

POSTMODERNIST FICTIONS:
A REVIEW ESSAY

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Postmodernist Fiction. By Brian McHale. New York:
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In his 1986 study of postmodernism, Andreas Huyssen noted that "while the postmodern break with classical modernism was fairly visible in architecture and the visual arts, the notion of a postmodern rupture in literature has been much harder to ascertain."¹ The different accounts of postmodernist literature and its relation to modernist fiction that have been offered by Leslie Fiedler, Ihab Hassan, and John Barth, among others, hardly constitute a consensus, and none of these views has yet succeeded in becoming a definitive critical statement on the subject. In the midst of this confusion, Brian McHale has boldly attempted to differentiate between the poetics of modernist and postmodernist fiction in what he candidly acknowledges to be "a one-idea book." That idea is summed up in a single sentence from McHale's preface: "postmodernist fiction differs from modernist fiction just as a poetics dominated by ontological issues differs from one dominated by epistemological issues" (xii). McHale elaborates what he calls this "descriptive poetics" of postmodernist fiction through a consideration of the various ontological issues that have been brought to the fore in the literature of a wide-ranging sample of American, French, Latin American, as well as other writers. He enumerates a variety of formal and structural devices used by such fiction to foreground the ontological status of the text: mise-en-abyme, trompe l'oeil, recursive structure, forking paths, excluded middles, multiple beginnings and endings, and intrusive authors, to name a few. All these paradoxes and illusions (many of the sort described by Douglas Hofstadter in his 1979 book Gödel, Escher, Bach, to which McHale frequently refers) actually serve the function in postmodernist fiction of illusion-destroying devices that allow ontological issues--and indeed reality itself--to intervene in the literary text's closed, fictional world.

The empirical evidence that McHale presents, the diversity of texts that he is able to explicate and relate to one another with his ontological poetics, supports his account of the "postmodern rupture" that Huyssen found to be "much harder to ascertain" in the case of literature than in the fields of architecture and the visual arts. Once, however, we accept (as I am generally prepared to do) McHale's thesis of a neat shift from an epistemological poetics of modernism to an ontological poetics of postmodernism, the question then arises as to what the implications of such a profound shift in our conception of fiction (let alone literature) will be for the very practice of literary criticism and literary history in which people like

McHale are themselves engaged. Given their epistemological character, modernist texts lend themselves to critical analysis and interpretation. However, the ontological issues foregrounded by postmodernist texts may well prove opaque to the interpretive and ultimately epistemological interests of traditional literary criticism, while the radical discontinuities that typify these texts would seem to call into question the quest for continuity and order of the literary historian.

Although McHale sets out to offer what in fact could very well become the definitive postmodernist poetics, he may not pursue the implications of his thesis far enough--and for good reason. For when fiction becomes so self-conscious and self-critical that it questions and plays with its own ontological status (what is it?), rather than bringing to the fore epistemological issues so congenial to criticism (what does it mean?), isn't the task of formulating a non- or meta-fictional critical discourse, or a "poetics" that could comment on and consolidate such ontologically-obsessed "fictions," itself rendered impossible or irrelevant? Doesn't the very idea of a definitive critical account of such self-critical fictions--a statement of their ontological identity--become absurd? Hasn't postmodernist fiction, in other words, preempted criticism, and beaten the critic at his own game? In this essay I will suggest that McHale's basically sound characterization of postmodernist fiction as ontologically-obsessed, self-critical discourse ironically, but also ultimately, precludes his own--and, I would go so far as to argue, anybody's--endeavor to formulate a definitive poetics of postmodernist fiction; hence, Huysen's observation about the difficulty of documenting a "postmodern rupture in literature." A poetics of such self-reflective and self-reflexive fiction could only be non-definitive and provisional--i.e., aware of its own fictionality as, it must be said, McHale's own book occasionally becomes when it begins to play with ontological paradoxes rather than present them in an expository dis-play. Here again Hofstadter's book may serve as an example of the kind of playful, essayistic approach that ontological investigations seem to require. For many the question must then become: can such essayistic play still be considered criticism?

