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

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

Professora Orientadora: Dra. Eloína Prati dos Santos

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I would like to thank my family and friends for all the support, encouragement, and love without which this dissertation would not have been completed.

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

Robert Louis Stevenson

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

Richard Wright

RESUMO

Esta tese de doutorado analisa dois romances do escritor Norte-Americano Robert Coover como exemplos de escrita hipertextual e de hiperficção no suporte do livro de papel. A complexidade dos romances *John's Wife* e *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* integra os elementos culturais característicos da atual fase do capitalismo e as práticas tecnologizadas que vêm forjando uma subjetividade diferente na escrita e leitura hipertextual, a subjetividade pós-humana. Os modelos da complexidade dos romances derivam do conceito de atratores estranhos da Teoria do Caos e de rizoma da Nomadologia. As transformações no grau de corporeidade dos personagens estabelecem o plano em que se discute a turbulência e a pós-humanidade. As noções de padrões dinâmicos e atratores estranhos e os conceitos do Corpo sem Órgãos e do Rizoma são interpretados para se revisar a narratologia e chegar a categorias apropriadas ao estudo dos romances. A leitura exercitada nesta tese põe em prática a proposta de leitura corpórea de Daniel Punday. As mudanças no grau de materialidade dos personagens são associadas aos estágios de ordem, turbulência e caos na estória, agindo sobre a constituição da subjetividade ao longo do processo de leitura. A inscrição dos planos de consistência que Coover realiza para se contrapor à linearidade e acomodar as feições hipertextuais nas narrativas em papel descreve a trajetória rizomática dos personagens. O presente estudo leva a concluir que a narrativa hoje se constitui antes como um regime numa relação rizomática com outros regimes na prática cultural do que como forma e gênero predominantemente literários. Também se conclui que a subjetividade pós-humana emerge alinhada a uma identidade de classe que tem nos romances hipertextuais a sua forma literária predileta.

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

ABSTRACT

This doctoral dissertation analyzes two novels by the American novelist Robert Coover as examples of hypertextual writing on the book bound page, as tokens of hyperfiction. The complexity displayed in the novels, *John's Wife* and *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*, integrates the cultural elements that characterize the contemporary condition of capitalism and technologized practices that have fostered a different subjectivity evidenced in hypertextual writing and reading, the posthuman subjectivity. The models that account for the complexity of each novel are drawn from the concept of strange attractors in Chaos Theory and from the concept of rhizome in Nomadology. The transformations the characters undergo in the degree of their corporeality sets the plane on which to discuss turbulence and posthumanity. The notions of dynamic patte and strange attractors, along with the concept of the B without Organs and Rhizome are interpreted, leading to the revision of narratology and to analytical categories appropriate to the study of the novels. The reading exercised throughout this dissertation enacts Daniel Punday's corporeal reading. The changes in the characters' degree of materiality are associated with the stages of order, turbulence and chaos in the story, bearing on the constitution of subjectivity within and along the reading process. Coover's inscription of planes of consistency to counter linearity and accommodate hypertextual features to the paper supported narratives describes the characters' trajectory as rhizomatic. The study led to the conclusion that narrative today stands more as a regime in a rhizomatic relation with other regimes in cultural practice than as an exclusively literary form and genre. Besides this, posthuman subjectivity emerges as class identity, holding hypertextual novels as their literary form of choice.

CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

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

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

What followed the exhibition of the captured bug to the family is a very dear image from my childhood: sitting on one end of his bed, with his hairy bare chest soaking wet – my

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

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

A little later I was really taken by the idea of adding that bug to the page – for there was where it belonged, not our living room - while my father explained that that species

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

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

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

contaminated my reasoning, fueling my critical spirit with the scent of imagination.

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

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

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

Brazilian Modernists. If the resulting text in that class —
was there really one? — was not hypertext as we conceive of
it nowadays, it can well be deemed as such in retrospect.

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

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

the *stop* key has been pressed or the reel has run through to its end. Or maybe the system is experiencing a halt.

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

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

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

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

If a reader and TV viewer of the 60s, like myself, could entertain the teletransportation imaged on *Star Trek,* it is owed to the fact that it certainly underwrote and matched the

desire and fantasy stirring the earnings for a life supplied with hope, order and, hopefully, some beauty. Likewise, in my parents' and before that in my grandparents' generation, that must have been the case with the fantastic contraptions that peopled H.G. Wells and Jules Vernes stories - stories which I was fortunate enough to have been summoned to share with them.

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

This is the point at which the theories of chaos and the emergence of post-human subjectivity can be brought to the scene and to the forum of literary studies. This is also the moment to recall Aristotle's definition of narrative as composed by recognition and reversal. The mimetic aspect attributed to postmodern writing by Brian McHale(1987), among

others, is contrived not so much at content level; it is at the level of form rather than regarding the realism of themes and topics that the theories (chaos theory, for one) that explain our (experience of) reality are reflected in the structure of contemporary fiction, narrative or non-narrative.

