Challenging and Violating Ontological “Worlds” in the Fiction of John Barth, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Thomas Pynchon

Alex Reece Senior

ORCID identifier 0000-0002-5004-6053

Ph.D. - Arts

Submitted 12/17

School of Culture and Communication

This thesis is submitted in total fulfilment of the degree.
Abstract

My dissertation examines instances of ontological violation in postmodern fiction through a close reading of John Barth, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Thomas Pynchon. Each reading will focus on diegetic violations generated through either ekphrastic or epistolary writing. I use literary theorists Gérard Genette, Patricia Waugh, Mark Currie and William Nelles (among others) to create a framework with which to analyse diegesis creation and violation. Central to my dissertation is Brian McHale's understanding of "literary ontology" and his insights into the ontological foregrounding that occurs in postmodern texts. The first chapter begins by introducing and examining epistemological narrative framing. This is done to demonstrate the codependence of epistemological and ontological framing; as often epistemological framing is necessary to create a “world” within a “world”. The first chapter also presents various different examples of narrative frame breaking and, more specifically, examines the various manifestations of ontological violations; for example mise en abîme. Each subsequent chapter thereafter is dedicated to each of my chosen authors. An assessment of my findings are outlined in my conclusion. This is followed with closing thoughts on future directions of research.

The creative writing component of my PhD incorporates both hypodiegetic and extradiegetic ontological violations to produce various comical and philosophical metafictional outcomes. The primary questions posed in the dissertation (and fiction) are: how are “worlds” framed and established in fictional texts? Moreover, what are writers trying to achieve by putting into question the existential status of the “worlds” in a fictional texts?
Declaration

This thesis is comprised only of original work towards the Ph.D. - Arts. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used. This thesis is 88,000 words, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices, as approved by the Research Higher Degrees Committee.
Acknowledgements

I would like to offer my sincere gratitude to my primary supervisor Associate Professor Justin Clemens for his continuous encouragement and guidance throughout the writing of this PhD. Further, I would like to thank my fiction supervisor Associate Professor Marion Campbell for her invaluable insights and feedback on my creative writing. Lastly, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge my family, Danielle and Imogen, for their patience and support while I was assembling words.
List of Figures

Figure 1 - Klein bottle 31
Figure 2 - Narrative structure of One Thousand and One Nights 54
Figure 3 - Narrative structure of Dunyazadiad 55
# Contents

Abstract ii

Declaration iii

Acknowledgements iv

List of Figures v

Introduction 1

Chapter 1. Metafiction, narratorial positions and ontological violations 10

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 10
The ontology of fictional text ............................................................................................................ 12
Narratorial positions in fictional texts ............................................................................................ 15
Modernist narrative framing ............................................................................................................... 20
The provenance of metafiction ......................................................................................................... 26
Metafiction theorised ......................................................................................................................... 29
Two modes of ontological violation: diegesis $\equiv$ extradiegesis or extradiegesis $\equiv$ hypodiegesis ................................................................................................................................. 35
*Mise en abîme*: reiterating information across diegeses ................................................................. 38
Summary ............................................................................................................................................... 42

Chapter 2. John Barth: framed frame stories, conflated “authors” and ontological violations through letters 45

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 45
Literature: from fatigue to vigour ........................................................................................................ 49
Framing framed stories in *Dunyazadiad* ......................................................................................... 54
*Lost in the Funhouse* of metafiction ................................................................................................. 58
*Menelaiad* and *mise en abîme* ....................................................................................................... 60
Conflated “authors” and ontological violations through *LETTERS* ............................................ 65
Summary ............................................................................................................................................... 75
Chapter 3. Alain Robbe-Grillet: “world” creation through ekphrasis

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 78
The literary device of ekphrasis ..................................................................................... 85
Looping “worlds” in The Erasers ................................................................................ 90
Trompe-l’œil in Project for a Revolution in New York ............................................. 95
The non sequitur ontology of In the Labyrinth ....................................................... 101
Ekphrasis in In the Labyrinth ...................................................................................... 106
Summary .................................................................................................................... 110

Chapter 4. Thomas Pynchon: “world” creation through ekphrasis

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 114
Writing television: ekphrastic mise en abîme in The Crying of Lot 49 .......... 127
Writing television: conflating television with the “real” in Vineland .................. 129
Gravity’s Rainbow: unstable narration and direct address .................................. 137
Writing cinema: absolute ekphrasis in Gravity’s Rainbow .................................. 142
Summary .................................................................................................................... 148

Conclusion .................................................................................................................. 151

Future Directions ..................................................................................................... 155

Bibliography ............................................................................................................... 159

The Woman Who Plays Claire in Dusk

Epilogue ...................................................................................................................... 181
Part I ............................................................................................................................ 185
Part II ........................................................................................................................... 207
Part III .......................................................................................................................... 224
Part IV .......................................................................................................................... 256
Part VI .......................................................................................................................... 288
Epilogue continued .................................................................................................... 305
Addendum .................................................................................................................. 308
Introduction

I think we should put some mountains here. Otherwise, what are all the characters going to fall off of?


Fictional worlds need to be populated with things such as mountains. As Anderson says, if you want a character to fall, then you need something to “fall off of”. Yet, while authors of realist fiction discreetly construct stable, mimetic worlds, other authors – those iconoclasts armed with a postmodern sensibility – simultaneously construct, tear down and violate worlds of fiction. Rather than describing a mountain and having a character fall off, the quote above unveils the process of construction. As such, the quote is self-reflexively postmodern in that it directly addresses its audience with the question of world construction. In fact, Anderson’s use of the editorial “we” frames the audience as co-conspirator with the omniscient author. This dissertation examines examples of such ontological creation and violation in postmodern fiction by conducting a close reading of three exemplars of this technique: John Barth, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Thomas Pynchon.

Each reading approaches this literary device through a different phase of postmodern writing in order to examine its operation in various divergent contexts. The first author I examine is the metafictional writer John Barth, with a primary
focus on his epistolary\textsuperscript{1} novel \textit{LETTERS} (1979). This novel, with its central conceit of wild and overt intra-textuality, results in the ontological paradox in which the author and characters cohabit and scrutinise their shared fictional world(s). The second primary reading is \textit{In the Labyrinth} (1959) by \textit{nouveau roman} writer Alain Robbe-Grillet.\textsuperscript{2} This novel provides a clear example of the ekphrastic production of new “worlds” within a text. I will also examine other texts by Robbe-Grillet, including \textit{The Erasers} (1953) and \textit{Project for a Revolution in New York} (1970). With Pynchon I specifically focus on his use of ekphrasis in his novels \textit{The Crying of Lot 49} (1966), \textit{Vineland} (1990) and \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow} (1973). Unlike the works of Barth and Robbe-Grillet, Pynchon’s complex, hybridised novels are centrally located as postmodern texts. The analysis of these texts will provide me with insights into the literary possibilities of author/character exchange and ekphrastic “world creation” which is also at stake in the creative writing component of my PhD.

I take the term “ontological violation” directly from the work of Brian McHale, particularly from his works \textit{Constructing Postmodernism} (1992) and \textit{Postmodernist Fiction} (1987). One of the definitions of violation is to “[b]reak or fail to comply with (a rule or formal agreement)” (Stevenson 2010 p. 1,982).

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{1} According to Janet Gurkin Altman, an epistolary novel is composed entirely of letters and has the literary status of genre. It is “readily perceived as a fixed form (narrative implemented by letter sequences), as one type of verbal medium distinct from the diary novel, memoir novel, and theatrical dialogue, with which it has the closest formal affinities” (1982 p. 192).
\textsuperscript{2} Despite being a \textit{nouveau roman} writer Robbe-Grillet is also defined as a postmodernist writer or, at the very least, his writing displays certain postmodern traits such as his nonlinear fragmented narratives and ontologically paradoxical instances of ekphrasis. Brian McHale labels \textit{In the Labyrinth} as a \textit{nouveau nouveau roman}, which has more postmodern tendencies (McHale p. 51). See also: “The Postmodern Weltanschauung and its Relation to Modernism: An Introductory Survey” by Hans Bertens in \textit{A Postmodern Reader} (1993). pp. 25-71.
\end{flushleft}
Another meaning – perhaps pertinent to opponents of postmodern texts – is to treat with disrespect” (Stevenson 2011 p. 1,614). This definition of the word functions perfectly to highlight the irreverent nature of postmodern strategies which go out of their way to work against the grain of logic, order and ontological stability. Unlike McHale’s tight historical placement of ontology versus epistemology, my central interest focuses on occurrences of ontological violations in any fictional text, be it modern, postmodern or historical. At times I look beyond written texts, drawing on the visual art device of trompe-l’œil [Fr. deceive the eye]. Although this device operates across the visual arts, I will be mainly focusing on its use in painting as it provides a clear analogue to “frame breaking” and ontological violations while also supplying insights into some of the forms of ekphrasis under scrutiny in this dissertation.

An inevitable outcome of ontological violations in a work of literature is self-reflexivity. This occurs whether, for example, the violation involves a character acknowledging his or her fictional status, resulting in a breach from the fictional level of the diegesis to the reader’s world of the extradiegesis, or whether the realm of the fictional diegetic level overlaps with a hypodiegetic level. The first example is dependent on the “self-aware” announcement or proclamation from a character, while the second example is produced through the construction and subsequent conflation of more than one diegesis. Both cases result in a text that draws attention to its own construction and ultimately to its own artifice. While both of the above examples can clearly be defined as postmodern in nature, it is the very fact that ontological violations draw attention to “world creation” or “world habitation” that prompts the need for a tighter focus. When I refer to new “world”
creation in a work of fiction I am not just referring to instances in which a new
diegetic level is created but also the “filling out” of that diegetic level to the point in
which it can become “inhabited”.\footnote{For instance, the characters in John Barth’s \textit{LETTERS} all write letters to one another (and
themselves) in the one diegetic realm. Even though they refer to other texts in which they also exist
intradiegetically, in the text of \textit{LETTERS} they all occupy the same diegesis. This is very different
from the discrete “worlds” which become separated from the primary diegesis of \textit{In the Labyrinth}
and \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow}.} It is for this reason that this dissertation will
frame the analysis of the works of Barth, Robbe-Grillet and Pynchon through the
lens of metafiction. The central tenet of metafiction is a work of fiction \textit{about}
fiction. As I explain in chapter one on diegetic violations, there is a vast array of
ways to create a work of fiction \textit{about} fiction. This writing can have as its focus
anything from the act of writing and process of fiction-creation through to the way
in which novels are consumed by the reader.\footnote{An example of the latter can be seen in B. S. Johnson’s \textit{The Unfortunates} (1969). This novel was
published in a box with no binding, apart from the stitching holding together each chapter. The first
and last chapter are labelled as such. Twenty-five other remaining chapters can be arranged by the
reader in any order.} However, it isn’t simply just drawing
attention to the creation or consumption of fiction which defines it as metafictive.
Any aspect of fiction, whether through form, dialogue or style, can be coerced into
functioning reflexively, thereby resulting in the production of metafiction. It is the
specifically self-reflexive nature of ontological violations which define it as a
metafictional device.

The three authors I have chosen epitomise their respective literary genres. For
example, Robbe-Grillet’s novel \textit{In the Labyrinth}\footnote{As I show, this novel came to define the \textit{nouveau roman}.} is solidly located in the literary
movement of \textit{nouveau roman}, Barth is famous as a writer of metafiction, while
Pynchon’s \textit{Gravity’s Rainbow} is widely considered \textit{the} seminal postmodern novel.
Despite these authors working in (slightly) different historical sites – and in the case of French writer Robbe-Grillet, a different cultural location – all utilise strong metafictional elements in their writing. Moreover, all three, despite their vastly different writing styles, explicitly incorporate self-reflexivity into their novels.

Their inclusion of self-reflexivity in their writings presents a challenge not only to conventional systems of narration, in which characters “live” in blissful ignorance of their fictionality, but also the stability of the ontological status of the works of fiction which they inhabit. What becomes apparent regarding the study of the relationships between ontological violations and self-aware texts/characters is that the two often go hand in hand. After all, a conflation of ontologies presents metaphysical problems and questions for the characters. Similarly – turning my claim around – a self-aware character, through his or her very act of self-awareness, be that directly addressing the reader or by merely making existential claims regarding his or her own fictionality, violates the boundary between the “world” of the character and that of the reader. This interdependence between character and the “world” which the character inhabits will inform my analysis concerning the operation of ontological violations while also supplying insights as to the motivation and purpose behind such literary manoeuvres. Once I have identified the instances of ontological violations in the chosen literary texts, I will then establish the degree to which such violations problematise narratorial positions and the “world(s)” which these narrators/characters “experience”. The analysis of such divergent strategies in the production of ontological violations used by each author provides a range of material to analyse the nature and variety of such paradoxes in works of fiction. The purpose of chapter one is to provide a
working schema regarding ontological violations as a metafictive device, make subsequent judgements on how this literary device functions, and question why such a device might be used.

Ontological violations – by their very nature – must include some form of narrative framing. One of the things that most ontological violations do is highlight and expose, through their very violation of the frame, the necessity of framing as such. In many ways, fictional texts can’t get away from narrative framing. It occurs in all fiction, from the office water-cooler yarn to a character’s diary entry. However, narrative framing can be emphasized epistemologically or ontologically. Because narrative framing is so ubiquitous and yet is a necessary function of ontological violations, I will spend some time in the first chapter examining epistemological narrative framing. This analysis is crucial to highlight the interdependence inherent in the binary of epistemological and ontological framing. The work I have chosen for this demonstration is Joseph Conrad’s modernist novella *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Chapter one will also endeavour to assemble, from the manifold writing styles of metafiction, a definition of ontological violations. However, before doing this I will unpack the operation of ontology in fictional works and explore what McHale refers to as “literary ontology”. McHale’s work is crucial to understanding the nexus between ontology, epistemology and literature. I draw heavily on his insights into ontologically problematic postmodern literature, through his argument that the only way “postmodernist poetics [can foreground] ontological issues of text and world” is by “exploiting general
ontological characteristics shared by all literary texts and fictional worlds” (McHale 1987 p. 27). Apart from McHale, chapter one will also draw on a range of literary theorists: Patricia Waugh, Bran Nicol, Mark Currie, Gérard Genette, Mieke Bal and William Nelles for their understanding of narrative framing, diegetic framing and literary ontologies, both stable and otherwise.

I begin by covering a number of general terms and concepts relating to where narrators can be located and what the narrator is ontologically located in. What becomes apparent through this analysis is that, despite the fact that modern and postmodern fiction often frame narratives within multiple diegetic levels, only postmodern texts deliberately set out to breach these levels, resulting in problematised and at times paradoxical ontologies.

The three chapters which follow chapter one will each be dedicated to one of my three authors. I have chosen to examine my authors out of chronological order, by placing Barth before Robbe-Grillet. The Erasers and In the Labyrinth were both written in the ’50s, well before the earliest writings by Barth which I discuss, namely Lost in the Funhouse (1968). I have done this primarily because the ontological violations in Barth’s LETTERS are managed through epistolary writing, whereas the instances of ontological violations I wish to highlight in the writing of

---

1 McHale’s primary thesis in his books Postmodernist Fiction and Constructing Postmodernism proposes a shift of emphasis from the epistemological concerns of modernist writing to the ontological concerns of postmodernist writing. Although the terms “postmodern” and “metafiction” have very different meanings, McHale’s term “postmodernist poetics” can also be brought to bear on metafictional texts. As I outline in chapter two, in some ways metafiction can be seen as a subset of postmodern fiction.

2 This analysis of modernist forms of narrative framing will provide crucial insights into the sometimes convoluted relationship between ontology and epistemology in works of postmodern literature. As McHale points out, both epistemological and ontological concerns exist in all works of literature; it is just that in postmodern texts ontological concerns assume dominance.
Robbe-Grillet and Pynchon will be examined through instances of ekphrasis. Furthermore, even though Barth flaunts the sanctity of diegetic boundaries in his writing, especially in his novel *LETTERS*, I argue that his ontological violations are comparatively sedate and playful. Barth’s epistolary writing sets out to problematise diegetic levels epistemologically by disrupting the transmission of knowledge, particularly through metalepsis\(^1\). Even though ontological paradoxes operate throughout *LETTERS*, I claim that Barth is more concerned with ontological violations for their playful insights into authorship and “charactership”, rather than as a disruptor of ontological stability of the “worlds” in which the characters operate. After all, the shared provenance of the characters who write to each other in *LETTERS* (apart from Barth, of course) reside in previous literary texts by Barth. This is the antithesis of the dissociative non-linear writing of Robbe-Grillet and the carnivalesque fiction of Pynchon, who violate ontologies to explore themes of nihilism and aphoria. Robbe-Grillet and Pynchon antagonise and violate their strange, manifold worlds\(^2\) through instances of ekphrastic sleight of hand. Ultimately, the sequence of Barth, Robbe-Grillet and Pynchon creates a progression through the dissertation from simple ontological violations by Barth, through the more complex looping ontological “worlds” of Robbe-Grillet, to the problematic, multilayered ontological violations of *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

\(^1\) As understood by Gérard Genette in its narratological context (rather than rhetorical), in which “an author (or his reader) introduces himself into the fictive action of the narrative or when a character in that fiction intrudes into the extradiegetic existence of the author or reader... [problematising]...the distinction between levels” (1988 p. 88).

\(^2\) My term “manifold worlds” simply means that the author has deliberately generated more than one fictional diegetic “universe” in which the story takes place.
The conclusion of this dissertation consolidates and summarises the analysis covered in chapters one through to four. At this point, I will have answered some of the primary questions posed throughout, such as, how are “worlds” framed and established in fictional texts? What are the various modes of “world” framing? When does such framing occur? What is a writer trying to achieve by putting into question the existential status of everything in a fictional text? I will have also raised further questions for future research such as how ontological violations in fictional texts bear meaningful commentary and insight into the ontological variabilities and contingencies within the “real” world and the subsequent metaphysical implications of such insights.
Chapter 1. Metafiction, narratorial positions and ontological violations

Introduction

My interest in the self-reflexive style of metafiction\textsuperscript{1} can be summed up in the words of Patricia Waugh when she mused over 20 years ago on the relationship between language, subjectivity and “reality”: “If, as individuals, we now occupy ‘roles’ rather than ‘selves’, then the study of characters in novels may provide a useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels” (1984 p. 3). Of course, this claim can be made about any form of fiction, but the rich complexity of metafiction – especially latter twentieth century metafiction\textsuperscript{2} – is that it not only presents “character studies”, but reflexively studies characters.

Broadly, this chapter provides an analysis of the operation of narrative and ontological framing – and the subsequent violation of these frames – in the context of metafiction. I pursue this through an analysis of how narrators are positioned in fictional texts, before focusing on instances of narrative framing used in Joseph Conrad’s early modernist novella Heart of Darkness. This novella illustrates how modernist forms of narrative framing are primarily epistemological. I utilise

\textsuperscript{1} It is generally accepted that the first use of the term “metafiction” is credited to William Gass in his essay entitled Philosophy and the Form of Fiction (Waugh 1984 p. 2, Currie 1995 p. 1). In the broadest sense of the term, metafiction is a work of fiction which comments on its own fictional status; it is a self-reflexive fiction.

\textsuperscript{2} Metafiction isn’t just a twentieth century phenomenon but has been present since the birth of literature.
examples of narrative framing in *Heart of Darkness* to provide a schematic, epistemologically driven counterpoint to the complex ontological nature of the narrative framing employed by mid to late twentieth century metafictionalists. This distinction plays an important role when I explore instances of narrative framing in the self-reflexive, postmodern texts of Barth, Robbe-Grillet and Pynchon, in that it is often epistemological strategies which are mobilised by these authors to frame and subsequently violate ontologies in (and outside) their texts.

I follow the analysis of *Heart of Darkness* with a brief historical survey of instances of self-reflexive writing in order to demonstrate the provenance and prevalence of metafiction. I then move on to how metafiction has been generally theorised as a prelude to unpacking the two fundamental forms of diegetic violations, moving from the diegetic level to the hypodiegetic\(^1\) level or to the extradiegetic level. After this, I give special mention to the ontologically problematising technique known as *mise en abîme*\(^2\) which involves the “mirroring” of information across narrative levels. As opposed to the many ways in which a narrator can be positioned in a text, I make the point that diegetic violations function through a simple bipartite relationship in which the boundaries overlap. Furthermore, diegetic violations equate roughly to ontological violations in that a

\(^{1}\) This is a term coined by Mieke Bal to replace Genette’s term metadiegetic which was thought — even by Genette himself — as confusing due to the prefix “meta”, which operates antithetically to the “way it functions in logic and linguistics” (Genette 1988 p. 91).

\(^{2}\) Translated from the French, the term simply means, “placing into the abyss”. The first use of this term was by André Gide in his 1893 journal, in which he makes reference to his penchant for a work of art to contain “on the scale of the characters, the very subject of that work” (1955 p. 29). He then goes on to refer to the use of a mirror in Diego Velázquez’s painting *Las Meninas* (1656) and the play within a play in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (circa 1599), comparing these reflexive devices “with the device of heraldry that consists in setting in the escutcheon a smaller one ‘en abyme,’ at the heart-point” (Gide 1955 p. 30). See Lucien Dällenbach’s *The Mirror in the Text* (1989 p. 11) in which he explains why Gide eventually dismisses *Las Meninas* as an analogy for the *mise en abîme*. 
diegesis can be seen as the all-encompassing ontology in which the character exists. By the end of this chapter, I will have established a solid conceptual framework with which to read instances of ontological violation in the fiction of Barth, Robbe-Grillet and Pynchon.

**The ontology of fictional text**

The term ontology warrants some attention when used in the context of fictional “worlds”. Ontology has its origins in philosophy. Over the centuries, many philosophers have grappled with ontological problems which primarily centre on the classification and relationship of things, both physical and metaphysical. The central aim of this philosophical enquiry is to ground our world of things in order to achieve stability and order. This impulse for a stable world flies in the face of most postmodern fictional worlds which tend to be plural, permeable and mutating. McHale acknowledges the contradiction inherent in combining the term “postmodernism” with ontology. One of the main impulses of postmodernism is to destabilise “ontological grounding”. However, McHale treats “literary ontology” as plural where each work of fiction constructs its own discrete ontology while “not necessarily... seek[ing] some grounding of our universe”. McHale frames ontology as functioning as an “indefinite article”. “[O]ntology is a description of a universe, not of the universe; that is, it may describe any universe, potentially a plurality of universes” (1987 p. 27).

---

1 Beginning, in the Western tradition at least, with Parmenides of Elea (510 B.C.E) and his attempt to categorise the fundamental nature of reality.
When I refer throughout this dissertation to ontology in a work of fiction, I am quite simply following the lead of many other commentators on the subject and referring to the fictional world(s) represented. However, there are many possible ways to represent our world or – as is the case with multiple diegeses – worlds. The writing style of realism\(^1\) mimics the extradiegetic world of the reader, while some worlds, such as fantasy and science fiction, can never exist or can only possibly exist in the future. In many ways, realism is not just reliant on “stylistic and narrative conventions” but also draws on “a fundamental attitude towards the relationship between the actual world and the truth of literary texts”. The success of realist literature is dependent “upon the notion of possibility (and not only logical possibility) with respect to the actual world” (Pavel 1986 p. 46). As such, while some ontologies of fiction strive to reflect the real world of the reader, other ontologies can never possibly exist. Because of this, the initial ontology of a work of fiction frames and restricts the types of violations that can occur in the text. For example, a character in science fiction can use technology to travel through time or parallel universes.\(^2\) In this genre, technology allows such ontological paradoxes to occur and is therefore less problematic, whereas instances in which characters “author” themselves into existence, as is the case in John Barth’s LETTERS, the text problematises itself ontologically.

\(^1\) When I used the term realism in this dissertation, I am using it in the general sense. This shouldn’t be confused with the sociopolitical writing movement of Literary Realism, of which Stendhal [a.k.a. Marie-Henri Beyle] (1783–1842) and Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837) were exponents.

\(^2\) McHale highlights the similarities between the ontological poetics operating in postmodernist fiction and the ontological foregrounding which exists in the “worlds” created in science fiction (1987 p. 60), referring to the writing style as an “ontological genre par excellence” (1987 p. 59).
The ontology or “nature of being” of a fictional text intrinsically relates to the diegesis or the world in which the narration occurs. Therefore, the occurrence of an ontological violation, by default, is also a diegetic violation and vice versa. However, diegetic shifts take place all the time in fictional texts without causing too many ontological problems. The problems that do occur often go unnoticed or are laid to rest as “coincidences”. For instance, when a second diegesis – called a hypodiegesis – is created and contains information from the primary diegesis, ontological problems and paradoxes begin to emerge. An example is the hypodiegetic shift, which occurs in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (circa 1599) through the embedded play *The Mousetrap*. This embedded play sits comfortably in the diegetic world of *Hamlet*. Yet, as I will explain later in this chapter, Shakespeare’s mirroring of themes from the diegetic level of *Hamlet* to the embedded level of *The Mousetrap* raises ontological issues.

What becomes apparent regarding the ontological possibilities of works of fiction is the dependence on who narrates and where (the “worlds” created in the fiction) they speak from. Given that the creation of multiple ontologies is fundamentally dependent on where narratives take place and who witnesses these “worlds”, it is important to spend some time considering narratorial positions.

---

1 Not to be confused with the definition posed by Plato in *The Republic* in which he has Socrates discuss the binary opposition of mimesis/diegesis in order to make the distinction between imitation (mimesis) and narration (diegesis).
Narratorial positions in fictional texts

In this section, I examine how a narrator can be located. For example, a character may be a third person narrator or a first person narrator residing outside of the story being narrated or participating with the other characters in the story.

