The authors refer to Herbert Marcuse for describing “real opposition to the system,” in which “the fact that [the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable] start refusing to play the game may be the fact which marks the beginning of the end of a period” (Herman and Weisenbuger 34, Marcuse 257). By using Marcuse’s definition of opposition, Herman and Weisenburger argue that *Gravity's Rainbow* embodies Pynchon’s response to a persistent political question of the 60s: “whether, and how, nonviolent (but still active) resistance should answer imperialist forms of domination and violence” (200).

The two main tiers of discourse on Pynchon’s politics – apolitical (Thomas) and political (Lacey, Herman and Weisenburger) comprise the thrust of a larger movement

within Pynchon studies. Within this “political” designation exists a series of more nuanced critiques, of course, but the main consensus stands: Slothrop’s attempt at flight leads him through the periphery of Europe, and this periphery contains pockets of resistant groups. However, these critics caution against the impulse to read Slothrop entering the margins / matrix as ideologically aware - it’s his lack of awareness that creates the much-maligned traits in his character. The Marcusian reader may also associate Slothrop with Orpheus and the BDSM in the 1960s context: “‘perverse’ sex is more fun” as it “returns experience to the physical body . . . [and] essential, unmediated preoedipal experience” (Hite 694-5). This critique, too, should be tempered with alternate readings of resistance and agency.

Luc Herman and Steven Weisenburger, for instance, see “nothing in the criticism” of Slothrop-as-Orpheus that “has persuaded us to read Slothrop as a political dissident or war resistor,” despite their casting him as “conscious of his entanglement and how easily he might slothfully set aside real needs and just go along to get along” (Herman and Weisenburger 39, 96). More compellingly, Christopher Breu notes in *Insistence of the Material* that Pynchon’s early work, particularly *V.*, depicts “an important transition point in the evolution of the logic of commodity fetishism within the more general movement from high to late capitalism” (65). It’s not a stretch to see how this cultural logic plays out in *Gravity’s Rainbow* as well – the prominence of BDSM, with Slothrop’s Pavlovian condition, reflects control reminiscent of Foucault’s biopolitics. The biopolitical, in this context, can describe the functioning of plastic surgery and sadomasochistic sex in the novel as part of a larger normalization of domination and control at the personal level of

everyday life.³ Considering Pynchon's interest in depicting the co-optation of non-normative ideology back into the hegemonic mainstream, the "pleasure principle" seems less a *resistance to* than a *part of* the hegemony.

There are several serious ambivalences in these critiques of *Gravity's Rainbow* that need to be examined more closely, however. While the novel definitely places Slothrop on the margins, does this marginality constitute resistance and escape? Herman and Weisenburger imagine Slothrop's escape as rebellious despite the "perpetual banishment" involved in avoiding surveillance indefinitely, but does the novel compel readers to judge Slothrop's disappearance as escape? Most importantly, in the context of a literary tradition building over the last 50 years or so, what are the implications of Slothrop's "escape" as They and their system carry on with the colonization and ordering of space?

The escape or "withdrawal" to the margins, when understood within the matrix model, poses a problem for any idea of resistance in these spaces. The Zootsuit Zanies and the Argentinean anarchists both offer some semblance of a resistant community, but as the matrix model suggests, they have only the tools of the system itself at their disposal. The Zanies, despite Slothrop's fantasy that they might smash "into the heart of the Rocket's own branch office in London," are emblematic of the ideological compromise at the heart of the matrix model (Pynchon 254). Slothrop's zoot suit, for

³ Foucault introduces the "biopolitical" in his essay "Society Must Be Defended," in which he expands upon previous theories regarding the complex ways in which power acts upon the individual. Foucault defines biopower as part of a renegotiation of the eighteenth and nineteenth century sovereign's power to "take life or let live," which becomes reformulated in the twentieth century as "the right to make live and let die" (62). In this context, political powers emerged "that were essentially centered on the body," and the panopticon, in this context becomes part of a series of methods for "economizing on a power . . . thanks to a whole system of surveillance, hierarchies, inspections, bookkeeping, and reports – all the technology that can be described as the disciplinary technology of labor" (63)

instance, comes from a kid who was “set up by a carload of Anglo vigilantes from Whittier [and] beaten up while the L.A. police watched,” and as the police delivered their jail-or-army ultimatum, the zoot suits were collected by entrepreneurs who saw “no harm in turning a little profit” (Pynchon 252). The symbol of the zoot suit, in this context, becomes culturally and ideologically diluted: the community of wearers who fought with the police has been dispersed or jailed, and the new collective of Zanies represents only a shell of the former organization. The sale of zoot suits, not to mention Waxwing’s profiteering via “PX ration cards, passports, and Soldbücher,” marks the organization as capitalistic and predatory, even if the sale of suit and papers helps Slothrop.

On the other hand, Squalidozzi, leader of the Argentinean anarchists, makes plans for resistance and rebellion without ambiguity: he makes no vague assertions about his desire to set society “back toward anarchism” (Pynchon 268). Furthermore, he states that “In ordinary times, the center always wins. Its power grows with time, and that can’t be reversed, not by ordinary means. Decentralizing . . . needs extraordinary times . . . This War – this incredible War – just for the moment has wiped out the proliferation of little states that’s prevailed in Germany for a thousand years. Wiped it clean. *Opened it*” (268). This earnest and utopian vision of the Zone – Squalidozzi’s utopian vision, at least – is completely dismantled by Pynchon before the end of the novel. Besides the troubling celebration of “this incredible War,” the anarchist vision for the Zone proves untenable. The frame, in which the narrative ends with analepses to the 1970s, lets the reader know what the anarchists don’t: the Zone will be reinscribed by Them, divided into a new Germany. While the Zone is, for a moment, free of the ordering that constitutes a “national tragedy” in Argentina (“Look at the suburbs of Buenos Aires,” Squalidozzi

says), liminality becomes a defining feature of the margins (Pynchon 268). No free space exists for long, and the marginalized can never be the colonizers, within the system: the Argentinean anarchists become involved in the filming of *Martin Fierro* by the end of the novel, and with the film, enter the world of “film industry” speak, filling the set with extras – and effectively embodying superficiality.

The anarchists and the Zanies represent just two of the many small factions that Slothrop encounters on the margins, but the effect is the same throughout: the margins of the system exist, but never challenge the hegemony of the system. Slothrop, as the arguable “hero” of the quest/farce, experiences these difficulties himself. While Squalidozzi and Waxwing are never primary characters in the novel and therefore get only fleeting narrative coverage, Slothrop’s journey makes repeated allusions to the overwhelming proportions of the system, and the difficulties of escaping the system. While Slothrop has certain abilities and privileges that others in the margins don’t - he’s a Harvard graduate, American citizen, a lieutenant in the US Army – these levels of privilege don’t entail any additional autonomy. Instead, his father’s wager makes clear that They assert control of individuals with remarkable immediacy. Slothrop, as Ian Scuffling, finds that he’s “been sold to IG Farben like a side of beef,” and as a result, “been under their observation, - maybe since he was *born?*” (Pynchon 290-291). One implication here is that economic, political, and educational functions all correspond: the transaction allows Jamf to expose Slothrop to Pavlovian condition for IG Farben, allows IG Farben to advance military technology, and allows Slothrop access to a Harvard education. As Herman and Weisenburger note, this transaction “makes a damning statement about the illuminating and resistant powers of higher education” (95). What’s

more, this passage extends the reach of the surveillance apparatus beyond the European theater: the system is in America and the world, intertwined into all institutions and omnipresent from birth.

Slothrop's disappearance leaves little room for enthusiasm, too. The "narrative" of Slothrop, told in the 1970s, tells of his "being broken down . . . scattered" without a sense of irony; the story should have a wink or "a punch line in it, but there isn't. The plan went wrong" (Pynchon 752). Bodine, as one of the few remaining people who "can still see Slothrop as any sort of integral creature anymore," stands opposed to the others, who "gave up along ago trying to hold him together, even as a concept" (Pynchon 755). Even if we are to believe, as Lacey suggests, that "Slothrop eventually learns that it is possible to work this labyrinthine system to one's advantage . . . [and] realizes that learning to navigate this complex system of plots 'may yet carry him to freedom,'" his escape is heavily inflected with a sense of deflation and defeat (11). The Counterforce, too, has failed in their cavalier glory, like so many others. They are co-opted into the system, eventually taking interviews and renouncing Slothrop through obfuscation: "We were never that concerned with Slothrop *qua* Slothrop" (Pynchon 753).

While Herman and Weisenburger smartly add that "there is nothing idealistic, much less transcendent, in such a self-alienating decision," the idea that he "may avoid that iterative violence . . . by exiting the text" still denies the narrative's subtle hints that Slothrop, like so many of the marginalized characters he encounters, faces an increasingly bleak fate (Pynchon 212). While there's a juxtaposition between Slothrop's dissipation and Bland's, in which Bland claims he's been "journeying under history" via old Masonic magic, the idea of Slothrop's transcendence competes with countless

narrative utterances describing his inevitable failure (Pynchon 600). Along with Bodine's tearful confrontation with the memory / vision of Slothrop, his night with Bianca serves as more evidence against a celebration of Slothrop's "escape." Bianca offers to hide Slothrop with her, which "he knows she can," but the narrator intervenes instead of offering Slothrop's response. The narrator states that "eventually [Slothrop will] go, and for this he is to be counted, after all, among the Zone's lost" (Pynchon 478). Becoming the Zone's lost entails, for Slothrop, the inability to forge connections among people. He adheres to the paranoiac isolation of the Zone, where he "imagines conspiracy with a global reach but is preoccupied with its particularly effects on him" (Lacey 11). The narrator, moreover, further embeds Slothrop in this critique by noting the ways he "creates a bureaucracy of departure, inoculations against forgetting, exist visas stamped with love-bites . . . but coming back is something he's already forgotten about" (Pynchon 478). This atomized bureaucracy becomes emblematic of Slothrop's failure in the Zone: he's both unable to see outside of Their ideology (reflected in his objectifying and noncommittal attitude toward Bianca) and also unable to stay anywhere on the margins for long. While marginality becomes essential for survival and evasion in *Gravity's Rainbow*, agency and communalization appear as fleeting possibilities in the face of a fatalistic conscription of totalitarian power.

What's critical in the conception of agency, however, is that Slothrop and the Counterforce are never imagined to change or engage the system. The novel *does* look at the edges of the system and illuminate the areas that exist just out of control but doesn't imagine a social constructedness in the system. Rather, the most overt expressions of agency in the novel culminate in either reaching or exceeding the margins – but the

margins never challenge the mainstream position, only the mainstream ideology. Totality, then, describes both the breadth of the bureaucracy and the endless array of acronym-based agencies, but also the unassailability of the system. This fact, simple as it may be, underpins all of Slothrop's interactions with agents of Them, regardless of whether Slothrop's action qualifies as withdrawal, escape, or resistance. So, while Slothrop's journey teases the possibility of escape and resistance, it's the system and Them, in pursuit of Slothrop, that plays a critical role in closing off so many possibilities for resistance.

Both Marcuse and Foucault are useful for extrapolating upon the disciplinary powers of this system. Molly Hite notes that Marcuse's "performance principle" proves useful for understanding the novel, especially for considering the impulse of Them in the novel to order society to fulfill "the demand for more, and more complicated, goods and thus technologies of production entails more work, more alienation, and more repression" (683).⁴ This unconscious impulse toward productivity and order – the Fordist impulse to use humans as cogs in the assembly line – becomes clear in Katje's critique of the war. She points out that "the real business of the War is buying and selling . . . the true war is a celebration of markets" (Pynchon 107). Importantly, this critique extends into the margins too.