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

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

as its triggering spark. Arran Gare(1996)[1] explains that for Benjamin, information understood as content in itself was displacing story telling. That is, the whole process was giving way to a specific product.

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

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

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[1] For a fuller version of this argument, see Arran Gare, Nihilism Inc. Environmental Destruction and the Metaphysics of Sustainability, Sydney: Eco-Logical Press, 1996.

fragments"(1992, p.25) typical of the cultural productions of such a subject.

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

Poster compares the forging of new identities within the emergent urban culture shaped by the new practices required by the dynamics of commodities exchange in the feudal society of the Middle Ages to the transformation of cultural identities supported by electronic media in the twentieth century. In both cases we can witness the emergence of the sense of individuality on different grounds.

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

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

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

Lyotard's alignment of technology with modern narrativity betrays his nostalgia of the fading presence of the autonomy of the modern subject. Inasmuch as he claims that the "computerization of society"(1993, p.47) jeopardizes the availability of knowledge that the instances of the performativity of utterances trigger, he claims that the information technologies, to a certain degree, comply with the impulse towards totalitarian control.

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

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

Nonetheless, in the late sixties, as today, most of the literature being produced matches the technical conventions of the nineteenth century, as John Barth contended in his controversial essay *The Literature of Exhaustion*. In his

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

analysis of Jorge Luis Borges's *Pierre Menard, author of the Quixote*, Barth points out the ingenious treatment Borges contrives to "the theme [...] of the difficulty, perhaps the unnecessity, of writing original works of literature" by formulating an aesthetic solution to "an intellectual dead end"(BARTH, 1997, p.69-70).

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

Borges rejects the dominant ideology of ultimacies of the time and reminds us of the mutual constitution of language and subjectivity, which does not seem to be amenable to exhaustion. Medium or message, whatever the author's choice to conceive of language, we can trust Marshall McLuhan's motto that the medium is the message.

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

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

One chooses to stick to the notion of individuality shaped by/within print culture - understood as one form of the cultural basis of modern society that fostered the rational, autonomous, centered individual. This view regards electronic media as enhancements to be deployed by this same form of identity. George Steiner(1991), for example,

prescribes an ecological therapy in a form of a diet from all media – this is the only way for the body, not only the human body, but the artistic body as well, to be saved from becoming wetware, a biological analogy of hardware and software.

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

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

In this way, the media is only an updating of previous technologies, and the Internet an upgrading of the telephone, for example. Grounded on that same notion of the modern subjectivity, it does not implicate the re-conception of

institutions such as the family, the community or the state. No new cultural formations of the (modern) self are imagined.

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

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

According to their model, the rendition of subjectivity in the representative model of a tree, which can also be found in Noam Chomsky's generative linguistics model, rests on a logic of tracing and reproduction of something that comes always already-made. The object of linguistics (the language system) and the object of psychoanalysis (the unconscious), understood and envisioned as a tree, are

themselves representative, their elements can be traced by following a genetic axis and a syntagmatic structure. The genetic axis gives the tree its unity, the basis upon which stages are laid on in a succession; the structure, hierarchically displaying ordered levels that reproduce patterns of constituents, ensures that the unity will remain traceable in another dimension. The botanic model of the arborescent structure "articulates and hierarchizes tracings; tracings are likes the leaves of a tree"(DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.12). In this way, subjectification, within the constraints of the arborescent model, is not amenable to analysis as a process, open to unpredictable developments, entertaining all sorts of variables, because the premise is that there is always a de facto state kept in a state of *equilibrium*, displaying symmetry, ready to be rescued by the analyst.

Unlike the tree, the rhizome is configured as a "map and **not** a tracing[4]"(DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.12). Unlike tracing, the map does not *reproduce* a system "already there". Rather, the map *constructs* its object in contact with the real, in experimentation, it is "open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. [...]. A map has multiple

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[4] My emphasis.

entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back to 'the same'"(DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.12).

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

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

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

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

> American literature, and already English literature, manifest this rhizomatic direction to an even greater extent; they know how to move between things, establish a logic of the AND, overthrow ontology, do away with foundations, nullify endings and beginnings. [...]. *Between* things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other away, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle(DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.25).

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

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

The fundamental concept in the study of disorderly systems, which involves the reckoning with uncontrollable and unpredictable randomness, is understood as one of the basic forms of natural (nature's) behavior. The example of the water flow is thus described and explained,

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

depending upon the velocity of the water(SLETHAUG, 2000, p.xxi).