It must be said at the outset that McHale's postmodernist poetics provides a valuable way to approach the heterogeneous "worlds" presented in a vast sampling of postmodernist writers' texts. While modernist texts tend to present relatively stable worlds mediated by unstable or unreliable narrators, in postmodernist texts it is the ontological status of the presented world or worlds that is itself problematic, rather than the narrator's point of view or his credibility. "To speak of 'world-views,' and the juxtaposition or confrontation of world-views, is to speak in epistemological terms; to take the metaphor literally, projecting worlds which are the realizations of discursive world-views, is to convert an epistemological motif into an ontological one" (166). Modernist and postmodernist fiction are not fundamentally opposed to each other; as

epistemology complements ontology, so modernist fiction gives rise to postmodernist fiction in what McHale describes as an inevitable succession:

Intractable epistemological uncertainty becomes at a certain point ontological plurality or instability: push epistemological questions far enough and they "tip over" into ontological questions. By the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions--the sequence is not linear and unidirectional, but bidirectional and reversible. (11)

Yes, we may agree, but isn't this ontological-epistemological see-saw applicable, not just to different works, but within one and the same text? McHale admits this possibility, but tends for the most part to see individual texts characterized by either an epistemological or an ontological "dominant" that in turn determines whether the work is either modernist or postmodernist. My own sense is that, while such categorization may work for many of the less significant texts of this century that McHale considers, more ambitious and complex literary works such as Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (both of which McHale identifies as postmodernist) are not so neatly categorized as epistemologically- or ontologically-oriented fictions. Their complexity arises in large part from the fact that they resist such easy categorization, and rather set the epistemological-ontological pendulum swinging within their own fictional structures.

Underlying McHale's study is the historical assumption that modernist and postmodernist fiction are related insofar as both are reactions against the mimetic assumptions of nineteenth-century realism. Postmodernist fiction goes a good deal beyond modernism in this regard, however, and McHale argues that its radical anti-realism has the effect of exposing what might be called modernism's "closet realism." McHale views postmodernist fiction as "participat[ing] in that very general tendency in the intellectual life of our time toward viewing reality as constructed in and through our languages, discourses, and semiotic systems" (164). The way such fiction reveals the constructed nature of reality is to de-construct that reality and to reveal it to be no more than a collectively fabricated world-view. Postmodernist fiction does this, according to McHale, by bringing the ontological issues inherent in literary representation to the fore. Instead of concealing its material substrate--pages, words, print, margins--in order to project an intentional, fictional world, the postmodernist text calls attention to its materiality. Thus, McHale gives the example of what he calls "concrete prose"--texts that extend the technique of "shaped typography" in the iconic concrete poetry of Apollinaire or the abstract concrete poetry of Mallarmé (poets whom McHale would probably regard as pre-postmodernists²). Such "concrete" texts are only the most explicit instances of the general tendency of postmodernist fiction to highlight what

McHale calls the "ontological 'cut'": "on the one side of the cut, the world projected by the words; on the other side, the physical reality of inkshapes on paper" (184). In other postmodernist texts, the "cut" divides the author into two beings: "as the vehicle of autobiographical fact within the projected fictional world; and as the maker of that world, visibly occupying an ontological level superior to it" (202). Whatever the particular means, postmodernist fiction invariably foregrounds the ontological "cut," while modernist fiction presumably conceals it or transforms it into an epistemological problem.

As "paradigmatic texts of postmodernist writing" (16), McHale cites Fuentes' Terra nostra and Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow insofar as these works are fantastic adaptations of the realist genre of the historical novel. In Fuentes' fiction, "familiar facts are tactlessly contradicted," thereby "convert[ing] the historical novel into a medium for raising ontological issues" (17). Along with "apocryphal history" and "creative anachronism," "historical fantasy" is, in McHale's view, a principal "strategy of foregrounding ontology in historical fiction" (94). Borrowing a tag from jazz pianist Les McCann, McHale aptly homes in on "the question postmodernist fiction is designed to raise: real, compared to what?" (96). By giving the traditional literary genre of the historical novel a fantastic twist, postmodernist writers like Fuentes and Pynchon approach the opposite (and the good deal less respectable, sub-literary) genre of science fiction, which, McHale maintains, "is to postmodernism what detective fiction was to modernism: it is the ontological genre par excellence (as the detective story is the epistemological genre par excellence)" (16).