While it might seem reasonable to defend the black markets as shadow economies that subvert a larger multi-corporate economic dominance, the proliferation of these markets reflects instead upon the driving logic of the "performance principle," in which

⁴ Marcuse's performance principle describes the "impetus to detach from and dominate the natural order. The performance principle has its origin in the need for survival but cannot stop when survival is assured." This principle denies "people's desire for 'mindless pleasure'" . . . in order to promote labor" (Hite 683).

productivity and accumulation of wealth becomes the dominant impulse that subverts more “natural” social impulses. Slothrop witnesses this transformation of community into market after becoming the Pig-Hero, where a black market springs up around the revelers. The narrator notes that “no other Slothrop ever felt such fear in the presence of Commerce” before asking – “where’d they all come from, these gray hustlers, what shadows in the Gemutlichkeit of the day were harbouring them?” (579). Slothrop’s uneasiness with this market’s apparition comes from the association he makes between commerce and Them: he’s connected the naturalized impulse to sell and buy with the conditioning implicit in Their system.

However, the performance principle, which describes the naturalization of capitalist enterprise, fails to describe the systems of control that work with the capitalist impulse of the military-industry complex. Particularly, the surveillance apparatuses and conditioning relate contain echoes of what modern readers recognize as Foucauldian theory. Pynchon’s highly bureaucratic system, despite its sometimes-bumbling henchmen (read: Major Marvey), appears entirely unassailable as it becomes neatly entangled in everyday life. This entanglement offers the resistance factions only two options: opt in or opt out. Slothrop’s paranoiac vision of the surveillance apparatus, while edging on ridiculous, reinforces similarities between Pynchon’s vision of totalitarianism and “panopticism,” described in Foucault’s later *Discipline and Punish*, published two years after *Gravity’s Rainbow*.⁵ Pynchon’s surveillance system in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, in which the White Visitation houses a few “thousand dodgy intra-Allied surveillance schemes that

⁵ Foucault’s “panopticism” takes its name from Jeremy’s Bentham’s (architectural) panopticon, a prison structure the uses a single tower at the center of a circular building; Foucault describes the cells within the prison as “so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible” (*Discipline and Punish* 200).

have sprung up since the Americans, and a dozen governments in exile, moved in,” prophetically echoes the qualities Foucault outlines (Pynchon 35).

The panoptic surveillance in the novel is among the most overt expressions of a paranoid vision of power, and the effect of this vision is essential in shaping the outlook for political potential in the novel. Pynchon makes a labyrinth of organizations, systems, and characters, many of which are complicit in Slothrop’s conditioning and surveillance, including PICSES, ACHTUNG, the White Visitation, not to mention the secondary level of MNC’s and governments, including IG Farben and The Firm.⁶ The totalizing quality of this system owes much to its inhuman conception: as Hite notes, “when there is no longer a human embodiment of power, power seems to be everywhere” (Pynchon 686). The novel goes to lengths to avoid conceptualizing a true hierarchy of power, instead abstracting the leadership with references to “Them” or “They” and occasionally, in its most abstract, the narrative discussed “the true king” (Pynchon 133). As the novel portrays a collapsing distinction between political and economic power, this mystification of authority compounds that power by offering no discernible origin for its logic; rather, the logic of this system (which is, arguably, the logic of capitalism) becomes naturalized: “when rules and prohibitions inhere in an omnipresent, authoritarian They-system rather than in visible human subjects, they seem ubiquitous” (Hite 686). This validates Foucault’s assertion that “it does not matter who exercises power” within the panopticon (202). The effect in the novel, however, is that Laslo Jamf, Ned Pointsman, and other

⁶ The novel also mentions, through Brigadier Pudding the involvement of more offices in the shaping and controlling of Europe: the BBC European Service, “the Special Operations Executive, the Ministry of Economic Warfare, and the F.O. Political Intelligence Department at Fitzmaurice House” as well as the American “OSS, OWI,” “Army Psychological Warfare Department,” and “SHAEF Psychological Warfare Division” (GR 78).

figures tracking Slothrop are cogs in the system, rather than the leaders. The “headless” system and its logic – where ideas of colonial domination and violence are deeply ingrained, naturalized – reinforces the inability to identify, no less address, the flaws in the system.

The dehumanizing of political-economic systems becomes clear when Slothrop hears about President Franklin Roosevelt’s death, months after his death occurred. His death, “just before the surrender,” reinforces the transition into a post-Fordist world of technocratic overdevelopment: a world “in which the built environment, modes of representation, the figuration of the body, and the experience of everyday life are profoundly intertwined with late-capitalism” (Breu 26). Slothrop, by naming Roosevelt as “*his* president,” can still attach an identity to the leadership of the nation - as opposed to the anonymously described Truman, “posing in a black cape at Yalta with the other leaders” (Pynchon 380). Not only is Truman depicted as somewhat anonymous middle-manager of the nation, but Slothrop further describes him as “a being They assembled, a being They would dismantle” (Pynchon 380). While this utterance *could* be filed under “paranoiac connection,” the imagining is not so far-fetched: that Truman, the leader of the United States, represents yet another level of bureaucrats in the hierarchy of global power consolidation.

If the system in which Slothrop exists in the narrative is panoptic and totalitarian, the pre-WWII world represents, if not a pristine place, one of *some* guiding moral judgment in relation to power. Brigadier Pudding, as a World War I veteran, becomes the referent for this past: he opposes Pointman’s decision to monitor and condition Slothrop, arguing that “it’s beastly” to subject a man to the kind of mental treatment that Slothrop

inevitably undergoes. Pudding's imagination, on the whole, is unable to cope with the power – he states, while writing the doomed history *Things That Can Happen in European Politics* that “it's changing out from under me” (Pynchon 79). The death of Roosevelt and the rise of Truman, in his place, becomes an American context opposite the one Pudding reacted to, implying both the absurd unfamiliarity of the power apparatuses and the inhuman treatment of people implicit in this new system.

Gravity's Rainbow's Foucauldian system creates a unique relationship between character and system. The debate over Slothrop's resistance, withdrawal, dissipation, or escape is heated, but a close look at the way the system (and Them) is represented in the novel reveals that, regardless of the conclusion on Slothrop, characters are unable to directly engage the system in any context. What's missing, ultimately, is not the agency or will to *oppose* the system, but more so the ability in the opposition to re-inscribe spaces defined by the system's logic. What escapes the postmodern imaginary is something like Michel de Certeau's concept of “spatial practices” (96). Like the matrix model, de Certeau's spatial practice imagines “microbe-like, singular and plural practices,” but unlike the matrix model, spatial practice argues that movement “manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be” (96; 101). In the novel, the potential interaction between subject and state occurs in The Zone, South London, Southern Africa – spaces that aren't autonomous so much as forfeit (for a “greater good” in South London and Africa) or awaiting the fallout of a new hegemony (the Zone). However, the apparatuses of power in *Gravity's Rainbow*, for all their similarities to Foucault's theories, contain the same fundamental relationship between state power and individual agency.

As de Certeau warns, it's "impossible to reduce the functioning of a society to a dominant type of procedures," and while he's speaking of social theory, Pynchon's Allied powers replicate this same dynamic in the novel (48). The narrative never implies strength at the margins, nor the possibility of unification between any disparate factions (as mentioned, the Counterforce fails and Slothrop leaves Bianca, squandering two of the most overt examples of shared ideological resistance in the text). The inability of organization is the result of Pynchon's relentless tearing down of ideology. Slothrop, for instance, pursues his idea of America to a fault, realizing only too-late that the promise of home-as-remedy is an illusion – the ordering of Europe is a global order, taking hold abroad.⁷

This isn't to say outright that Slothrop "fails," or that agency within the system becomes impossible. Instead, by considering the allowances of this system, the very possibilities for Slothrop's expressions of resistance become clear. In a surveillance state characterized by totality and a naturalized logic of oppression, the methods of resistance and withdrawal available become bleak exercises. The "perpetual banishment" that Herman and Weisenburger describe captures the pessimistic outlook for Slothrop: recognizing that "everyplace he's been, Cuxhaven, Berlin, Nice, Zurich, must be watched now" he faces only banishment or capture, one choice characterized by isolation and paranoia, the other by manipulation and experimentation (Pynchon 635). The effect of this unavailability could not be more profound on characters in the novel. While many critics, as far back as two or three decades ago, will claim that postmodern characters are "feeble, suspect constructs," lack depth, or exist only as symbols, these criticisms fail to

⁷ The narrator laments Slothrop's naiveté for "still thinking there's a way to get back" to America, and for the fact that "he can't let her go" (GR 635).

take into account the relationship between character and their relationship with the environments constructed around them (Franzen, 247).

These claims, which do have a certain amount of leverage with other more playful postmodern texts, don't do *Gravity's Rainbow* justice. Instead, the Foucauldian qualities of Pynchon's novel reproduces the kind of agency-leveling effect described in *Discipline and Punish*. Slothrop's listless attempts at connecting, and later, reconnecting with factions, allies, and the uncompromised in *Gravity's Rainbow* reflects the ways in which marginality become the only ways of existing, and moreso, the ways in which the system constantly and forcefully attempts to bring these margins into a network of control – or, if excluded, destruction. In light of this, we shouldn't view Slothrop or any of the more developed, central character (Mexico, Katje, Pirarte) as less-than-human, or as “feeble constructs.” Instead, by looking at the system's mode of power, it becomes clear that any hope of Thomas's “socially reproducible practice – a habitable space, an underground civic entity, a micro-political flourishing” as resistance in these spaces becomes optimistic, if not outrageous (Thomas 118). Instead, we becomes spectators to the conscription of nearly every character to a central authority as authoritarian direction is “integrated into any function (education, medical treatment, production, punishment)” (Foucault 203). Like Pudding and Slothrop, the readers are too slow to understand the beginning of a new political pact: the narrator places us in the theater with The Bomb just overhead, “cozily assured that ‘we’ recognize the disaster and our collusion in it” (Hite 683).

Before descending too far into a pessimistic malaise, I will take a moment to defend the political potential of language and the resistance implicit in imagining new

worlds (after all, *The Grapes of Wrath* and *1984*, for all their differences, weren't banned for nothing). Thomas's definition of politics rejects denaturalization and deconstruction as viable tactics, which implicitly privileges utopianism and severely underrates the material effects of deconstructive portrayals of power throughout the history of the political novel. For Pynchon, this means that his denaturalization should not be casually dismissed as postmodern pastiche. Pynchon's use of signification, to that point, "teaches his readers about the modern organization of power and its terrible inhumanity . . . but all the breathtaking pyrotechnics on display [stylistically] in Pynchon's fiction should not prevent interpreters from mining his work for some kind of stable meaning" (Lacey 4).

Breu jumps to this defense as well, arguing that Pynchon "presents a vision of the world in which language presents the possibility of creating multiple worlds" even as the "limitation of humanist forms of subjectivity . . . gives Pynchon's novel its characteristically antihumanist tone" (Breu 67). The idea here is not to celebrate language games and kitsch as revolutionary, but rather, to draw attention to the important difference between deconstruction and wordplay. While many of the narrative strands in *Gravity's Rainbow* prove to be fruitless avenues for a constructive political discourse, this shouldn't be grounds for the dismissal of language's potential. The construction of "multiple worlds" doesn't necessarily spell out a viable political alternative, but the presence of a *deconstructive* political discourse shows the presence of discourse nonetheless.

Understanding *Gravity's Rainbow* in light of another four decades or so of postmodern fiction, then, means theorizing both agency and the political system of the novel. Theorizing a sustained political resistance in the novel without first articulating the

nuances of the system in which this resistance is contextualized, as I should have made clear, is destined for insufficiency. Likewise, theories of twenty-first century literature need to consider this context as well. If these theories consider a more overt political engagement or complex character histories as part of the stylistic shift away from postmodernism, as Burn's and Holland's do, then knowing where these forms of engagement evolve from matters deeply. Pynchon's novel, for instance, creates a scatter montage of Slothrop's life, from birth to death. This history, however, is intertwined with the representation of totalitarianism in the text, giving the impression that, instead of engagement, the novel is one of disengagement: no solutions offered, no imagination for the future.

Instead, Pynchon forces engagement upon the reader. The readers' collusion with the text, sitting in the theater with the bomb overhead, makes clear their role in the text. *Gravity's Rainbow*, is neither apolitical nor endlessly deconstructive. Rather, the novel problematizes any simplistic, easy engagement, making note of the ways in which the system seeks to obfuscate any attempt to pin down the location of its power or influence. *Gravity's Rainbow*, as the stand-in for the "high" postmodern novel, replicates an uncannily Foucauldian conception of power. Through this structure, the novel levels agency and political potential, and critics of the inhuman touch of the text feels instead the inhumanity of the systems involved. Powerlessness against co-optation, as a defining feature within the political superstructure of this text, becomes the legacy of Pynchon's big book from which other authors – as I'll show in the next two chapters – drew influence.