Mapping out the multitude of narratorial positions will prove useful in providing a definition of terms which are used throughout this dissertation in order to decipher the ambiguous, dynamic position(s) of the postmodern narrator. To do this I will primarily draw from the work of Gérard Genette and William Nelles.

Genette’s typology of narratorial positions theorises that the location of the narrator is both spatial – originating inside or outside the diegesis – and temporal – existing in the present or as a flashback (analepsis) or the less common flash-forward (prolepsis).¹ ² Furthermore, the narrator can be a character in the diegesis or not be a character and exist outside of the diegesis. For example, if the narrator is inside the text, he or she is intradiegetic, and if s/he is outside the text s/he is extradiegetic. Moreover, the narrator could be a character in the story, in which case s/he would be referred to as homodiegetic, or not a character in the story and be referred to as heterodiegetic (Genette 1988 p. 79-83). Further, heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrators can function either intradiegetically or extradiegetically. As Genette points out, the intricate nomenclature involved in locating the narrator,

¹ As Nelles points out, Genette’s initial analysis didn’t specifically take into account focalisation in the context of a homodiegesis or heterodiegesis (first person and third person narrator, respectively). This oversight was redressed with his 1998 publication Narrative Discourse Revisited (Nelles 1997 p. 81).
² Analepsis and prolepsis are examples of anachrony; moments in a narrative which are out of sequence to the actual unfolding of events which constitute the story.
which “analysis, or simply description, cannot differentiate,” necessitates the
“ripping apart” of the “tight web of connections among the narrating act, its
protagonists, its spatio-temporal determinations, its relationship to the other
narrating situations involved in the same narrative, etc.” (1980 p. 215). What
Genette is specifically highlighting is that the narratorial position is determinant on
the narrator’s relationship with the diegeses, characters and temporal
circumstances.

In Genette’s seminal work *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method* he
parses narrative into three categories: tense, voice and mood. The category of tense
has to do with temporal relationships. This category not only has, as its focus,
elements that modify the way in which a narrative unfolds chronologically
(summary, ellipsis, flashbacks, etc.), but also techniques which impact on the
temporal relationship between narrative and story,¹ in what order narrative events
occur or, for that matter re-occur. The category of mood, which defines the
“regulation of narrative information” (Genette 1980 p. 41), also contains a critique
contesting the binary of diegesis and mimesis; maintaining that mimesis (showing)
is simply an aspect of diegesis (telling).² In the section on voice Genette breaks
down aspects of narration into a number of constituent parts, such as narrative
instance (the enunciative context in which the narration occurs), narrative time

¹ A story is “structured” causally and chronologically: for example, A meets B for dinner and then
later that night they both go on to meet C at the theatre. A narrative on the other hand is structured
poetically, that is, according to its telling (which is not subject to linear causation). The previous
story could be *narrated* in the following way: B describes to C the dinner he ate with A during
intermission at the theatre.

² In *Narrative Discourse Revisited* Genette further contests the function of mimesis in narrative.
“Narrative does not ‘represent’ a (real or fictive) story, it *recounts* it – that is, it signifies it by means
of language – except for the *already verbal* elements of the story (dialogues, monologues)” (1988 p. 43).
(the relationship between the narrative instance and recounted event), and narrative levels, which in the context of this dissertation, often work in concert with ontological levels.

Genette offers an afterword (of sorts) on his analysis of narrative levels in *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (1997). The chapter entitled “Level” provides further examples of the functioning of narrative levels that occur in texts such as Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (circa fourteenth century), Vladimir Nabokov’s *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) and *One Thousand and One Nights* (author and date unknown). He makes the point that a narrator can be positioned in relation to more than one diegesis. For instance, Scheherazade “is an intradiegetic narrator because before uttering a single word she is already a character in a narrative that is not her own; but since the story she tells is not about herself, she is at the same time a heterodiegetic narrator” (Genette 1988 p. 84). This dual existence of Scheherazade as both intradiegetic and heterodiegetic narrator is by no means logically problematic or, for that matter, uncommon. However, the “dual existence” of a character in a postmodern text such as Barth’s *LETTERS* is exploited to problematise diegetic/ontological relationships.

It is also worth noting that Genette reboots the old term ‘point of view’ with his concept of focalisation. With his typical scientific rigour he divides this term into three types: zero, internal and external. Generally speaking, zero focalisation

---

1 Genette’s chapter on narrative levels was one of many additional chapters that appeared in *Narrative Discourse Revisited*.
2 *One Thousand and One Nights* has its provenance in Persia and Arabia with some of its stories dating back even further “to the Mesopotamian, ancient Indian, or ancient Egyptian cultures”. This collection of stories was compiled into its present-day form by “pre-modern Arabic culture” and was first introduced to Europe by François Galland in 1704 (Marzolph 2004 p. xxiii).
can be seen as omniscient. Regarding internal focalisation, the narrator has access to the thoughts and feelings of the characters often conveyed through the point of view of a single character. External focalisation limits the narrator to just empirical facts and events. This type of narrator has no access to a character’s thoughts or feelings. Genette’s concept of focalisation is far more complex and nuanced than this summary can explore.

Finally, there is Genette’s term metalepsis1, which refers to “any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe (or by diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe, etc.)” (1980 pp. 234-35). Genette suggests that this violation of the “threshold of embedding” disturbs “the distinction between levels.” He suggests that the main motivation for such violations is to produce either humor or the fantastic or a mixture of both (1988 p. 88). Yet, Genette seems to ignore perhaps the central motivation for self-aware texts — metalepsis being one of its many components — and that is to provide a “useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels”.

William Nelles uses the terms of zero focalisation, internal focalisation and external focalisation and overlays them roughly with the “traditional categories of omniscient, selective omniscient, and objective narration” respectively (Nelles 1997 pp. 77-78). Of particular significance to the functioning of ontological violations are the varying degrees of knowledge assigned to the extradiegetic “omniscient”

1 Its original meaning, from ancient legal discourse, is used to define a figure of speech applied in a new context as opposed to its twentieth century narratological use to define a type of ontological violation.
narrator and the homodiegetic narrator.¹ This is demonstrably important when analysing intricate, manifold narrative structures which contain metalepsis and its strange self-reflexive literary bedfellow, *mise en abîme*.

Nelles breaks framing down spatially into two distinct types: verbal/horizontal and modal/vertical. A narrative, which is verbally embedded within another narrative, exists as a collection of stories within the same diegesis. For instance, a narrative framed or bracketed by another narrative. Nelles defines this form of embedding as epistemological because the transmission of information occurs in the same world. The narrating instances are situated “horizontally” on the same diegetic level or plane, for instance, when a story told by one narrator contains a second narrator who proceeds to tell a story. Modal embedding, on the other hand, occurs when the narrative moves from one diegetic level down to another and is ontological in nature.

In summary, diegesis is the realm in which the story takes place, extradiegesis is the realm one level higher than the diegesis, hypodiegesis is the realm one level lower than the diegesis (embedded narrative), a heterodiegetic narrator is a narrator not represented in the story he is narrating, an homodiegetic narrator is a narrator who is represented in the story he is narrating, an extradiegetic narrator is a narrator whom exists one level higher than the diegesis (first degree narrator), an intradiegetic narrator is a narrator speaking from within the diegesis (second degree narrator), an extra-heterodiegetic narrator is the first degree narrator who

¹ A homodiegetic narrator has an active role as a character in the narrative. This narrator need not necessarily be the protagonist. An example of a homodiegetic narrator is Nick Carraway from F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Carraway functions as the unreliable narrator of the protagonist’s (Jay Gatsby) story.
tells a story in which he is not involved, an extra-homodiegetic narrator is the first
degree narrator telling a story in which he is involved, an intra-heterodiegetic
narrator is the second degree narrator telling a story in which he is not involved,
and an intra-homodiegetic narrator is the second degree narrator telling a story in
which he is involved.¹

Despite the many narratorial positions which can exist and the plethora of
prefixes which are needed to define these positions, this dissertation will generally
focus on single instances of ontological violations of the boundary between the
diegesis and the hypodiegesis or the boundary between the diegesis and the
extradiegesis. Before I move on to some of the ontological complexities associated
with various forms of metafictional narrative framing, I will briefly survey and
unpack the horizontal, epistemological framing, which occurs in Joseph Conrad’s
Heart of Darkness.

**Modernist narrative framing**

Works such as Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (1912) and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*
(first published in a single volume in 1922) challenged the paradigm of literary
realism.² Texts such as these placed an emphasis on introspection, cynicism,

¹ Therefore, both heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrators can additionally be either extradiegetic or intradiegetic.
² The *fin de siècle* saw a departure from the dominant literary style of realism embodied in works
such as Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (first
published in a single volume in 1874) and Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). The primary
focus for writers in this tradition was the depiction of common, everyday events and a belief that the
narrative in a work of fiction is “capable of providing a direct imitation or equivalent of life”
(Parsons 2007 p. 22).
cultural exhaustion and self referentiality.¹ For example, the character of Aschenbach is simultaneously comical, carnivalesque and satirical, while Ulysses – an example of sustained intertextuality – utilises stream of consciousness, privileging the narrative position to a level of conscious thinking in which ambivalent or conflicting thoughts dance in free association. It is important to note here that this type of anti-realism – whether it is self-referentiality, intertextuality or satire – which reflects on its own mimetic nature (a defining characteristic of metafiction) – is a central component of modernism. In fact, it was modernism’s “self-consciousness about...imitation” which led to a “postmodernist’ demystification of any straightforward correspondence between art and life from the 1960s” (Parsons 2007 p. 22). This is partly the reason why definitions of literature as being modern, postmodern, metafictional etc. are so elusive; one is the component outgrowth of another, extending and amplifying certain aesthetic or philosophical concerns while repressing others.

The example of modernist narrative framing I focus on here is Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness. It provides a canonical instance that succinctly exemplifies certain aspects of modernist formal experimentation, and so can usefully function as a test case. McHale theorises a philosophical distinction between modernist and postmodernist (including metafictional) texts.² He claims that modernist texts place an emphasis on epistemological concerns, as opposed to

¹ All of which are also aspects of a postmodern sensibility.
² Bran Nicol points out that “the most characteristic practice in postmodern fiction is metafiction, by which a text highlights its own status as a fictional construct... [and that]... [s]elf-reference is the literary equivalent of the postmodern ironic attitude...” (2006 p. 568).
postmodernist texts, which have an ontological focus.\footnote{Similarly, David Lodge, in his book \textit{After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism}, suggests that one of the defining characteristics of postmodern literature is its \textquote{foregrounding of diegesis} (1990 p. 28).} Although the thesis McHale puts forth in \textit{Postmodernist Fiction} has received some criticism\footnote{See Robert Siegle's article \textit{Postmodernism} for its criticism of McHale's thesis in \textit{Constructing Postmodernism} regarding diegetic \textquote{secondary} worlds and extradiegetic \textquote{primary} worlds. Siegle suggests that McHale's labelling everyday life as a \textquote{paramount reality} misses the point that everyday reality is constructed, \textquote{as if it were a \textquote{primary} [world] on entirely different footings} (1995 p. 6).} – in particular from himself in his introduction in \textit{Constructing Postmodernism}, in which he laments his methodology through his emphasis on a \textquote{single, all-inclusive infantry of features or characteristics of postmodern writing} (p. 2) – it does not diminish his observation that with postmodernist literature there began a shift in emphasis away from how knowledge is \textquote{transmitted from one knower to another} to a preoccupation with questions such as \textquote{[w]hat kinds of worlds are there, how are they constituted... [and what happens] when boundaries between worlds are violated?} (1987 pp. 9-10).\footnote{More frequently cited examples of the transition from modernism to postmodernism is that of comparing modernist notions of authenticity, sincerity and originality against postmodernism's emphasis on irony and appropriation.}

In many ways, \textit{Heart of Darkness} perfectly demonstrates the \textquote{epistemological foregrounding} which dominates modernist literature. This novella – replete with internal and external analepsis\footnote{Internal analepsis is a flashback to an earlier time in the narrative while external analepsis is a flashback to a moment before the narrative began.} provided by multiple narrators – supplies many examples of narrative framing, which all exist horizontally on the same diegetic level and at no point threaten the ontological stability of the text. While the work in many ways is \textit{about} ontology – the worlds of black and white, Europe and Africa,
the colonisers and the colonised, Kurtz’s world and Marlow’s world – the text isn’t problematised *ontologically*.

The story opens with the narrator (an unnamed sailor) describing the location of the *Nellie*, anchored in the Thames estuary. The unnamed sailor functions as the frame narrator for the embedded narrative, which is told by Marlow, the protagonist. One common modernist strategy to obfuscate or subvert epistemological certainty in a text is to de-centre the narrator.¹ So, rather than have Marlow begin the story, and operate as the narrator in the primary and embedded narrative, he is relegated to being someone else’s (the unnamed sailor’s) story. It is this switching from one narrative frame to the next, and so on, which raises epistemological questions in modernist texts. There is “general agreement... that Conrad’s fiction emphasises the problematic nature of questions of what we can know, how we can know it and what degree of certainty is possible” (Roberts 2000 p. 118). McHale makes the point that epistemological foregrounding doesn’t rule out ontological concerns, but merely subordinates them. Not only do these two modes of philosophical enquiry coexist in any work of literature, they are fundamentally interdependent. At a certain point a narrative which relentlessly generates epistemological uncertainty through multiple narrative frames will begin to produce ontological questions and, by “the same token, push ontological questions far enough and they tip over into epistemological questions” (1987 p. 11).

¹ Julian Hanna suggests that “[r]elativism is perhaps the key identifying factor of modernist literature: what ‘happens’ in a modernist novel or poem is highly speculative and subjective, owing to unreliable narrators, shifts in perspective, and other techniques suggesting epistemological uncertainty” (2009 p. 41).
From the outset of *Heart of Darkness*, the unnamed narrator suggests the meaning of the story “was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale”. He refers to the “yarns of seamen” having “a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut” (2006 p. 5). Although much debate surrounds what Conrad was suggesting with this metaphor it clearly functions to highlight the impending embedded narrative\(^1\) while also announcing the “self-consciousness” of this modernist text. Yet, as Peter Brooks points out, beyond reflexively highlighting impending embedded narration it also provides us with a “warning that the structure of ‘framed narration’ used in *Heart of Darkness* will not, in this instance, give a neat pattern of nested boxes, bracketed core structures, nuts within shells” (1984 p. 126). Similarly, Alfred J. Lopez suggests that Conrad offers “no inner essence or ‘kernel’ of truth, of darkness or otherwise, to be revealed or illuminated in the telling... [and that meaning] in Marlow’s tales is not merely indeterminate, but restless...” Lopez presents his analysis through Saussurean semiology to highlight that the “narrator’s critique of Marlow’s tales, then, might itself serve as a useful metaphor of the slippage that constantly occurs along the signifying chain throughout *Heart of Darkness*, as the text’s promise of truth in the form of an illumination [*Aufklärung*\(^2\)] constantly falls prey to the impossibility of that promise” (López 2001 p. 52).

Rather than the traditional patterning associated with narrative framing in which we neatly enter and exit each frame we are presented with more

---


\(^{2}\) German trans., enlightenment.
epistemological problems, especially with regard to Kurtz who “never assumes the narration of his own story” (Brooks 1984 p. 257). Kurtz’s story is obliquely related to the reader through Marlow and other characters such as the Russian who, grappling with the English language, introduces himself with the following “[b]rother sailor ... honour ... pleasure ... delight ... introduce myself ... Russian ...” (1984 p. 116). Moments like these emphasise to the reader of Heart of Darkness that the way one’s knowledge is “transmitted from one knower to another” is compromised on many fronts. Using multiple narration through manifold narrative frames, Conrad relentlessly plays a game in which he offers and then negates information.

This obfuscation of information in Heart of Darkness is flagged symbolically throughout the novella. A case in point is the constant presence of mist and fog. At one point “a cry, a very loud cry as of infinite desolation” emanates from the jungle through a thick fog, prompting Marlow to think that the “mist itself had screamed” (2006 p. 39). While information (for Marlow and the reader) is constantly denied “behind the blind whiteness of the fog” (2006 p. 42) in this instance it seemingly articulates language and, consequently, further problematises the transmission of information.

Ultimately, through this deliberate structuring of the text – unreliable narrators, narrators narrating narrators, foreign narrators, etc. – the figure of Kurtz comes to symbolise not just the quest for logos but also its absence. Kurtz’s final pronouncement “the horror” – which on the surface can be understood as a reaction to a world of barbarity and inhumanity – may also, as suggested by Perry Meisel, be a reference to the novella’s thesis regarding “the impossibility of
disclosing a central core...[or]...essence” (1978 p. 25). It is Marlow’s deceit to Kurtz’s wife that the “last word he pronounced was—your name” (2006 p. 77) which acts as the dénouement; laying bare the impossibility of truth.

The modernist epistemic framing strategies outlined above also operate in the work of Barth, particularly his short story *Dunyazadiad* and also in the epistemological labyrinths which structure the text of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Epistemological framing becomes more complex when it operates symbiotically with ontological framing, whereby information migrates across diegetic levels. This strategy is fundamental to the framing used by Barth, Pynchon and – to a lesser extent – Robbe-Grillet. In fact, the use of multiple narrators often underpins the production of ontological framing. This is especially the case in John Barth’s novel *LETTERS* where some of the diegetic characters – who have formally existed hypodiegetically in other novels (worlds) – dialogue not just with each other, but with the “character” John Barth, who resides in the extradiegesis.

**The provenance of metafiction**

It isn’t surprising that during the time of metafiction’s creative zenith – the 1960s and ’70s – there were also enormous developments in the postmodern notion of the socially constituted subject¹ through the work of the philosopher–historian

---

¹The genesis of the postmodern concept of the socially constituted subject is often credited to both Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. These two thinkers subverted the traditional Cartesian idea of the self as a unified, self-determining entity. While Marx placed an emphasis on capitalism as the force,
Michel Foucault, with his emphasis on discursive formations that constitute subjectivity; and by the literary critic and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva, who theorises subject formation through Lacanian psychoanalysis and semiotics.\(^1\) It isn’t surprising that Kristeva worked as an editor of the French avant-garde literary journal *Tel Quel*\(^2\), which published metafictional writers such as Umberto Eco and Robbe-Grillet. Patricia Waugh noted that “[i]f our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of ‘reality’ itself” (1984 p. 3). Bran Nicol reiterates Waugh’s thesis, stating that the “real world is effectively just as constructed, mediated, and discursive as the reality we are presented with in the world of fiction” (2006 p. 568).\(^3\) These various lines of enquiry from social and literary theorists put forward the same message; subjects are created through language, fictional or otherwise. McHale proposes that the “narrative turn” is one of the “contemporary responses to the loss of metaphysical ‘grounding’ or ‘foundations’ for our theorizing”. Obviously, this lack of grounding threatens our ability to “build intellectual structures upward from the firm which shapes subjectivity, Freud highlighted the primacy of the unconscious. Over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, these two strands of thought have been augmented with other theories such as semiotics, feminism and postcolonialism, to name but a few (Clewell 2001 p. 382).

\(^1\) See Michel Foucault’s chapter “Discursive Formations” in *Archaeology of Knowledge* (2002) and Julia Kristeva’s “The Subject in Process” in *The Tel Quel Reader* (1998).

\(^2\) Founded in 1960 by Philippe Sollers and Jean-Edern Hallier, this radical periodical explored the philosophical implications of writing, with particular focus on the texts of Jacques Derrida, Russian Formalism, psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan, and Marxists such as Louis Althusser. The publication ceased in 1982.

\(^3\) What Nicol and Waugh are referring to here is the previously mentioned work of Kristeva, Foucault (and others such as Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida) which contributed to the linguistic turn of the 1970s. This “movement” placed language as the central structuring agent that mediates “reality”.
epistemological and ontological foundations” (1992 p. 4).¹ The sentiments regarding the constructedness of “reality” voiced by Waugh, Nicol and McHale inhabit the work of Barth, Pynchon and Robbe-Grillet. These three authors strive to replace the essentialist notions of ontological foundations with the idea that the world is created and shaped through language.

Although often regarded as a postmodern phenomenon, the metafictional trait of self-reflexivity manifests itself as far back as the fourteenth century, in Giovanni Boccaccio’s (1313–1375) *The Decameron* (1353). This collection of novellas, which is packed with epistemological framing, hypodiegeses and multiple storytellers, is as much about the plague as it is about narration. Or, perhaps further back still, to the self-reflexive writing of Plato’s (circa 424–347 BC) *The Phaedrus* (circa 370 BC), which ruminates on the nature of authorial writing. Patricia Waugh suggests that metafiction is a “trend... inherent in all novels [and] although the term ‘metafiction’ might be new, the practice is as old (if not older) than the novel itself” (1984 p. 5). In many ways, literary metafiction² – like other forms of postmodern aesthetics – eludes a clear historical location. In fact, some art historians rightly argue that the roots of postmodern painting go back to

¹ Some suggest that the downfall of the twentieth century’s epistemological and ontological certainty began through the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, the most significant nineteenth century precursory theorist of postmodernism (see Clayton Koelb’s book *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: Essays Pro and Contra* (1990)). In Nietzsche’s perspectivism, all ideations are dependent on an individual’s perspective. Perspectivism contests absolutes and asserts that there are no transcendent logos or originary essence residing below cultural formations.

² Metafiction can be seen as a component part of the postmodern project. “Many of the writers discussed under [the] rubric [of metafiction] are also identified as postmodernist, for example, Barth, Barthelme, Coover, Gass, Nabokov, and Pynchon. However, ‘metafiction’ has a much wider compass than ‘postmodernism’ and is generally used to denote...fiction which investigates and exposes the processes of its own construction and, by implication the codes and shifting parameters of ‘literature’. Hence Cervantes, Sterne, Barth, and Barthelme may all be defined as metafictional but only the latter two are postmodernist.” (Maltby 1993 p. 525).
the Baroque and Rococo periods,\(^1\) just as metafictional traits show up in texts dating back centuries or millennia.\(^2\)

**Metafiction theorised**

Fiction can draw attention to its own fictionality in many ways. Some of the more obvious literary modes and techniques are protagonists in a work of fiction “breaking character”\(^3\) and directly addressing the reader, self-conscious narrative plotting,\(^4\) marginalia and footnotes (which rupture the narrative’s illusion of “reality”), metanarratorial comments (in which fictional characters explicitly allude to the narrative genre in which they exist) embedded narratives\(^5\) and diegetic levels and so on. The degree of self-referential intensity is variable. In its most subtle

---

\(^1\) See *The Return of the Baroque in Modern Culture* (2004) by Gregg Lambert, in which Lambert maintains that “the baroque itself constitutes an extremely elastic, variable and mobile ‘topic’ (or theme) that can be enlisted at any point to serve the interests of establishing a postmodern sensibility” (p. 79). Citing Velazquez’s *Las Meninas*, Lambert argues that this period “establishes an alliance between modern and postmodern principles of representation” (Lambert 2004 p. 81).

\(^2\) *The Metamorphoses* (8 AD) by Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso, 43 BC–17 AD) could also be viewed as having metafictional tendencies; especially its use of “mise en abyme” in the Minyeids episode which clearly displays its metalinguistic, self-reflexive, character (Knox 2006 p. 349). Furthermore, *The Book of Job* from the Hebrew Bible (circa 450 BCE–200 BCE) “reveals a masterful narrative design” in which the prologue scenes function as “part of an extended frame narrative which constitutes the substructure for the total plot” (Hable 1975 p. 79). So it seems, that for over two thousand years there has been a preoccupation and fascination with storytelling gesturing towards – or blatantly announcing – its own fictionality.

\(^3\) A theatrical term which refers to a performer slipping out of character. The result is a break of the illusion of the performance’s “reality” resulting in the *alienation effect*. The *alienation effect* (or *distancing effect*) was adapted from the *Russian formalist* concept of defamiliarisation by German dramatist Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956). The effect takes place when a dramatist deliberately makes “familiar aspects of the present social reality seems strange, so as to prevent the emotional identification or involvement of the audience with the characters and their actions in a play” (Abrams 2009 p. 6). Defamiliarisation can occur in a multitude of ways; one of the extreme forms is when a character acknowledges his or her fictional status.

\(^4\) Although this is achieved primarily through some form of narration.

\(^5\) When one narrative is framed within another narrative, it is referred to as being “embedded in another narrative. The containing narrative is what is called a framing narrative” (Porter 2008 p. 28).
form, an instance of metafiction may be simply a self-reflexive aside\(^1\) to the reader by the author, which still has the effect of breaking the fourth wall. The fourth wall is an imaginary division between the reader/audience and the fictional text/performance. This concept was first conceived in the context of theatre in the late 1800s by French philosopher and art critic Denis Diderot to separate the stage from the audience, creating “an entirely self-contained artificial reality” (Friedland 2003 p. 26). One of the effects of breaching this boundary is the destabilisation of the text’s verisimilitude. Although the specific use of the term fourth wall is usually associated with direct address, the disruption of diegetic boundaries can have the same effect as that of “conscious” dialogue between the diegesis and the extradiegesis (or hypodiegesis). More extreme manifestations of metafiction occur when the modal inner workings of a text become exposed or fold into itself. McHale compares this process to a Klein-bottle\(^2\) in which the resulting internal literary system of the text becomes indecipherable with the external storyline surface.