Whether or not one agrees with McHale's account of a shift during the past generation from an epistemologically- to an ontologically-oriented poetics, most literary historians should have no trouble seeing twentieth-century fiction in general as a reaction against nineteenth-century realism. McHale proposes that we differentiate two phases of this reaction: where early twentieth-century modernism shifts the principle of literary representation away from "objective" reality to subjectively experienced worlds, more recent fiction has taken the more radical step of breaking with the tenets of realism altogether and adopting a fantastic mode of presentation. But what is the precise nature of this fantastic mode that we encounter in so much recent fiction?

In one of his most penetrating observations, McHale takes issue with Todorov's theory of the fantastic in literature as a tension or hesitation between the uncanny and the marvelous--supernatural events either that are susceptible to rational explanation or that are not. Instead of hesitation in this sense of "epistemological uncertainty" [that is] the underlying principle of the fantastic according to Todorov" (74), McHale finds an "ontological hesitation [to be] the principle of all fantastic fiction" (95), by which he means a "frontier" or "zone of hesitation . . . not . . . between the uncanny and the

marvelous, but between this world and the world next door" (75). Taking a passage from Pynchon's The Crying of Lot 49 as an epigraph to a chapter called "A World Next Door" ("You know what a miracle is . . . another world's intrusion into this one. Most of the time we coexist peacefully, but when we do touch there's cataclysm."), McHale observes that, along with James's Turn of the Screw, Lot 49 is notable as one of the few literary works that manage to maintain Todorov's epistemological hesitation for the entire length of the text; even at the end of the work the reader does not know whether the strange events described are uncanny and can be rationally explained or are indeed marvelous and beyond rational explanation. Because of the epistemological problematic it brings to the fore, Lot 49, like V., is seen by McHale to be a late-modernist text. He notes that "In the transition from Lot 49 to Gravity's Rainbow," Pynchon appears "to push past this point of poised epistemological uncertainty" and "to exit the fantastic genre" altogether. But, McHale insists that, at this crucial juncture in Pynchon's career, "and as other postmodernist writers do at various stages in their own careers" (74), it is not a question of resolving the epistemological uncertainty of Todorov's fantastic by leaping into the realm of the marvelous and the unabashedly supernatural or sci-fi, but rather of moving from the epistemological to the ontological uncertainty of a work like Gravity's Rainbow. This work, according to McHale, presents us with the postmodernist phenomenon of the "zone" in its "paradigmatic" form. Far from being a realistic depiction of occupied Germany at the end of World War II, the zone's

collapse of regimes and national boundaries, it turns out, is only the outward and visible sign of the collapse of ontological boundaries. As the novel unfolds, our world and the "other world" mingle with increasing intimacy, hallucinations and fantasies become real, metaphors become literal, the fictional worlds of the mass media--the movies, comic books--thrust themselves into the midst of historical reality. The zone, in short, becomes plural:

Isn't this an "interface" here? a meeting surface for two worlds . . . sure, but which two?

In fact, Pynchon's zone is paradigmatic for the heterotopian space of postmodernist writing. . . . Here (to paraphrase Foucault) a large number of fragmentary possible worlds coexists in an impossible space which is associated with occupied Germany, but which in fact is located nowhere but in the written text itself. (45)