CHAPTER III
FIGHTING THE ODDS: COINCIDENCE AND
RESISTANCE IN *LIBRA*

Don DeLillo's 1988 novel, *Libra*, is as obvious a successor to *Gravity's Rainbow* as may be possible. DeLillo enjoys the honor of being compared or juxtaposed to Pynchon perhaps more than any other living author – the two inevitably find their ways into conversations about postmodern (and post-postmodern) literature. The similarity between their fiction is significant – both are commonly held up as paragons of postmodern style - but the association between the two authors' style contains little mention of representational politics. This chapter, then, will show exactly how the juxtaposition of their novels reveals the effects of social contexts on their politics. In short, the basic premise behind placing DeLillo *in sequence* with Pynchon is to draw attention to the transition from Pynchon's mode of representing the social world – through totalitarian superstructures and complex surveillance grids - to something else: the world as defined by simulation.

Before qualifying exactly how DeLillo extends the paranoiac legacy of postmodern fiction (a lineage including Pynchon, Vonnegut, Coover, Reed, and more), it's important to consider the shifting contexts surrounding the writing of these novels.

Pynchon composed *Gravity's Rainbow* throughout the 60s into the 70s, in a time of post-war consolidations of power, the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the Cold War, as a constant reminder of the threat of nuclear annihilation. DeLillo's *Libra* was published in 1988, during the decline of the Soviet Union – the Soviet government, under Mikhail Gorbachev, had implemented *perestroika* two years prior – and the rise of neoliberalism in American politics under Reagan. The 80s, according to Jeffrey Nealon, became the decade in which “the dictates of the market became a kind of secular monotheism in the United States,” creating a “cultural orthodoxy” out of the “downsizing and layoff mania” (55).

The individualist rhetoric derived from this business/cultural orthodoxy (“pull yourself up by the bootstraps, kid!”) plays a role in the arts, too, as the commercialization of individual desire becomes the norm. Nealon points out the effect of this individualizing logic in cultural production: “The memoir, with its emphasis on private experience, is clearly *the* literary form of our time” – its confessional, personal narrative reflects the emphasis on the individual - while “the home is the new work and play space of our time, leading to an unprecedented privatization of the culture and entertainment industries . . . even strolling the streets is a privatized proposition these days” (73). The “New Left,” as a part of this movement, “gave more value to individuality . . . and to politicization of culture rather than just of economic arrangements,” further conflating personal spheres of life with the political (Regnier 262). The transition from the moment of collective political potential in the 60s, then, is one characterized by disillusionment. While Pynchon, in the early 70s, laments this missed opportunity before the inscription of

new, authoritarian powers, DeLillo writes from a world in which the potential of the “long 60s” appears to be ancient history.

DeLillo, however, gains narrative distance from this context by instead writing about the 60s –not unlike Pynchon’s narrator in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, who speaks knowingly from the 70s about events in the 40s. This distance poses some interesting questions, but I intend to approach the textual questions through the issues already discussed in postmodern politics: namely, how does DeLillo conceptualize agency, resistance, and action in his text? Does he reinstate the paranoid politics present in earlier postmodern works? And, is DeLillo’s postmodernism political? These questions, as the underlying focus of this chapter, will seek to make clear the ways in which, in the movement towards the “end” of postmodernism – or the decline of the aesthetic dominance of postmodern literature, at least – that DeLillo’s novel presents an essential shift in the representation of agency and social engagement in the postmodern novel. This shift, in turn, will become essential for demystifying the representation of social engagement and political discourse in the novels of the new millennium.

Interestingly, the debate surrounding the (a)politics of Pynchon’s fiction, a debate fueled by anxieties about postmodernism’s deconstructive tendencies, doesn’t reappear for *Libra* with the same vigor. John Coyle, for instance, argues that *Libra* strikes a balance between the “two sets of extremes . . . the affectless passive absorption of a bombardment of images on the one hand, and apolitical, ahistorical aestheticism on the other” (31). Paul Regnier, on the other hand, argues that DeLillo, like his characters, longs “for a time when an individual could act out his opposition, the culture has become too abstract, too ‘virtual,’ too removed from personal contact, for such action to be

effective” (266). This statement reflects the rhetoric unique to the hypermediated 80s, specifically in its concerns for an increasingly virtual reality, but echoes the sentiments of Samuel Thomas and Jameson: the inability to pin down a rapidly evolving social and political world threatens any potential for engaging with that world. The solipsism in *Libra* doesn’t elicit the same attacks to its political agenda as *Gravity’s Rainbow*, however. While both novels contain vast swaths of historical references and symbols, critics are much quicker to concede that “the novel highlights the constructed nature of all narratives” and challenges “the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation” (Michael 151, Hutcheon 92). The critical consensus, then, regards DeLillo’s novels as “unusually successful at presenting the pervasive experience of kitsch without being complicit with it” (Coyle 29).

DeLillo himself might have a role in situating himself within political discourse, too. When critic George Will reviewed *Libra*, declaring it “an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship,” DeLillo responded – something that readers and critics can’t expect from Pynchon. Even more, DeLillo declared that “being called a ‘bad citizen’ is a compliment to a novelist . . . We ought to be bad citizens. We ought to, in the sense that we’re writing against what power represents, and often what government represents, and what the corporation dictates, and what consumer consciousness has come to mean” (Boria 53). Moreover, in an interview with *the Paris Review*, DeLillo conflates the value of a novel with the efficacy of its political critique, stating that “we need the writer in opposition, the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation. We’re all one beat away from becoming elevator music” (“The Art of Fiction No. 135). It’s difficult to see these statements as

anything but an acknowledgment of his role in political critique, and while I don't want to overstate the importance of a rebuke on the critical reaction to the novel or his potentially curmudgeonly attitude in interviews, these responses certainly offer an authorial insight that's missing from Pynchon's work.

The fact that *Libra* is exempt from a more drawn-out debate regarding political engagement, however, doesn't mean the novel contains an equally clear consensus with concepts of agency, engagement, and opposition to political systems. Several critics fixate on the paranoid reconstruction of plots, like those in Pynchon's fiction, that radically displace agency from the individual by insisting upon an external force capable of constructing their realities. Coyle, for instance, argues that the paranoid visions of reality in DeLillo's works are laden with the impulse to order events, stating that these plots "rely a great deal on pattern, and this is what paranoia is about. Paranoia repeats phenomena as design" (37). Skip Willman echoes this idea too, noting that "conspiracy theory restores our grip on reality by erecting the fantasy figure of a hidden agent . . . a move which posits a hidden order behind the visible chaos" (410). Willman places Everett at the center of the plot against Kennedy, with the mission to "reveal the obscene underside of public power" (411). As the narrative unfolds, though, the "totalizing narrative" becomes "held together by the 'meaningless' and the contingent" (412).

This paranoid vision doesn't offer an explanation for where agency exists – Willman and Coyle argue only that it's displaced from the individual. Michael James Rizza, on the other hand, offers a critique that's helpful for elucidating the subtle ways in which DeLillo's novel moves agency into the multiple plots, and, in doing so, avoids the traditional deconstructive and denaturalizing tendencies in postmodern politics that

locates agency and power in a “system” of sorts. In “The Dislocation of Agency in Don DeLillo’s *Libra*,” Rizza argues that *Libra* “problematizes any explanation of the events, even [DeLillo’s] own, by destabilizing a simple understanding of agency and accountability” and “displaces agency from the individual characters onto outside forces, dispersing it beyond the characters themselves and thus keeping certainty elusive in the end” (172). Agency doesn’t disappear or become consolidated into the structure of the dominant sociopolitical apparatus; instead, plots and “the extent to which a plot appropriates agency into itself, acquires ‘some movement, a driving logic,’ is the extent to which people seem to be deprived of free will” (176).

Michael sees plot in the novel as assuming agency, too, but finds the displacement of agency more extreme. Rizza *does* acknowledge that, despite the agency of coincidence and plotting, “the characters make choices – which Everett not only knows but also fears. Characters are not merely determined by the plot; they also create it” (177). Michael, however, argues that DeLillo challenges the typical portrayal of a thriller and the “neat delineation of a conspiracy with a set scheme,” instead showing how cause-and-effect “are rearranged, co-opted . . . the novel thus simultaneously presents and subverts humanist notions of the subject as centered, rational, and self-determining” (146; 148). He points to Marguerite’s attempts to retell Lee’s story - the untold parts of his story – as evidence of her “insistence on relations cause and effect and on the possibility of agency . . . [that] must be viewed as existing in tension with other strands of the novel” (Michael 147). So, where Rizza finds characters modifying their plots, despite the power of coincidence and chance, Michael insists that the novel “effectively denies the possibility

of individual agency by highlighting the all powerful role that coincidence plays in the unfolding of events” (153).

So, as DeLillo shifts agency from character to the plot, rather than to an authoritative system – the question remains: What does this shift mean for characterization, and what does it mean for political opposition and engagement? Several factors become immediately clear in the shift from the postmodern “system” in the fifteen years between Pynchon’s and DeLillo’s novels. While surveillance and autonomy are still key concerns for the postmodern novel, the Foucauldian authoritarianism is more a specter than reality. Conversely, resistance is everywhere: nearly all of the men in *Libra* – Lee Oswald, Jack Ruby, David Ferrie, Win Everett, General Walker, and more – see themselves directly opposed to a nefarious, conspiratorial system poised to strike them. It’s the nature of this resistance that DeLillo fixates upon, deconstructing the ideological and social conditions that produced a wave of oppositional and resistant postures – all of which, in their own ways, are doomed to fail.

The plot to assassinate the president, for instance, begins in Everett’s basement “out of ordinary dog-eared paper,” not as a killing at all but rather a “spectacular miss” that would mobilize Kennedy and the nation to war once again (*Libra* 51). The irony of this plot’s origin cannot be missed: as this idea leaves Everett’s desk, it’s modulated through interacting with characters and systems on its way toward death – the deaths of Kennedy and Oswald, which many readers will anticipate. While characters attempt to shape this plot, the move from spectacular miss to direct hit portrays the move of agency to plot, as the privileged view of the reader takes in the many obfuscations of the plot by those acting upon it. Everett’s original idea runs against Mackey’s own plotting – he

commits the “second leap” in the plot, toward killing Kennedy, whereas Everett’s first leap was shifting the target from Castro to Kennedy in the first place (*Libra* 219).

Moreover, Mackey’s own paranoia, with his distrust of Wayne Elko, Guy Banister, Oswald, and many others, leads the plot down a darker and more secretive path.

Plot’s inheritance of agency, however, comes not from the decisions made by these two characters, but rather from the labyrinth that the plot passes through on its way toward execution. While Everett and Mackey represent two main actors, the plot implicates the personal paranoia of the characters and the anger associated with the Bay of Pigs failure, factions of anti-Castro dissidents, the whims of the president’s travel plans, the layers of Lee Oswald’s identity crises. Altogether, these factors make impossible any semblance of control over plot, especially when so many characters are unified in a hyper-individualizing ideology and paranoid. Lee, for instance, carries his own idea of the plot’s execution, in which “he wanted to use the rifle that could be traced to him through the transparent Hidell,” just as Jack Ruby decides to kill Lee only if he has time to run to the bank first (*Libra* 303). If Ruby fails to make it to Lee in time, “it’s decreed [he] wasn’t meant to do it,” with his bank teller’s expediency as the deciding factor in another historical murder (*Libra* 436). It’s this balance of oppositional ideology, freeplay of identity, and the inescapable power of coincidence that turns Everett’s plot inside-out, and puts Lee in position to pull the trigger.