The Klein-bottle analogy has other associations. The fact that the text (and the bottle) penetrates itself, alludes to the self-serving and – some have argued – self-indulgent characteristic of autoeroticism. Although such claims against metafiction

---

\(^1\) An aside is traditionally used in theatre, functioning similarly to the ancient Greek chorus. However, unlike the chorus, which presents the audience with the “moral dilemma” of the play an aside is used to create dramatic irony in which the audience has privileged knowledge, which is withheld from the characters in the play.

\(^2\) A Klein bottle (also known as a Klein-surface) is essentially a “three-dimensional möbius strip. This shape, identified by the German mathematician Felix Klein, is formed by elongating a bottle’s neck, passing the neck through the bottle’s side, and joining its opening to a hole in the base” (Huehls 2005 p. 44 n.10). See McHale’s reading of Robbe-Grillet’s novel *In the Labyrinth* (1959), in which he briefly discusses how this mathematical concept of a form with no distinct “inner” and “outer” sides is applied to the metafictional technique of narrative levels (1987 p. 14).
regarding self-indulgence are not necessarily intended to be negative,¹ the label of narcissism is usually the main departure point for any attack.

To some, metafictional writing is merely vain self-absorption in which the rejection of realism threatens the traditional purpose of the novel as an unmediated window onto “reality”. Author and literary critic Tom Wolfe launched a scathing attack against postmodern literature in his article published in *Esquire* magazine “Why They Aren’t Writing the Great American Novel Anymore” (1972). He argued that metafiction is a form of decadence and self-indulgence, which robs the novel of energy and vitality (pp. 152-59). Arguably, aspects of metafiction are narcissistic but this characteristic is the price this literary form has to pay, as part of its pursuit in scrutinising the mediating processes in which language constructs fictional worlds and our own “reality”.

Predictably, advocates of metafiction not only reject Wolfe’s position, but also propose that this form of writing actually generates complexity and energy in works

¹ See Linda Hutcheon’s *Narcissistic Narrative: the Metafictional Paradox* (1980).
of fiction. For example, Mark Currie describes metafiction as a “borderline discourse” which “places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and which takes that border as its subject”. In describing the benefits of metafiction, he writes that for “criticism this has meant an affirmation of literariness in its own language” while also providing fictional narratives with a “critical perspective”. Currie points out that the ensuing frisson of this writing style provides “an unlimited vitality: what was once thought introspective and self-referential is in fact outward-looking” and “eventually took hold beyond the domain of art, on modes of historical and scientific explanation, and indeed on representation and language in general”. The implications of which extend “far beyond the boundaries of fiction” and into “the more demotic realms of film, television, comic strips and advertising” (1995 p. 2). Currie isn’t suggesting that this self-consciousness came from the project of metafiction but was rather part of a general trend “within each specific discourse” (1995 p. 2).

Being a metafictional novelist and a literary theorist, it’s not surprising that John Barth contributes theoretically regarding the placement and definition of metafiction. He presents a counter argument to Waugh’s almost apologist approach, in which she genuflects to the notion that metafiction is a subset of fiction “inherent in all novels”. Barth’s short essay, The Literature of Exhaustion (1967) is, among other things, a treatise on the relationship between tradition and intertextuality. “[I]literary forms certainly have histories and historical contingencies, and it may well be that the novel’s time as a major art form is up” (2002 p. 144). In response to Barth’s essay, Niall Lucy argues that metafiction “defines the tradition against which realism has to be seen as counter-traditional or
unorthodox”. “[T]he self-conscious novel of ‘imitation’ associated with [Borges, Robbe-Grillet and other writers of their time] can be seen as a revival rather than a rupture”. While Waugh sees metafiction operating as a subordinate component to fiction, Barth and Lucy position metafiction as the dominant tradition, with realist fiction functioning as an “experimental” stage in the history of the novel. Lucy acknowledges Barth’s legitimising strategy by suggesting that through repositioning realism as merely “a ‘detour’ along a path stretching back to Cervantes [Barth] was better placed to attribute a seriousness of purpose and a sense of tradition to the non-realist concerns and practices of his own fiction” (Lucy 1997 pp. 104-05).

This notion of stylistic overlap is broadened through the work of Wladimir Krysinski. Krysinski positions metafiction as a philosophical discourse. Using Borges, Eco and Calvino as his examples, Krysinski maps out the way these specific writers use metafiction – in particular, its utilisation as a “borderline discourse” – in order to “engender visions of the world as well as a critical discourse on representation”. Krysinski states that what is at stake is the “problem of mimesis”. If there is one consistent component of metafiction which most literary theorists would adhere to, it is the negating premise that “[m]etafictional novels confirm that mimesis is both wishful thinking and a vicious circle necessarily entering the discourse as semiotic process, the sign about signs about signs” (2002 p. 202).

---

1 Although other theorists I have discussed allude to philosophical components of metafiction, Krysinski likens metafiction to the “proverbial ‘Spanish tavern’”; a space “where philosophers and writers convivially lodge together, although each of them brings heterogeneous subjects to the tavern” (2002 p. 202).
Gerhard Hoffmann suggests there is more to the character of metafiction than just self-referentiality. He states that “metafiction in modern (and more so in postmodern) fiction designates more than the term ‘self-consciousness’ suggests. It includes fiction-upon-fiction, the intertextual mode of writing in so-called ‘historiographic metafiction’ [and] the parody of traditional narrative forms and especially in the postmodern narrative meta-mode, the fantastic” (2006 p. 188).

Likewise, Krysinski suggests that the metafictional techniques employed by twentieth century writers such as Samuel Beckett, John Fowles, Barth and Pynchon are “not a homogeneous monoreferential discourse arising out of a limited series of problems linked to the narrative or novelistic process”. Rather, these writers display metafiction, which is a “polyvalent problematization of the critical, reflexive, analytical, or playful perspective of that which is narrated reflected upon itself” (Krysinski 2002 p. 186). Although Waugh, Hoffmann and Krysinski articulate the underpinnings of metafiction in vastly different ways, they mutually share the view that this form of self-reflexive literature is both dynamic and heterogeneous. Metafictional traits are ubiquitous in most works of fiction; however, what differentiates fiction from metafiction is when these innate latent expressions of metafiction are foregrounded.

Similar to the privileged insights afforded the Roman god Janus, who resides on the boundary between the past and the future, metafiction – replete with its

---

self-aware characters, inter/intratextuality, diegetic violations etc. locates itself on boundaries; both epistemic and ontological. From this liminal position metafiction looks out of and into the texts in which it resides.

Two modes of ontological violation: diegesis ↦ extradiegesis or extradiegesis ⇄ hypodiegesis

When diegetic/ontological violations overlap with other metafictional strategies it can be difficult to highlight how such textual manoeuvres operate. On top of this is the various literary modes used, such as description, exposition, dialogue, transition etc., which are often co-opted to achieve these violations. Yet, diegetic violations only occur in two ways: either across the boundary of the diegesis and the extradiegesis or across the boundary of the diegesis and the hypodiegesis.¹ Violations that are diegetic/extradiegetic are fundamentally different to violations that are diegetic/hypodiegetic. A diegetic/extradiegetic violation is philosophically and ontologically more paradoxical because the content from the diegesis enters the “world” of the reader.² Yet, this form of diegetic violation is usually less convincing because the “worlds” are ontologically distinct from one another. The diegesis is a fixed, static text while the extradiegesis is the fluid indeterministic

¹ All violations beyond these two are simply variations, such as the hypo-hypodiegesis, from hypodiegesis – skipping the diegesis – to the extradiegesis, etc.
² I am framing this discussion with a basic tripartite of hypodiegesis, diegesis and extradiegesis. Of course, in convoluted manifold diegetic structures, the extradiegesis is not necessarily the “world” of the reader and there could potentially be many hypodiegetic realms which characters traverse.
“world” of the reader.¹ In the case of ontological violations from the diegesis to the hypodiegesis there are less problems of ontological compatibility because both worlds are fictional.

The following are two examples of diegetic violation. The first is from Italo Calvino’s (1923–1985) *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* (1979) and the second is from Julio Cortázar’s (1914–1984) *Continuity of the Parks* (1964). The first example by Calvino utilises a handful of sentences to create the diegetic violation while the second example by Cortázar requires the entire length of a short story to understand the diegetic violation. In the example by Cortázar the diegetic violation functions as the *dénouement*.

The second chapter of Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* begins with, “The novel begins in a railway station, a locomotive huffs, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter, a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph”.² Here we have a description which seemingly – through the reader’s imaginative assistance – lifts itself off the page, out of the diegesis, and into the reader’s “world”. This short-lived metalepsis is but one of many instances of diegetic/extradiegetic exchange throughout the novel. On the same page, the narrator notes, “the pages of the book are clouded like the windows of an old train, the cloud of smoke rests on the sentences”. Further still, the narrator describes a

---

¹ Putting aside the argument for the moment, that culture is a text.
² This device by Calvino, in which a description in the story links up with the physical book containing the story, can also be seen in the closing sentence of his novella *Marcovaldo or the Seasons in the City* (1983). This story ends with an allegorical coda involving a white jack-hare and a black wolf. The hare travels across white snow while the wolf follows along the dark edge of a forest. The wolf comes out onto the snow “open[s] wide its red maw and his sharp teeth, and bit the wind”. The hare now “a bit farther on, invisible… Only the expanse of snow could be seen, white as this page” (1983 p. 121).
“whistling sound, like a locomotive’s, and a cloud of steam [which rises] from the coffee machine that the old counterman puts under pressure, as if he were sending up a signal, or at least so it seems from the series of sentences in the second paragraph” (1981 p. 10). The “second paragraph” which the narrator is referring to, is the same paragraph that contains the words “or at least so it seems from the series of sentences in the second paragraph”. Throughout the novel, the narrator constantly addresses the reader as “you”, thereby conflating the idea of the fictional reader residing in the diegesis and the one who – along with Italo Calvino – resides outside of the novel. This becomes one of the strategies Calvino uses throughout the novel to question the nature and function of a reader. The small instances of diegetic/extradiegetic violation given in the examples above operate in If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller as humorous accents which complement the relentless interplay, and at times violation, of the diegesis/extradiegesis boundary.

Argentine writer Julio Cortázar’s short story Continuity of the Parks perfectly demonstrates an ontological violation from the diegesis to the hypodiegesis. To summarise the short story, the protagonist is sitting in his favourite green armchair reading a novel. The armchair has its back to the door and faces a window, which looks out onto his garden estate. The novel the protagonist is reading contains the story of an adulterous man and a woman who plot to kill the woman’s husband. The story ends with the adulterer – knife in hand – approaching the protagonist from behind who is sitting in the green armchair reading. The protagonist reading the novel at the beginning of the story finds himself to be the victim in the novel at the end of the story. Is Cortázar suggesting that the novel in the protagonist’s hand is his life foretold or that the protagonist has somehow – maybe through the
“conjuring” nature of reading – unleashed this fictional murderer into his “real” world? Such an open-ended paradox can be interpreted either way.

*Mise en abîme: reiterating information across diegeses*

Yet there is another way of disturbing the ontological stability in a work of fiction other than directly assaulting the diegetic level and that is to repeat information, such as motifs or themes, across these levels. McHale states that “[m]ise-en-abîme... disturbs the orderly hierarchy of ontological levels” (1987 p. 14). This literary technique is unique as an ontological violator and therefore needs special consideration. *Mise en abîme* doesn’t concern itself with the *boundary* between realms per se; rather it operates by mirroring information across what should be autonomous diegetic realms. This is very different from metalepsis, which occurs when a hypodiegetic character is promoted to the level of “reality” by moving up to the primary diegetic level. *Mise en abîme* doesn’t need to go through the process of violating the boundary separating the two diegetic levels. This artistic device isn’t reliant on the narrator or protagonist “speaking” across diegetic boundaries in order to produce diegetic violations. *Mise en abîme* creates diegetic violations – and paradoxes – through the conflation of narrative content.

Mark Currie defines *mise en abîme* specifically as an “embedded representation, occupying a narrative level inferior to that of the primary, diegetic narrative world; secondly, this nested representation resembles...something at the level of the primary, diegetic world; and thirdly, this ‘something’ that it resembles must constitute some salient and continuous aspect of the primary world...” (1987
Dällenbach categorises *mise en abîme* into three different forms of reflection: simple, infinite and paradoxical. Dällenbach gives an example of simple reflection through heraldry in which a shield\(^1\) contains a small copy of itself, *within* itself. He describes infinite reflection as the repeating effect created when two mirrors are placed opposite each other. As opposed to simple reflection – in which one “thing” contains a copy of itself, within itself – infinite reflection (as the name states) has an “infinite” recurrence of the primary “thing” within itself.\(^2\) Paradoxical reflection takes place when a narrative folds back on itself. A perfect physical analogy of this would be the Möbius strip\(^3\) (Dällenbach 1989 p. 24).

Such repetition occurs in *Continuity of the Parks*. The figure of the adulterous murderer exists in the hypodiegesis and, at the end of the story, exists on the diegetic level. Yet, on that same diegetic level also exists the novel which contains the adulterous murderer. This paradoxical reflection, involving the narrative folding back on itself, results in aporia. Despite the fact that simple and infinite forms of *mise en abîme* don’t produce paradoxes doesn’t mean that they don’t have the ability to disrupt the ontological stability of a text. As I mentioned earlier, *The Mousetrap* exists as a hypodiegesis in the play *Hamlet*. Even though the content of

---

\(^1\) Also known as an escutcheon.

\(^2\) Of course, Dällenbach doesn’t literally mean that this recurrence is infinite. It just needs to repeat itself enough to suggest that it has the potential to go on forever.

\(^3\) Further visual examples would be the graphic works of Maurits Cornelis Escher (b. 1898 – d. 1972) more commonly known as M. C. Escher. His lithograph, *Drawing Hands* (1948), depicts two hands, leaving the “frame” of the paper – *trompe-l’œil* style – each drawing the other, while *Waterfall* (1961), which portrays the flow and fall of water beginning from and returning to its source, embodies what cognitive scientist Douglas Hofstadter terms a “*strange loop*”. Hofstadter explains that the term describes a “kind of feedback loop in which...there is a *shift in levels* that feels like an upward movement in a hierarchy [in which] one winds up where one started, in violation of the seeming hierarchy. Unlike a mere round trip, a strange loop feels like a paradoxical voyage in an abstract space” (Hofstadter 2006 p. 494).
the play The Mousetrap doesn’t explicitly refer to the plot of Hamlet, it still mirrors enough of its central themes to create a mise en abîme. This thematic mirroring is created by Hamlet – the author of the play The Mousetrap – to expose Claudius’s guilt. As Hamlet says, “The play’s the thing/wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King” (1997 pp. 604-05). But, Shakespeare’s inclusion of the play The Mousetrap within Hamlet inevitably raises questions regarding the “reality” of the primary diegesis.¹ The self-conscious theme of life-as-fiction is also seen in some of Shakespeare’s other plays. In his comedy, As You like It (1600), Jaques announces, “All the world’s a stage/And all the men and women merely players”, forcing the audience/reader to examine the boundaries in which these narratives are connected. Ultimately, any text which contains mise en abîme – whether paradoxical, infinite or simple, as is the case with The Mousetrap/Hamlet – inevitably places a question mark over the ontology of all diegetic levels within the text.

McHale, in his essay Cognition En Abyme: Models, Manuals, Maps, gives a slightly more open-ended description of mise en abîme. Drawing on literary theorists Moshe Ron and Mieke Bal,² McHale puts forward just two criteria to satisfy his definition for mise en abîme: “there must be a demonstrable relation of analogy between the part en abîme and the whole, or some substantial and salient

¹ This is a common aspect of mise en abîme. Information that is mirrored from the hypodiegesis to the primary diegesis inevitably calls into question the ‘reality’ of the primary diegesis.
² Unlike pictorial instances of mise en abîme, in which the totality of the image is contained within the image, the use of this framing device in literature is never complete with the embedded content reflecting “only a part of the [primary] text, or a certain aspect”. Given this difference, and in order to make the distinction between visual arts and literature Bal prefers to use the term “mirror-text” (1997 p. 58) instead of mise en abîme. Of course, the use of this term also serves to acknowledge the significance of Genette through partially “mirroring” the title of his seminal work The Mirror in the Text.
aspect of that whole... [and] the part *en abîme* must be inset one or more levels ‘down’ or ‘in’ from the primary world... [and be] ontologically subordinated to the primary one” (2006 pp. 176-77).¹ In this essay, McHale uses the term “modeling” to refer to the interplay which occurs between the primary text and its double and chooses to focus on three aspects of this process. First, he suggests that *mise en abîme* has the ability to yield knowledge “of the text itself by modelling its form”. He argues that this can provide insights if the “form is elusive”. Next, he makes the point that *mise en abîme* can model the reading process, thereby bracketing “how the reader engages with the text [in effect] providing a sort of user’s manual for the successful operation of the text. Lastly, McHale suggests that *mise en abîme* “may even yield knowledge of the extratextual world” (2006 p. 178).

Shakespeare makes the claim that “all the world’s a stage”. Waugh points out that metafiction “provide a useful model for understanding the construction of subjectivity in the world outside novels”. Similarly, McHale suggests that *mise en abîme* has the “potential to yield knowledge of the world outside the text”. When modelled to do so, this mirroring of information up diegetic levels to the world outside the text has the potential to “map the real” (2006 p. 188). Historically, fiction has always had a pedagogic function. But, with the development of theories regarding the constructed nature of culture and the subject which began in earnest in the 1970s, the importance of fiction as a mirror or model of the “world outside novels” takes on elevated status.

¹ As pointed out by Gerard Genette, it stands to reason “that the embedded narrative is narratively subordinate to be embedding narrative, since the former owes its existence to the latter and is based on it.” (1988 p. 90)
Summary

This chapter has laid out the framework in which to read the ontological paradoxes operating in the writing of Barth, Robbe-Grillet and Pynchon. The sections on the ontological nature of fictional “world” construction and narratorial positions presents the possibilities in which various diegetic levels can exist and the possible manifold positions of the narrator within those levels. The section on modernist narrative framing provides examples of epistemological framing while also demonstrating the ubiquitous nature of this type of framing. The sections on metafiction explore the social and historical intentions behind this genre while endeavoring to map out its various literary strategies. These sections, along with my discussion on the two modes of diegetic violations and *mise en abîme*, extend my discussion on epistemological framing, and demonstrate how this framing is used to frame and then violate diegeses, in order to create ontological and philosophical problems.

What binds the writing of Barth, Robbe-Grillet and Pynchon is their self-reflexive stance. This stance is central to metafiction, which is “committed to the idea of constructed meanings rather than representable essences” (Currie 1995 p. 15). It is for this reason that my analysis of the creation and use of ontological violations by these authors takes place through the lens of metafiction.

As I have shown, approaches to defining metafiction vary greatly from one theorist to the next. Waugh focuses on the “sustained opposition” inherent in metafiction, which constantly works to subvert the traditional binary reading of a text’s “creation” and “criticism”; replacing these concepts with those of
“interpretation” and “deconstruction”. McHale underscores the transition of what is foregrounded in modernist and postmodernist (metafictional) texts\(^1\), while Barth installs metafiction as the canon, deciding that the “novel’s time as a major art form is up”. Furthermore, the ability to define a work of literature as fiction, postmodern fiction, metafiction, etc. is dependent on how the individual reader interprets complex literary devices such as *mise en abîme.*\(^2\) Thus, perhaps the adage regarding pornography\(^3\) needs to be applied to metafiction: if you see a novel as metafiction then it is metafiction.

The ensuing chapters will predominantly draw on the self-reflexive turn of literature in the second half of the twentieth century in which, due to the arrival of the “French ‘new novel’ of the 1950s and 1960s, a veritable epidemic of reflexivity has swept the fiction-writing world” (Connor 2001 p. 129). As previously mentioned, the ontological violations under analysis in the work of Barth, Robbe-Grillet and Pynchon will primarily be limited to their ekphrastic or epistolary occurrence. Both these literary techniques are predisposed to creating narrative frames, yet when used metafictively, epistolary and ekphrastic writing – like many

---

\(^1\) As previously mentioned, in treating metafiction as a subset of postmodernist fiction there will obviously be parts of McHale’s thesis regarding ontological/epistemological foregrounding which will not be applicable. However, a significant amount of McHale’s argument regarding the ontology of postmodern fiction can be directly applied to the understanding of metafiction due to the “self-awareness” or “self-announcement” resulting from ontological violations.

\(^2\) As outlined by reception theorist Wolfgang Iser, a critic’s (and one would assume a reader’s) task is to “explain not the text as an object but rather its effects on the reader”. Iser shifted the emphasis away from the text and underscored the importance of how the text is read in the context of a reader’s assumptions and experiences (Selden 2005 p. 53). Reception theory is a variation on reader-response theory, which focuses on the reader’s understanding and interpretation of the text rather than placing the primary focus on the content of the work or the intentions of the author.

\(^3\) “I know it when I see it” was used by United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart in the case *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964) which set out to determine whether the 1958 French film *The Lovers (Les Amants)* fell into the category of pornography.
other writing forms and techniques – can be co-opted to produce ontological violations and paradoxes.
Chapter 2. John Barth: framed frame stories, conflated “authors” and ontological violations through letters

Introduction

It would not be an exaggeration to make the claim that John Barth is the patriarch of the genre of metafiction. His career has stretched over almost half a century, starting with his first novel *The Floating Opera* (1956), to his most recent *Collected Stories* (2015). Throughout Barth’s career, his approach to writing metafictional “self-aware” novels has taken various directions. For example, his highly intertextual work *Giles Goat-Boy, or, The Revised New Syllabus*¹ (1966) – with its allusions to theology, mythology and the Cold War – represents the world as a college campus, while his more subtle 1987 novel *The Tidewater Tales* takes as its focus the plight of storytellers and the act of storytelling. These two novels highlight two primary self-reflexive modes common to his writings. His novels usually contain past stories and myths as intertextual vehicles for the story, or the stories are about storytellers. These modes are not necessarily mutually exclusive. For example, his short story *Dunyazadiad* (1972) is a retelling of *One Thousand and One Nights* in which he uses a past story as a structure for his story, yet is also a story about storytelling.² Similarly, his 1992 novel *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* incorporates an ancient story – *Sinbad the Sailor* – that is itself a story

¹ Commonly known as *Giles Goat-Boy*.
² This is unavoidable given that *One Thousand and One Nights* is driven by the same self-reflexive imperative.
about storytelling. In fact, *Sinbad the Sailor* is one of the framed stories in *One Thousand and One Nights*. Moreover, *Sinbad the Sailor* is not just an embedded narrative but also functions to frame further stories.\(^1\)

When examining Barth’s œuvre it becomes apparent that all aspects of his story construction are expressly self-reflexive. Further Barthian strategies in this regard include: his choice of allusions to ancient stories for their metafictionality; fictional characters which are written to exist in the extradiegesis; and characters which are modelled on Barth himself. For example, Elaine Safer, in her chapter “John Barth, the University, and the Absurd”, makes the connection between Pennsylvania State University – where Barth lectured from 1953 to 1965 – and New Tammany College, the fictional campus that features in *Giles Goat-Boy*. Safer points out that New Tammany College “has many geographical similarities to Penn State, including a goat farm” (Siegel 1989 p. 89). More specifically, protagonist Peter Sagamore, in the novel *The Tidewater Tales*, is an academic and novelist from Dorchester County, just like Barth himself.\(^2\)

Yet Barth’s early fiction didn’t start out as self-referential. His first two novels, *The Floating Opera* (1956) and *The End of the Road* (1958) are relatively conservative works, written in a realistic mode. These two novels “portrayed contemporary incidents and characters; had made the action and locale appear believable; had provided dialogue sounding more or less the way people talk; had, that is, relied on the techniques of realism”. While he prepared to write his third

---

\(^1\) See Ulrich Marzolph’s *The Arabian Nights Reader* (pp. 329-30)
\(^2\) In this instance, my reference to self-reflexivity relates to the way Barth incorporates himself into the writing.
book, *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960), which he initially intended to be stylistically similar to his first two books, his ideas about the nature of fiction changed drastically” (Morrell 1975 p. 33). *The Sot-Weed Factor* marked this new metafictional direction. *The Sot-Weed Factor*, which is “substantially a stylisation of, and a tribute to, the eighteenth-century novel” (Slethaug 1993 p. 125), provides an insight into Barth’s adoption of appropriation, intertextuality and parody, which has remained throughout his career.

These literary manoeuvres go to the very heart of the operations of metafiction (and, more broadly, postmodern fiction). To begin with, the novel appropriates a previous text by Ebenezer Cooke (1665–1732), a British born English/American poet, who wrote “The Sot-Weed Factor, or A Voyage to Maryland, A Satyr” (1708), considered by some to be the first American satire. *The Sot-Weed Factor* (by Barth) not only draws on this earlier text and other historical details from the 1680s and ‘90s in London and Maryland, but also appropriates the *Bildungsroman*¹ style of writing from this period, positioning this novel as a work of historiographic metafiction. The sort of questions Barth is raising through this intertextual manoeuvre revolves around authorship, authenticity and the relationship between fictional and factual construction. These points – especially the relationship between fiction and fact – are of primary importance when

¹ *Bildungsroman* literally translates as a “novel of growth” or “formation-novel.” *Bildungsroman* generally depicts the personal development and growth of the protagonist. Originally, a German literary style, it took on a slightly different form when executed in Britain where it grew into a genre known for its overt transgressive depictions of sexuality and sexual politics (Childs 2006 p. 18-19). In fact, Barth utilises this *Bildungsroman* style to mimic not just Ebenezer Cooke’s text, but also Henry Fielding’s *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749) (Harris 1983 p. 59). This is not a surprising choice by Barth given that Fielding’s novel includes “embedded tales, numerous intertextual references and frequent metanarrative comments” (Hühn 2010 p. 74).
considering the types of ontological violations found in Barth’s novel *LETTERS*, one of the key texts I will be discussing in this chapter.