McHale certainly hits on a key feature of postmodernist texts by drawing attention to their juxtaposition or overlapping of heterogeneous worlds in a multi-dimensional space. (I would take issue with the claim that "Pynchon's zone . . . is located

nowhere but in the written text itself"; this reflects the unfortunate textualist tendency prevalent in criticism today which reduces historical reality--and, for that matter, historical fantasy--to the level of the written text.) As texts as different as Pynchon's Gravity's Rainbow and Nabokov's Invitation to a Beheading show, these "worlds" need not be the exotic domains of the historical novel and science fiction, but rather fantastic worlds in McHale's sense of the world next door. We seem to be closing in on what postmodernist fiction is all about when we regard such texts as the zone where different, seemingly incommensurable cultures are made to converge (although again I am not as quick as McHale is to see this as a specifically ontological phenomenon that excludes, or simply overshadows, epistemological issues). Thus, the two "paradigmatic texts of postmodernist writing" in McHale's view--Terra nostra and Gravity's Rainbow--seem to be fantastic variations of the historical novel precisely because of their amalgamation of different cultural levels. Fuentes collapses historical periods and geographical boundaries in his novel, while his writing shuttles back and forth between languages in a kind of literary lingua franca. Pynchon's writing is postmodernist principally because it cuts across, and back and forth between, high and low cultures (opera and vaudeville) and because it mixes media (movies and comic strips); instead of trying to create a specifically literary style in the manner of the high modernists, it brings various discourses such as army slang, mathematical equations, scientific and political discourse together in metaphoric and metonymic relations that are undeniably literary, but where the term "literary" is revealed to be inextricably tangled with other non-literary modes of representation and other informational, communicative, and entertainment media.³

Huysen argues that, where modernist writers valiantly sought to preserve the arts as an autonomous "world" from the encroachments of mass culture, technology, and commerce,⁴ postmodernist writers have no illusions regarding the feasibility and advisability of such a heroic defense of high culture. One only has to compare the novels and plays of Beckett with the performance art of Laurie Anderson to see that modernist and postmodernist art may be virtually identical in their formal use of language--fracturing human discourse with pauses and interruptions, questioning the possibility of any kind of communication, revealing the absurdity of any endeavor to produce meaning, reducing human action to the level of ritual or game--but quite different in the aesthetic effect they produce. Beckett depicts a world running down, a world whose time has come and whose time is up, a world that has exhausted itself by exhausting meaning and where play is essentially unproductive and negative; Anderson's performances, in contrast, disclose what seem to be limitless occasions for liberation, parody, subversion, and positive play amidst the mindless banalities of contemporary culture.

Because he restricts his field of inquiry to literature, McHale has a good deal to say about Beckett but nothing at all

about performance artists like Anderson whose work, however, is characteristically postmodernist, particularly in its play with the referential and communicative functions of language. Obviously, it is impossible for McHale to refer in his study to every practitioner of postmodernism, but the omission of such literature-related, or "para-literary" genres as performance art raises a question about the usefulness of terms like "literature," "fiction," and "narrative" in a postmodernist context. It may well turn out to be the case that the most interesting developments in postmodernist uses of language may be occurring outside of "literature" altogether, in the margins of literature, so to speak, or in the domain of multi- or mixed-media. If this is so, McHale's commitment to a traditional conception of literature in a study of postmodernist fiction may give the impression of being unnecessarily confining, and actually more in the spirit of modernism--with its concern for the autonomy of the arts, and for their separateness from mass culture--than in the postmodernist spirit.

We may fully assent to the assertion that sometime about the middle of this century a "postmodern rupture in literature" occurred that constituted what Huysen calls a "break with classical modernism." We may, however, question whether McHale's "descriptive poetics" of modernist and postmodernist fiction finally does justice to the complexities of this rupture which can only be adequately described by moving beyond a poetics of literature altogether to a critique of culture or the mass-media. It is not clear, for example, that McHale regards the passage from modernism to postmodernism as a rupture in the first place. Both periods in his view are reactions against nineteenth-century realism; postmodernism differs from modernism only in the degree and mode of its anti-realism. But as theorists like Huysen and Lyotard have pointed out, postmodernism differs from modernism chiefly in the fact that it refuses, or is simply unable, to be anti-anything--anti-realism or even anti-modernism. By characterizing the distinction between modernist and postmodernist fiction as a shift from an epistemological mode of soft anti-realism to an ontological mode of hard anti-realism, McHale loses sight of the far more important difference between modernism and postmodernism as cultural conditions: namely, modernism's adversarial stance that pits it not only against realism but against mass culture, and postmodernism's non-adversarial stance that allows it to play (along) with realism, mass culture, as well as modernism without necessarily committing itself to any of their ideological assumptions. It might be possible to integrate McHale's view of modernist and postmodernist poetics with this view of modernity and postmodernity as cultural conditions. One could say, for example, that the epistemological orientation of modernist fiction is grounded in some form of cognitive certainty ("I think, therefore I am and everything else is") that is disposed to doubt everything of which it is not certain, while the ontological orientation of postmodernist fiction results from the lack of any epistemological or existential ground from which to express either certainty or doubt. But this is not so much an