Lee’s behavior, too, becomes a symbol of a larger postmodern identity crisis, fueled by a desire for individualism while simultaneously crippled by inefficacy and indecisiveness. As the novel’s “leading man” of sorts, he encompasses the oppositional ideals that underpin the male psyche in the novel - he’s idealistic and stubborn, but also

listless and adrift. He resists various forces of society which he associates with a “normalization,” specifically consumerism – but has little idea where the “struggle” actually is. This array of factors places Lee’s character in tension with his aspirations and the narrative reality: he wants to “carry himself with a clear sense of role” and “reach the point where he was no longer separated from the true struggles that went on around him,” even as the narrative makes clear that his ideals are impossibly lofty (*Libra* 248). Instead, Lee is found by other characters (and likely, readers) to be “lacking a sense of authentic self” and possessing a thoroughly “postmodern subjectivity” (Rizza 172). The KGB agent Alek Kirilenko encapsulates Lee’s conflicted personality, noting that he does not have “self-command and mettle, a steadiness of will. This boy played Ping-Pong in his head” (*Libra* 167).

Lee’s contradictory behavior, his oppositional yet romantic worldview, comes from the “powerful world of Oswald-hero, guns flashing in the dark. The reverie of control, perfection of rage, perfection of desire, the fantasy of night, rain-slick streets, the heightened shadows of men in dark coats, like men on movie posters” (*Libra* 47)⁸. Ironically, Lee’s attitude towards the United States is fueled by narratives of rogue individualism and valorized outsider-status – a subjectivity produced more so by Hollywood than *Das Kapital*, which Lee can only connect to as proof of Trotsky’s living “in a working-class area of the Bronx not far from the places Lee had lived with his mother” (*Libra* 34). This structuring of subjectivity through media creates “a sort of nebulous state leading not at all to a surfeit of innovation but to the very contrary, to total

⁸ Lee’s conflation of real events and movie tropes reflects Baudrillard’s concept of the hyperreal, in which simulation becomes more definitive than the real through the generation of images “by models of a real without origin or reality” (*Simulation and Simulacra* 1).

entropy” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 100). Lee, naturally, does not recognize his postmodern subjectivity, reaching instead modernist notions of struggle and resistance, whose “meaning has been radically thrown into question in the contemporary world” (Wilcox 349).

Nothing exemplifies this illusion of ideological resistance better than Lee’s quick disillusionment with the Soviet Union. His quest for acknowledgment and importance runs up against his role in the Soviet Union as an unreliable source and a mere “regulator first-class,” or a “metalworker unskilled” (*Libra* 189). It’s not long before Lee approaches his handler/agent Alek to find a way to “get ahead,” complaining that “the plant is dull and regimented. Always got to meetings, always read the propaganda. Everything is the same. Everything tastes the same” (*Libra* 198). His reaction shows the ways in which his expectation clashes with the “hyperreal,” or the sense that “something has disappeared: the sovereign difference between [abstractions and reality] was abstraction’s charm” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 218). Not only does the standardization of the everyday represent the meeting point between simulation and commerce, but Lee’s letdown in Russia – for the lack of ideological purity, for the lack of “true struggle” – reflects the effect of various allegories on Lee’s concepts of self, purpose, and reality, or the lack thereof.

While Marina’s narrative doesn’t take on the pseudo-heroic dimensions of Lee’s, her move to America uncovers the seductive quality of simulation that proves useful for understanding Lee’s resistance as well. The power of commerce in *Libra* embodies something like Jean Baudrillard’s Disneyland, in which what draws the crowds is undoubtedly much more the social microcosm, the miniaturized and religious reveling in

real America, in its delights and drawbacks” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 262). Being surrounded by “things you could not buy in Russia if you had unlimited wealth, if you had money spilling out of your closets,” in this context, becomes a near-religious experience for Marina that she compares to “a dream at first” (*Libra* 226). Marina, in this iteration of the United States, is “happy just to walk the aisles of the Safeway,” taking in the illusory accessibility and choice offered by the supermarket - despite the reality of her poverty highlighting the superficiality of that choice (*Libra* 226).

For Lee, this Disneylandification of reality enters into his character at the level of ideology: his efforts to engage in “struggle,” which he understands through historical allusions to previous generations (*Das Kapital*, *The Communist Manifesto*), exhibits the “illusions and phantasms” of a hypermediated society: instead of reconnecting with a “real” historical context, the narratives of struggle become distorted by pop-culture renderings of the real (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 262). He’s not alone, either: Wayne Elko, one of the many conspirators, can’t help but understand his role in the plot in terms of the film *Seven Samurai*: “free-lance warriors . . . to carry out a dangerous mission” and “men outside society are called on to save helpless people from destruction” (*Libra* 178). Resistance and ideology, then, become muddled by culture itself. As Baudrillard states in *The Illusion of the End*, “no history can withstand the centrifugation of facts or their being short-circuited in real time,” causing the vanishing a history into the vast web of information and fact (2). By casting the terms of their resistance in the context of a nostalgic (and potentially nonexistent) past, or, in Wayne’s terms, entirely within a film-mediated past, Lee and Wayne show the limitations of their ability to understand both their place in society, and their society’s place in history.

While the displacement of agency should be familiar among postmodern anxieties, the intersection between a hypermediated reality and the attempts to execute any sort of plot reveals the unique ways in which agency is conceptualized in DeLillo's novel. As Rizza and Michael argued, plot takes on the displaced agency, taking on a life and agenda of its own in the form of coincidence and chance. The political effect of this displacement is the opposite of the Foucauldian logic portrayed in *Gravity's Rainbow* - the means of resistance in the text are numerous, meaning that, instead of a concentration of agency in hegemonic power, *Libra* disperses agency into all characters, plots, and events. While the logic of the panopticon imagines the movement of agency from individual to system, *Libra* offers a vision of plotting in which control and authority cannot be perfected. The plan can be made, but no plan can be executed flawlessly, as envisioned. The plot to assassinate the president, for instance, takes on the dimensions of the Baudrillardian hold-up, in which Baudrillard asks readers to . . .

Go and organize a fake holdup. Be sure to check that your weapons are harmless, and take the most trustworthy hostage, so that no life is in danger (otherwise you risk committing an offense). Demand ransom, and arrange it so that the operation creates the greatest commotion possible—in brief, stay close to the “truth,” so as to test the reaction of the apparatus to a perfect simulation. *But you won't succeed: the web of artificial signs will be inextricably mixed up with real elements (a police officer will really shoot on sight; a bank customer will faint and die of a heart attack; they will really turn the phony ransom over to you)—in brief, you will unwittingly find yourself immediately in the real, one of whose functions is precisely to devour every attempt at simulation, to reduce everything to some reality—that's exactly how the established order is, well before institutions and justice come into play . . . Thus all holdups, hijacks, and the like are now as it were simulation holdups, in the sense that they are inscribed in advance in the decoding and orchestration rituals of the media, anticipated in their mode of presentation and possible consequences (Simulacra 267, emphasis added).*

The “web of artificial signs” enters into the plots of *Libra* too, frustrating attempts for the characters to partake in resistance. These characters, however, *have agency*, but

the lack of effective action comes from the conflation of image and reality (as seen in Baudrillard's bank robbery scenario). This nostalgia for the past and the prominence of heroic narratives prove the ironic Achilles' heel for the numerous "outsiders" in *Libra*. The outsiders, including General Walker, Lee, Weird Beard, and the CIA agents all construct a binary "us vs. them" relationship between themselves and what they perceive as the "center." Therefore, even as *Libra* portrays the limit to their mastery of any plot, they see the social and political systems around them working in rigid and nefarious ways.

General Walker, for his part, speaks out against the "Real Control Apparatus," which "paralyzed not only our armed forces but our individual lives, frustrating every normal American ambition" (*Libra* 282). Walker links the paralysis of the army to "confirmed reports" of "red Chinese . . . massing below the California border" (*Libra* 282). Weird Beard also subscribes to a binary opposition between himself and a massive, existential threat on the horizon. His barely-coherent radio spots take on oppositional rhetoric, declaring him and his followers "for real," listening covertly because you don't know who to trust except me. We're the only ones who aren't them" (*Libra* 266). While Rizza argues that these fringe characters "define themselves by their opposition but also, like martyrs to their cause, they morally sanction their reactionary position," this situating against an unknowable "other" connects to the larger process in the novel, in which the hyperreal and real collide in the "web of signs," further impeding any sense of reality, on one hand, and resistance on the other (173). Moreover, the vague reports of enemies at the border echoes the Baudrillardian "centrifugation of facts" in which the mystification of information makes Walker's action impossible – he's both willing to believe facts that

contribute to his understanding of himself in the world, but also, in the flurry of available information, unable to discern fact from fiction.

Banister, too, expresses a paranoid “us vs. them” mentality that projects agency and totalitarian power onto the government (namely, the J.F.K. administration). He argues that Kennedy is “trying to engineer a shift. We’re not smart enough for him. We’re not mature, energetic, Harvard, world traveler, rich, handsome, lucky, witty . . . Do you know what charisma means? It means he hold secrets” (*Libra* 68). He reacts, not unlike Lee and Walker, to a feeling of powerlessness, of his *perceived* lack of agency. The increasingly virtual nature of information, the “web” of fact and fiction – Banister himself has stories of the CIA’s secret mission and bases, always ending with “men stranded in the smoke of remote meditations” – fuels the binarization of power, even as Banister participates in a conspiracy that manipulates Lee’s own black and white perception of good, bad, and “true struggle.”

If the margins of society offered freedom from the totalizing “Them” of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the margins in *Libra’s* hyper-mediated world, then, becomes the space of solipsism and retreat, exacerbating the feelings of powerlessness in each character. These margins, moreover, occur everywhere and in plain sight: Lee’s attempt to escape to Russia proves useless, in that he soon discovers his participation in not only an uncannily similar political system, but also a similarly isolating social layout. The increasing individualization and compartmentalization of space experienced by Lee, Everett, and even Nicholas Branch, the historian within the novel, is the fundamental characteristic of this formation of marginality, too - the home in *Libra* contains echoes of Foucault’s concept of enclosure, “a place heterogeneous to all others and closed in upon itself”

(141). The home-as-enclosure gives “each individual . . . his own place; and each place its individual,” reflecting, with a touch of Foucault’s dehumanizing rhetoric, the increasing emphasis on individuality and autonomy in the 80s. The isolation inherent in these spaces helps found the paranoid or virtual qualities of reality, as each enclosure or “monastic cell” of a home forces the imagining of resistance, action, and plotting into wild abstraction, with each character “insulated from knowing” (*Libra* 21).

Branch, as the narrative’s metafictional “organizing source,” sums up the frustrations of connection and control in the system, while speaking from his own enclosure: “looking for a means of connection” means that “you apply for a credit card, buy a handgun, travel through cities, suburbs and shopping malls, anonymous anonymous, looking for a chance to take a shot at the first puffy empty famous face, just to let people know there is someone out there” (*Libra* 181). Branch’s frustration with social engagement, which echoes the homicidal inclination of the CIA agents, addresses the disconnected sensation of a simulation-laden reality in which “people no longer look at each other, but there are institutes for that. They no longer touch each other, but there is contactotherapy. They no longer walk, but they go jogging, etc. Everywhere one recycles lost faculties, or lost bodies, or lost sociality, or the lost taste for food” (Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* 13).

Branch’s home study is not the exception, either. Win Everett, too, feels himself becoming simultaneously isolated and starved for involvement. The narrator points out the effect of Everett’s “semiretirement”: “deprived of real duties, of contact with the men and events that informed his zeal, he was becoming all principle, all zeal” (*Libra* 18). The domesticity of his late-career spying work, its conflation of his personal and professional

life, adds to the sense of helplessness. In his semiretirement, Everett is charged with recruiting possible junior officers for the CIA – to which Everett concludes that “this is what we end up doing . . . spying on ourselves” (*Libra* 18). This revelation, which Everett makes from his “American kitchen,” is meaningfully connected to the space: he’s asked to parse possible connections from the vast array of events, narratives, and people at his particular university (which, in this scene requires the reading of multiple newspapers). His home, however, becomes an “exile” for Everett, away from the inner-workings of the CIA, a place for his knowledge of their capabilities to fester into abstraction and paranoia.