After *The Sot-Weed Factor*, Barth’s novels became increasingly metafictional – *Giles Goat-Boy*, *Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice* (1968), *Chimera* (1972) and *LETTERS*. Unlike *The Sot-Weed Factor* and *Giles Goat-Boy*, which contain stories about *someone*, *Lost in the Funhouse* marks a transition whereby the writing is primarily about *something* – namely, writing.

Barth’s preoccupation with writing-as-muse continues with his next book *Chimera*, which is actually composed of three novellas; *Dunyazadiad, Perseid* and *Bellerophoniad*. This novel refers to the mythical creature not just in name but also through its tripartite arrangement; the Chimera being composed of a lion’s head, a goat’s body, and a serpent’s tail. The titles of each story refer to the mythical characters Dunyazad, Perseus and Bellerophon. Similar to the revisionist reimagining of history seen in the historiographical metafiction of *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Chimera* can be seen as a kind of mythographic metafiction whereby the “facts” of Greek myths mutate to the service of each novella.

The first story, *Dunyazadiad* provides a simple, useful insight into Barth’s writing strategy. *Dunyazadiad*, is an adaptation of the Arabic story *One Thousand and One Nights* in which Scheherazade stalls her execution at the hand of the King by beginning a tale each night. In a similar strategy to *LETTERS*, *Dunyazadiad* includes the author as a character within the story. In the novel, Barth is central to saving Scheherazade’s life when he materialises from the future – *deus ex machina* style – and suggests a way for her to postpone her execution. *Dunyazadiad* is the first fictional work I analyse here because it strongly demonstrates Barth’s
fascination with allusion to past stories and their storytellers – through the incorporation of himself into the story as a character – while also providing clear examples of ontological violation. The story provides a clear example of how Barth’s work raises ontological issues regarding the conflation of the diegesis with the extradiegesis. After Dunyazadiad I will analyse a number of stories from his collection Lost in the Funhouse. The key focus of this chapter will be a selection of close readings from Barth’s novel LETTERS, which is widely considered his magnum opus, in order to examine the way he employs epistolary writing as a structural conceit in order to produce diegetic/ontological violations and ontological paradoxes.

**Literature: from fatigue to vigour**

Before I turn to Barth’s fiction, I will briefly look at his academic writing; specifically, one of his most cited essays, “The Literature of Exhaustion” (1967), which later became part of the collection of essays in The Friday Book (1984). The essay, “The Literature of Exhaustion” functions to locate historically a point in time in which metafictional/postmodern texts were placed under analysis. Barth outlines three primary concerns in this essay. His first concern is the “used-upness” of possibilities in contemporary literature, which as a result is left at an impasse. His second concern – or rather claim – is that experimental authors such as Samuel Beckett and Jorge Luis Borges are leading the way in resolving this impasse by exploiting the “felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for... [their]...
work”.¹ In doing so, these authors paradoxically “transcend” such ultimacies, which contain at the centre the impossibility of creating “original literature” (1984 p. 144). Finally, Barth raises some “professional concerns” that link in with his concept of the ultimacies of literature and its subsequent impasse tackled by authors like Borges and Beckett. He positions these writers as possessing the experimental inventiveness of the French *nouveau roman* yet “speak eloquently and memorably to our still-human hearts and conditions, as the great artists have always done” (1984 p. 140). Barth acknowledges that these authors are writing experimentally but – unlike other experimentalists – Borges and Beckett have the artistic talent of the “old masters” of the twentieth century to make such experimental writing work.

Of particular importance to this dissertation is the analysis of why writers such as Borges and Barth chose to engage with self-reflexive techniques. Barth explains that the motivation for self-reflexivity – which manifests in a variety of literary techniques such as direct address to the reader, conflation of diegetic boundaries, intertextuality, etc. – is driven by the desire to escape the exhausted “aesthetic of high modernism”. Barth points out that Borges “confronts an intellectual dead end and employs it against itself to accomplish new human work” (2002 p. 143). This is achieved through Borges’ interests and utilisation of the “story-within-the-story turned back upon itself”; in other words, Dällenbach’s paradoxical *mise en abîme*. Barth suggests that Borges’ use of “*regressus in

¹ In fact, Barth claims that his essay *The Literature of Exhaustion* (1967) – which was ostensibly about the exhaustion of modernism – was written “in an effort to come to terms with the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges” (1984 p. 142).
"infinitum" is so fascinating because it “disturb[s] us metaphysically when the characters in a work of fiction become readers or authors of the fiction they’re in, we’re reminded of the fictitious aspect of our own existence” (2002 p. 145). In many respects, Barth’s writing is a continuation of the concerns inherent in the work of Borges. One of these concerns, as pointed out by Eberhard Alsen, is that of the fantastic. Both Borges and Barth utilise the fantastic in order to advance their own philosophical concerns. Borges “employs the fantastic to give his stories a metaphysical dimension, [while] Barth employs it... to develop his nihilistic outlook” (Alsen 1996 p. 155).

The main literary example, which Barth cites in “The Literature of Exhaustion”, is Borges’ short story Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote (1939). The story is written as a scholarly review or hommage to the fictional twentieth century French writer Pierre Menard. Menard sets out to write – not reproduce or copy – a number of chapters of Miguel de Cervantes’ novel The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha, (1605–1615). In part, what Borges is attempting to do in this short story can be summed up by the narrator of the story when stating that the “Cervantes text and the Menard text are verbally identical, but the second is almost infinitely richer” (Borges 1998 p. 94). In other words, the differences between these two identical texts are the authors and their unique sociohistorical context: Cervantes the fifteenth century Spaniard and Menard the twentieth century French symbolist. What Borges is exploring – and is of interest to Barth – in Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote is that works of literature are
dependent on the sociohistorical context in which they are created and read.¹ Literature can never suffer exhaustion because it is uniquely created and uniquely understood in different periods in history. In addition, the judgment of the narrator that Menard’s text is “infinitely richer” raises further questions regarding originality, reader-response criticism² and authorship.³ Barth points out that Borges “doesn’t merely exemplify an ultimacy; he employs it” in order to critique ultimacies (2002 p. 141). For Barth, self-reflexive and highly intertextual texts such as *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* serve to re-evaluate and replenish literature through the way such texts are designed to fold back on themselves. Barth’s essay credits Beckett and Borges as breaking from the “aesthetic of high modernism”, in order to escape what many at the time saw as a depleted, “used up” literary dead end.

Although the essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” provides a good departure point for Barth’s central preoccupations, such a reflexive text (Barth on Barthian writers), the essay may possibly have prejudicial shortcomings with respect to whether early twentieth century literature had indeed reached a creative cul-de-sac (a point which is debatable) and – if this is the case – had been saved by authors of metafiction (and its precursors such as Borges). Niall Lucy argues that Barth’s thesis is not simply that literary works from the past, such as Laurence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–1769), “can

¹ It is interesting to note the similar didactic style of Borges’ short stories and Barth’s short pieces in *Lost in the Funhouse*.
² A literary movement from the 1960s that places an emphasis on how the reader interprets a literary work.
³ Such concepts of authorship and providence are also questioned in Cervantes’ novel *Don Quixote*. Cervantes cites the fictional Moorish author, Cide Hamete Benengeli as having recorded the noble deeds of Don Quixote.
be seen in terms of metafictive or postmodern writing today; it’s that, from the
beginning, literature was always already self-reflexive or self-questioning about
what ‘it’ is” (2000 p. 28).

Like all historical revisionism, this reassessment or rebadging of the works of
Sterne and Miguel de Cervantes as postmodern is, for the most part, dependent on
the paradigmatic cultural upheaval, which “arose in America in the 1960s and ’70s
to do with a felt sense of change in relation to questions of literature”. Nevertheless,
despite such revisionist impulses, which were stirring in 1960s/70s America, such
re-examinations of past authors preoccupied with self-reflexivity proved fruitful in
informing avant-garde authors of the mid to late twentieth century of their
heritage. It was Barth’s essay “The Literature of Exhaustion” which played a part in
such a reexamination.

Central to Barth’s thesis is that writers such as Sterne and Cervantes –
through the use of intertextuality and allusion – produce self-conscious novels and
the same literary strategy can be seen in the work of Borges and Robbe-Grillet.
Barth’s claim in “The Literature of Exhaustion” is one in which “the novel of
‘originality’... actually represents a counter tradition” [and as such] “metafiction
defines the tradition against which realism has to be seen as... unorthodox” (Lucy
1997 pp. 104-05).
Framing framed stories in *Dunyazadiad*

Like *The Sot-Weed Factor*, *Dunyazadiad* is a story inspired by another story. It is no surprise that the intertextual reference for *Dunyazadiad* is *One Thousand and One Nights*, which is itself not just a story about stories but about framed stories. Genette explains the narrative structure of *One Thousand and One Nights* as extradiegetic narrator A (the first narrator of the *One Thousand and One Nights*) producing a “speech bubble” – a first narrative with its diegesis – in which would appear an (intra) diegetic character B (Scheherazade) who in turn becomes the narrator of a metadiegetic narrative about the metadiegetic character C (Sinbad) (1988 p. 85) (see Figure 1). Add to this narrative a helpful time-travelling Genie who feeds stories to Scheherazade from a future copy of *Arabian Nights* (*One Thousand and One Nights*) and you have the premise for *Dunyazadiad*.

![Figure 2 - Narrative structure of One Thousand and One Nights](image)

---

1 It is possible that the story’s title *Dunyazadiad* is an allusion to Alexander Pope’s literary satire *The Dunciad* (1728).
2 This can also be viewed as an intra-intra-diegetic narrative.
One Thousand and One Nights is brimming with potential metafictional possibilities. The very fact that it is a story about stories and storytelling, positions it alongside works such as Tristram Shandy and Don Quixote, which have a history of being plundered by metafictionalists for self-reflexive treasures.¹ The difference between the diegetic narrative structures of One Thousand and One Nights as opposed to Dunyazadiad is that the former keeps the diegetic levels apart and the latter violates them.

![Figure 3 - Narrative structure of Dunyazadiad](image)

¹ The influence of The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha extends beyond writers of fiction such as The Moor's Last Sigh (1995) by Salman Rushdie, Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote (1939) by Jorge Luis Borges, or Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream by Kathy Acker, but is also evident in Michel Foucault’s The Order of Things (1966) that examines quixotic aporia. The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha also had a significant influence on The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, with Stern himself referring to the “Cervantic humour” of the novel (1891 p. 211). For The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, adaptations carry through and amplify metafictionally in Martin Rowson’s graphic novel of the same name and also the metafilmic adaptation A Cock and Bull Story (2005) by director Michael Winterbottom.
As seen in Figure 2 above from Robert Chambers’ study *Parody: the Art That Plays with Art*, violations occur in *Dunyazadiad* when there is a break in one of the boxes. Chambers refers to the reflexive narrative structure of *Dunyazadiad* as an example of “broken boxed banding”. The eight levels of banding Chambers lists in *Dunyazadiad* are: (1) the Arabian nights tales; (2) the frame story regarding Scheherazade and her pursuit to live another night; (3) the narrative supplied by Scheherazade’s sister, Dunyazade; (4) Zaman’s band; (5) an omniscient and unidentified narrator; (6) the narration from the Genie, who is also identified as John Barth; (7) Dunyazadiad (the short story itself); (8) *Chimera*, the title of the collection of stories (2010 p. 102). The two final levels of banding (7 and 8) aren’t directly relevant to my discussion here, given that I’m only specifically interested in narrative levels rather than Chambers’ broader discussions around the way in which a work’s title functions to frame. Nonetheless, it is the case that entitling can be employed to highlight certain kinds of ontological violation. Chambers’ diagram thus underscores the existence of a breach that permeates all of the diegetic levels. It is level 6 – in which the stories of *One Thousand and One Nights* pass from the Genie (John Barth) to Scheherazade – that creates an infinite regress.

As observed by Stan Fogel and Gordon Slethaug, this sustained diegetic breach has the effect of “reversing the relation between container and contained – telling the stories to Scheherazade that she in *One Thousand and One Nights* tells to him” (1990 p. 137).¹ This description of Barth’s novella by Fogel and Slethaug is

¹ This is a direct reference to a conversation, which takes place between the Genie and Scheherazade in the novel, whereby they contemplate the structure and function of narrative framing only to then move on to equally reflexive musings regarding the psychoanalytic underpinning of language and

(Footnote continued on next page)
reminiscent of the previously mentioned Klein-bottle structure in which the internal and external share the same space. Barth utilises this “time loop” paradox – in which the Genie feeds the stories contained in *One Thousand and One Nights* to Scheherazade, whose story is eventually recorded in a book, which the Genie reads and then feeds to Scheherazade – in order to place under scrutiny the intertextual nature of stories. It also raises questions around the relationship between the production of stories and their provenance. And, what of Barth’s choice of story to “rewrite”? Where did *One Thousand and One Nights* originate? Its genealogy is murky, given that it is a collection of Middle Eastern stories from diverse Persian, Indian, Turkish and Mesopotamian folk tales. *Dunyazadiad* is a story, which on the one hand, affirms storytelling, while, on the other, questions and undermines the heroic authenticity of the storyteller.

The central conceit, regarding a time-travelling Genie who crosses diegetic realms – from *Dunyazadiad* to *One Thousand and One Nights* – is entirely outlandish. Barth wants the reader to put aside conventional approaches to reading a text. The Genie (Barth) – through his omniscient power – mirrors Barth (the former Penn State professor), resulting in a sort of pedagogical fiction. The Genie – as an antirealist intertextual manoeuvre – signals to the reader that we must discard the conventional mindset that each work of fiction lives independently as a mimesis of the real world. All works of fiction (in fact, all texts) are fundamentally connected through various degrees of separation. It is this connection which goes to the heart of *Dunyazadiad*. Rather than critiquing the function of fiction as sexuality (Barth 1972 p. 24).
mimesis of reality Dunyazadiad critiques the problems inherent in mimesis of mimesis.

Lost in the Funhouse of metafiction

Barth’s writing, which explores the writing process and strategies underpinning the creation of fiction, puts it in a category which Mark Curry labels a “borderline discourse”: a merging of critical and fictional writing. Of all Barth’s oeuvre, none of his novels demonstrates this conflation between fiction and academic instruction more so than Lost in the Funhouse. This collection of short stories, published one year after “The Literature of Exhaustion”, engages with the process of “fiction creation” almost at the cost of content or plot (Slethaug 1990 p. 4). The title of Barth’s collection of short stories Lost in the Funhouse: Fiction for Print, Tape, Live Voice, hints from the outset that the reader should be prepared for playful fictions that can’t be easily located. While the title foreshadows themes such as the carnivalesque and aporia, “[t]he subtitle’s sequence...print → tape → live voice, seems to suggest...a returning from writing, through a mediating stage, to orality” (Caramello 1983 p. 116), or in a Platonic sense, returning from the impurity of the written word to the logos (trans., Greek, word or speech). If Barth seems to be suggesting a return to foundations or absolutes, this is ironic, given that the collection of short stories is deliberately riddled with deferment or vacuums of meaning. This obfuscation of meaning takes various forms, such as labyrinthine
narrative structures, intertextual slippages and semiotic, self-referencing jokes\(^1\) such as the title of one of his stories entitled, \textit{Title}.

\textit{Frame Tale}, the first story from \textit{Lost in the Funhouse}, isn’t really a story at all, but a set of instructions; a demonstration exercise more fitting in the context of a university tutorial than a work of fiction. This exercise requires that the reader cut out a narrow piece of text from the book, twist it \(180^\circ\) and join both ends to form a Möbius strip. When finished, the strip contains the words “Once upon a time there was a story that began” as a continuous and endless loop. The text weaves its way from the inside to the outside of the loop, providing an allegory for the possibilities in which texts can both frame and be framed. Taking reader-response theory to a new level of engagement, the outcome of following Barth’s instructions results in a page missing from the text. Two texts now sit before the reader; the book \textit{Lost in the Funhouse} with its newly created lacunae and a Möbius strip containing an infinitely repeating opening.

\textit{Frame Tale} serves as the framing allegory for the rest of the book, positioning \textit{mise en abîme} as one of its main concerns. It functions “as both message and medium...[its form] lacking fixed content or signification, doubles and repeats itself ad infinitum if the reader permits; within what appears a self-enclosed tale there is no enclosure, or within an endless tale there is complete enclosure – as the reader chooses”\(^2\). \textit{Frame Tale} frames all the stories contained

\footnote{Discussions on semiotics fundamentally rely on the on the gap or lacunae which exist between the signifier and the signified.}

\footnote{The conjugation of message and messenger which is “demonstrated” in \textit{Frame Tale} is explicitly stated in \textit{Night-Sea Journey} by the protagonist Ambrose Mensch (more on him later), who happens to be a spermatozoön, reflecting on how he can be “both vessel and contents” (1968 p. 3). We have}
in *Lost in the Funhouse* as being “not so much preoccupied with *what* they tell as with *how* they do so” (D’haen 2002 p. 34). If the reader chooses to follow the instructions contained in *Frame Tale* to the letter, this pedagogical “craft project” – with its attention to the physical form of a text – reaches such a point that the narrative moves off the page into materiality; or, if you will, from the diegesis of the text out into the extradiegesis of the crafty reader.

**Menelaiad and mise en abîme**

As opposed to the flat repetitive “story” that rides the surface of the Möbius strip in *Frame Tale*, another story from the collection *Menelaiad*, is structured as a “who-said-what-to-who” multiple nested narrative; ad absurdum. *Menelaiad*’s repetitive form has a descending structure in which the protagonist Menelaus – the Mycenaean king – recounts his past, involving “narratives of his own characters, who in turn include the narratives of others” (Slethaug p. 31). The story, containing stories within stories and so on, reaches such dizzying narrative levels it almost throws the reader into floundering aporia. I say almost because, like Hansel’s breadcrumbs, Barth’s use of quote marks within quote marks orient the reader, by providing a “running measure of the depth to which the narrator has embedded the story”. And, on the ultimate narrative level it is Menelaus’s wife Helen who gets the “last and deepest word, winged with eight levels (the outermost unmarked) of diegetic tension: “““““Love!””””’ (Clarke 2008 p. 95).

---

seen a similar type of metaphor before when looking at Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and his reference to the way in which narrative framing is like a nut enclosed in a shell.
Similar to Calvino’s novel *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, *Menelaiad* puts forward the relationship of information “transmission” and narrative-level playfulness. Both these two stories also share the *raison d’être* for such complex narrative nesting, which is the idea that the text functions as both the messenger and the message. Calvino’s novel narrates in first, second and third person throughout two diegeses which flip back and forth across chapters. One of the messages of this “detective fiction” – with its hunt for a complete copy of *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller* – is the demonstration of the instability of texts. The carnivalesque manifold narrative/diegetic structure mirrors, and formally advances the poststructuralist idea that texts are never complete and are contingent on other texts. Similarly, in *Menelaiad* the story steps down narrative levels. The protagonist Menelaus moves deeper and deeper down when, “in his innermost story, he asks the Oracle at Delphi...‘Who am I?’ The answer...is seven sets of quotation marks enclosing nothing” (Harris 1983 p. 116). Barth effectively hijacks the normative conventions of quote marks, which are commonly seen singularly or in pairs and, occasionally, as two pairs to reflexively interrogate the function of quotation marks as a framing device.

Putting aside other metafictional concerns in the *Menelaiad*, it is this proliferation of quote marks throughout the story – which normally reside within a text as inconsequential and secondary – that serves as a constant reminder of the didactic point Barth is making; that being, “foundationless regression”. Sletthaug makes the observation that the “idea of a *mise en abyme* (a frame within a frame to infinity) has become an extremely important way of conveying...the disappearance of causation or origin” (2000 p. 31). It is clear that Barth chooses to reiterate the
idea of endless repetition in order to question philosophical ideas such as essentialism\(^1\) and authorship. Barth simultaneously references a canonical myth while undermining possibilities of provenance that ultimately open broader philosophical questions concerning logos. There is a question which constantly stalks *Menelaiad*; what is the source or essence of myth? Is it an historical distortion of the truth or is it an honest, universal allegory. Is it amorphous and transitory or is it essential and absolute?

The source of the *mise en abîme* in *Menelaiad* is the repeated positioning of the narrator within the story of the narrator *ad infinitum*. At one point in the story, Menelaus exclaims, “When will I reach my goal through its cloaks of story? How many veils to naked Helen?” (1968 p. 144).\(^2\) In this way, Barth “unveils” his use of narrative framing; draws attention to it. It can be argued that *Menelaiad*, through its use of multiple framing, unmask[s] the conventions of fiction writing by way of exhaustive repetition. The quote marks around the Oracle’s reply, which ripple down to emptiness, highlight that “[n]either Menelaus nor Helen exists outside the stories that contain and create them” (Harris 1983 p. 116). Perhaps Barth’s hope is that the reader – with the sharpened attention necessary to keep track of this multi-framed narrative – will play a part in the replenishment of the novel.\(^3\) Even though there is only one narrator in *Menelaiad*, the shift which occurs through Menelaus telling stories within stories, is “characterised by emphasis on the

---

\(^1\) Essentialism is the belief that there is an essence or set of characteristics to things in the world that are intrinsic and absolute. One of the first people to suggest this idea was Plato and his Theory of Forms.

\(^2\) Not only does Menelaus have to wrestle with the confusing polymorphic figure of Proteus; he (like the reader) also has to struggle with the confusing multi-layering of narratives.

\(^3\) An argument advanced by reader-response theory, which places “emphasis on the different ways in which a reader participates in the course of reading a text” (Cuddon 1999 p. 726).
process of communicating knowledge [and antagonises any understanding of] who imparts what to whom” (Nelles 2002 p. 344). The way Barth poses problems of infinite regress and *mise en abîme* in *Menelaiad*, is relentless and formally explicative. The “borderline discourse” operating throughout *Lost in the Funhouse* seems to be informed more by Barth-the-academic than Barth-the-prose-writer.

McHale states that in a *mise en abîme* “everything is mirrored, and finally no distinction is possible between the original and its double, the model and the thing modeled” (2006 p. 177). This description seems to mirror the figure of Menelaus, who is simultaneously the subject, narrated and the narrated subject resulting in the dilution of the ontological status of Menelaus. Therefore, while the nested narratives in *Menelaiad* create *mise en abîme*, which functions to problematise the ontology of the text, ontological violations don’t exist because all of the narratives exist in the same ontological “world”. Yet, *Menelaiad* may not even make it into McHale’s definition of *mise en abîme* because it is only the narrator who is reflected in the nested narratives. *Mise en abîme* manifests through the text’s absurdly overloaded structure. This type of *mise en abîme* doesn’t bear any similarity to the ontological distinction which exists between Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and its contained play of *Mousetrap*; which also fits a story within a story with different narrators.¹ Yet each subordinate level of *Menelaiad* provides narratives which reflect the previous level and serve as a segue into the next level down, to the point at which it is “turtles all the way down” or, to riff on this expression, it is “texts all the way down”.

¹ *Mousetrap* is authored by Hamlet.
In the case of realist and naturalist fiction the main purpose of \textit{mise en abîme} is “to make a text clearer and more comprehensible by doubling it, holding up to it a mirror in which its essential features could be contemplated”. With regard to Symbolist, \textit{nouveau roman} and, in particular, postmodern fiction McHale asserts that \textit{mise en abîme} is employed to create “paradox and the uncanny, disrupting representation and increasing complexity and difficulty” (2006 p. 178). Yet, \textit{Menelaiad} doesn’t seem to comfortably fall into either camp; its \textit{mise en abîme} is semiotic rather than existential. The \textit{mise en abîme}, in which the figure of the narrator is mirrored, reflected and refracted, bears resemblance to the stories told and retold in \textit{Heart of Darkness}, yet it is the overdetermination of Menelaus that problematises the stability of each narrated level in the text.

\textit{Mise en abîme} is a powerful and versatile literary technique that can figure in any genre of fiction and can be put to use to disrupt or interrogate the ontology or epistemology of a text. Unlike the simplicity of narrative framing, the recognition and analysis of \textit{mise en abîme} is a far more difficult task. This is not only due to the added requirement that the embedded narrative reflects the primary narrative but also because of the highly subjective nature of determining how much of the original narrative needs to be mirrored in order for it to be defined as \textit{mise en abîme}. As opposed to the epistemological \textit{mise en abîme} in \textit{Menelaiad}, \textit{LETTERS} utilises this literary device epistemologically, in which narrators narrate narrators, but also ontologically, in which “nested” worlds violate each other.
Conflated “authors” and ontological violations through LETTERS

Before I look at Barth’s epistolary novel LETTERS¹ it is important to discuss the genre of epistolary writing in order to establish the way in which Barth is appropriating this genre. It has been argued that the increased popularity of letter writing (and subsequent letter collecting) which occurred during the 1600s was largely due to the “expansion of court and drawing-room society and the creation of an efficient postal service” (Visconti 1994 p. 294). This pervasiveness of letter writing led to the birth of the epistolary novel, which began to flourish in seventeenth century Europe. Yet, the use of the epistolary form can be seen as far back as ancient Greece with Chaireas and Callirhoe (circa first century A.D.) written by Chariton. However, Chaireas and Callirhoe made use of the epistolary form as “fragments” incorporated into a broader work of non-epistolary prose. Chaireas and Callirhoe begins with the narrator introducing himself in a manner of the “early historians” in which he states his occupation and city of residence at the beginning of the text. This deliberate framing strategy, in which the author positions himself with “historians, to justify the ‘truth’ of his story” (Rosenmeyer 2001 p. 138) – along with the use of letters throughout a narrative – increases the sense of authenticity and provenance of the tale. Authenticity and provenance are important features and, by their very nature, a necessary outcome of the epistolary genre.