orientation as a radical dis-orientation that ultimately makes it impossible for postmodernist fiction to oppose itself to anything—to realism or even to "reality." And if "reality" ceases to have much meaning for postmodernism, so, for that matter, does the category of "fiction" and the entire enterprise of delineating a poetics of postmodernist fiction.

The limitations of McHale's approach can be seen if we apply his epistemological-ontological polarity to his own way of treating the difference between modernist and postmodernist fiction. Despite his evident appreciation and enjoyment of what he designates as postmodernist fiction, McHale's own critical approach to his subject is, in his own terms, unabashedly modernist. The problem stems from his use of the term "fiction." Although this term appears in the title of his study and is central to his analysis, McHale virtually passes over any discussion of the concept while he instead undertakes a lengthy interrogation of the term "postmodernist." The title of the study turns out to be a misnomer; the book ought to have been called Postmodernist Literature, or at least Postmodernist Fictions. For the meaning--or rather the validity, the function--of the term "fiction" is precisely what is at stake in the debate about postmodernism. By identifying fiction with literature, McHale drastically reduces the concept of fiction to those literary fictions that are customarily given a privileged cultural status, and he thereby maintains the modernist opposition between art and reality as two separate ontological realms. The literary work continues to be regarded as a heterocosm, a separate world unto itself. In contrast, the postmodernist text is notorious, as McHale himself shows, for violating all such ontological distinctions. "Literature" is merely one set of by no means privileged fictions, along with all the other media-mediated fictions that constitute our cultural existence: advertising, politics, fashion, and we might add such disciplinary fictions as history and criticism themselves.

McHale is certainly aware of the tendency of postmodernist writers to present multiple possible worlds, and even competing worlds, within one and the same fiction. He alludes to the claim raised by "possible worlds" theorists that "fiction's epidermis . . . is not an impermeable but a semi-permeable membrane" (34). He even acknowledges that a

symptom of ontological stress is anarchism, the refusal either to accept or to reject any of a plurality of available ontological orders. This, I would maintain, is precisely the postmodernist condition: an anarchic landscape of worlds in the plural. (37)

And again, "what postmodernist fiction imitates, the object of its mimesis, is the pluralistic and anarchistic ontological landscape of advanced industrial cultures--and not only in the United States" (38). McHale expands on this point later in his study in a section called "Which reel?" where he writes, "Postmodernist fiction at its most mimetic holds the mirror up to

everyday life in advanced industrial societies, where reality is pervaded by the 'miniature escape fantasies' of television and the movies After all, if the culture as a whole seems to hover between reality and televised fictions, what could be more appropriate than for the texts of that culture to hover between literal reality and a cinematic or television metaphor" (128). Precisely. But even when he admits the anarchic ontology of the postmodern condition, McHale seems to cling to the modernist idea of fiction as a literary heterocosm that somehow stands apart from and above, in a mimetic relation to, some pre-existing reality. Throughout his study he expresses the mimetic concern about how real-life people and events are reflected and refracted within literary fictions. Only intermittently does he entertain the post-Wildean recognition that there is no longer anything natural about a "reality" that is never "given" in the first place, but that is always already constructed. Postmodernism entails an acknowledgment that "reality" necessarily models itself on, and is mediated by, literary fictions that are by no means privileged, or even autonomous, but that are in turn modeled on different kinds of non-literary fictions and non-verbal media.