Outside of the home, Dallas becomes the symbol for this spatial displacement on a macrocosmic scale. While Jack Ruby calls it the “most pro-American city anywhere in the world,” his adoration is made ironic by references to West Dallas’s “buildings stretched in barracks formation . . . fenced in, isolated from the city” (*Libra* 268, 270). Downtown Dallas, too, is “empty” to Lee – walking in the “shadows of insurance towers and bank buildings” causes a more extreme loneliness and “vaster isolation than Russia” (*Libra* 248). This isolation epidemic connects two important strands of discourse in the novel: first, the spatial arrangement reflects the hegemonic ideology, emphasizing individuality and privacy (not to mention commerce). The effect of this spatialization creates spaces – or, reinforces – segregations of private from public, of business from home, and, in many cases, men from women.⁹ Second, this arrangement fuels the

⁹ The separation of largely masculine-coded spaces of business, commerce, and government from the home in *Libra* carries serious ramifications. Michael, for instances, argues that women, particularly the agents’ wives, dispel the paranoiac visions of their husbands and “seem to resist the novel’s pull toward the vision of a chaotic world rule by chance” (149)

mystifying effects of simulation and hyperreality, making the corroboration and validation of information without the assistance of media even more unlikely.

The combined effects of simulation, hypermediation, and isolation do not combine in a way that makes resistance impossible, however. These factors are essential parts in the system which, instead, creates resistance everywhere, so much so that it's deeply implicated in a web of coincidental and chance connections. The "us vs. them" paranoia of the novel encapsulates this point: characters valorize their individuality and embattlement, but this paranoia makes them agents of chaos when they strike out violently.¹⁰ However, DeLillo makes clear that agency can and *does* exist, even amid the chaos of the real. In fact, agency is made clear in the most important scene in the novel: Lee pulls the trigger. This action proves an important distinction between agency and resistance – Lee *can* attack sources of power, violently, as can the other paranoiacs in the text. He identifies a power-broker in the "system" opposing him, and takes action that radically reshapes the American landscape: even as the man on DeLillo's grassy knoll struggles to work with Lee ("Leon fired too soon"), Lee himself isn't merely a spectator (397). He fires at Kennedy, and in a much more "real" and personal way, confronts and kills a police officer, even as he tries to walk the line between careful and careless, trying to "make them believe he didn't want to be identified" (*Libra* 404).

¹⁰ To this point, see DeLillo's prophetic reference to a potential mall shooting, "just to let people know there is someone out there," as well as Lee's decision to shoot General Walker (181, 285). The pliability of identity in the novel (especially Lee's) reinforces the chaotic qualities of this decision making: Ferrie believes a nuclear crisis would "seal [his] authenticity" while Lee conforms his identity to a caricature of an assassin, "dressed in black, holding a rifle in one hand" and the Militant and the Worker in the other – posing for a photo that he mails to George de Mohrenschildt before attempting to kill Walker (*Libra* 278, 290).

Despite the ambivalences in Lee's identity and the extent to which he could be reduced to a puppet in a larger plot, these two killings reveal a unique quality about his opposition. Unlike the more totalitarian renderings of political systems, Lee's ability to slip in and out of surveillance and into and out of various plots gives him a level of freedom that makes these acts – however heinous – possible.¹¹ The hypermediated world DeLillo portrays caters to this kind of action: Lee's killings are connected more to his desire for abstracted struggle and notoriety than to specific grievances with either the president or the Dallas police. However, this world is both saturated with this kind of media-fixated celebrity – on the news, on the radio, shown at hundreds of screens - with a ready-made Hollywood narrative of rogue resistance for Lee to insert himself into. So, while the efficacy of Lee's engagement is up for debate (this killing, understood as “political engagement,” likely does little to connect Lee to a true struggle as opposed to a new level of self-abstraction), his agency is less so. In the shift from a system echoing Foucault to one with Baudrillardian qualities, the potential for individual action increases drastically even if representations of that action leave the ideological efficacy of that action in question.

Lee's movement between these many plots (from Kirilenko's interrogation of Francis Gary Powers, Everett's plan to *almost* shoot the president, and Mackey's plot to shoot the president, and more), as he slips the surveillance apparatus and is allowed to slip the surveillance apparatus, becomes DeLillo's cautionary tale. DeLillo doesn't imply that Lee is explicitly capable of subverting CIA or KGB control, but rather, hyperreality

¹¹ The narrative treatment of Lee Harvey Oswald, however, is radically different from that of Slothrop. I'll note here that understanding Lee and Slothrop as main characters makes certain narrative treatments more and less likely. A positive or optimistic narrative is arguable for Slothrop – but not so much for Lee.

aids and abets his efforts, obfuscating his history and identity. Lee's homicidal potential, then, increases when various entities try to harness him within their finely-tuned plots. Kirilenko, wary of Lee in his own plot, warns that "idealists of course are unpredictable. They tend to be the ones who turn bitter overnight, deceived by lies they've told themselves" (*Libra* 165). Paradoxically, Lee's attempts at ideological purity and "high principles" become a liability as he reassesses his own situation, trapped between a fantasy he's seeking and a reality that is destined to disappoint (165).

The shift of ideology, then, is signaled with a change of name for Lee. For instance, he asks to be called "Alek" in Russia, but upon his disillusionment and return, tells Marina not to "call me Alek anymore. This is not Alek country" (*Libra* 230). Likewise, the incongruence between Ferrie's use of "Leon" for Lee and Lee's own profession of his plan to be traced by to Hidell shows the ways in which Lee's name association outpaces other characters' attempts to track his ever-changing ideals and goals (*Libra* 317). This is not to say, though, that Lee doesn't undergo identity crises along the way, or that he doesn't subscribe to multiple names along the way, unable to settle on one for himself. Rather, the various names demarcate particular frames of mind for Lee, culminating with his capture, in which he sees "Lee Harvey Oswald" on TV, deciding that "this was the true beginning" (*Libra* 434).

Therefore, when the second shooter – on the grassy knoll – remarks that "Leon fired too soon," he fails to see that, like the act of inscribing a name upon Lee, the attempts to confine him to a well-defined plot have failed. Like Marina's use of the name Alek, this naming problem for Ferrie and the second shooter underpins a larger dissonance: Lee, in his attempts to maintain an unattainable ideological purity, shifts

quickly and drastically in his desires to connect with “real” struggle – which leads him to pursue his own narrative for the shooter, which includes his capture. Ideology, then, makes Lee ironically *more* dangerous: he pursues valorization as a celebrity-shooter and, ultimately, defies the attempts by Ferrie and Mackey to control the variables of their plot. Lee’s ability to move in and out of various plots, then, becomes less a straightforward tool of resistance than a danger in itself: the taking on of multiple identities here implicates Lee in multiple plots, just as the boneyard of past names becomes a symbol of his vulnerability to co-optation and manipulation.¹²

This shift in the representation of individual vs. system does maintain some qualities seen in Pynchon’s novel, however. DeLillo’s novel still partakes in denaturalizing and deconstructive critique, very much in line with the techniques described in Hutcheon’s *Politics of Postmodernism*. Moreover, underneath the stylistic smoke-and-mirrors, both novels advance a surprisingly traditional social critique against familiar targets, including the excesses of capitalism, the dangerous conflation of economic and political interests, and the threat of co-optation. Marguerite Oswald’s defense of Lee, for instance, “presents Lee as a product of his social, historical, political, and economic situation,” connecting his radical and homicidal tendencies as an adult to his “economically deprived childhood” (Michael 146-47).

This connection folds into the many criticisms of the “American Dream” – discussed throughout the novel – and, with brutal irony, portrays the danger of co-optation into the system. Marguerite recounts her and Lee’s past to a judge, showing the

¹² Compare Lee, in this scenario, to Slothrop: the various incarnations of Ian Scuffling and Rocketman are confounding to the panopticon in *Gravity’s Rainbow*; they allow Slothrop’s narrow escape – usually – while implicating his enemies in capture. Major Marvey’s donning of the pig suit, for instance, portrays identity-fluidity as libratory for Slothrop, with each identity coming and going superficially (Pynchon 620).

ways in which her own resistance faces co-optation. She hedges her criticisms by stating that “I love my United States” and her best defense is to add, in court, “we are a military family” (*Libra* 6-7). Her attempts to change the narrative, then, show how she and Lee “are victims, in the sense that their attempts at self-construction . . . are covered over, rearranged, co-opted” even while “she buys into and endures the system that has marginalized and victimized her” (Michael 146, 148). This critique, combined with Larry Parmenter’s casual allusions to George de Mohrenschildt as a CIA asset, “a man from United Fruit, a man from the Cuban-Venezuelan Oil Trust” and the CIA’s role in the future (“keeping track of world currencies. Moving and hiding money”) targets governmental profiteering, corruption, and greed – not unlike *Gravity’s Rainbow* (*Libra* 125, 361).¹³

As the postmodern novel reacts to new conditions, defined by technological advance and the increased speed of media and commerce, representations of social and political systems shift to take into account the new regimes of coincidence and chance. If *Gravity’s Rainbow* focuses intently upon the inscription of a political agenda upon a nation (or nations) and its inhabitants, *Libra* considers the inscription of commerce and capitalism as the chief force shaping the “real.” What’s more is that, while Pynchon’s political apparatus was nebulous (“them”) but recognizable, the logic of capitalism in *Libra* works at nearly unconscious levels, problematizing the ability to imagine resistance and social engagement outside the forces of simulacra. DeLillo’s novel, then, marks the

¹³ George de Mohrenschildt’s character, as a CIA asset and United Fruit employee, bears an uncanny resemblance to John Foster Dulles, the CIA head under Eisenhower who doubled as a board of trustees member for the company, using the two posts to a considerable economic advantage (Cohen 186).

transition into an era of “serial invocation of individual heroism,” even as the engagement is mystified and heroism thrown into questions of simulation (Nealon 72).

CHAPTER IV
THE FUTURE IS NOW: FORGETTING THE EIGHTIES
IN *A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD*

The trajectory from Pynchon to DeLillo, up to this point, implies a series of stable features in the representational politics of the postmodern novel: each includes paranoiac characters, the mystification of the real as a barrier to engagement, spatial reorganization as a manifestation of hegemonic power, and the omnipresent threat of co-optation to resistance and autonomy. These two texts emblemize a larger tradition within postmodern style – a style which, according to several aforementioned critics, is declining in influence as a new aesthetic rises. But, as I’ve made clear in the first chapter, this postmodern tradition carries serious ramifications for contemporary literature, especially when critics insisting on the split between these two literary movements view a distinctive “return” to social and political discourse. Having specified several characteristics central to postmodern political discourse, the question becomes: returned to what? Or, to put it more nicely: what is the legacy of postmodern discourse in the arena of contemporary literature?

This trajectory, then, begs for a contemporary novel to confirm or deny the separation of contemporary discourse from the postmodern. Enter Jennifer Egan’s 2010 novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Her novel, a Pulitzer Prize-winner, contains many of

the newly minted trademarks of contemporary literary fiction: her disjointed timeline and realist narrative conventions show a preoccupation with character and “personal history dramatized by the author . . . [and] linked to alternative treatments of time” (Burn 23-4). Moreover, Egan’s depiction of characters engulfed in the tension between human connection and anxiety over authenticity reveals a “faith in language and certainty about the novel’s ability to engage in humanist pursuits” (Holland 1). The bandshell-in-the-park finale, as the coagulation of social anxieties around “changes in the public sphere, particularly as a consequence of technological innovation,” making the relationship between public and private an “ineluctable feature of the present (Green 12). In this context, *Goon Squad* fits well within contemporary theories and, as I’ll make clear going forward, extends this particular postmodern tradition, albeit with the ambivalences central to the twenty-first century.