¹ The subtitle for this novel, which functions to preface its metafictional content, reads An Old Time Epistolary Novel by Seven Fictitious Drolls & Dreamers Each of Which Imagines Himself Factual.
Epistolary writing can hide its fictionality due to its first person creation and the nonfiction convention of correspondence, which it exploits. Quote marks and omniscient narrators, which disclose the “fiction” of a work of fiction, are circumvented in this genre. If quote marks are used, they are normalised within the framework of the correspondence. In fact, the genre of epistolary writing which “presents itself as direct evidence, as a document of facts and feelings” (Visconti 1994 p. 299) is the antithesis of metafiction, which strives to highlight itself as fiction.

One of the earliest “modern” epistolary novels is *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (published anonymously in 1669).¹ This collection of five letters proved extremely popular throughout the seventeenth century. In part, this was due to the book’s scandalous nature – for it contained passionate love letters. However, *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* was also so popular because, at the time, the letters contained were thought to be authentic.² Another notable epistolary novel, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) by the eighteenth century English writer Samuel Richardson tells the tale of a poor servant girl named Pamela Andrews whose employer, a lecherous nobleman referred to as Mr B.³, constantly makes uninvited “advances” towards her. The novel, written in the *Bildungsroman* genre, follows the life of Pamela from orphaned child, youthful struggle and finally success and acceptance in the broader

---

¹ However, eventually attributed to the French politician Gabriel de Guilleragues (1628–1684).
² Controversy has surrounded the provenance of the anonymously published novel *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* up to this day. One of the most recent publications regarding this controversy is Myriam Cyr’s book *Letters of a Portuguese Nun: Uncovering the Mystery Behind a 17th Century Forbidden Love* (2006). Cyr argues in her book that the Portuguese nun, Mariana Alcoforado (1640–1723), who was rumoured to have had a love affair with the French officer Noël Bouton de Chamilly, was the author of the letters.
³ Barth is occasionally referred to as Mr B. in *LETTERS*. 
world. Both *Letters of a Portuguese Nun* and *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* demonstrate how epistolary novels utilise the personal nature of correspondence in order to describe “the senses” and present truth claims. It is this highly subjective and personal characteristic of letter writing, coupled with its ability to be framed as “authentic”, which heightens the level of authenticity in epistolary fiction.

It is the veracious quality of letter writing which becomes the source of play in Barth’s novel *LETTERS*. Barth isn’t just appropriating the epistolary genre in his novel *LETTERS*, he is also citing other non-epistolary texts from that period. Neither of the previously mentioned texts utilise the elaborate chapter titles that are employed in Barth’s *LETTERS*. Self-reflexive titles such as “Ambrose Mensch to the Author. A left-handed letter following up a telephone call. Alphabetical instructions from one writer to another”, are referencing the elaborate titles employed in eighteenth century books such as *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749) by the English writer Henry Fielding.¹ Chapter titles from this novel such as “Chapter XIV. A Most Dreadful Chapter Indeed; and Which Few Readers Ought to Venture upon in an Evening, Especially When Alone”, are both elaborate and – in the example given – metafictive.

The inclusion of reflexive chapter titles such as these go against the grain of the epistolary genre, which tends to hold verisimilitude at its center. Such chapter headings in *LETTERS* draw attention to “fictiveness and the organizational patterning that belie the realist representation conventionally suggested by the use of the epistolary form” (Hutcheon 2002 p. 82). In *LETTERS* this “realist

---

¹ Otherwise known simply as *Tom Jones*, it is one of the earliest works of English prose to be referred to as a novel.
representation” is undercut at the level of the chapter titles by the very fact that the characters address their letters to the author. Such diegetic violations are exploited to great effect.

Given the length of LETTERS (over 750 pages long), I have decided to break the analysis of this novel down into two sections. The first section will be largely descriptive, in order to supply an overview of the content and structure of the novel. This will provide the context for the second section, which will be a close reading of the letters of Ambrose Mensch, in order to examine specifically the varied ways Barth transgresses diegetic boundaries and what function such violations play in the ontology of this novel.

LETTERS is both an epistolary novel and a self-reflexive homage to the epistolary genre. The narrative is structured around seven correspondences, five of which are characters from Barth’s earlier novels.¹ This re-appropriation of past characters is important because it also supplies Barth with the possibilities of narrative framing², which figures prominently throughout his previous work.³ Densely intertextual, Barth’s LETTERS resurrects characters from past novels

---

¹ Lady Amherst (a.k.a. Germaine G. Pitt) is the exception here, having never appeared in a previous work of Barth’s fiction. Barth is the seventh letter writer. Even though I haven’t done so, it would be just as correct to list him as having also appeared as a character in his earlier novels; for instance, the figure of the Genie in Dunyazadiad.

² This isn’t just because there are multiple “authors” involved. The same framing structure can be achieved whereby a single narrator writes a series of letters or writes a letter, which includes a transcription of another letter. A similar, albeit more simple, structure can be seen in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Poor Folk (1846), which involves the correspondence between two people as a first person narrative. Each letter not only frames the other but also integrates the text as a whole, through the extended dialogue within the familiar convention of correspondence, creating a narrative that spills from one frame (letter) to the other.

³ Another obvious reference point for Barth’s LETTERS is Italian theatricalist, Luigi Pirandello’s play, Six Characters in Search of an Author (Sei Personaggi In Cerca d’Autore) (1921), because of the same number of characters (minus the author) and for the shared central preoccupation with self-reflexivity and ontological violations.
while at the same time exhumes what some may consider as the dead genre of epistolary writing. Yet Barth isn’t employing this genre unconditionally. As Kim McMullen points out, the novel extols the “self-revealing ‘textual’ qualities of epistolary conventions over their more traditionally-valued mimetic powers” (1990 p. 407). This point demonstrates the vulnerability of some of the defining qualities of the epistolary genre – authenticity and provenance – in the face of metafictional strategies. The verisimilar and “mimetic powers” inherent in the very ontology of epistolary writing don’t just come into question, in the context of self-reflexive writing, but – in the case of LETTERS – provide the pivotal conceit for the novel.

LETTERS “directly assaults the relationship between reality and representation” by reducing the world of fact and fiction to a “linguistic universe” (D’haen 1983 p. 43). D’haen asserts that the plot and characters of LETTERS “only exist in function, and are themselves functions of, the act of writing (or re-writing)” (1983 p. 44). Characters in this novel not only become both narrator and narrate but, in a breach of diegesis in which there is an ontological overlap, Barth himself begins to correspond with these characters, rendering the binary of fact and fiction meaningless. The plot – if that is the right word for such a rambling novel – is initiated in the form of a letter sent across an ontological boundary. This letter of invitation is addressed to “the author” (Barth) to accept an honorary Doctor of Letters from a fictitious university.

Not only are extradiegetic “characters” requested to “go into” the novel to attend fictional ceremonies but also characters within the novel are awarded credit for having penned texts “outside” of the novels in which they “live”. In an aside in section I of the first chapter titled “The Author To Whom It May Concern”. Three
concentric dreams of waking, Barth explains that both Mensch – from Barth’s novel Lost in the Funhouse – and Bray – referred to indirectly in Barth’s novel Giles Goat Boy (1966) – are partial authors of Barth’s previous novel Chimera (1972 p. 49).¹

To understand what Barth is trying to achieve and to fully appreciate the dynamics of these diegetic shifts it is crucial for the reader to incorporate Barth’s previous texts. In LETTERS, not only does the novelist (Barth) move from the extradiegetic level into the realm of fiction, but also dormant characters from Barth’s previous texts wander nomadically into this novel and out into the extradiegetic world of the reader. The occurrence of this intertextuality creates a type of “latent” diegetic movement once the reader has contextualised the novel with Barth’s earlier texts. While the letters contained in LETTERS function as discrete narratives which frame one another, they also function to create a complex, dynamic network of discourse that sources (what was up until that point) Barth’s oeuvre.

In light of the previously outlined metafictional premise of this novel, I now want to examine the character Ambrose Mensch. This character – who serves in both this novel, as well as Lost in the Funhouse, as Barth’s doppelgänger or proxy² – operates as a font for Barth’s writing strategy. As I mentioned, Mensch credits himself in LETTERS with coming up with the idea for one of the stories (Perseus)

---

¹ In fact, Bray (as protagonist in the short story “Bellerophoniad” in the collection Chimera) announces that “Art is as natural an artifice as Nature; the truth of fiction is that Fact is fantasy; the made-up story is a model of the world.” (1972 p. 246).
² Referred to by Barth in LETTERS as his “alter ego and aesthetic conscience; eventually even as the other’s fiction” (1979 p. 653).
from *Chimera*. This story draft spills over two letters: “H: Ambrose Mensch to yours truly. His final such letter: the plan of his abandoned Perseus story, conformed to the plan of his own life”, and “I: Ambrose Mensch to the author. A left-handed letter following up a telephone call. Alphabetical instructions from one writer to another”. If, as I have previously asserted, Barth is primarily concerned with allusions to stories or myths – which themselves are preoccupied with reflexive announcements such as narrative framing – or the reflexive figure of the storyteller, it is Ambrose Mensch who embodies both; for he is a metafictional storyteller, transdiegetic fictional collaborator and character-in-residence who inhabits metafictional “worlds”.¹

Letter “H” written by proxy Mensch² places the reader’s focus on Barth’s academic background. This letter – containing a numbered list of god–hero attributes from independent scholar Fitzroy Richard Somerset, a visual schematic from mythologist Joseph Campbell, and accompanying footnotes – presents a structural breakdown and rewriting of the Perseus myth. The letter closes with Mensch terminating his correspondence with Barth and the “career of ‘Arthur Morton King’” (1979 p. 651). In a contradictory move – with which this book is rife – the next letter, once again, is from Mensch to the author. This immediate ambivalence by Mensch underscores Barth’s devotion to the symbiotic relationship

¹ The novel, *LETTERS* is replete with references to what Barth regards as the “old masters” of literature such as Balzac, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville and Miguel de Cervantes (some of whom appear in the novel as minor characters).
² Also known as Arthur Morton King. This pen name – stated from the outset in letter “H” (but clearly referred to on page 152) possibly alludes to the myth of King Arthur. This is another “strategy of deferral” of Barth’s, in which the literary convention of a pen-name consequently alludes to a mythical figure, etc.. Similarly, the character Jacob Horner alludes to the nursery rhyme *Little Jack Horner*. Literary allusions such as this form part of Barth’s intellectual “Where’s Wally” game play.
that he has set up between both character and creator and the diegesis and extradiegesis. At one point in this letter Mensch tells Barth of his regret at having left the Funhouse (the novel *Lost in the Funhouse*), remarking that “it was so peaceful being lost there” (1979 p. 652). Even though the characters acknowledge the fictionality of the “worlds” they inhabited in other novels, none of them seem to suffer from what Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing refers to as “ontological insecurity”, in which an individual experiences a “precarious sense of existence” whereby it is difficult to maintain “a sense of personal continuity” (Miller 2004 p. 46). This would no doubt take place if such information were disclosed to a real conscious individual and there lies the limitations of ontological violations in works of fiction; it is only ever a proxy or stand in. One interpretation of Mensch’s remark would be that he was peacefully lost in the text *Lost in the Funhouse* and that existing in another text (*LETTERS*) affords him a privileged perspective on his plight in the Funhouse. It is possible that Mensch is lamenting his loss of innocence. Whether this is the case or not, the figure of Mensch – as intertextual character and self-reflexive literary commentator – epitomises the carnivalesque ontological violations which constantly churn throughout the text in *LETTERS* to the service of absurd humour.

Extending on my observations made regarding the overdetermined components, which multitask as both medium and messenger throughout *Lost in the Funhouse*, the same attributes can be applied to the figure of Ambrose Mensch. Mensch is but one of a number of intertextual and intratextual characters, settings

---

1 German philosopher Martin Heidegger (and others) argue that ontological insecurity exists in everyone in the form of existential anxiety.
or themes, which defy the logical boundaries ascribed to fiction; yet which are embraced by metafiction. It is through the revival of characters such as Mensch in \textit{LETTERS} that Barth “demonstrates that each work [of his fiction] is not self-contained in form or meaning but can be resurrected and transformed into another piece of art with different signification” (Slethaug 1993 p. 132). The strategy in \textit{LETTERS} in which Barth reemploys characters from his other novels and then promotes them to “authorial status” creates similar paradoxes regarding provenance or \textit{logos} as that seen in \textit{Dunyazadiad}. Again, using \textit{Frame Tale} as a comparison, the genie in \textit{Dunyazadiad} and Ambrose Mensch in \textit{LETTERS} both create narratives in which the “origin and telos of creativity cannot be charted in linear progression but in a complicated manner is shared by author and character, writer and reader, past and present” (Slethaug 1993 p. 133).

With all the mirroring of characters and plotlines across diegetic levels within the text of \textit{LETTERS} and beyond – from other Barthian texts – it is not surprising that instances of \textit{mise en abîme} appear. This structural device, when used in \textit{Menelaiad}, functions on a purely epistemological level much like its operation in \textit{One Thousand and One Nights}. However, in the case of \textit{LETTERS}, in which we have repetitions of characters, texts and themes between both narrative levels \textit{and} dietetic levels, the instances of \textit{mise en abîme} also operate ontologically. The obvious instances occur when the primary diegesis spills into the extradiegesis as seen in the example of Ambrose Mensch, who both inhabits a number of Barth’s fictional texts while also authoring others.\footnote{Mensch’s interests seem to gravitate towards self-reflexivity. Topics discussed include narratology, \textit{Footnote continued on next page}}
In addition to these obvious repetitions, which move out of the text into the extradiegesis, there are also many examples of hypodiegetic mirroring in which the primary diegesis is reflected one diegetic level down. For instance, there is “Reg Prinz’s asymptotic film\textit{ FRAMES} and Jerome Bray’s “revolutionary” work as it undergoes its various transformations from \textit{NOVEL} to \textit{NOTES} to \textit{NUMBERS} ...

[and also]... Ambrose Mensch’s several half-finished, abandoned, and embryonic narratives” (Harris 1983 p. 164), all of which, in some manner or form, refer to the primary diegesis in \textit{LETTERS}; or at least to Barth’s other novels.\footnote{Any reference to Barth’s other novels obviously leads back to the novel \textit{LETTERS}, which is populated by the protagonists from his previous novels.} Furthermore, included in one of Ambrose Mensch’s letters – credited under his pen-name Arthur Morton King – is the short story \textit{The Amateur, or, a Cure for Cancer}. This short story is structured in a similar way to \textit{LETTERS} whereby sections are alphabetised. At the beginning of section “I”, which occurs about halfway through the story, the first person narrator declares, “I’m lost in the funhouse....” However, the question is presented to the reader; raising the question, \textit{who} is actually lost? Because the narrator goes on to explain that “\textit{the I of this episode isn’t I; I don’t know who is}” (1979 p. 168). This can be read as a statement by Barth that he is lost in a “funhouse” of fiction in which the \textit{I} shares equal footing with invention. Further on in this section the narrator separates himself from the “author” (or his alias) by referring, in the first person, to both Ambrose Mensch and Arthur Morton King. These instances of \textit{mise en abîme} – alphabetised sections and metamorphic narrators, etc. – dislocate characters throughout the novel \textit{LETTERS}. Yet, because...
of the relentless use of narrative framing, *mise en abîme*, diegetic violation, intertextuality, Derridean deferral, puns and countless other forms of literary game play, the narrative remains cohesive; contextually bound by these closely related literary components. These components work to remove the possibility of any “originary beginning or conclusive end... [which reinforces]... its status as a *mise en abîme*, a Derridean plexus of intertextual traces” (Harris 1983 p. 165). Barth creates a “self-generating linguistic system” (D’haen 1983 p. 46) in order to provide a narrative of free-floating possibilities rather than logocentric certainty.

**Summary**

After examining a number of Barth’s texts it becomes evident that his use of self-referencing and intertextual referencing is undertaken as a “borderline discourse” to not only examine the way stories are constructed, but to explore the – at times – complex relationship between fictional (diegetic) and factual (extradiegetic) construction. The motivation for Barth’s use of intertextuality and self-referentiality can be found in “The Literature of Exhaustion” and reiterated (like much of his fictional writing) in “The Literature of Replenishment” in which he makes reference to the exhaustion of certain literary possibilities and the ultimate impossibility of originality. Barth’s reasoning is one in which the artist must tackle the problem of literary exhaustion and produce something passionate and engaging through the ensuing dialectic.

The ontological violations outlined in this chapter are but one of the strategies Barth employs to reboot literature. Yet it is diegetic violations which predominantly
figure in almost all of his writing. No more so is this the case than in *LETTERS*, with its central premise of fictional characters corresponding with their author (and each other); Pirandelloesque characters who have the ability to travel across various texts. Barth explains himself in “The Literature of Exhaustion” in which he (as always, deferred and once removed) speaks of Jorge Luis Borges’ interest in “the story-within-the-story turned back upon itself”. “[W]hen the characters in a work of fiction become readers or authors of the fiction they’re in, we’re reminded of the fictitious aspect of our own existence…” Such stories “disturb us metaphysically” (2002 p. 145). The ontological violations in Barth’s fiction provide the reader with a fleeting privileged position from which to examine one’s own life while also forwarding the proposition that “reality is but a framework of infinitely nesting narratives” (Maltby 1991 p. 530).

Ultimately, it is the “problematization of the characters’ ontological status, and of the very world he is invoking” which occurs throughout *LETTERS* – such as the appearance of Edgar Allan Poe and Balzac as minor characters alongside fictional characters – that provides commentary on the “fictionality” of the real world rather than the reality of fictional worlds. This inversion by Barth, in which “life imitates art, or fact fiction” is done to jeopardise the reader’s sense of fact” (D’haen 1983 pp. 58-59). Barth’s fiction extends the twentieth century tradition, forged by writers such as Borges, Pirandello and Gide, which sets out to contest the mimetic nature of realist fiction by “fuzzing the ontological status of characters and author, of characters’ and reader’s reality” (D’haen 1983 p. 65). Barth advances the argument in *LETTERS* that there is no meaningful reality beyond “the level of verbalization” and dismisses claims that the realistic novel “faithfully represent[s]
reality as mere pretense” (D’haen 1983 p. 64). As Barth writes in “The Literature of Exhaustion”, “literature can never be exhausted, if only because no single literary text can ever be exhausted – its “meaning” residing as it does in its transactions with individual readers over time, space, and language” (1984 p. 205).
Chapter 3. Alain Robbe-Grillet: “world” creation through ekphrasis

Introduction

Alain Robbe-Grillet (1922–2008) was a French *Rive Gauche* filmmaker and *nouveau roman* (new novel) writer. Émile Henriot first used the term *nouveau roman* in a review in the newspaper *Le Monde* in May 1957 in reference to Nathalie Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet (Kauppi 1996 p. 99). The *nouveau roman* was a distinctly European precursor to American metafictionalists such as Barth and postmodernists such as Pynchon. The term *nouveau roman* was used to describe French writers whose preoccupations centred on language. This literary focus was a natural extension of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s work in the 1900s on semiotics. French literary theorist Roland Barthes (1915–1980) describes Robbe-Grillet’s writing as having “no density and no depth: it remains on the surface of the object and inspects it impartially, without favoring any particular quality: it is the exact opposite of poetic writing” (1972 p. 14).

Robbe-Grillet’s essay, “New Novel, New Man” (1961) from his work, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* (1963) outlines these “innovations in language” which define the *nouveau roman*. In this essay, he rejects what he considers misguided condemnation of the *nouveau roman*. While most of Robbe-Grillet’s observations regarding the *nouveau roman* are sound, his argument becomes

---

1 The *Rive Gauche* (Left Bank) filmmakers were connected with French New Wave cinema but also had strong ties to the *nouveau roman* movement and left wing politics. Directors associated with this movement were Agnès Varda, Jacques Demy, Alain Resnais and Chris Marker.
convoluted and counterintuitive when he suggests that his flat writing style, which impartially “remains on the surface” of objects, is the best way to depict subjectivity; which was one of his central concerns. Robbe-Grillet argues that accompanying the detailed descriptions – so typical of his writing – is “the eye which sees them, the thought which re-examines them, the passion which distorts them” (1989 p. 137) and that his novels engage in an obsessive “emotional adventure” which distorts vision to the point of “producing imaginings close to delirium” (1989 p. 138). This assertion seems closely associated with attributes of subjectivity. The issue isn’t so much the rendering of subjectivity but more the location of the subjectivity rendered. And, on this point Robbe-Grillet’s novels sometimes have more than one focaliser (point of view), and the narrative is often ambivalent or contradictory.

The discourse surrounding the aesthetic merits of the *nouveau roman* are varied. Some view this writing style, with its narrative dead ends and blindspots, as being devoid of human connection, while others argue that it is these very gaps in the text, which corral the reader’s attention and engagement. With its fractures and ellipses, the writing style of the *nouveau roman* maintains the stance of a half-made jigsaw puzzle; beckoning the reader to fill the remaining pieces. It is the half-madeness of the *nouveau roman* that compels the “creative role of the reader in the construction of the novel” (Kafalenos 1983 p. 40). As such, every reader uniquely constructs the text, and invariably “finishes” the text with a unique experience. This isn’t to imply that experiencing realist texts – which strive to mimic a stable ontology (like that of the reader) whereby there is a single focaliser located in logical causation – is somehow homogeneous. It is just a matter of amplitude. The
more the reader has to interpret and fill gaps, the more Robbe-Grillet’s delirious, phantastic “worlds” are shaped, constructed and subsequently owned by the reader.

Similar to Barth, Robbe-Grillet’s writing career spanned decades.¹ His career can be loosely divided into his early *nouveau roman* period which includes his novels *A Regicide (Un Regicide)* (1949), *The Erasers (Les Gommes)* (1953), *The Voyeur (Le Voyeur)* (1955), *Jealousy (La jalousie)* (1957), *In the Labyrinth (Dans Le Labyrinthe)* (1959), and his *nouveau nouveau roman*, period which includes *The House of Assignation (La Maison de Rendez-Vous)* (1965), *Project for a Revolution in New York (Projet Pour Une Révolution à New York)* (1970), *Topology of a Phantom City (Topologie D’une Cité Fantôme)* (1976) and *Recollections of the Golden Triangle (Souvenirs Du Triangle d’Or)* (1978).

In an article dated from 1976, Robbe-Grillet proposes that the *nouveau roman* began in the 1950s and the *nouveau nouveau roman* spanned “1965 to the present” (Passias 1976 p. 131). Academic Ben Stoltzfus defines the *nouveau roman* as being characterised by its display of “reflexivity, discontinuity, and achronology”, while the *nouveau nouveau roman* includes the former characteristics and simultaneously promotes language itself as one of the characters in order to emphasise “generative themes”, paronomasia (wordplay) and polysemy (a type of literary overdetermination) (1985 p. 13). McHale makes a comparison between this European literary movement and the literary

---

¹ *A Sentimental Novel (2007) (Un Roman Sentimental)*, his final novel before his death in 2008, was contentious for its depiction of sadism and paedophilia. It was poorly received by the literary community and became a sad parting gesture from a groundbreaking novelist.
transformation which was taking place in the United States. “[T]he watershed between modernist and postmodernist poetics... coincides rather closely with the one between the *nouveau* and the *nouveau nouveau roman*” (1987 pp. 13-14). In a way, the *nouveau nouveau roman* can be seen as a self-reflexive amplification that embraces language (the medium) as another aspect for scrutiny. “The latter period of Robbe-Grillet’s career diversified into autobiographical writing,¹ theoretical essays – many of which were published in his 1963 critical work *For A New Novel (Pour un Nouveau Roman)* – film-making and a series of collaborative works with visual artists such as René Magritte, Robert Rauschenberg, Paul Delvaux and – not surprisingly – contentious “child photographers” Irina Ionesco and David Hamilton.²

Robbe-Grillet’s writing style has been described as cinematic³ through its “heavy reliance on sight and sound, especially on the framing, detail, and

---

¹ His autobiographical writing period saw the production of the *Romanesques* trilogy. These three autobiographical works, *Ghost in the Mirror* (1985), *Angelique or Enchantment* (1988), and *Corinthe’s Last Days* (1994), were labelled Romanesques because the works are “like novels (romans) without quite being works of fiction...connot[ing]...the dream and illusion associated with idealised fiction” (Smith 2000 p. 127). This autobiographical trilogy is widely labelled as autofiction. This term, coined by French critic Serge Doubrovsky in his study “Autobiography/Truth/Psychoanalysis” (1980) (*Autobiographie/Verite/Psychanalyse*), has similarities to psychoanalysis in which the writing occurs outside of the distinction between invention and confession (Smith 2000 p. 168 n.3). Although not as blatant as the conflation between real and imagined narrators in John Barth’s *LETTERS*, these three novels nevertheless problematise the distinction between “narrator and subject” (Smith 2000 p. 127), thereby complicating the diegetic location of the narrator.
² Both Irina Ionesco and David Hamilton are predisposed to choreographing naked pubescent and prepubescent erotica. In the case of Irina Ionesco her daughter Eva Ionesco functioned as her “muse”.
³ Roch C. Smith describes the short stories in Robbe-Grillet’s collection *Snapshots* (1962) as “verbal still lifes” due to a writing style that insistently yearns to become a still photograph. The stories contain “little of the linear plot of the traditional short story... [emphasising] description as a means of telling the story”. The description becomes so densely detailed as to have the effect of holding back the pace of the reading to the point of a “freeze frame”. The meticulous and objective description – such a defining aspect of Robbe-Grillet’s writing – has an impersonal quality which requires “the reader to become a partner in the composition of the picture” being written (Smith

*(Footnote continued on next page)*
movement of the visual descriptions” (Smith 2000 p. 30). This cinematic style – or mimesis of cinematic form – existed in his writing before he turned his hand to screenplays and later film direction.¹ Needless to say, Robbe-Grillet’s career – which involved filmmaking, writing and collaborations with visual artists – contained several distinct aesthetic phases. In part, it is the labyrinthine network of fastidious disembodied “visual descriptions” which structures Robbe-Grillet’s writing style that facilitates a staging ground for ontological violations. When diegetic/ontological violations occur in his texts they can appear subtle; either crowded out or working (and sometimes competing) in tandem with other antirealist manoeuvres. It is these “distortions” in Robbe-Grillet’s novels such as transient narrative positions, looping chronologies and the trope of the doppelgänger which will be taken into account when analysing specific ekphrastically structured ontological disruptions and violations in his novels.