Perhaps the best example of postmodernist fiction's modeling of itself on non-literary media is McHale's own illustration of Gravity's Rainbow as a text where

the movies serve as the background for spectacular metalepses, violations of the ontological hierarchy which foreground postmodernism's ontological themes (including the theme of control). Such metalepses occur throughout Gravity's Rainbow: cinematic images of copulation lead to the conception of two real girls; an Allied propaganda film apparently generates a real corps of Black African rocket troops; and, in a final, apocalyptic metalepsis, the rocket launched within the film-within-the-novel hangs poised above the theater in which the film itself is being viewed. (130)

Cinema is functioning here neither as a metaphor for the world nor as a metaphor for literature; in Pynchon's text, literature has become inextricably enmeshed in the medium of film because, with no objective, non-mediated world for the literary text to mirror, the medium of fiction can only depict an alternate medium such as film, and vice versa. The medium is now the message because there no longer is (and may well never have been) any message, content, tenor, signified, referent, or world to be represented via a medium, form, vehicle, signifier, sign, or fiction. The various media only refer to each other.

In our post-literate society, when electronic technology and the visual media have largely taken over the traditional functions of language in both its literary and communicative modes, literature has necessarily had to accommodate itself to the new state of affairs, adopting techniques from the other

media. Literature needs to be flexible in this regard; for it to continue to insist upon its privileged status in the domain of public discourse at a time when, as Neil Postman suggests, the Age of Typography has given way to the electronic Age of Telegraphy and Television⁵ would only show how out of touch with reality it is--ironically at the very moment that reality is coming to be recognized as the interplay of assorted fictions. Works of literature that present themselves as mimetic imitations of reality without acknowledging their inter-mediatational status will end up becoming the content of the more recently developed medium of film, in the same way that film, according to McLuhan, has now become the content of the yet newer medium of television and videotape.⁶ Where kids growing up in the '50s were still likely to have received their first exposure to the great works of Western literature in the admittedly debased, but nevertheless literary, form of the Classics Illustrated series of comic-books, today's generation of "readers" can cut its teeth on the classics in the televised form of Masterpiece Theatre. Which is the more "literary" form of presenting "literature"?

The interdependence of literature and the other media in the postmodern era may account for postmodernist fiction's affinity for the fantastic. McHale is right to point up the significance of the fantastic in postmodernist fiction, and he is particularly perceptive in his description of the postmodernist sense of the fantastic, not as an exotic, sci-fi marvel, but as the "world next door." One can go a step further, however, and identify that next-door world in a literal sense as the medium of television which, beginning in mid-century, brought the external world indoors in every home in industrialized societies. It cannot be a coincidence that the first generation to have grown up with their view of the world mediated by TV happens to be our generation of postmodernist writers. Why not simply define postmodernist fiction as what happened to literature as a result of the advent of the mass-medium of television?

In the postmodern era, it no longer makes sense to differentiate literature and life based on a distinction between fiction and reality. Instead, as Baudrillard suggests, reality and the imaginary (fiction) are equivalent simulacra that endlessly mirror each other in the domain of the hyperreal. Thus, where the great monuments of modernist literature like Ulysses and A la recherche du temps perdu present an inner subjective world in opposition to, and superior to, external material reality, texts like Gravity's Rainbow and Terra nostra not only rewrite history but go on to expose history and fiction as homologous structures, neither of which can maintain itself independently. To continue to speak of literature as a closed canon of texts distinct from history, and to use the term "fiction" interchangeably with this literary canon or system of literary texts, clearly goes against the grain of the postmodernist enterprise. In Baudrillard's words, "There is no more fiction that life could possibly confront, even victoriously—it is reality itself that disappears utterly in the

game of reality--radical disenchantment, the cool and cybernetic phase following the hot stage of fantasy."