However, it’s worth noting the ways in which the social and political contexts have shifted since Pynchon’s 70s and DeLillo’s 80s. Egan’s novel comes after the 9/11 attacks, and just after the 2008 financial collapse – two popular demarcating point for new eras of U.S. consciousness – but these occurrences represent an acceleration of the conditions described by Nealon in the 80s, rather than anything uniquely different. Surveillance, as a central anxiety in Pynchon’s and DeLillo’s novels, has become a part of business orthodoxy. As Mark Fisher argues in *Capitalist Realism*, bureaucracy is “ironically re-emerging at the heart of a [neoliberal economic] system which has professed to destroy it,” creating an “increase of administration and regulation,” reintroducing old systems of control (40). Ironic, as well, is the dissonance between bureaucratic surveillance and with the new “slogan” of work in the twenty-first century:

“no long term” (Fisher 32). As workers are increasingly asked to “periodically re-skill as they move from institution to institution,” the isolation and difficulties of communalization – seen in the two previous novels – becomes even more realized (Fisher 32). Thus, the focus on space, community, and interpersonal relationships that underpins DeLillo’s and Pynchon’s political discourse remains, on a social and economic level, extremely relevant.

Fisher adds, too, that these conditions – increased economic demands for mobility, bureaucracy, and surveillance – have impacted the possibility for political action. He paraphrases Slavoj Žižek’s description of “anti-capitalist” co-optation to drive home this point: “So long as we believe (in our hearts) that capitalism is bad, we are free to continue to participate in capitalist exchange” (13). This fact rests heavily upon the prominence of the pleasure principle; “capitalism’s appropriation of ‘the new’” drives consumerism in the tech era, using “debt rather than enclosure” in education and work to control the individual (Fisher 28, 26). Far from Marcuse’s revolutionary vision of pleasure, the neoliberal economy “has our desires and preferences as its only mandate,” using the pleasure principle to discourage discourse and resistance by encouraging, instead, personal pleasure and consumption (Fisher 49). While this combination of co-optation and pleasure makes resistance unlikely and/or ineffective, bureaucracy also plays a role in frustrating attempts to engage with politics. Fisher uses the call center as the stand-in for bureaucracy in general, in which “anger can only be a matter of venting; it is aggression in a vacuum, directed at someone who is a fellow victim of the system but with whom there is no possibility of communality” (64). While Nealon attributed increasing social insistence on the individuality to the 80s – as part of the logic of late

capitalism - Fisher's account of the 2000s is essential for extending that critique to include the return of bureaucracy and more direct (and disciplinary) forms of control.

The return of bureaucracy, as a potential symbol for a new representation of disciplinary structure, doesn't mean that Egan's *Goon Squad* reads more like *Gravity's Rainbow*, however. Egan Instead, the novel's depiction of the world embraces realism – to an extent - and like *Libra*, she employs a series of chronological shifts to differentiate. *Goon Squad*, unlike the two previous novels, avoids overt references to politically loaded symbols (Pynchon's Axis and Allies, DeLillo's Kennedy assassination) and instead uses punk rock and the music industry as a vehicle by which the characters can act out the processes of growing up and growing old: Bennie Salazer, for instance, moves from a young bassist to a record executive, navigating various underground venues during the 1970s west-coast punk boom to the glitzy New York office spaces expected of his position. Egan's delivery of this story, and that of an ensemble cast of other character, isn't as straightforward as this trajectory implies, however. *Goon Squad* relays its narrative in short, episodic bursts in snapshots of unstable narration, with no one chapter told from the same perspective, no one chapter meshing in a neat chronology with the chapters to follow. This shift in representation, toward the more mundane and relatable events of the everyday, signals the return to character and humanist pursuits that Burn and Holland predict, but also, examines the politics of the everyday with microscopic focus. This focus reflects the postmodern interest in depicting the conflation of the personal and political, seen in the biopolitics of Pavlovian conditioning in *Gravity's Rainbow* and the proliferation of paranoiac, embattled rhetoric in *Libra*.

Punk rock, then, becomes a central symbol in the text, essential to understanding the complex interplay between punk rebelliousness and music industry co-optation. The end to which Egan employs the punk allusions, however, has been a confounding problem for critics of *Goon Squad*. Music critic Sean Carswell understood the text as loosely appropriating punk fashion instead of punk ideology. He takes Egan to task for this superficial depiction, stating that “any exploration into the fundamentally democratic, egalitarian principles of punk rock is . . . ignored” (325). Moreover, Carswell argues that Egan’s sprawling timeline, in which the characters participate in the punk scene only as teens, casts punk as “a childish subculture” through which Egan makes the transition from “youthful transgressions turn into middle-aged complacency” seem inevitable (325, 323). This stance, in effect, demands the juxtaposition of punk ideology and punk music and fashion – and declares that, in Egan’s failure to take up the values that “make” the genre, *Goon Squad* is complicit in the capitalist production that the punk ideology seeks to distance itself from.

Instead of seeing the ideology of punk rock in the musical subtext, Gerard Moorey argues that Egan uses music as a euphemism for artistic production in general. Moorey, by examining the links between the music industry and a larger backdrop of consumer capitalism, argues that “countercultural notion of rock music as a genre with anti-capitalist and collectivist pretensions is dispensed with once and for all” by Gen Y, whose tastes enact a “wholehearted embrace of capitalism” (68). His critique draws a parallel “between the decline of US political hegemony and the decline of the rock ideology,” through which the desperate fight against aging – like Bennie drinking gold flakes for libido – becomes an embodiment of anxiety over the future. Like Carswell,

then, Moorey finds the text portraying an uncomfortable relationship between capitalism and characters in the text, in which the market imperatives push each character toward being the worst version of themselves.

Danica Van de Velde, too, finds in Egan's novel an ideological emptiness in the characters, though she argues that the novel takes on a punk rock structure rather than punk rock ideology. Van de Velde finds that, by locating punk ideology in the past, "genuineness and truth . . . can seemingly only be located in the past," making for a nostalgia that "lays bare the hollow idealism that is particularly at the heart of her male characters' lives" (130, 124). The punk rock aesthetic, on the other hand, is represented through "fragmentation and collage" and "contrasting and conflicting elements," which provide a useful metaphor for understanding Egan's narrative analepses (126). The conflict between politics and nostalgia, Van de Velde argues, relegates the hope for purity, authenticity, and political resistance to the past, with Bennie celebrating his friend's impoverished, disconnected adulthood as a credential for his access to uncompromised musicianship (130).

The limited critical reaction to Egan's novel focuses almost entirely on the issues of authenticity and artistic production, but, in doing so, largely ignores the ways in which Egan's esoteric, futuristic conclusion contextualizes the stakes of these issues. While Carswell sees the conclusion as an embrace of capitalism, Moorey sees it, rather simply, as "satirizing the original baby-boomer generation" (81). David Cowart echoes Moorey's response, noting that Alex, the central character of the final chapter, "realizes the impurity of his shilling for Bennie Salazar's scheme to sell dubious Scotty Hausmann to music lovers of the cultural twilight," which leads Cowart to argue that Egan portrays a

mere vestige of 1960s political energy (248-51). Van de Velde, however, finds that, despite her overall pessimism, Egan's conclusion represents the possibility for uncompromised, "authentic" music "as a source of hope and redemption" (133).

This conclusion, in depicting the inscription of authoritarian control and an accelerated-but-recognizable capitalism, connects Egan's novel to a history of political representation, a tradition occupied by Pynchon and DeLillo. While authenticity and artistic production are critical anxieties in the novel, the possibility for artistic production becomes a part of a larger political debate, in which artistic production (musical, in the novel) is central to public discourse and shared experience. Egan's novel, in light of the dystopian final chapter, poses punk rock not as a fashion or ideological construct, but rather as symbol of the legacy of the 80s. Punk, as a symbol for an *individualizing* counter-cultural movement, is an essential opposition to the communalizing possibilities that coalesce around musical and cultural production late in the novel.

To discuss this conclusion and Egan's off-brand futurism, punk rock poses a necessary starting point. Egan's disjointed narrative doesn't begin with the characters' adolescent punk roots – the reader meets Sasha, Bennie's one-time assistant, and Bennie himself – before encountering the novel's earliest available context for Bennie, Scotty, Rhea, and Jocelyn.¹⁴ The shifting narration in this section allows Rhea to inflect the section with the ambivalences of teenage interpretation (she asks, for instance, "when does a Mohawk become a real Mohawk?"), which becomes a surprisingly appropriate tone for deconstructing the identity politics of the counter-culture. While this teen-punk

¹⁴ I'm tempted to call this chapter the "beginning" of the chronology, except for a minor flashback that depicts Lou, a record executive, on a safari. While the novel's ensemble remains fairly decentralized, this analysis will focus on Bennie and Scotty, as they become central to the novel's finale.

juxtaposition led Carswell to declare that the novel abandons “any exploration into the fundamentally democratic, egalitarian principles of punk rock,” this passage actually makes a serious, political critique of the genre (325).

Instead of vapid representation, Egan contextualizes punk rock “against the wider backdrop of Western liberalism,” which illuminates the ways in which the punk aesthetic is fetishized and traded like a consumer good (Moorey 71). Rhea focuses heavily upon punk performativity, punk fashion, and boasts of seeing “Crime, the Avengers, the Germs, and a trillion other bands” (Egan 45). Music, in this case, represents angst and clichéd anger more than political engagement. Unlike Carswell’s account of Egan “trivializing” issues in punk, however, it’s clear that the characters, in their teen years, aren’t mobilizing punk ideology so much as punk attitude. Although Rhea idolizes bands in the punk scene, she admits that Scotty’s lyrics “might as well be: *fuck fuck fuck fuck*” while anguishing over questions of authenticity (Egan 44). Also, there are criticisms that Rhea makes unknowingly: when visiting another punk girl’s house, she finds a stark contrast to the one-note performance of punk identity, with the implication that punk attitude, as portrayed, is superficial and bound for expiration (Egan 47).

This chapter, in parodying a certain punk rock authenticity, serves to contextualize the legacy of punk to the 2000s – and the ways in which it replicates mainstream, hegemonic social order in its attempt to subvert the dominant order. The band’s name, the Flaming Dildos, becomes emblematic over the kind of superficial rebelliousness of the punk culture. Besides Rhea’s insecurities, the more serious and damaging tendencies of mainstream culture become insidious additions to the culture. Rhea’s friend, for instance, tells Rhea that Bennie’s a “cholo,” but reassures her that “rich

girls won't go with cholos . . . period-the-end" (Egan 42). Besides the casual racism, the punk subculture celebrates hypermasculinity and unattainable ideals of individuality. For instance, Lou, the record executive, insists that he'll "never get old" after having sex with the 16-year-old Jocelyn. For her part, Rhea notes that Jocelyn, then Lou's mistress-of-sorts, "never mentioned [his apartment] was on the thirty-fifth floor . . . or the green marble slabs in the elevator. I think that was a lot to leave out" (Egan 55). The egalitarian, class-leveling ideals of punk lifestyle, which *did* exist, to Carswell's credit, have since given way to a co-opted version of punk and production, that replicates the individualist, Darwinian discourse of neoliberal economics in the 1980s.

This context radically reshapes the reader's understanding of the characters in the first two chapters. While readers, by the third chapter, have already experienced the desperate libidinal crisis of Bennie's life and Sasha's kleptomania, each chapter offers little evidence for a root cause of these issues, permeated only by "a sense that 'something is missing'" (Fisher 22). In fact, these first two chapters reflect Fisher's modern "condition" which is "constituted not by an inability to get pleasure so much as . . . an inability to do anything *except* pursue pleasure" (Fisher 22). Bennie's "shame memories" exemplifies both the hollowness at the center of capitalist enterprise – he admits his "hatred for the industry he'd given his life to," even as an executive – and his inability to elicit pleasure from anything. Egan, too, makes his pursuit of pleasure rather obvious: he drives a Porsche, drops gold flakes into his coffee (in a desperate attempt to rescue his libido), and makes equally desperate passes at Sasha, his assistant (Egan 35-7). Sasha, for her part, agrees with her therapist that stealing is a "personal challenge," where

she steals a tourist's wallet as "a way for Sasha to assert her toughness, her individuality" (Egan 4).