This introduction will be followed by a brief analysis of ekphrasis, which will include historical examples such as the ekphrastic description of the Shield of Achilles from Homer’s The Iliad. This discussion will highlight the way ekphrasis can be augmented, through the addition of movement, to mimic the mimesis of “real life” which occurs in the primary diegesis. The first novel I will look at in this chapter is The Erasers. While definitely antirealist in style, this novel – with its relatively stable narrative position and realistic, linear chronology – has a more traditional structure. The Erasers presents Robbe-Grillet’s writing style as

¹ This is evidenced by the fact that his first film script, Last Year in Marienbad (1961) was written several years after The Erasers and The Voyeur; both of which contain cinematic sensibilities.
complex, and (as I will discuss later) *almost* contains a diegetic/ontological violation. *The Erasers* provides a useful straightforward introduction to Robbe-Grillet’s queer ontology.

The other two novels under analysis in this chapter, *In the Labyrinth* and *Project for a Revolution in New York*, both maintain the writing style of *The Erasers*, yet also contain ontologically destabilising elements such as chronological paradoxes, spatial paradoxes (diegetic/ontological violations) and enigmatic, manifold narratorial positions. The level of emphasis on each destabilising component varies from novel to novel, yet all of these components become more extreme as we move from 1953, when *The Erasers* was first published, to *In the Labyrinth* and then 1970 with *Project for a Revolution in New York*.

Each section is dedicated to one of Robbe-Grillet’s aforementioned novels and starts with an introduction containing general stylistic analysis pertinent to the book being discussed. The introduction to each novel will be tailored to contextualise the diegetic/ontological violations discussed. For instance, the ekphrastically generated ontological violations in *Project for a Revolution in New York* seem to have carnivalesque, sideshow elements to them and are partly reliant on the use of *trompe-l’œil* whereas the use of ekphrasis in *In the Labyrinth*, while structurally unambiguous, is more beguiling and enigmatic.

*Trompe-l’œil*¹ (French “deceive the eye”) is an art technique borne from a period of the early Renaissance known as the Quattrocento.¹ The technique,

---

¹ A much-cited example of *trompe-l’œil* is Pere Borrell del Caso’s painting, *Escaping Criticism* (1874) which depicts a boy climbing out of the painting. This is achieved by positioning the boy’s hands, feet and head “outside” of the picture on the painted representation of the “frame”.
involving forced perspective, heightened realism and other optical tricks, seeks to create the illusion that painted “objects” on a canvas exist in the three-dimensional space of the viewer. This painting/drawing technique is perfectly represented in Pere Borrell del Caso’s painting *Escaping Criticism* (1874), which depicts a young boy hoisting himself out of the painting’s “frame”. This is done through incorporating the “frame” as part of the painting, giving the illusion that the boy is entering into the diegesis of the viewer. Given the diegetically invasive nature of *trompe-l’œil*, it is a natural fit for both ekphrasis – which, after all, is writing masquerading as another art form (painting/photography) – and the unbound, transgressive ontology of Robbe-Grillet’s novels. In fact, there is even an example in the novel *Project for a Revolution in New York* of a *trompe-l’œil* inversion in which this “trick” becomes physically manifest. As such, the section on *Project for a Revolution in New York* is partly read through the lens of *trompe-l’œil*. In contrast, in *In the Labyrinth* I exclusively analyse the ontological violation that occurs through the “seemingly” straightforward ekphrastic instance involving the “Reichenfels” etching.

What I demonstrate in this chapter is the way Robbe-Grillet employs ekphrasis – whether packaged as *trompe-l’œil* or not – to create new diegetic levels (hypodiegetic, or otherwise). This is done through a reliance on visual “cinematic” descriptions whereby Robbe-Grillet’s “camera eye focuses on a picture... then slides

---

1 The technique is indebted to paintings such as *The Tribute Monkey* (circa 1420) by Masaccio which rejected the flat International Gothic style of the time and instead utilised chiaroscuro to render realistic form and single-point perspective; both of which had – more or less – lain dormant since the fall of the Roman Empire. Over time this realism was further augmented in the ceiling paintings (barrel vaulted or dome) of the late quattrocento, through the use of perspective distortions such as foreshortening, marking the first modern use of *trompe-l’œil*. 
into the scene and makes it actual” (Brooke-Rose 1981 p. 334). Naturally, it follows that when pictures become “actual” in works of fiction the primary diegesis is demoted from the status of “real”. This process of levelling out the position of the “real” with fiction is constantly at work in the novels of Robbe-Grillet.

**The literary device of ekphrasis**

Before I move on to *The Erasers*, I want to discuss briefly the historical use of ekphrasis in order to demonstrate how this literary technique can operate either as ontologically benign or ontologically problematic. This discussion will provide crucial insights into this literary technique, not only when employed by Robbe-Grillet but also, in the next chapter, by Pynchon.

Ekphrasis, like many other literary devices, has a long history. Its meaning and use has markedly changed since it was first introduced by Plato. The term ekphrasis comes from the Greek *ekphrassein* which roughly translates as “to speak out” or “explain” and was first used in reference to the “rhetorical stratagem of giving voice to mute objects in order to achieve *enargeia*, or the creation of vivid pictorial images before the mind’s eye of an audience” (Jurkevich 1989 p. 19).

Therefore, *enargeia* is in essence the “process by which ekphrasis is produced” (Collins 1991 p. 126) [my italics].

Ekphrasis is broadly defined as any artwork that “describes” another artwork. The artwork (as mute object) being depicted must reach a certain level of “vivid

---

1 The concept of *enargeia* comes from Greek historian and biographer Plutarch (AD 46–AD 120). He used the term to describe the operation of verisimilitude in works of art.
pictorial” description for it to achieve the status of ekphrasis. Traditionally, this rhetorical device takes place in poetry¹ and the work of art being described need not even exist. For the most part, historical instances of ekphrasis function as nothing more than a vivid description;² however, there are historical cases of ekphrases which function paradoxically. For instance, Oscar Wilde’s novel The Picture of Dorian Gray (1890) depicts a portrait in a painting ageing over time. The idea that a static painting of a face would grow old is a disturbing one; all the more so as a doppelgänger. In a formally similar way, the description of the Shield of Achilles in the Iliad by Homer (circa eighth century BC) depicts static art as coming to life. Often cited as one of the earliest instances of ekphrasis it is also one of the first demonstrations of ontologically problematic ekphrasis; one in which stasis is “unnaturally” animated. However, the “animation” (ageing) in The Picture of Dorian Gray is manifestly different to that which occurs in the Shield of Achilles. In the latter, the focalisation enters and inhabits the picture.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the inclusion of epistolary elements³ in a work of fiction provide a context for diegetic/ontological violations through framing or embedding a narrative. Ekphrasis can also embed or frame a narrative and therefore has the potential to generate a new hypodiegetic level. Similar to epistolary writing, ekphrasis strives to “write the senses” by rendering the subject

---

¹ This was particularly the case among the Romantic and Pre-Raphaelite poets.
² For example, Shakespeare’s Cymbeline (1623) provides a relatively benign example of ekphrasis when several sensuous paintings are described. The painting The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb (1522) by German artist and printmaker Hans Holbein the Younger (1520–1522) is described in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s (1821–1881) book, The Idiot (serially published between 1868 and 1869). Both instances of ekphrasis are exploited thematically; the former draws on the sexual nature of the paintings and the latter the existential content.
³ The inclusion of journal entries or letters within a work of epistolary or non-epistolary writing.
in such a way as to “put visual objects in front of the reader’s inner eyes as though they were present” (Hertel 2005 p. 70). Even though ekphrasis is “at once ancient and postmodern” (Wagner 1996 p. 262), its employment to challenge and violate diegetic/ontological levels is primarily a contemporary (twentieth/twenty-first century) literary manoeuvre.¹

Invariably, when ekphrastic passages incorporates movement to something which is inanimate (such as a painting or sculpture) – as is the case in the Shield of Achilles description from the *Iliad* – ontological questions get raised. The description of the Shield of Achilles originally begins as static ekphrasis but quickly segues, through the inclusion of movement in time, into something more rich and complex; a discrete ontological world. The animation of people and objects in the description of the Shield of Achilles conflate with the primary diegesis and disturb the diegetic temporality.² There is no indication in the embedded ekphrastic narrative that takes place on/within the Shield of Achilles that “Hephaestus himself made the images on the Shield live and move and speak; rather, the type of description that is characteristic of the *Iliad* makes the images of the Shield into stories” (Becker 1995 p. 80) [my italics].³ In the world of gods and myth, anything is possible.

¹ This is driven, in part, by the fact that “contemporary” literature – from Modernism to the present – has a preoccupation with allusion and “[e]kphrasis is a special case of intertextuality” (Persin 1997 p. 23). Furthermore, twentieth century philosophical projects such as structuralism question positivism and its essentialist notions of “reality” resulting in a postmodern literary milieu persistently fascinated with ontological paradoxes. Extreme forms of ekphrasis become one strategy to challenge these essentialist concerns.

² Even though it is argued by theorists such as Mieke Bal (2006 p. 246) that the static image contains narrative, it is the inclusion of the spatiotemporal (movement in space) which provides a narrative as theorised in cinema, theatre and literary studies.

³ Another noteworthy point regarding the Shield of Achilles sequence is its placement in the poem.
The shield, with its depiction of labour and celebration, reconciliation and war, becomes a window onto – or perhaps, more accurately, a reflection of – the world of the protagonist, Achilles. The shield functions as a frame within which a “world” takes form. The form that this “world” takes – populated with common worldly archetypes – is reflective of the diegesis (the world of Achilles) and extradiegesis (the world of Homer). Even though the ekphrastic passage operates on the hypodiegetic level it reaches up two levels – through the diegesis – into the extradiegetic realm of Homer; referencing primary components of the human condition such as war and festival. In doing so, the ekphrasis draws the extradiegetic content through (and therefore into) the primary diegesis, enriching the narrative of Achilles. Despite the content being referenced in this example of ekphrasis as being perhaps too general for the passage to be defined under the rubric of mise en abîme, it does function in a similar way, with multiple diegetic realms supplying and receiving content; sharing themes and motifs central to the life of Homer and the “lives” within the text.

Tamar Yacobi’s essay “The Ekphrastic Figure of Speech” in Martin Heusser’s Text and Visuality explores ekphrasis when it operates on the level of figure of

The following is a brief summary of the events which lead up to the ekphrastic sequence. Achilles, having lent his armour to his friend Patroclus, loses it to Hector who claims it as a trophy after slaying Patroclus. Armourless, and wanting to avenge the death of Patroclus, Achilles’ mother travels to Olympus to have Hephaestus forge new armour. As this takes place, Achilles – contrary to his mother’s request – has travelled to the battle to retrieve Patroclus’ body. It is at this point (with Achilles and his comrades gathered on the edge of a battle zone mourning their fallen friend) that the extended ekphrasis occurs: halting the action, deferring the primary narrative and ultimately generating suspense. The ekphrasis, which takes up approximately half of book XVIII, creates a tension in the poem in which the reader is forced to wait to return to the primary narrative. In this way, the embedded narrative component of ekphrastic passages obviously serve more than one purpose. The device can reflect the content of the primary narrative or diegesis and – in this case – modulate the narrative flow to create suspense.
speech. The example Yacobi cites is that of a woman having a smile like the Mona Lisa. Alternatively, Yacobi refers to the Scots poem/song by Robert Burns, *My Love Is like a Red, Red Rose* (1794) in which the *subject* “My love” and the *vehicle* “a red, red rose” create an “ontological dualism” (1999 p. 94). Even though the *subject* and the *vehicle* are linked through language, “they do not refer to the same ‘world’, the same domain of existence”. Yacobi explains that the subject “is part of the (fictive) reality presented in the text; while the vehicle, qua figure of speech, belongs to another reality, one introduced only by, for, and through the comparison” (1999 p. 93). While ekphrasis can be seen simply as a benign literary representation of an art object, it constantly operates with complexity because it “entails a relation between domains... [in which] the two domains (the representing vs. the represented) belong to two media (verbal vs. visual), or two art-forms (literary vs. graphic)” (1999 p. 93). Ekphrasis, by its very dualistic nature, embodies (at least on a formal level) transition and transformation.

The short examples of ekphrasis, which Yacobi cites, are very different to the protracted examples I will be using further ahead in this dissertation; but the “ontological dualism” – with its attendant boundary – still holds true. When ekphrasis moves from being a figure of speech such as a metaphor or simile to something more drawn-out and expansive, it has the potential to claim the status of embedded narrative. This precondition, for ekphrasis to refer to other “worlds”, provides a conceptual framework to explore (and possibly subvert) the ontology of fictional worlds.

---

1 Ekphrasis can take place using any art form as the medium and the source. For example, a painting that successfully depicts and illuminates a work of architecture could be described as ekphrastic.
Both epistolary and ekphrastic writing is created through an impulse to represent subjectivity: feelings and sensations. And, both can function as a framing device. Yet the actual character of epistolary framing differs significantly to that of ekphrasis. Unlike the simplicity and “naturalness” of epistolary framing, ekphrasis functions through a superimposition of the subject and the vehicle that – through this innate “ontological dualism” – has the potential to create highly complex, substantive ontological levels.

Looping “worlds” in The Erasers

I want to begin with Robbe-Grillet’s The Erasers¹ for the very reason that it doesn’t contain explicit diegetic/ontological violations. I have done this in order to explore the strange, detached “world” of The Erasers without the added complication of multiple diegeses. However, even though The Erasers takes place within a single primary diegesis, it constantly threatens to break the fourth wall through its self-reflexive style. This is evident through intertextual references to the Oedipus myth and also through subtle Brechtian techniques; like the stilted mechanical “performances” of the characters and the stylised, filmic scene descriptions, involving detached visual detail. It is this dominant focus on visual detail – as opposed to a realist style, which incorporates descriptions of all the senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, etc.) – that creates further estrangement between the reader and the text. The same alienating strategy by Robbe-Grillet regarding description

¹ The möbius strip narrative structure of The Erasers is reminiscent of Julio Cortázar’s short story Continuity of the Parks, but without diegetic violation.
can be seen in plot causation. Rather than realism’s use of linear narrative, teleological plot construction and cohesive, unified characters, *The Erasers* – and the *nouveau roman* generally – manufacture defamiliarisation through an emphasis on a systematic account of objects, which exist in chronologically uncoupled moments. In *The Erasers*, Robbe-Grillet rejects the various subjective positions rendered by the “classical novelist” and instead presents his world to the reader through the blinkered vision of a protagonist who can only witness the “spectacle before him, [with] no other power than that of his own eyes” (Barthes 1972 p. 24).

*The Erasers* is ostensibly a work of detective fiction, told primarily from the viewpoint of police-agent Wallas, who is sent to a small town to solve a (supposed) murder. The victim, Daniel Dupont – only slightly wounded in a robbery and in fear of his life – fabricates with his friend Dr. Juard, the story of his murder. This is achieved through a forged death certificate and an arrangement with the “appropriate authorities” of the transportation and disposal of “his” body in the capital. The central conceit of the novel is the explanation given to the doctor regarding Dupont’s fake death. Dupont asks the doctor to tell his officials that the body has been “disposed of”. Regarding the physical evidence needed to prove Dupont’s death, he instructs the doctor to, “just hand over to them the bullet you’ve removed” (1964 p. 26).

*The Erasers* is replete with clues which point to agent Wallas as the murderer; for instance, a witness reports the murder suspect as having a tear on his overcoat, which exactly matches a tear on Wallas’ overcoat. This complex novel, “in which the protagonist seeks a murderer only to become that murderer in the end”
(Morrissette 1968 p. 162) has all the hallmarks of the timeless fatalism of myth. This isn’t surprising, given the novel’s many concealed (and not so concealed) allusions to the Oedipus myth\footnote{The primary allusion to the Oedipus myth is obviously the murder itself. Wallas, like Oedipus, is doomed to commit a murder, which he “knows” has already taken place. In the case of Oedipus, this knowledge is achieved through premonition and in the case of Wallas, it takes place through deception on the part of Dupont. Among the many intertextual connections with the Oedipus myth is the reference to the ruins of Thebes (1964 p. 168) and the riddle of the Sphinx, which is parodied continually throughout the novel by a drunk with comments such as “[w]hat animal is parricide in the morning, incestuous at noon and blind at night?” (1964 p. 226). For more on this novel’s intertextual operations with the Oedipus myth see Bruce Morrissette’s 1968 article “Games and Game Structures in Robbe-Grillet” and “Oedipus and Existentialism: ‘Les Gommes’ of Robbe-Grillet” (1960).} in which Wallas/Oedipus is fatally drawn – the former through profession and the later through paternity – into murdering a significant other.

The paradoxical “narrative loop” is made possible through the setup in which the victim goes into hiding after concocting an elaborate plan to trick the authorities into thinking that he has been murdered. This is distinctly different from the paradoxical “narrative loops” which exist in Barth’s LETTERS where fictional characters, themes and plotlines resurface from Barth’s previous novels. In the case of The Erasers the central paradox – in which the detective becomes the killer in the “murder” investigation he is conducting – is generated epistemologically; in that there is a breakdown in the transmission of knowledge similar to a “comedy of errors” plot structure. This aspect of The Erasers is ontologically unproblematic, yet, as I will outline, there are a number of instances in this novel which do set out to challenge the ontological stability of the text.

The opening of The Erasers describes a somnambulant cafe manager working in the morning dimness, wiping down tabletops and arranging chairs in
preparation for the day’s patrons. The passage closes with the line “When everything is ready, the light goes on…” (1964 p. 8). On the face of it, this may not seem like a Brechtian literary manoeuvre of self-disclosure. After all, the room is dim and the manager has (presumably) turned on the light. Yet, it is the “staging” of the opening scene in the first few paragraphs in which the manager – who is described as an automaton¹ suggestive of nineteenth century *tableau mecanique automaton* – moves through the cafe, seemingly without agency, which alludes to theatrical choreography.² This opening, constructed with deterministic repetition, frames the novel as a *self-conscious* meditation on *unconscious* existence. The scene implies that the *mecanique automaton* resets itself every day; foreshadowing the inevitable fate of agent Wallas, who paradoxically becomes the murderer he is seeking.

On the surface, the use of self-reflexivity and repetition is reminiscent of the möbius strip structures employed in Barth’s writing. Yet on closer inspection *The Erasers* is more akin to the motif of the Ouroboros³, which depicts a serpent eating its own tail; the site of violence (self-consumption/murder) is destined to repeat forever. This clockwork, deterministic “world” in which the manager robotically “puts the setting back in place” functions as a thematic synecdoche for the whole

¹ A similar “empty figure” can also be seen in *The Dressmaker’s Dummy* from *Snapshots* (1962), whereby Robbe-Grillet choreographs the interplay of two mirrors to create “copies” of a dressmaker’s dummy, resulting in — through this duplication — *mise en abîme*. Although there is no dialogue (or human figure for that matter) in this “story”, the dummy serves as a human “presence”. The multiplication of this “figure” gestures towards the trope of the doppelgänger. However, because the story is devoid of real human bodies and — perhaps to a large extent — in light of the detached, clinical writing style, the uncanny effect, which is usually associated with the doppelgänger, isn’t fully realised.

² “An automaton’s arm puts the setting back in place” (1964 p. 8).

³ This motif represents both recurrence and self-reflexivity.
novel, which reboots every 24 hours.¹ The theme of a rebooting “reality” displays resemblances to Friedrich Nietzsche’s thought experiment of the eternal return² and his preoccupation with *amor fati* (Latin, love of fate). Without diegetic violations, it could be argued that the ontology of this novel is secure. However, an ontology that resets and repeats opens similarly disturbing questions to conflated and violated ontologies; both place a question mark over the “reality” and stability of the “world” depicted in the text.

The detached impartial writing of *The Erasers*, which “remains on the surface of...object[s]” and doesn’t seem to favour any particular quality, falls under Roland Barthes’ category of zero-degree writing.³ Simply put, Barthes argues that writers such as Albert Camus, Samuel Beckett and Robbe-Grillet distil literature to a sparse simplicity where the text reflexively engages with its own particular discourse. Unlike traditional realism, which depicts not just shapes and forms but also “odours, tactile properties, [and] memories” to create fictional “worlds”, the ontology of Robbe-Grillet’s “worlds” rely purely on the “sense of sight” whereby the “object is no longer a centre of correspondences, a welter of sensations and

¹ As seen on page 41 when Wallas’ watch stops at 7:30 and on page 245 when his watch starts up again. When coupled with all the other instances of achronology and references to the Oedipus Rex myth — a myth which links in with Sigmund Freud’s notion of the timelessness of the unconscious whereby past memories and desires forever prowl — the stopping and starting of Wallas’ timepiece reinforces the inevitability of him murdering Dupont.
² Friedrich Nietzsche’s idea of the “eternal return” is where one’s whole life is infinitely repeated. This horrific idea questions the notion of how morality can exist within a “deterministic” world.
³ Outlined in his book *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), Roland Barthes puts forward the argument that French prose literature, from the Renaissance to the twentieth century, has gradually become less ornate or decorated. The ornate and embellished writing of the Renaissance he refers to as a high writing degree and the less embellished literature of the mid twentieth century approach is zero-degree writing. Barthes’ arguments laid out in this book primarily hinge around his term *écriture*, which is distinct from the stable, synchronic nature of language (*langue*) and the transient, diachronic characteristic of speech (*parole*). The *écriture* exists between these two categories and reflects the “writing character” of particular historical periods such as the Baroque or the Enlightenment.
symbols: it is merely an optical resistance” (Barthes 1972 p. 14). What Robbe-Grillet seeks to achieve, through this particular type of flat surface writing, are fictional “worlds” where “objects, spaces, and man’s circulation among them are promoted to the rank of subjects”. A “world” whose inhabitants – such as Wallas – are denied access to a “psychology, a metaphysic, or a psychoanalysis in order to approach the objective milieu he discovers” (Barthes 1972 pp. 23-24). Wallas’ alienation is achieved through the denial (or at least masking) of his internal, subjective realm, leaving him to merely function mechanically alongside – rather than within – the sparse and strange ontology of his “world”.

Apart from its connection with the Oedipal myth, The Erasers’ strange, otherworldly ontology – made manifest through “optical resistance” – frames Robbe-Grillet’s text as phantasy. This “ontology as phantasy” is a detached reverie; libidinal and disembodied. As exemplified in the next section on Project for a Revolution in New York, it is these strange ontological characteristics in Robbe-Grillet’s texts that allow for (and promote) diegetic ruptures through ekphrasis.

**Trompe-l’œil in Project for a Revolution in New York**

A subsection of William Ashline’s essay “The Problems of Impossible Fictions” entitled “Diegetic Violations” uses a passage from Robbe-Grillet’s carnivalesque nouveau nouveau roman novel Project for a Revolution in New York as its example. The example used is subtle. It takes place just a few pages into the novel and begins with the click of a lock. This sound initiates – within the narrator’s imagination – the thought that he has left his key on a side table next to a brass
candlestick after leaving his apartment. This internal image promises to conclude that there “must be a table in this dim vestibule” (1972 p. 5). What happens in this “passage” is the movement of the narrator across a diegetic level. At one point, the narrator is outside the room, and then – through an aural cue – the narrator inhabits a seemingly “physical” space in his imagination. There is a conflation of “the embedded world of the narrator’s imagination with the diegetic level of the fictional world of the text, leading [the narrator] to transpose the separate spaces of his apartment and the room he hears being locked” (Ashline 1995 p. 5). For a stable ontology, the boundary between imagination and the primary diegesis, which the characters “inhabits”, should remain separate.¹ But, within the first few pages of Project for a Revolution in New York, ontological disruptions such as the example above – along with repetitions and scenes which have “been rehearsed several times” (1972 p. 1) are foregrounded.

This unstable ontology is one in which we witness – through the eyes of the first person narrator – a pattern in faux wood grain transform into a sadistic scene involving a bound and gagged young woman (1972 p. 2).² This ontology isn’t just a dark version of Proustian phantasm in which sounds (rather than smells) trigger memories and imaginings; it is an ontology which is framed as a film. The artifice of the “world” of Project for a Revolution in New York is announced when events in the novel are interrupted with the word “cut” or “retake,” raising the question:

¹ Unless of course, the genre of fiction is supernatural (extrasensory perception) or science fiction (post-human, transfer of consciousness), etc.
² This opening scene raises the question; where is the first person narrator located? The answer is, it could be anywhere; or for that matter, anywhen. The fact that the first person narrator enters a “scene” which comes to life in patterned faux wood grain suggests that the narrator doesn’t hold any “dominant diegetic perspective” in this instance (Smith 2000 p. 76).
do the events unfold in the novel or in a novel about a film? If it is the latter, then the whole novel can be seen as a single ekphrastic text. The broader ontological implications for this unresolvable classification is diegetic ambivalence. The novel’s ontology throughout is problematised by the very fact that the narrative calls into question its own formal identity; novel or film.