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

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

[h]owever random, these vortices and eddies will distribute themselves over time and space, potentially creating choppy, swirling water, in which the flow will never be as it was: a new, much more complex pattern replaces the old in subtle and often dramatic ways. Turbulence and its effects are, then, parts of complexity. [...]. Bifurcation is the term used to describe the sudden change from a stable system to an unstable/stable one, the change form equilibrium to nonequilibrium, to far-from-equilibrium, or to a very different state of equilibrium. At some point [...] the stable point [...] disintegrates or breaks down and forks, simultaneously creating both stability and instability(SLETHAUG, 2000, p.xxi).

The new behavior, the behavior emerged in between, after bifurcation, is understood as part of the system's self-organization, and it may follow either a repeatable,

recursive pattern or follow a pattern only in retrospect, as something initially utterly unpredictable. Later in *Beautiful Chaos*, these two instances of complex behavior are illustrated as informing the structural choice in the recent works of fiction by John Barth, Toni Morrison, and Thomas Pynchon, among others.

The paths I will be constructing in the process of presenting the readings of Robert Coover's novels *John's Wife*(1996) and *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre*(2002) will refer to these models of complexity - the rhizome and chaos - concerning the hypertextual mode attributed to his works by theoreticians such as Stuart Moulthrop, Espen Aarseth, and Rainee Koskimaa, and their mythopoetic and metafictional feature explored by scholars such as Jean-François Chassay, Marc Chenétier, and Larry McCaffery. At the same time, I will examine the problematization these two novels pose to narratological categories of literary analysis, what should serve the purpose of characterizing this sample of Coover's work as innovations in terms of the form of the novel as narrative genre and as tokens of literature as an expressive form of a culture founded on the notion of post-humanity forwarded by N. Katherine Hayles.

The second chapter offers a characterization of what David Miall(2003) called "the hypertextual moment", and weaves together the concepts of hypertext, the novel as form

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

Chapter three characterizes Coover's writing as hyperfiction and draws some narratological implications to the literary analysis of this instance of narrative form. I especially address the idea of character as an embodied existence to be reckoned with as an essential element in the organization of plot and with an impact on the dynamics of the reading process, on the level of the reader as constitutive of the work. This is based on Daniel Punday's revision of the narratological models as a historically specific formation grounded on the modern view of the world and of the subject. Punday argues that narrative, after

deconstruction, yields different outlines, and as such escape the constraints imposed by those models.

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

Coover's latest novel, *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre. Director's Cut*, published in October 2002, is examined in the fifth chapter. Coover borrowed the title of the novel from a B-movie from the sixties, whose eponymous hero wandered from clip to clip facing naked women without ever getting sexually aroused by any, as a matter of fact, without even touching them. So far, the novel has received few and disparate reviews, which range from claims to the return of the Hays

Code[5], only this time applying to print literature, to acknowledgments of Coover's geniality and inventiveness as an unyielding innovator. Here, it is approached as a serious work of literary art at a time in which, as Coover himself puts it, art has been migrating to digital environments and formats. And it is his plight to make sure there is a place for literature (in) there.

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

Be it by reading its opening lines aloud - one cannot easily resist Coover's artful in-scription of the summoning of the muses, be it by jumping from section to section (reel to reel), whose opening words reproduce Johan Sebastian Bach's ciphering of the octave, as borrowed from the alphabetic ordering multiplicity is enacted and asserted. The multiple levels of the story intertwine and still configure a story.

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

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

2. MODELS OF COMPLEXITY: CHAOS THEORY AND RHIZOME

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

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

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

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

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

As we can see, though advancing a departure from more deterministic and totalizing elaborations of the world as system, chaos theory, or the sciences of complexity, remains

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

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

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

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

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

alternative and possible world, a world that does not yet exist, may well bear the elements of smooth space.

2.1 The hypertextual moment: hypertext writing and the novel

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

The summons, then, is for us to reckon with the complexity of dealing with the poetic, literary dimension of language as actualized in these new media, inasmuch as subjectivities are engendered in the process of reading - and

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

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

On the same topic, Robert Coover, in *The End of Books*(1992), makes his claims on the novel as convention, and presents hypertext as a potentiality-rich medium for fiction writing. He explains that his unmerciful commitment to "fictions that challenge linearity" and his allegiance to the

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

defiance and "subversion of the traditional bourgeois novel" were the factors that have driven him to teach - for him, the best way to learn - a course in hypertext.

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

> the novel, too, as we know it, has come to its end. Not that those announcing its demise are grieving. For all its passing charm, the traditional novel, which took center stage at the same time that industrial mercantile democracies arose -- and which Hegel called "the epic of the middle-class world" -- is perceived by its would-be executioners as the virulent carrier of the patriarchal, colonial, canonical, proprietary, hierarchical and authoritarian values of a past that is no longer with us(COOVER, 1992).