The text offers no explanation for this behavior in the early chapters; instead, Egan's critique of punk rock offers the diagnosis. The punk scene, in the context of the incoming neoliberal 80s, re-inscribes a kind of individualist, masculine performance that subverts both the political legacy of the 60s and the supposed values of the music itself. This resentment for 60s idealism is barely beneath the surface, as well. Rhea, as narrator, celebrates the incoming eighties ("Nineteen eighty is almost here, thank God") in part for the relegation of the 60s to the past: "the hippies are getting old, they blew their brains on acid and now they're begging on street corners all over San Francisco" (Egan 41). While Nealon refers to the "collective, angry punk music of the 1970s" as the perfect opposite to the "hyperinteriorized affect" of grunge and indie acts in the 90s, the music in *Goon Squad* has instead instilled in the characters an adherence to personality worship (Lou) and social apathy. The malaise that these characters suffer in their pursuit of pleasure, then, represents a total co-optation of desire, with the belief in "anti-capitalist and collectivist pretensions . . . dispensed with once and for all" (Moorey 68).

Egan's model of delayed disclosure, in which details of the characters' lives eke out in short episodes, further reinforces the extent to which persistent insecurity of late capitalism invades the quotidian. The legacy of neoliberalism demands self-sufficiency, individuality, and masculinity, and this ultimatum permeates Bennie's actions throughout the novel. The sixth chapter, narrated by Scotty, lets readers in on what, up to that point, is Bennie's prime: he's married, has a three-month-old son, has a Manhattan office, and is constantly embarrassed with the "gifts life had shoveled upon him" (Egan 102). The

meeting is telling of Bennie's shift, too: he immediately asks, in a barrage of questions, "You have a demo tape you want me to hear? You've got an album, a band? Songs you're looking to have produced?" (100). Scotty's response makes clear the dissonance between their worldviews: "I came for this reason: I want to know what happened between A and B" (101). Bennie's response, however, outlines the ways in which his language immediately conforms to the rhetoric and primacy of commerce – his questions all predict a transaction or trade, and exemplify his inability to imagine a relationship built upon anything except business.

Bennie's complicity in capitalism, which *should* be a slight to the punk ideology, becomes increasingly apparent with the criticism offered by Scotty. Despite his moment of euphoric recollection, readers are already familiar with Bennie's materialism and womanizing, reinforced again in the following chapter, where details of his second affair, in the affluent New York suburb of Crandale, confirms the extent to which Bennie is hopelessly complicit in the capitalist pursuit of pleasure, even as he accuses his neighbors of being "fascists" for their Republican sympathies (Egan 116-18). Scotty, on the other hand, thinks existentially about capitalism, noting the "infinitesimal difference . . . between working in a tall green glass building on Park Ave. and collecting litter in a park," offering an alignment with the egalitarian roots of punk rock (Egan 93-94). Moreover, Scotty laments not only having the "information but the artistry to *shape* that information," noting with urgency his desire to overcome a hypermediated reality, in which "you could scour planet earth and the universe without ever leaving the green velvet couch you'd pulled from a garbage dump and made the focal point of your East Sixth Street apartment" (Egan 97, 96). Scotty, then, is the one character who is most

attuned to the costs of neoliberal cultural production, bearing witness to a crumbling public sphere and the barriers to accessing and consuming art (98).

Celebrating Scotty's awareness, however, doesn't mean that he and Bennie become diametrically opposed. Scotty admits that he'd disappeared from the public whose evaporation he laments, enveloped in his own social experiments to qualify the "X's and O's" of experience (Egan 96). So, while Moorey juxtaposes Scotty's tech-paranoia to his artistic authenticity, making for a satirical ending in which an aging rocker redeems the youth-obsessed mainstream culture, Scotty's withdrawal from society problematizes this reading. While Bennie celebrates Scotty as "absolutely pure," this praise doesn't indicate a backwards nostalgia or denial of technology. Instead, Scotty and Bennie share between them a return to the social world, to creating music. Egan, then, makes redemption possible in the novel, offering ways out of co-optation that allow characters to adapt to the world and to reclaim lost ideals.

The possibility for redemption becomes a key factor in the novel's final chapter, too. Like punk rock recontextualizing the earlier chapters, Egan's proleptic conclusion introduces new ways of engaging with the technocratic society and, unlike the punk context, offers an optimistic vision of cultural production as the locus of resistance to social and political co-optation. What Egan portrays recalls Sam Thomas's "matrix model," in which "renegade users are able to use the matrix to their own advantage – setting up covert economies and communities" (96).¹⁵ In this final chapter, Bennie specifically employs the lessons from his time as a record executive, embedding himself back into the world of promotion and marketing, to propose a concert that ultimately

¹⁵ Thomas argued that this model "enables us to recover some sense of agency" in Pynchon's novels, but ultimately abandons the matrix model as a model for understanding politics within *Gravity's Rainbow*.

attempts to subvert the market's imperative and deliver a transcendent musical experience.

Egan's final chapter increases the stakes of resistance by showing the evolution of the economic and political hegemony: New York becomes transformed into a dystopian amalgamation of twenty-first century fears, with surveillance and technology run rampant. Communication is ruled by "Starfish," or "kiddie handsets," which greatly simplify language to seemingly ridiculous extents – and created a group of new consumers in preverbal toddlers (Egan 313). This new market, in turn means that "bands had no choice but to reinvent themselves for the preverbal," as the narrator notes that Biggie changed his hit "Fuck You, Bitch" to "You're Big, Chief!" (Egan 313). The academy doesn't escape this economic assault on language, either. Alex, the fixer whom the chapter focused on, is married to a professor, Rebecca, described as an "academic star" who is "prematurely graying" while "slaving to finish a book while teaching two courses and chairing several committees" (323). While this description of academic work may be the least caricatured aspect of Egan's dystopia, Rebecca's work is nothing if not depressing: "her new book was on the phenomenon of word casings, a term she'd invented for words that no longer had meaning outside quotation marks. English was full of empty works – 'friend' and 'real' and 'story' and 'change' . . . How had 'American' become an ironic term? How had 'democracy' come to be used in an arch, mocking way?" (323-24).

This funhouse-mirror distortion of society is not limited to talk about work and the economy, either. Like *Gravity's Rainbow* and *Libra*, *Goon Squad* depicts the hyper-mediation of space as an essential role in the consolidation of power toward

authoritarianism. The narrator makes references to the ominous surveillance of the concert space, where choppers “converge overhead” as “the price of safety,” a thinly-veiled reference to the post-9/11 logic behind the Patriot Act and the overwhelming public approval of domestic surveillance. This conscription of space occurs more subtly, too: Alex and Rebecca reflect fatalistically on their apartment’s waning view of the Empire State Building, as a developer planned to raze their neighboring building for a skyscraper “that would seal off their air and light” (Egan 314). Besides the economic implication here (“the apartment would become impossible to sell”), this hermetic sealing of their home euphemizes the isolating power of the social and economic structure. Just as Bennie’s executive role showed the impact of economics on language and communication, Alex and Rebecca’s “sunset” – with the high rise conversely rising up – shows the extent to which, while there’s room for people in this society, there is considerably less room for humanity.

This oppression manifests without explicit mention of a political force or character behind these forms of control, obfuscating any sense of political resistance, but the postmodern anxieties remain - Egan’s dystopia depicts a world of troubled language, panoptic surveillance, and a mystification of power structures. The critical difference lies in the way the matrix model is deployed within this context. While consumerism is constantly reified as the only mode of expression, and it becomes increasingly difficult to “see outside neoliberal ideology,” Bennie – up to this point, the character who constantly falls short of his own ideals – utilizes the tools of the system to mount a resistance (Carswell 326). Bennie complains about the state of artistic production, arguing that “it’s not about sound anymore. It’s not about the *music*. It’s about reach,” even though he’s

simultaneously able to use the communicative tools to his advantage: he and Lulu organize the “blind team” to market Scotty’s performance, convincing Alex to lend his skills as a promoter to this group (Egan 312).

This use of the “system’s” tools implies more than just ingenuity, too. Whereas the matrix model – and Pynchon’s novels, to which it was applied – imagines the characters at the margin as the “resistance,” *Goon Squad* places the characters firmly within the political and economic system. Bennie, Scotty, and Alex, as the main actors in this final chapter, don’t seek to escape or marginalize themselves to escape; their intentions are to upend the assumptions and imperatives of the system from within. While this representation carries certain risks – Bennie could be read as complicit or co-opted, for his wealth – the dystopian extension of neoliberal logic would be reified, not resisted, by any valorization of a marginal hero. To address a system that emphasizes individuality and creates isolation, then, the answer is the direct opposite of Bennie’s punk-rock past; Scotty’s concert resists commodification and seeks to communalize an increasingly isolated and disparate public.

Leaving this 80s legacy behind, moreover, means overtly connecting to an alternative lineage, which happens to be the one that, in their youth, the punks resisted. Scotty concludes his meditation on experience with finality, noting that “it may be that a crowd at a particular moment of history creates the object to justify its gathering, as it did at the first Human Be-In and Monterey Pop and Woodstock. Or it may be that two generations of war and surveillance had left people craving the embodiment of their own unease in the form of a lone , unsteady man on a slide guitar” (Egan 335). This conscious connection to the famous music festivals of the 60s fits the communalizing logic of the

gathering, but avoids simply replicating or simulating the events themselves. Instead, Scotty's performance echoes the anxieties of the time, playing "ballads of paranoia and disconnection" from "a man you know . . . was part of no one's data" (Egan 336).

The rebelliousness of this performance is limited, in that Scotty and Bennie make no grand gestures to political action, but their event "manipulates spatial organizations" and radically reprioritizes the layout of the land (De Certeau 96). By using their platform to speak to the anxieties of twenty-first century – of surveillance, militarism, economic mobility, artistic malaise – they assemble a previously imagined community, assuring each other simply that they're not alone in their feelings of paranoia and helplessness. With this modest goal, against the backdrop of militaristic control and economic totality, *Goon Squad* offers a constructive vision of the future, in which the way forward for art, literature, and music is through the act of communalizing. While the novel maintains the deconstructive and denaturalizing techniques of its postmodern predecessors (the handsets and telepathic communication are a not-so-subtle treatment of the contemporary fixation with nonverbal cell phone use), using the matrix model to this end creates a series of critical implications for political discourse in the novel.

Goon Squad's matrix model creates new potential for characters in the novels. In the previous novels, co-optation is the result of the inescapability of the system – making the system itself, therefore, unredeemable and inherently totalitarian, corrupt. For Pynchon, this is true in the most extreme sense: the conflation of America and Germany, shown through the continued disclosure of cooperation between IG Farben, GE, and various government organizations, gives the impression that political power is uniformly oppressive. For DeLillo, the political-economic system is inflexible not for its

particularly horrific qualities, but for the ways that communication, media, and agency becomes intertwined in hyperreality, mystifying any focused critique or plot in the sea of information. Egan, however, imagines both the redeemability of her characters and the system in which they live.

So, while her characters long hold the belief the “capitalism is bad” but abide to its logic nonetheless, *Goon Squad* offers an alternative imagining of resistance that forgoes co-optation or withdrawal. The difficulty of “see outside neoliberal ideology” becomes less a problem than addressing that neoliberal system, but, while deconstruction has time and again come up short for proposing the “outside,” *Goon Squad* asserts an alternative set of values that can exist *inside* the novel’s socio-political system. The connection to the 60s at the novel’s conclusion, which is too often read as “a conflation of authenticity and nostalgia, whereby genuineness and truth can seemingly only be located in the past,” can be considered instead as part of the novel’s treatment of redemption and resistance (Van de Velde 130). The decade that haunts progressive politics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, oft-treated as *the* moment of radical political potential, can be redeemed through a constructive vision of engagement, in which artistic production once again communalizes and reorders the spatial prerogative of society. In a world in which “time is a goon,” *Goon Squad* renegotiates the relationship between art and resistance, relegating the mistakes made to the past and, by holding a microscope up to everyday life, holds us not liable for our past, but for our future.