It is important to note the extent to which _Project for a Revolution in New York_ sets out to mimic cinema.¹ “Events are frequently described as ‘scenes’” (as demonstrated several times on the opening page) and, in several instances are lit by “spotlights” (1972 p. 151). At one point the character Ben-Said – or is it the “false Ben-Said” (1972 p. 103) – becomes embroiled in a conversation regarding the use of the word “cut”. Upon clarification, this word is compared with the word “retake”, followed by a definition of sorts, in which the word is explained as “a sudden interruption necessitated by some material reason, purely internal or on the contrary external to the narrative; for example, in the present case: your untimely questions...” (1972 p. 162). Epistemological, self-referential gameplay such as this, whereby components of the narrative are self-reflexively located and analysed, work in concert with a narrator who shifts between first person and omniscient third person throughout the novel. The anti-realism inherent in the novel, through the use of _trompe-l’œil_, cinematic and theatrical references – coupled with a bizarre plot in which a violent revolutionary subculture haunts the streets of New

---

¹ One approach to reading Robbe-Grillet’s fractured writing style is through the lens of both psychoanalytic and cinematic theory. Many theorists such as Jean-Louis Baudry and Christian Metz have sought to understand cinema through a psychoanalytic framework. Slavoj Žižek and Laura Mulvey conflate psychoanalysis and cinematic theory in order to explore the human condition. For Žižek theories of psychoanalysis are employed to understand cinema but also, Žižek argues, cinema can provide insights into the structures and motivations of the unconscious.
York – constructs a world which is constantly in a state of transformation, dissol

dition and repetition. In fact, the polymorphic nature of this “world” –
pl"fefully constructed from disparate sources of visual culture – is so

epistemologically and ontologically unstable it makes it difficult to detect singular

moments of diegetic violation.

As such, I will start with a less ontologically problematic example of such
gameplay. This is the strange “mirror glass” instance of trompe-l’œil involving a
blown-up picture of a house; possibly the same house in which Laura, one of the
protagonists of the novel, is held captive. This blown-up advertisement is plastered
to a tall fence. As it stands, this alone doesn’t fit the requirements of trompe-l’œil.
But, perhaps it does when it’s pointed out that a little door is cut into the fence
which “corresponds exactly to the fake door shown on a photographic poster” (1972
p. 134). This visual gag by Robbe-Grillet is more a case of inverted trompe-l’œil.
Rather than the trompe-l’œil illusion of a painting “expanding” from its two-
dimensional confines into the viewer’s diegesis, a little hidden door – reminiscent
of the tiny door Carroll’s Alice tries to access\(^1\) – allows passage through a flat
billboard photograph and into a “little square of some ancient town” (1972 p. 134).
Even though the passage on page 134, describing a photograph of a house with a
functioning door, doesn’t create (and violate) a new diegesis and is ontologically
“rational” and stable it does signpost the “world” of Project for a Revolution in
New York as a manifold structure with permeable boundaries.

\(^1\) In fact, both Alice in Wonderland (1865) and Project for a Revolution in New York involve keys, miniature doors, fluid carnivalesque characters and paradoxes.
An example of ekphrastic trompe-l’œil which does create an explicit ontological violation involves an image on a book cover coming to life. This isn’t an instance of creating the illusion of “permeable boundaries” as is the case with the real estate billboard but one in which a foreshadowed scene from a book cover manifests as an actual occurrence. The ekphrastic trompe-l’œil is initiated during the scene in which the character Laura spies “the bald head of the man bent down in the posture of a voyeur” attempting to look through the keyhole. Instead of attacking this (conveniently nearsighted) locksmith with a “knitting needle” (1972 p. 93) she decides to amuse herself by placing a book cover image up to the keyhole. The scopophiliac locksmith thinks he is gazing on a scene of sadism, when in fact he is looking at a photograph depicting sexual bondage from the cover of a detective novel. In various passages later in the novel (1972 p. 158 and pp. 165-66), the locksmith returns to the house and interrupts the scene on the book cover. The trompe-l’œil “proves not to be a nested representation but a ‘real’ event” (McHale 1987 p. 118). The ontological “world” of the photograph – that exists one diegetic level down from the locksmith and, it is assumed, is originally photographed on a stage set – violates the ontological boundary by promoting itself up a diegetic level. The fact that the “sadistic scene” is repeated, as either a photograph or “real” event, undermines any possibility of chronological certainty. The “sadism scene” is both polydiegetic and atemporal.

The fictional “world[s]” created in Project for a Revolution in New York are ontologically distinct from those of traditional realist texts by privileging the visual and restraining other sensory information. The primacy of vision and the intensity of visual observation in Robbe-Grillet’s fiction create an uncanny reading
experience in which the “sense of sight” is oversaturated and all other “sensory input” is either subordinate or rejected outright. It is within this visually supercharged ontological construction that instances of optical trickery such as *trompe-l’œil* and ekphrasis embed themselves comfortably alongside a kaleidoscope of other antirealist techniques in the text and appear to occur almost “naturally”.

When the locksmith comes across the “sadism scene”, which is lit with the “double cone of harsh light from the spotlights” (1972 p. 165), the “scene” as though taking place in a studio, we discover that ontological violations (like the characters themselves) are never what they seem, for it turns out that it isn’t the locksmith who is witnessing the photograph-made-real but another character, Ben-Said, who is wearing a “lifelike” mask of the locksmith. The initial instance of ekphrastic *trompe-l’œil* depicting the torture scene exists as a moment that is constantly frozen and released from the clutches of time. This is a “world” in which photographs come to life, causality is disrupted and characters transform. In this sense, the “world” of *Project for a Revolution in New York* has an ontological composition more aligned to the logic of a dream than rational, linear “reality”.

A photographic surface, which shouldn’t provide access, contains a door and a “crime scene” from detective fiction “plays out” on the primary diegetic level; behind the representation is the real and vice versa. *The Erasers* and *Project for a Revolution in New York* demonstrate Robbe-Grillet’s deployment of diegetic/ontological violations as a strategy to explore both fantasy and phantasy.¹

¹ On the one hand is Robbe-Grillet’s sado-sexual fantasies and on the other phantasy as a...

(Footnote continued on next page)
This needs to be borne in mind when considering the complex psychological gravitas that is delivered through the ekphrastic ontological violation which takes place in *In the Labyrinth*.

**The non sequitur ontology of In the Labyrinth**

*In the Labyrinth*, composed of a “multiplicity of false starts, digressions, variations and repetitions” (Conner 2001 p. 129), not surprisingly embraces the literary trope of the labyrinth. In fact, Robbe-Grillet consistently projected the “vision of the labyrinth” (Smith 2000 p. 52) into his novels. More broadly within the literary landscape of the twentieth century, labyrinthine structures and aporia have been constantly invoked.¹ And more specifically, it is writers of the *nouveau roman* style such as Maurice Blanchot in his novel *The Madness of the Day (La Folie du jour)* (1973), the previously discussed writer Julio Cortázar and Marguerite Duras in her semi-autobiographical work, *War: A Memoir (La Douleur)* (1985)² who constantly return to the labyrinthine motif.

---

¹ In 1963, Calvino wrote an article “The Challenge to the Labyrinth” in which he outlined literature’s role in providing a “way out” of the labyrinth of contemporary society. He saw literature as a map, which could assist in charting humanity out of the convoluted miasma of his times (McLaughlin 1998 p. 75). This is, no doubt, a tall order. Many of Calvino’s novels contain the metaphor of the labyrinth. Amiable Twagilimana suggests that the use of labyrinth as metaphor in *If On A Winter’s Night A Traveller* functions both as a window into the human condition while also underscoring a “faith in the imaginative possibilities of literature, in its ability to challenge, not surrender to, the labyrinth and find the exit”. In many ways, Calvino’s preoccupation was as much about the creation of labyrinths as it was to do with the restructuring of the author/reader contract. *If On A Winter’s Night A Traveller* exemplifies his preoccupation with the function of literature “not only as storytelling but also as a reflection on the nature of storytelling, on the role of the author, the reader, and the text...” (Twagilimana 2009 p. 82).

² Other texts which draw on the figure of the labyrinth – but not associated with the *nouveau roman* movement – is James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Franz Kafka’s *The Castle*, and many of Jorge Luis (Footnote continued on next page)
Along with the deadpan, detached writing style of *In the Labyrinth*, highly restrained signposting also operates and serves to limit the chronological or spatial location points of the narrative and the narrator[s]. The novel tells the story of a disoriented unnamed soldier making his way through an unknown town in order to deliver a shoebox (whose contents are only revealed at the end of the novel to be a gold watch, a ring, a bayonet and a collection of letters addressed to Henri Martin) to another soldier whom he has never met. The story of the wandering soldier navigating the streets (and seasons), along with the repetitive looping narrative structure, force the reader to “backtrack” and reread one’s “steps”. The use of an antirealist structure involving ekphrasis, repetitions and lacunae conform to the imperative advanced by Robbe-Grillet (and the *nouveau roman* movement in general) that the novel should display its own “fictionalizing function” (Conner 2001 p. 129). As Stephen Connor points out “it is not so much that this kind of fiction creates worlds of pure fantasy, as that it no longer seeks to suppress its own part in the making of fiction” (2001 p. 129).

Although not as obviously self-reflexive as Barth’s *LETTERS*, *In the Labyrinth* demonstrates a similar attention to a text that continually rewrites itself. A case in point is the way the narrative is repeatedly reframed, both in a structural sense and in the way the text is to be read or interpreted. The fractured narrative of *In the Labyrinth* is, in effect, a vast assemblage of localised achronological sequences. Most of the sequences can be logically connected together by the reader but some cannot. The structural reframing throughout *In the Labyrinth*, which

---

Borges’ short stories, in particular those published in his 1953 collection of short works *Labyrinths* which explores the themes of the labyrinth, paradox and aporia. (Smith 2000 p. 52).
include “intercuts, much as in film, in which the perspective alternates between inside and outside” (Smith 2000 p. 53) seems to mimic the aesthetic of slow camera pans framed between Brechtian jump-cuts, suggesting that it could be interpreted through the sensibilities of French New Wave (La Nouvelle Vague) film form.¹ Similar to Project for a Revolution in New York, narrative time and space become parsed into discrete packets; they become quantised.

Another interpretation of the text’s structure is that the repeatedly dissolving and coalescing narrative serves as an analogue of the Freudian processes of condensation and displacement.² Take for example the opening lines of the novel from Christine Brooke-Rose’s 1967 translation in which the chronological and physical location of the narrator constantly transform.

I am alone here now, safe and sheltered. Outside it is raining, outside in the rain one has to walk with head bent, hand shielding eyes that peer ahead nevertheless, a few yards ahead, a few yards of wet asphalt; outside it is cold, the wind blows between the bare black branches; the wind blows among the leaves, sweeping whole boughs into a swaying motion, swaying, swaying, that throws its shadow on the white roughcast of the walls. Outside the sun is shining, there is not a tree, not a bush to give shade, one has to walk in the full

¹ An anti-realist French film style from the fifties and sixties that emphasised nonlinear, fragmented editing, authorial address to the audience and other defamiliarising techniques.
² At times, the narrative seems to behave like a stream of consciousness or free association. The narration moves abruptly between moments and locations. At one point, the focaliser is within a building observing the outside world and then instantly the focaliser is outside looking in. Furthermore, objects will trigger references to other objects, mimicking the psychoanalytic process of free association.
sunlight, hand shielding eyes that look ahead, a few yards ahead only,
a few yards of dusty asphalt where the wind traces parallels, curves
and spirals.

One assumes that the focalisation from the passage above with its
unannounced changes, whereby there is an abrupt switch in the flow of time or
point of view is through that of the confused unnamed soldier. Perhaps the passage
encompasses a confluence of memories and “actual” events. Robbe-Grillet is
concerned not just with the world “out there” which is independent from the mind
but also “the world as perceived, ordered and distorted by the individual
consciousness” (Lethcoe 1965 p. 497). His writing, therefore “is phenomenal rather
than noumenal”¹ (Lethcoe 1965 p. 497) for the very fact that this constantly
shifting spatio-temporality mimics the various ways in which a subject – as
understood, in a post Freudian sense as fractured and plural – experiences the
world.² Barthes also argues that objects in Robbe-Grillet’s writing “do not exist

¹ As understood in the philosophy of Kant, the noumenal is a thing as it is in itself, independent of
the mind; phenomenal objects are perceived by the mind. Yet it is this switch from the subjective to
the objective that has always put a question mark above the claim that Robbe-Grillet’s writing is
phenomenological. In fact, when the detailed and exquisite descriptions which take place in Robbe-
Grillet’s writing are omniscient, the things (people, buildings and slices of tomato, etc.) in the
‘world’ being described are noumenal, or at least such descriptions are gesturing in that direction.
Also of consideration is the phenomenology inherent in the process by which the reader consumes
the novel In the Labyrinth – involving the handling and perception of the book itself.
² Although it has been highlighted by many literary theorists, including Hanna Meretoja, that there
are, in essence “two Robbe-Grilllets”: that of the chosisme – in which objects are elevated to the
same status or importance as characters – and the subjectivist. On the one hand – more applicable
to his early work – his novels privileged “the world of objects encountered by an objectifying,
alienating gaze... [which eliminates]...the human perspective from the novel” while on the other
hand, in novels such as Jealousy (La jalouse), the gaze of the obsessive and jealous husband is
highly subjective. These two competing modes therefore make it difficult to categorise Robbe-
Grillet’s writing style as purely phenomenological (Meretoja 2010 pp. 123-26).
beyond its phenomenon” (1972 p. 15). It isn’t surprising that Robbe-Grillet’s books have been loosely categorised as phenomenological.¹

The novel begins with the “I” located “under cover”. After which the narrator appears to be accompanying “one”; also read as the “you” character². Furthermore, some of the passage above describes the outside environment as wet and cold and then the weather abruptly changes and the “world” is dry and sunny. At one point the unnamed soldier is shielding his eyes from the rain only to be shielding his eyes from the brightness of the sun moments later. Given the shift from first person to third person, one of the first approaches to understanding the novel would be to locate just whose subjectivity is being represented. Through whom is the novel focalised? Is it that of the wounded soldier or a third person narrator? It would be contradictory if it were that of the wounded soldier, given that the soldier dies on page 181, before the novel has ended. Not only that, the doctor appears to take over as narrator when he says, “[a]t my last visit there was no need for the third injection. The wounded soldier was dead” (1972 p. 181). This shift in focalisation creates a non sequitur epistemology where there is a constant disconnect regarding who (premise) is witnessing what (conclusion).

¹ This is phenomenology of a Heideggerian persuasion; taking place through the idea of intentionality. Robbe-Grillet constantly reminds us of the “ultimate separation which lies between inner and outer reality”, similar to Heidegger’s assertion that consciousness is always outside itself (Barnes 1962 p. 41).
² This isn’t an intimate, second person narration like that in If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller in which the “you” is the reader. The “you” character is obviously the protagonist of the novel; the wounded soldier.
Ekphrasis in In the Labyrinth

Christine Brooke-Rose explains that the “Defeat of Reichenfels” etching (hereafter referred to as the “Reichenfels” etching) which depicts a “framed cafe-scene” that sits “above the chest of drawers in the room is described to us, like all else, not by a dramatised narrator but (or so it seems) by a sort of omniscient narrator who may or may not be the sudden ‘I’ at the end of the novel” (1981 p. 296). The “I” Brooke-Rose is referring to here is different from the one which appears on page 181, which is that of the doctor.¹ This is achieved by “paradoxically combining external focalisation (externalising all phenomena) and internal focalisation (as seen by a central consciousness, but wholly unpersonalised and even sometimes unidentifiable)” (1981 p. 326). While the creation of multiple narratorial positions (soldier, doctor and “central consciousness” problematises the location of the narrator,² it is central to the creation of the text’s indeterministic, non sequitur ontology. Despite that, it is the impersonal, unidentifiable narrator who “enters” and explores the newly created “world” of the “Reichenfels” etching.

McHale refers to the description of the “Reichenfels” etching in In the Labyrinth as “violat[ing] the implicit contract with the reader”. This etching begins as a “nested ‘still’ representation [which is then] transformed before our eyes into an ‘animated’ sequence with every appearance of belonging to first-order reality”

¹ Further, on page 187 a third-person narrator refers to the wounded soldier and then on page 189 the (now dead) wounded soldier is (perhaps) narrating again when he refers to “the whole town behind me”.
(1987 pp. 117-18). It is useful to consider this instance of ekphrasis to that of conventional trompe-l’œil as seen historically in painting and drawing. While trompe-l’œil in a traditional sense tricks the eye into seeing a two-dimensional space extend out into the viewer’s three-dimensional space, as I will explain, in the case of the “Reichenfels” etching, a two-dimensional space “fills out” both spatially and temporally.¹ Yet, rather than typical trompe-l’œil (where the two dimensions of the artwork extend out to three-dimensional space), there is a reversal in which “living” people move within the artwork.

Half a dozen pages into In the Labyrinth the ekphrasis begins with the narrator stating that the “picture in its frame of varnished wood is of a café scene” (1967 p. 19). The scene in the etching is then described in precise detail to the point that it takes on the “reality” of the primary diegesis. The etching is populated by a fat proprietor, middle-class citizens, soldiers and a child with arms “wrapped round a big box, something like a shoebox” (1967 p. 21). This last point involving the shoebox becomes one of a number of diegetic paradoxes which underpinned the ekphrasis; for, along with the protagonist (unnamed soldier), both the boy, and the shoebox he is holding, also exist in the “primary” diegesis.

The etching is described as containing figures displaying “exaggerated gestures ... [and]... violent facial contortions” while others figures “carried away by passion, are half-rising from their chairs or their benches, stretching out an arm

¹ What I mean by this is that the technique when augmented to include motion contains a similar function to that of trompe-l’œil: that being an image breaking out of its frame. But, in this instance, instead of “opening out” into the third spatial dimension – as seen in traditional trompe-l’œil – the “Reichenfels” etching implements the fourth dimension of time. Obviously, in both instances of trompe-l’œil (painting and writing) the visual illusion can only be “described” and not “seen”.
above all those heads towards some speaker further away”. A proprietor is described leaning forward with “both hands on the edge of the counter... his massive shoulders turned towards a small group of men” (1967 p. 20). While later, he is redescribed as leaning towards the middle-class citizens “taking no notice of his other customers” (1967 p. 22). It is the level of detailed description in combination with the constant exploration and re-exploration across this “image” (the proprietor is but one example), that produces a sense of “movement” even before the ekphrasis is explicitly animated. Because of this, there is uncertainty as to when the etching moves from stasis to movement; from something described in the primary diegesis to a newly created hypodiegesis.

Earlier hints of movement, which begin on page 20 and carry through to the middle of page 22, become more definitive with the statement that “isolated characters are moving about” (1967 p. 22). Finally, the soldier sits in half-darkness at the red and white chequered table by himself, the last of the customers having left the café, and “the proprietor having turned off most of the lamps before himself leaving the room.” (1967 p. 24).¹

What results from this ekphrasis is that the characters which inhabit the novel “somehow spill over and blend themselves into the represented world itself – into the world which contains the picture, but contains it as something belonging, as it were, to an ontologically discreet, ontologically discontinuous, dimension” (Ingarden 1973 p. xxxix). McHale invokes the “Klein bottle” structure for an explanation. “[I]nside and outside are indistinguishable in Dans le labyrinthe, its

¹ Of course, such nuanced observations regarding the use of verbs to describe action is potentially muddied by the text’s translation from French into English.
secondary or embedded representations (viz. the engraving of “Reichenfels”) becoming the “outside world,” its world in turn collapsing back into a secondary representation (a world within a world), which is thus embedded in itself” (1987 p. 14). Given its “Klein bottle” structure, how is the reader to make sense of such paradoxical ontologies? McHale claims that the only way to “recuperate” the text from the ontological violation contained in the “Reichenfels” etching is to “attribute the instability and inconsistency of its world to the consciousness of the dying soldier who is its protagonist” (1987 p. 14). Yet, McHale maintains that this “it-was-all-a-dream” explanation comes at a price in that “it requires us to smooth over a good many difficulties and to repress the text’s own resistance to being read” as a dying man’s vision (1987 p. 14). One primary difficulty of attributing a single consciousness to the novel is the first person narration by the doctor.

The promotion of ambiguity throughout In the Labyrinth, and in particular the ontological paradox/violation generated through the “Reichenfels” etching, results in a dreamy, non sequitur writing style. In the Labyrinth is modernist in its interiority yet postmodern through its exploitation of ekphrasis to create a paradoxical, hybridized ontology. Robbe-Grillet conflates the ontological levels (primary diegesis and “Reichenfels” etching) to such a degree that it is difficult to tell (nor, is it necessary) which level is “primary” to the other; the very point of such conflation.

---

1 Although the text is predominantly “characterized by concrete, geometrical descriptions” there are moments when the reader enters the “consciousness of the soldier... [within]...the narrator’s story” (Lethcoe 1965 p. 500). Or, an alternate reading – one which McHale subscribes to – is that there are several narrators and that epistemological and ontological paradoxes are irrecoverable.
Summary

Ekphrastic lends itself to the creation of new diegeses; new “worlds”. As I demonstrated in the previous chapter on Barth, LETTERS provide a “logical” setting in which his fictional characters “speak” extradiegetically. However, Robbe-Grillet’s ekphrastic description of an etching is a more complex framing vehicle. This is due to the a priori conceptual structure of ekphrasis, in which there is a “relation between domains”. Even though epistolary framing (along with any other form of narrative framing) can be exploited to raise ontological questions, what epistolary elements lack – yet is central to ekphrasis – is this “innate” ontological duality. Ekphrastic writing transposes and reinforces two aesthetic realms. And, when used in postmodern literature – read ontologically foregrounded literature – this “relation between domains” doesn’t just exist as transposition but also as a conceptual template that announces the presence of a secondary diegetic/ontological level.

The “world” which comes to life in the Shield of Achilles is inexplicable and ontologically problematic, yet this “world” itself exists within a fantasy world of gods and magic. Instances of ekphrastic writing depicting static art objects as animated obviously become more ontologically problematic when things (people and objects) set up residence in this newly created hypodiegesis, as is the case in the “Reichenfels” etching. The Shield of Achilles generates a moderate, limited mise en abîme through representing a world which mirrors the toils and struggles of the primary diegesis but the ontological status of both “worlds” remain separate. Whereas the mise en abîme in the “Reichenfels” etching presents an acute violation
in which people and a specific, McGuffinesque object (the shoebox) paradoxically exist in both “worlds”. In the case of Homer’s work this “magical” shift from stasis to animation can only be read as “poetic licence” yet, as suggested by Lethcoe (1965 pp. 501-02) and Brooke-Rose (1981 pp. 296-97), the animation in the “Reichenfels” etching is perhaps rationalised as a psychological manifestation.¹ Lethcoe compares these multiple levels of narration to the “regression images seen reflected by two parallel mirrors” (1965 p. 500). Yet, it is my understanding that the narrative structure of In the Labyrinth has more similarities to the previously mentioned “Klein bottle” structure than to mise en abîme, which Lethcoe is alluding to, for the following reason: the ekphrasis and the primary diegesis are conflated spaces that appear to share the same surface. The cafe in the primary diegesis is physically and ontologically the same as the one in the etching. Yes, they “mirror” one another but apart from the fact that it is framed in “varnished wood”, the cafe in the etching appears to be identical to the “first order reality” of the primary diegesis and not merely a copy.

¹ As previously pointed out, this is a common strategy by Robbe-Grillet whereby there is a conflation between “the embedded world of the narrator’s imagination with the diegetic level of the fictional world of the text” (Ashline 1995). Yet, as I will explain, in this instance a further complexity is added in which the narrator’s imagination becomes conflated with the newly created “world” of the ekphrasis. The most reasonable explanation is that the soldier, as narrator “imposes the things constituting his own reality on his narrative... [utilising] his physical surroundings [to] become the raw materials for the fiction he is creating” (Lethcoe 1965 p. 500). Further evidence to suggest that this nineteenth century etching is a confluence of “real object” and delirium is demonstrated by the fact that it contains elements from the twentieth century. Within the narrative regarding the Reichenfels battle are machine gun toting soldiers on motorbikes, electric lights and telephones. Lethcoe points out that these apparent contradictions are resolved when the narrative is read phenomenologically, in which the “twentieth century narrator is imposing his own reality on the story... [of the] nineteenth century painting” (Lethcoe 1965 p. 501). This “doubling up” which occurs in the etching frames the primary diegesis of the novel as a construction; something just as arbitrary and artificial as the etching itself. This counter-logic (counter realism) of the narrative can be read allegorically as delirium induced by a dying consciousness.
Similar to the previous chapter regarding epistolary “framing” as a structure for diegetic/ontological violations, ekphrasis also functions as a structure to break the narrative. In the case of Barth’s writing, ontological violations through letters of correspondence are used to “speak out” from the text as authorial address. The examples of ekphrastic framing I cite used by Robbe-Grillet are philosophically more problematic in that they either suggest the possibility that the “world” of the protagonist is guided or constructed through prophetic photographs (Project for a Revolution in New York) or that a completely new “world” can spring into existence through a static visual image (In the Labyrinth). While ekphrasis has a long history extending back to ancient Greece it is no surprise – given its ontological possibilities – that it has been enrolled by contemporary postmodern authors to generate new diegetic levels in order to question and violate fictional ontologies.