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[8] All the quotations of this essay are from "The End of Books" in the New York Time Book Reviews(1992).

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

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

As to narrative flow, Coover states that, the fictions developed in his hypertext workshop they have put "venerable novelistic values like unity, integrity, coherence, vision, voice" in jeopardy. These fictions explore as diverse forms and genres as choose-your-own-adventure stories, parodies of the classics, "nested narratives, spatial poems, interactive comedy, metamorphic dreams, irresolvable murder mysteries, moving comic books and Chinese sex manuals" and often many of them simultaneously. Besides, cradled in the dimensionless

infinity of hyperspace - as oxymoronic as the phrase might sound - the notion of movement essential to narrative becomes closer to that of "endless expansion", like the one we experience in lyrical genres.

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

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

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

2.2 The second age of media and the posthuman subject

The fundamental questions raised by Internet communications for cultural formations have helped issue the field of Science and Technology Studies, a unique *locus* of exploration of the interface between the human subject, art, and science. Among the gurus of the field, there is Katherine Hayles, who, in a recent article, stresses that literary criticism and theory have remained grounded with the culture of print. By linking hypertext to the tradition of books, she

highlights the materiality of the texts and claims the importance of the medium in the transformation of narrative.

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

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

In so being, the identity of the self can be formed in simulation practice as well as in hard reality. These experiences thus multiply the kinds of realities an individual faces in society. The imaginary that the word or the film triggers in the "original world" is not only transported as simulation but also transformed, due to the fact that the constraints posed by the materiality of walls, or by the laws of physics, need not apply.

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

As of today, the blogs stand as the format of choice to engage in multimedia based interactive practices by a host of PC users - typically, posthuman subjects as described by Hayles(1999). There are blogs teaming up several "tribes", communities of elected affinities that confer a distinctive hue to the anthropological concept, as long as they mime it.

In the second media age, according to Poster, interactivity is the machinery of subject constitution.

Whoever is acquainted with the routine of sending and receiving e-mails, digitally encoded messages, has submitted one way or another to this machinery.

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

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

Therefore, interface design must disguise its own opacity, it must vanish, melt in the air, so that it belies its technologic nature and that the users at every end fail to spot the boundary between the human and the machinic. As the body gets erased in discussions of technology, so do technological interfaces by users. It is precisely this contraption what draws the human into the technology and renders technology into equipment and the human into a

cyborg, or into a continuum of intensities and flows, in Deleuze and Guattari's words.

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

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

> [t]he face digs the hole that subjectification needs in order to break through; it constitutes the black hole of subjectivity as consciousness of passion, the camera, the third eye(DELEUZE and GUATTARI, 2003, p.168).

In language, the (speaker's) face is donned by the potential listener to guide his choices. In film, the face subjected to a close-up shot may reflect light or engulf it

in its shadows; either way resonates the white wall/black hole system.

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

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

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

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

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[9] My emphasis.

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

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

Our interpretations are tested against the resulting physical ends and closures. The narrative fragments are not united spaciously in one single unit by the computer. As a result, the computer works as a machine for interweaving simultaneous multiplication of the **rhizosomatous narration.** As opposed to the tree, which imposes the verb "to be" and keeps at bay the potential "becomings", the rhizome's fabric is,

the conjunction, "and...and...and..." This conjunction carries enough force to shake and uproot the verb "to be." Where are you going?

> Where are you coming from: What are you heading
> for "These are totally useless questions. Making a
> clean slate, starting or beginning again from
> ground zero, seeking a beginning or a foundation –
> all imply a false conception of voyage and
> movement (a conception that is methodical,
> pedagogical, initiatory, symbolic...)(DELEUZE and
> GUATTARI, 2003, p.25).

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

The digitized and networked global economy and society of the Third Millenium rekindles the post-World War II nausea of the twentieth century. That was a time when we believed the technology we had developed would reduce inequality and insecurity, but, having been irrevocably put to use in the stirring of more conflicts, crises and even catastrophe, turned us all bitter and appalled at our own sense of belonging to the human race.

Such a predicament, easily recognized as pertaining to the postmodern scene, rests on the mutual interdependence of scientific and technological revolutions and the world-ranging capitalist structure that has produced fundamental

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[10] Infotainment can be defined as the integration of information, education and entertainment services.

changes from warfare to education and reshaped modes of communication, entertainment, everyday life, identities and even bodily existence and life-forms. As our modes of perception are altered by technology, so are the ways we experience life reconstructed, producing new, innovative, and original realms of interaction and agency that have altered our existing notions of space, time, reality, embodiment, and identity.

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

The subject's sense of disturbance concerning his positioning in a comprehensible space, an architectural notion of orientation, finds expression in formal strategies