CHAPTER V
CONSTRUCTING THE FUTURE: AGENCY AND ENGAGEMENT
IN THE CONTEMPORARY NOVEL

The contemporary novel, in the wake of 50 years of postmodernism's aesthetic dominance in literary fiction, begins to move toward something different – that much should be clear. Different, however, is separate from new. As my analysis has shown, the ways in which characters are depicted in relation to each novel's political apparatus slowly but certainly moves away from the solipsistic portrayal common to the high-postmodern moment. This, in a way, becomes an endorsement of Burn's argument, "that younger novelists more obviously address the idea of a real world" and Holland's call for "constructing new avenues toward meaning and meaningful human connection" (Burn 21, Holland 2). However, too much focus on any of the theories would miss the larger implications of this analysis. While these theories are undoubtedly important to conceptualizing the limit of a new aesthetic, this trailblazing comes with risks, chief amongst them is the unaddressed questions of political discourse and a return to the politically-engaged novel.

The issue for these vague notions of social engagement lies in the abstraction of engagement – the term stands in for an awareness of the "material world" outside the text – that explains little of the representation of engagement. How is engagement

represented? Or, what kinds of representations of nation or political system can be engaged with? Perhaps the most straightforward explanation for this “return” to politics lies in the contemporary novel’s depiction of character and system. The previous chapter made clear the ways in which Egan’s novel represents a significant shift in the political imaginary: not only have her characters recovered agency from the jaws of co-optation later in their lives, but they use that freedom and mobility to directly engage with the system from within. While this sort of revolutionary imagining is certainly prone to romantics, Egan’s novel contains only microcosmic resistances, the kind that are, if not systemically revolutionary, existential yet attainable. In the context of political engagement, this mobilization of art, physical space, and a healthy dose of anti-capitalist ideological underpinning proves useful in not only damning the economic and political forces acting upon the characters, but also in offering a vision for the future. So, when Alex asks, in the final chapter, “*if thr r children, thr mst b a fUtr, rt?*” Egan responds with an affirmative yes, and goes further to reiterate the importance of collectivism and popular resistance, “a kind of army” in its own right (330-1).

Moreover, the recovery of agency exceeds the limits of individual action. Unlike DeLillo’s lone shooter, Egan’s depiction serves as an example of a larger trend in which imagined communities can blossom into *real* communities, overcoming the obstacles of simulation and political totality to suggest the possibility of collectivism. This collectivism, though, becomes attainable in part as a result a matrix-model that allows for resistance-from-within. Using the tools of the economic and political system becomes a key feature of political representation and agential conceptualizations in the contemporary novel. Egan’s novel is not unique in this representation, either. The

resistance-from-within appears in any number of contemporary “social” novels. Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom*, Percival Everett’s *Erasure*, Chris Bachelder’s *U.S.!*, and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* similarly portray the complex negotiation of a modern political landscape. Moreover, these novels take care to portray the knife’s edge between co-optation, as each protagonist struggles to enter and engage a political discourse, whether it’s Walter Berglund’s ecocritical conundrum in *Freedom* or Thelonius Ellison’s attempts to strike out at the publishing industry’s racist compartmentalization of authors in *Erasure*.

Redemption, too, becomes possible in these novels – Walter, Thelonius, and Bennie are all portrayed as compromised and co-opted before finding ways to push back against the imperative of their various political-economic systems. Pynchon’s Slothrop, on the other hand, can withdraw from the political system instead, without hope for reentering society, instead depicting either violent dissipation or perpetual banishment (Herman and Weisenburger, 211). The inability to see outside of the political and economic system troubles the postmodern authors - marginality in *Libra*, for instance, yields no ideological promise but instead instills paranoia – but Egan finds potential for resistance without exclusion or retreat. The importance of redeeming lapsed ideological resistance cannot be underestimated: while Pynchon’s novel directly implicates readers in complicity with the power structure that banishes (or destroys) Slothrop, Egan’s novel portrays complicity without the same ideological dead-end. This lack of fatalism in co-optation alters the novel’s effect significantly, offering similarly complicit readers – myself included – a way in which to access systemic critique without demanding ideological purity (a fiction in itself) or eliciting self-damnation and solipsism.

Resistance and engagement, however, don't become possible in the contemporary novel simply as part of a return to mimeticism or an increased "preoccupation with notions of character" (Burn 23). This recovery is due in part to the willingness of the contemporary novel to examine the present as well as to imagine the future. Looking backward still remains a useful tool for deconstruction, but often renders the characters without agency – the reader knows, to an extent, the way in which the past proceeds. For instance, while Pynchon's depiction of the Red Cross selling donuts at the Battle of the Bulge takes on the celebrated image of the "wholesome" NGO, the trajectory of the war as a whole is well-known, just as Lee Oswald simply *can't* fulfill the plot for a "spectacular miss" (Pynchon 610, *Libra* 51). Therefore, Egan's shift toward the contemporary moment indicates a renewed willingness to address the contemporary moment itself, which produces a new relationship between the character and nation, in which consolidations of power and agency are fluid, not solidified in history.

This is not to suggest, however, that contemporary novels owe nothing to their postmodern predecessors, or have somehow foreseen and evaded the pitfalls of deconstructive critique. Rather, the groundwork set by Pynchon, DeLillo, and their postmodern cohort is still visible in the textual DNA of many contemporary novels and the anxieties of the late-twentieth - of militarism, consumerism, co-optation, political totality, the failure of the 60s – remain crucial issues in the twenty-first century. Moreover, the contemporary novel hasn't moved away from the Foucauldian representations of power and discipline or the Baudrillardian multiplicity of image: Egan's conclusion clearly depicts the difficulty of staging any sort of countercultural

event in a landscape marked by increasing demands for order, productivity, and surveillance.

Deconstruction, then, remains central to political critique in both postmodern and contemporary novels. While critics readily rail against postmodern fiction for its supposedly apolitical, affectless wordplay, these critiques overestimate the extent to which postmodern fiction seeks to disconnect itself from the material world in its “anti-credal, promiscuously ‘open,’ deconstructive enthusiasms” (Boyers 232). Rather, in the wake of the collapse of 60s counterculture, the end to which *Gravity’s Rainbow* manipulates meaning-laden language and imagery – to euphemize the violence of political and economic control - is anything but apolitical. Deconstruction and denaturalization, in both literary contexts, is indispensable in laying bare the ways in which resistance and political opposition is subsumed into hegemony and mainstream politics, effectively testing the boundary between political engagement and hegemonic co-optation. To suggest that deconstruction, in light of Pynchon and DeLillo’s influence, has exhausted its usefulness, like postmodernism, would be to discard this legacy.

Egan’s novel – and contemporary fiction in a broader sense – is inseparable from this tradition. While the addition of prolepses, new representations of matrix-model resistance, and a less totalizing view of co-optation and hyperreality, the contemporary novel builds upon the political representation and deconstructive tendencies of the postmodern period. While Hutcheon acknowledges that “the postmodern has no effective theory of agency that enables a move into political *action*,” contemporary fiction, through these shifts in representation, begins this work (3). The postmodern political tradition, moreover, plays an important role in this conceptualization of action: through decades of

examining and ruminating over the dangers of political power, ideological co-optation, and the disarming potential of easy consumption and pleasure, Pynchon and DeLillo reach a logical climax at the question of “where did we go wrong?” This postmodern past, with dehumanized structures of power and politics, have been displaced in literature by oppressive structures, insists, nonetheless, on a level of human involvement and human constructedness. It would seem that, in response, contemporary novels have finally taken up the charge to restore the faith that postmodernism challenge – a “faith in politics and in the possibility of change” (“The Art of Fiction No. 135”).

REFERENCES

- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. 1981. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1994. Print.
- . *The Illusion of the End*. Trans. Chris Turner. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1994. Print.
- Boria, Damon. "Pricking Us into Revolt? Vonnegut, DeLillo, and Sartre's Hope for Literature." *Sartre Studies International* 19.2 (2013): 45-60. Web. 4 May 2015.
- Breu, Christopher. *Insistence of the Material: Literature in the Age of Biopolitics*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2014. Print.
- Burn, Stephen J. *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism*. London: Continuum, 2008. Print.
- Carswell, Sean. "Goons and Grrrls: A Meditation on Punk Rock Ideology and Neoliberalism." *Critical Sociology* 42.2 (2016): 323-28. Web. 5 March 2016.
- Cohen, Rich. *The Fish that Ate the Whale: The Life and Times of America's Banana King*. New York: Picador, 2013. Print.
- Cowart, David. "Thirteen Way of Looking: Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*." *Critique* 56.3 (2015): 241-54. Web. 12 Jan. 2015.
- Coyle, John. "Don DeLillo, Aesthetic Transcendence and the Kitsch of Death." *European Journal for American Studies* 26.1 (2007): 27-39. Web 3 May 2015.
- DeLillo, Don. *Libra*. 1988. New York: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- . "The Art of Fiction No. 135." Interview with Adam Begley. *The Paris Review*. The Paris Review, 1993. Web. 5 March 2016.
- Drake, Scott. "Resisting Totalizing Structures: An Aesthetic Shift in Thomas Pynchon's *A Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity's Rainbow*." *Critique* 51.3 (2010): 223-40. Web.
- Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. New York: Anchor, 2010. Print.
- Franzen, Jonathan. "Mr. Difficult." *How to Be Alone*. New York: Picador, 2003. 238-69. Print.

- Foucault, Michel. "Panopticism." *Discipline and Punish*. 1975. Knopf, New York: 1995. 195-309. Print.
- . "Society Must Be Defended." *Biopolitics: A Reader*. Eds. Timothy Campbell and Adam Sitze. Durham: Duke UP, 2013. 61-81. Print.
- Green, Jeremy. *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print
- Herman, Luc and Steven Weisenburger. *Gravity's Rainbow, Domination, and Freedom*. Athens: U of George P, 2013. Web. 2 May 2015.
- Hite, Molly. "'Fun Actually was Becoming Quite Subversive: Herbert Marcuse, the Yippies, and the Value System of Gravity's Rainbow'" *Contemporary Literature* 51.4 (2010): 677-702. Web. 2 Feb. 2016.
- Holland, Mary K. *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature*. 2013. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. Print.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991. Print.
- Kelly, Adam. "Beginning with Postmodernism." *Twentieth Century Literature* 57.3-4 (2011) 391-422. Web. 6 May 2015.
- Lacey, Robert J. "Thomas Pynchon on Totalitarianism: Power, Paranoia, and Preterition in *Gravity's Rainbow*." *Americana: E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary* 6.2 (2010): n.p. Web. 2 May 2015.
- McLaughlin, Robert L. "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World." *symploke* 12.1 (2004): 53-68. Web. 14 Sept. 2014.
- Michael, Magali Cornier. "The Political Paradox in Don DeLillo's *Libra*." *Critique* 35.3 (1994): 146-56. Web. 3 May 2015.
- Moorey, Gerard. "Aging, Death, and Revival: Representations of the Music Industry in Two Contemporary Novels." *Popular Music and Society* 37.1 (2014): 65-84. Web. 4 May 2015.
- Moraru, Christian. *Cosmomodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2011. Print.

- Nealon, Jeffrey T. *Post-Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time-Capitalism*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2012. Print.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. 1973. New York: Penguin, 2006. Print.
- Regnier, Paul. "Writing from the Center and From the Periphery of the Culture – Norman Mailer and Don DeLillo." *Mailer Review* 7.1 (2013): 260-71. Web. 2 May 2015.
- Rizza, Michael James. "The Dislocation of Agency in Don DeLillo's *Libra*." *Critique* 49.2 (2008): 171-84. Web. 3 May 2015.
- Thomas, Samuel. *Pynchon and the Political*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Wilcox, Leonard. "Baudrillard, DeLillo's *White Noise*, and the End of Heroic Narrative." *Contemporary Literature* 32.3 (1991): 346-65. Web. 3 May 2015.
- Willman, Skip. "Traversing Fantasies of the J.F.K. Assassination: Conspiracy and Contingency in Don DeLillo's *Libra*." *Contemporary Literature* 39.3 (1998): 405-33. Web. 1 May 2015.
- Wood, James. "All Gravity, No Rainbow." *The New Republic*. The New Republic. 4 March 2007. Web. 25 Feb. 2016.
- Van de Velde, Danica. "'Every Song Ends:': Musical Pauses, Gendered Nostalgia, and Loss in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*." *Write in Tune: Contemporary Music in Fiction*. Ed. Jeffrey Roessner and Erich Hertz. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. Print.