While McHale acknowledges this anarchic condition of postmodernity, where the concepts of "literature," "fiction"--and indeed, "postmodernism" itself--cease to be useful categories of critical analysis, he retreats from this insight in his final chapter. Here he attempts to defend postmodernist fiction against the bad press it has received because of its radical anti-mimetic, anti-realist orientation. It is "postmodernist fiction's role in this project of unmasking the constructed nature of reality" that McHale claims has alienated critics afflicted with a "nostalgia for unproblematic mimesis" (164), such as Robert Alter, Gerald Graff, John Gardner, and Charles Newman. For these and other critics of postmodernism, the project to unmask the constructed nature of reality is not a solution to our present problems, but part of the problem itself. As McHale characterizes their position, we live at a time when "everything in our culture tends to deny reality and promote unreality, in the interests of maintaining high levels of consumption. It is no longer official reality which is coercive, but official unreality; and postmodernist fiction, instead of resisting this coercive unreality, acquiesces in it, or even celebrates it" (219). But when he defends postmodernist fiction against Graff's charge that such ostensibly anti-mimetic fictions "are themselves mimetic of the kind of unreal reality that modern reality has become,"⁸ McHale puts himself on the defensive by conceding that

There is no denying that "unreal reality" is a recurrent theme and object of representation in postmodernist fiction. It is the theme of postmodernism's revisionist approach to history and historical fiction, and of postmodernism's incorporation of television and cinematic representations as a level interposed between us and reality. But if this were postmodernist fiction's only object of representation, then Graff would be justified in wondering whether this doesn't make postmodernism as much a symptom of unreality as a representation of it. (221-22)

It turns out that "Postmodernist fiction may be antirealistic, but anti-realism is not its sole object of representation" (222). Instead of making a strong defense of postmodernist fiction by answering the charge of antirealism head on and arguing that postmodernism is actually not anti-anything, McHale simply concedes the point, and then goes on in the final pages of his book to reassure Graff, Newman, and company that, while postmodernist fiction may indeed be in complicity with the hyperreal or unreal reality, nevertheless, the two "favored themes to which it returns obsessively are about as deeply colored with 'traditional' literary values as anyone could wish" (222). These "favored themes" that are supposed to prove postmodernist fiction's adherence to tradition and to compensate for its antirealism are the themes of love and death, which are

actually "metathemes" referring to, not "fictional interactions in the text's world, but rather the interactions between the text and its world on the one hand, and the reader and his or her world on the other." As metathemes that bridge the world of the text and the world of the reader, love and death have the same function as all the other formal, structural, and stylistic devices of postmodernist fiction--namely, as "foregrounded violations of ontological boundaries" (227).

After McHale's lengthy catalog of all the devices postmodernist fiction exploits to "unmask . . . the constructed nature of reality," this last-minute move to appease postmodernism's more mimetic-minded critics by appealing to traditional thematic values must seem anticlimactic. More to the point, this appeal to the traditional themes of love and death sounds strange when we consider how the love-death relation is actually presented in key postmodernist texts. Thus in Gravity's Rainbow--one of the texts McHale considers "paradigmatic" for postmodernist fiction--"world-renowned analyst Mickey Wuxtry-Wuxtry" denies the existence of the scientist Dr. Jamf, who "was only a fiction" to help Slothrop "deny what he could not possibly admit: that he might be in love, in sexual love, with his, and his race's, death."⁹ Where McHale treats love and death as separate metathemes in his analysis of postmodernist fiction, Pynchon's novel suggests that they cannot be separated, that they are inextricably related to each other. Moreover, the function of fiction is precisely to avoid the recognition of the inseparability of love and death. Christian and Romantic love are examples of such cultural fictions that offer the hope of transcending death. The character Dr. Jamf may not be so much Pynchon's invention as the creation of Pynchon's fictional protagonist Slothrop, who could have quite possibly fabricated Jamf and the story about the plastic implants in his genitals as a way of denying the horrifying reality of the love-death nexus. In fact, the entire population of characters who inhabit Pynchon's novel, the entire world of the novel itself, may be Slothrop's hallucination for all we know. Certainly Wuxtry-Wuxtry's hypothesis raises a host of ontological questions of the sort McHale associates with postmodernist fiction. But this is hardly to discount the epistemological uncertainty of the reader: the world of the novel may be a fiction of the fictional Slothrop's mind for all we know.

McHale's characterization of postmodernist fiction as literature that is primarily concerned with ontological rather than epistemological issues--i.e., as fiction principally concerned with its own fictionality--raises the possibility that literature itself (and the poetics that would describe it) may be a modernist category that postmodernism has rendered obsolete precisely through its ontological awareness that literature is only one set of fictions among all the others that make up the heterogeneous, composite fiction we commonly designate as the "real world." Even the one exclusive privilege that literary fictions may still claim--namely that they are the model for all the reified fictions that constitute reality--can no longer be

maintained when literary fictions are indistinguishable from the "real-life," "historical" fictions of which they themselves are mere simulacra.

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Notes

¹ Andreas Huyssen, After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986) 184.

² Huyssen makes a good case for drawing an analogy between postmodernism and pre-modernism (romanticism). The modernist theorist Theodor Adorno's extended critique of Wagner's romantic music for its unhistorical theatricality and mythology might very well, as Huyssen suggests (34-42), constitute the basis of a critique of postmodernist aesthetics. The "actual" pre-modern castle Neuschwanstein, built by Wagner's patron King Ludwig of Bavaria, becomes the model for the "fake" Sleeping Beauty castle in Disneyland, the postmodern phenomenon (even if unintentionally so) par excellence.

³ In this respect, I would also include William Gaddis's novel JR as a paradigmatic postmodernist text insofar as it brings together the seemingly separate discourses of art, advertising, and business--revealing them to be interdependent and even indistinguishable. Gaddis's fiction would seem to be pertinent to McHale's study since it explicitly documents the impact of modernization on the artist and his art. Gaddis's first novel, The Recognitions (1955), is a transitional work between modernism and postmodernism that treats the theme of Joyce's Portrait of the Artist in the form of Joyce's Ulysses. The protagonist is a painter, Wyatt Gwyon, who comes to question the romantic-modernist value of originality and artistic invention, and who realizes that the only truly authentic art is the reproduced artistry of the forger. Gaddis thus begins his career as a postmodernist writer where the modernist Thomas Mann ends his--with the confidence man, Felix Krull. The sixth-grader protagonist JR of Gaddis's second novel is the consummate con-artist, wheeling and dealing himself a corporate empire with dazzling skill because the business world--and, indeed, the world at large--is for him just a game with no referential reality and no practical consequences. Gaddis portrays the oxymoronic, hyperreal, world of commodity aesthetics where art has been reduced to mere commodity in a ubiquitous capitalist system of exchange, and where, moreover, all commodities are aesthetically designed and styled in order to enhance their contrived, media-mediated desirability.

4 Theodor Adorno's critique of mass culture and its threat to reduce the rich dialectical ambiguity of the artistic work to an easily consumed commodity or to kitsch anticipates the more recent work of the art historian and critic Michael Fried. (See, for example, his "Art and Objecthood," Art Forum [June 1967], which has been extensively reprinted.) After such radical deconstructions of the work of art as that of Derrida in his essay "Parergon," Fried's valiant defense of the work of art's objecthood lends support to McHale's modernist/postmodernist dichotomy by revealing what the modernist critic fears most: without a stable object to elicit--and anchor--multiple interpretations, art "degenerates" into objectless chaos where critical and interpretive analysis become irrelevant and impossible. All that remains to do when confronted with the absence of the art object is to theorize with Martin Heidegger, Roman Ingarden, Arthur Danto, and Brian McHale about the work of art's ontology.

5 Neil Postman, Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business (New York: Penguin, 1985).

6 Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (New York: New American Library, 1964) ix.

7 Jean Baudrillard, "The Orders of Simulacra," in Simulations, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), 1983) 148.

8 Gerald Graff, Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1979) 179-80; cited by McHale, 219-20. Graff's mimetically-motivated assault on postmodernist fiction for its promotion of "unreal reality" echoes Adorno's modernist critique of the "illusion of the absolute reality of the unreal" that he associates with Wagner's romantic pre-modernism (T. W. Adorno, In Search of Wagner, trans. Rodney Livingstone [London: New Left Books, 1981] 90; cited in Huyssen 39).

9 Thomas Pynchon, Gravity's Rainbow (New York: Viking, 1973) 738.