The discussions in this chapter regarding Robbe-Grillet’s use of ekphrasis has provided valuable groundwork for the next chapter where I examine Pynchon’s use of ekphrasis in his novels, The Crying of Lot 49, Vineland and, in particular, Gravity’s Rainbow for its use of extended cinematic ekphrasis. Overall, ekphrasis becomes less ontologically problematic when the source of the description is cinema, due to the source already being animated. That doesn’t mean that this descriptive device, when applied to cinema (or other moving artforms), can’t be utilised to disturb and violate ontological boundaries; it’s just that the “art” being described shares the characteristic of “movement through time”. In the case in which the focalisation enters an image, there is no confusion for the reader as to what “world” one is inhabiting, whereas cinematic ekphrasis (or the psychologically
generated vision by Robbe-Grillet) presents a challenge for the reader to locate
*where* the story is being narrated *from* because the ekphrastic “world” – with its
elements of “sound” and “movement” – more closely mirrors that of the fictional
world which contains the ekphrasis; and by extension the extradiegetic world of the
reader.¹

¹ Ekphrasis can only ever be relayed to the reader through the narrator. It is the process of the
narrator describing the art object. This can become problematic when there is an indeterminacy
regarding the mental state of the narrator, such as in the description of “Reichenfels” etching.
Chapter 4. Thomas Pynchon: “world” creation through ekphrasis

Introduction

Thomas Pynchon’s texts epitomise postmodern writing, and his novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* is perhaps the quintessential postmodern novel. McHale describes *Gravity’s Rainbow* as “an anthology of postmodernist themes and devices” (1987 p. 16) giving the impression that the novel is a postmodernist writer’s user manual. Similarly, Jeffrey Nealon proclaims that the novel is an “encyclopaedic, end-less text whose difficulty and resistance to interpretation are legendary” and can be seen as “perhaps the postmodern text par excellence” (1993 p. 108).

Many of Pynchon’s American contemporaries; John Hawkes, Kurt Vonnegut, Joseph Heller, Donald Barthelme and Barth were labelled as “counterrealists” (Cooper 1983 p. 3). All of these writers contributed uniquely to the literary style that was to be labelled and archived as postmodern. Cooper’s definition of the counterealist included narrative instability and non-closure. He suggested that central to the thinking of the counterealists is the recognition “that there is no Reality – only subjective realities, or mental constructions of the world made from unique and imperfect vantage points” (1983 p. 22). This emphasis on subjectivity and relativism by the counterealists is – as I have previously discussed – a concern which garnered the attention of metafictionalists such as Barth and nouveau roman authors such as Robbe-Grillet. They are all part of a mid to late twentieth century trend away from depictions of realism’s totalising ontology towards the
counterealist plurality of “subjective realities”. Some of Pynchon’s polyvalent realities reside not just within different subjectivities and “vantage points” but also act from different narrative and ontological levels; television and cinema playing an important role in “world” creation.

Although many other authors of the time carried this postmodern literary trend, “Pynchon figures as an exemplary postmodernist in formalist studies that attempt to define postmodernism in terms of technique and style” (Lord 1996 p. 48). *Gravity’s Rainbow* utilises the full breadth and depth of postmodern literary techniques. It is safe to say that Pynchon, along with his early 1970s contemporaries Barthelme, Vonnegut, Heller and others, announced the beginning of the postmodern turn for literature – a turn that is still playing out to this day.¹

This chapter will target specific examples of ekphrasis in three of Pynchon’s novels, *Vineland*, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Unlike the dense tome, which is *Gravity’s Rainbow*, *The Crying of Lot 49* is generally regarded as “the most accessible of Pynchon’s novels” and, as a result of this, possibly one of his most read novels (Lord 1996 p. 49).² My analysis will begin by outlining the style and literary techniques used by the author. From there I will target the specific

---

¹ There is much that overlaps the writing strategy and style of Pynchon’s contemporaries. For instance, Hawkes dismisses plot and character as constraints on his texts, Vonnegut employs metafictional techniques and intertextuality; Barthelme’s work frequently contains allusions to historical publications and incorporates non sequiturs to generate fragmented narratives, and even Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, which is (relatively) ontologically stable, constantly churns with absurd, anti-realist ironies and self-reflexive wordplay. Further, Vonnegut includes outrageous drawings of hypodermic syringes and anuses in his novels. Similarly, Pynchon includes drawings of a muted horn in *The Crying of Lot 49* and mathematical equations in *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

² Although this comment was published in 1996, it is still arguable that *The Crying of Lot 49*, due to its brevity and relatively linear narrative, is the most accessible novel in Pynchon’s oeuvre to date.
relevant passages which incorporate multiple diegetic levels and ontological violations.

Like the preceding chapters, this chapter will provide only a limited synopsis of the novels under examination for the sole purpose of giving a contextual framework to read Pynchon’s creation and violation of new diegetic/ontological “worlds”. I will primarily examine ekphrastic passages of ontological violations in all of the three Pynchon novels. These ekphrastic passages mostly involve television and cinema, however in the case of *The Crying of Lot 49* I will be also looking at a play within the novel, *The Courier’s Tragedy*. I give special attention to the way the embedded play is used to create *mise en abîme*. Some of these instances of ekphrasis such as the play-within-the-novel are more “traditional” and less ontologically antagonistic; other instances involving descriptions of popular television shows are wildly “contemporary” and seemingly anarchic.

It is important to note that the performance of the play *The Courier’s Tragedy* that takes place in the novel isn’t a clear-cut example of ekphrasis, in that substantial sections aren’t *visually* described in the novel; rather, the plot points and dialogue are *told* to the reader. However, none of the instances of ekphrasis in any of the three novels to be discussed is clear-cut. Pynchon’s employment of so many diverse ontologically destabilising elements in his novels serves to obscure the reader’s ability to be certain of what underpins the “world” of the text, let alone clearly “bracket out” instances of ekphrasis which create these “worlds”.

I will conduct my reading of *The Crying of Lot 49* in two sections. The first section will examine the play within the novel, *The Courier’s Tragedy*, and the subsequent production of *mise en abîme* and the second section will examine
instances of TV ekphrasis\(^1\) or what McHale refers to as “TV-en-abyme” (1992 p. 130).\(^2\) This notion of “TV-en-abyme” will also carry through to my discussion on ekphrastic writing in *Vineland* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*. After *Vineland*, I will examine the operation of *mise en abîme* as ontological destabiliser and ekphrasis as ontological violator in Pynchon’s most complex and ontologically problematic novel, *Gravity’s Rainbow*.

As part of my discussion, I will examine the epistemological problems created through framed and nested narratives in all three novels. These framed narratives are created through ad breaks, cinema, prolepses, analepsis, metalepsis, ekphrasis, etc. Information in Pynchon’s fiction is always conditional and elusive. In addition, it is this epistemic conditionality that constantly works to frame multiple diegeses.

The use of the carnivalesque, parody and satire in *Gravity’s Rainbow* have led many theorists to link its epistemologically complex writing style to that of the Menippean satire (Sibley 1995 p. 59, Kharpertian 1990 p. 15).\(^3\) Unlike the teleological *bildungsroman*, which focuses on the single, linear story arc of an individual, the menippea has a sweeping burlesque reach with a polyvalent

---

\(^1\) This strategy of Pynchon’s in which he writes “life is a movie” novels can be seen in his first novel, *V* (de Zwaan 2002 p. 83).

\(^2\) “TV-en-abyme” is an evocative, though slightly awkward phrase. Yes, Pynchon references television (either ekphrastically or as a general aesthetic template) in order to shape his writing. He represents television as a mythmaker or machine of social control. However, TV-en-abyme would suggest something akin to a television camera plugged into a monitor filming itself. Television isn’t being delivered to the reader via the “ubiquitous Tube” but through the printed word. This is the perennial problem of recognising instances of *mise en abîme*; where does one draw the line at a definition? How does one locate the contemporary use of *mise en abîme*; especially when its application is directed at something as pluralistic and amorphic as television? This task is made harder when confronting the writing of authors such as Pynchon in which narratives are warped and literary devices – such as ekphrasis – are distorted beyond their traditional intent.

\(^3\) Mikhail Bakhtin divides the novel into two stylistic categories. The first is the traditional realistic novel which is narrated using a single voice. The second can be categorised as Menippean satire. (2004b p. 410-411).
narrative structure; perfect for information disruption. Mikhail Bakhtin defines Menippean satire as literature which contains “moral–psychological experimentation: a representation of the unusual, abnormal moral and psychic states of man – insanity of all sorts (the theme of the manic), split personality, unrestrained daydreaming, unusual dreams, passions bordering on madness, suicides and so forth”. Such “representations” play out in scenes of scandal, “eccentric behaviour, inappropriate speeches and performances, that is, all sorts of violations of the generally accepted and customary course of events and established norms of behaviour and etiquette, including matters of speech” (2004a pp. 120-21). Elements of a Menippean style, with its “sharp contrast”, “oxymoronic combinations” and “inserted genres” (2004a p. 122) are not just limited to Gravity’s Rainbow but are also evident throughout Vineland and The Crying of Lot 49. Pynchon’s “Menippean” style operates symbiotically within a plethora of framing strategies – of which, ekphrasis is but one – to obfuscate both a clear reading of information transmission and antagonise ontological hierarchies.

**Mise en abîme: “The Courier’s Tragedy” in The Crying of Lot 49**

*Mise en abîme* contained in The Crying of Lot 49 is one of many techniques Pynchon uses to problematise the stability and coherence of the “world” of Oedipa, the protagonist. The primary instance of *mise en abîme* in the novel is the ekphrastic description of *The Courier’s Tragedy*, which functions as a cipher.
through which to read the primary diegesis.\(^1\) The ekphrasis is limited because it is through an exposition of plot points rather than a detailed description of “the senses”.\(^2\) Written by the fictional Jacobean playwright Richard Wharfinger,\(^3\) *The Courier’s Tragedy* is a revenge play which operates as an extended embedded narrative performed within the novel.\(^4\) Various elements from the primary narrative are incorporated into the play resulting in self-reflexive embedding; namely *mise en abîme*. Information in the form of shared plot points and motifs in both *The Courier’s Tragedy* and the novel containing it, *The Crying of Lot 49*, challenges the diegetic distinction between the two texts and as such places this instance of *mise en abîme* under Dällenbach’s category of paradoxical. Parallels can be drawn here with the way Barth’s *LETTERS* also challenges the separation of diegetic hierarchies. As outlined in the chapter on Barth, when the fictional world of the hypodiegesis merges in any significant way with the diegetic world in which it is contained, the “reality” of the primary diegetic level comes under question.

In typical circuitous fashion, Pynchon introduces the reader to the play indirectly, when he has a “long-waisted, brown-haired lovely in a black knit leotard” describe the events unfolding on the diegetic level of *The Crying of Lot 49*.

---

\(^1\) Although it never provides the “key” to understand the primary diegesis.

\(^2\) The reader is also jolted out of the play through the tone of the narrator and the use of modern-day terms such as “double-take” and “flunkies”.

\(^3\) Pynchon’s choice of name for the playwright is interesting. It was perhaps chosen due to the time he spent in the U.S. Navy in the late ’50s. A “wharfinger [is] one who owns or keeps a wharf, for the purpose of receiving and shipping merchandise to or from it” (Bouvier 1993 p. 493). During the time in which merchandise is at the wharf, the wharfinger has sole responsibility for those goods. The duties of a wharfinger can also include keeping tide tables, and conflict resolution. Therefore a wharfinger lends many analogous traits to Wharfinger the playwright, who is not only entrusted with the hypodiegetic narrative but also with the way meaning is “shipped” from one diegesis to the other.

\(^4\) The play is described almost continuously, over seven pages (1974 p. 47-55).
as having a most “bizarre resemblance to that ill, ill Jacobean revenge play we went to see last week” (hypodiegesis) (1974 p. 46). What this “brown-haired lovely” is referring to is the plot resemblance from her diegesis involving the use of crushed bones from American World War II soldiers to make cigarette filters (1974 pp. 45-46), and a subplot in the hypodiegetic world of *The Courier’s Tragedy* whereby the Lost Guard of Faggio suffer a similar fate, although their bones are reduced to charcoal and subsequently used in ink (1974 p. 54). This narrative motif is yet again used later in the novel when Mr Thoth relates a dream to Oedipa involving Porky Pig and Indians (who are possibly Mexicans). The “Indians” would “burn bones and stir the boneblack with their [white] feathers to make them black” (1974 p. 68).

At every opportunity, Pynchon loops narrative elements back on themselves. This is either done involving the violation of diegetic realms – as seen in content “doubling” in the play and the primary diegesis (*mise en abîme*) – or simply through reiterating motifs on the same diegetic level. After her conversation with Mr Thoth, Oedipa visits Genghis Cohen, “the most eminent philatelist in the LA area” who offers her homemade dandelion tea. Cohen announces that he “picked the dandelions in a cemetery, two years ago” (1974 p. 70). This cemetery, having been previously mentioned, connects back to Inverarity, a secret organisation

---

1 The bone motif is first introduced to Oedipa during a television commercial at the beginning of the book which advertises Beaconsfield Cigarettes, “whose attractiveness lay in their filter’s use of bone charcoal”. Metzger’s comment to her, that Inverarity “owned fifty-one percent of the filter process”, begins the link between Inverarity, Tony Jaguar, and the play *The Courier’s Tragedy* (1974 p. 23).
2 As is the case with the motif of the utilisation of human bones (i.e. turning them into ink, dyes or cigarette filters) which occurs in a hypodiegesis and various instances in the primary diegesis. With so many references to bones, this motif moves from one of simple “doubling” to a polyvalent reference intermittently bound to both the hypodiegesis and primary diegesis.
3 A philatelist is a person who studies stamps.
called Tristero and bones being used in the production of cigarette filters. At this point – after so many reinscriptions of this narrative motif – Oedipa speculates that her search for Tristero, and Inverarity’s connection to this organisation, may never be resolved and that she may simply be left with “only compiled memories of clues, announcements, imitations, but never the central truth itself...” (1974 p. 71).

Plot similarities aside, *The Courier’s Tragedy* also stylistically resembles the primary diegetic world of *The Crying a Lot 49*. Both contain carnivalesque characters generated through the use of scandal, eccentricities and obfuscation. It is the overlapping of such paranoid ticks and twitches, conspiracy and elements of ambivalence which bind the two diegetic realms.¹ Things which exist in Oedipa’s world, whether that be one of a number of unfolding convoluted narratives, or the “existence” of Tristero, also figure – just as obscurely – in the play. Therefore, *mise en abîme* generated from *The Courier’s Tragedy* is produced through not just a doubling up of motifs, plot points, play on words but also through the hypodiegesis and primary diegesis embracing a similar paranoid, labyrinthine style.²

*The Courier’s Tragedy* is structurally framed the same way that the play *Mousetrap* is framed within *Hamlet*. However, unlike the play *Mousetrap*, whose title (and function) directly alludes to the narrative meaning of *Hamlet* in which it

---

¹ Following McHale’s thesis, the repetition, mirroring and ‘doubling up’ associated with *mise en abîme* within postmodern literature continually seeks to problematise the text ontologically. Pynchon’s use of *mise en abîme* in the play *The Courier’s Tragedy* is specifically co-opted and nuanced to produce “worlds” of conspiracy and paranoia within *The Crying of Lot 49*. Furthermore, this technique, when presented in a postmodern text such as *The Crying of Lot 49*, is co-operating in tandem with other ontologically subversive literary manoeuvres. This is not just limited to *The Crying of Lot 49*. *Gravity’s Rainbow* also uses the paradoxical technique of *mise en abîme* to create conspiracy and paranoia.

² Similarly, as shown later in this chapter when discussing *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the aesthetics of cinema and TV are “mirrored” across diegetic levels to create *mise en abîme*. 
will “catch the conscience of the King” (Shakespeare 2007 p. 308) through guilty
disclosure, *The Courier’s Tragedy* ultimately only serves to obsfucate an
understanding of *The Crying of Lot 49*. This is done while under-handedly offering
false hope to Oedipa – and the reader – that the embedded play will function as a
key to decipher the primary diegesis.¹

When placed side by side, both hypodiegetic texts (*Mousetrap* and *The
Courier’s Tragedy*) fulfill Currie’s definition of a *mise en abîme*, where the
embedded representation exists on an inferior narrative level to that of the primary
diegesis, represents something from the primary diegesis, and finally, where this
“something” is a significant component of the primary diegesis. Yet, the resulting
effect of this technique in the two examples is significantly different. It’s the
complex, relentless intratextual referencing – both through narrative and the
stylistic devices – which operate between *The Courier’s Tragedy* and *The Crying of
Lot 49* that is antithetical to the simplicity of the relationship between *Hamlet* and
*Mousetrap*.² While both embedded narratives serve to address the themes of
conspiracy and paranoia, *Mousetrap* achieves this through the dialogue in the
embedded play and the way in which the plotline mirrors the concerns central to
the narrative of *Hamlet*. While *The Courier’s Tragedy* mirrors a number of the
plotlines and replicates distinct stylistic themes of the primary narrative, such as
the use of the destabilising wordplay in the form of misspelt names, similar

¹ Interestingly, conspiracy and paranoia feature front and centre in both *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Hamlet*.
² It could be argued that a stable ontology in the embedded play *Mousetrap* mirrors the ontological
stability of *Hamlet*. The point I am making regarding the relationship between *The Courier’s
Tragedy* and *The Crying of Lot 49* goes beyond similarities regarding their ontological instability,
but takes into account the specific conspiratorial elements of both narratives (labyrinthine plotting,
wordplay, utilitarian repurposing of bones, etc.).
sounding names and acronyms and more broadly, secret organisations and practices. The central point here is that *mise en abîme*, while traditionally generated through the “mirroring” of the fiction content (a character or plot point), can also be created through the fiction form or structure such as misspellings, mood (paranoia), aesthetics (cinematic writing), etc.

Aspects of the play – and the physical book itself – operate as a cryptic mirror, reflecting fragmented clues of the primary diegesis. The mail distribution company, Trystero (spelt throughout the novel as both, Trystero or Tristero) when mentioned in the play provides “evidence” that this organisation has been in operation for centuries. However, does the organisation exist at all? At one point in the novel Oedipa’s research convinces her that the organisation existed in the past, yet “beyond its origins, the libraries told her nothing more about Tristero. For all they knew, it had never survived the struggle for Dutch independence” (1974 p. 123).

There may be “[a]nother mode of meaning behind the obvious, or none” and Oedipa may be in the “orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia” or actually witnessing the machinations of a secret organisation called Tristero (1974 p. 138). The *mise en abîme*, which is produced from the play within *The Crying of Lot 49*, is one of the primary devices in which Pynchon pushes the theme of labyrinthine paranoia. Yet,

---

1 In the play, Tristero and Thurn and Taxis are feuding “postal services”. Thurn and Taxis actually existed as a postal service which was first established in the latter half of the fifteenth century in Tyrol, Germany by “Roger I, Count of Thurn, Taxis and Valsassina” (Washington 1850 p. 205). However, philatelist Genghis Cohen asserts that Thurn and Taxis have existed “from about 1300, until Bismarck bought them out in 1867” (1974 p. 72). Similarities with the city of Tyrol and Trystero don’t go unnoticed. Pynchon’s inclusion of these brief moments of historiographic metafiction – in which he weaves together strange historical facts with strange fiction – is yet another device to problematise the protagonist’s (and reader’s) quest for epistemological certainty.

2 Pynchon’s use of *mise en abîme* in *The Crying of Lot 49* is Borgesian through its display of ontological paradoxes but also serves to infect both diegeses with the Kafkaesque hyper-bureaucracy
the paranoid conspiracy (and skullduggery) which is located within the performance of *The Courier’s Tragedy* also serves to activate – or is that re-activate – Oedipa on her quest to discover the motivations behind Tristero. This is “enacted” through her attempts to hunt down a complete copy of the script in the hope that it will shed light on the provenance of Tristero inside the play and the organisation’s possible relationship with the Tristero, which exists outside of the play.

Although the narrative of *The Crying of Lot 49* is played out in an absurd paranoid world, its ultimate meaning is “an enquiry into and dramatisation of our incessant desire for meaning” (O’Donnell 1991 p. 13). In many ways, Oedipa’s relentless investigation for meaning, positions *The Crying of Lot 49* to be read through the lens of detective fiction.¹ Oedipa’s attempt to locate a copy of the play *The Courier’s Tragedy*, leads her on a journey whereby she is “dogged by misprints [and] multiple editions”.² Her constant frustrated search for a complete copy of the play becomes an allegory for (and is entangled with) the conspiracy which may exist behind the Tristero organisation.

Oedipa becomes “[p]uzzled by hieroglyphs of all sorts [and] she admits her incapacity to read them” (Quilligan 1979 p. 261). These constant slippages with

---

¹ From the outset, the novel contains a death, conspiracy and a “phone call late at night that propels the protagonist into detective duties” (Jarvis 1998 p. 87). The frame has been set for suspense and mystery. Because of her initial inquiry into her deceased ex-boyfriend’s estate (of which she is co-executor), Oedipa launches an investigation into the Tristero – an organisation which may or may not exist and whose purpose is unknown. The vague, ghostly clues that hint at the existence of the Tristero begin to stack up. Separately, each clue seems insignificant but when examined collectively take definite shape; further prompting Oedipa along her quest.

² Jorge Luis Borges uses a similar premise in *Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius* (1940), which depicts the narrator’s intrusive search for an article believed be in an encyclopaedia.
language (obscure footnotes, publication misprints, acronyms and names, which sound like other names) which thwart her hunt for an “essential” copy of The Courier’s Tragedy, overwhelm Oedipa and ultimately underscore the absence of logos in The Crying of Lot 49. Oedipa becomes a protean figure, taking on the guise of “cryptologist, code breaker, literary critic, archaeologist, author – but neither she nor the reader is permitted to know finally whether she is discovering things or creating them” (Jarvis 1998 p. 60).

While the spilling of information across diegetic levels from The Crying of Lot 49 to The Courier’s Tragedy and back again serves to destabilise and flatten the ontological hierarchy through the repetition of figures (doppelgänger) and themes (human remains), it also functions as an enigmatic metaphor for Oedipa’s pathological ambivalence regarding the existence/nonexistence of Tristero. The primary diegesis and hypodiegesis overlap like a Venn diagram,¹ creating a shared narrative space which incorporates both The Crying of Lot 49 and The Courier’s Tragedy. Oedipa’s constantly thwarted quest, or should I say quests – her overarching quest for the truth behind Tristero is bound up with Pierce Inverarity and composed of a subset of quests such as her hunt for a complete original copy of The Courier’s Tragedy – at the heart of the novel is used as a counterpoint to the reductive teleological perspective of the police procedural genre of detective

¹ Conceived of by John Venn in the late 1800s. A Venn diagram is a schematic representation of relations between sets or groups of things. Each discrete group represents as a circle. When two circles overlap, the newly created shared space contains a mixture from both groups.
fiction. This teleological perspective is one which Oedipa subscribes to and which the *mise en abîme* induced aporia works against.

Oedipa as “cryptologist” is compelle to navigate a strange “California noir” landscape (Rzepka 2009 p. 464). The lack of *dénouement* in *The Crying of Lot 49* highlights the way the novel works against the grain of detective fiction genre. Pynchon uses *mise en abîme* in *The Courier’s Tragedy* to undermine epistemological certainty and to question the “reality” of the primary diegesis. It is through meeting Driblette (the director of the play) that Oedipa Maas’ asks herself, “Shall I project a world?” (1974 p. 60). This “signposting” serves to remind the reader that the story, the play within the story and the reader of the story are all “projections”; the “subjective realities” of the extradiegetic reader being as much a construction as that of Ms Mass.

The counterrealist obfuscation removes any chance for Oedipa – or, for that matter the reader – to locate truth. It is the withholding of answers in *The Crying of Lot 49* that ironically supplies the key, or at least provides a frame, in which to understand the text. If there is a *dénouement* in *The Crying of Lot 49* it is the realisation, when Oedipa settles back, to await the crying of lot 49, that there is no *dénouement*: only questions.

---

1 The incorporation of ekphrasis, intertextual allusions and *mise en abîme* in *The Crying of Lot 49* “dismantles the sense of teleology on which classic detective fiction...depend[s]”. (Patell 2001 p. 123)

2 As outlined by Geoffrey William Lord, the “significance of the detective/mystery structure in postmodern fiction lies in its inversion of the philosophical implications of the popular form”. Lord suggests that the narrative form of detective fiction, with its emphasis on tracking down a “solution [or] answer – is deployed precisely to foreground the impossibility of certainty as against postmodernism’s epistemological and ontological doubt” (1996 p. 65).

3 Lot 49 being a set of rare postage stamps that Oedipa believes Trystero is trying to obtain.
**Writing television: ekphrastic mise en abîme in The Crying of Lot 49**

With the ubiquity of television in the 1970’s it is not surprising that ekphrastic instances in works of “contemporary” fiction incorporate the moving image. Television in *The Crying of Lot 49* functions as a force of ontological destabilisation and as a generator of mise en abîme; and humour. A few pages into the novel, the protagonist Oedipa Maas feels distanced from the “world” around her “as if watching a movie, just perceptibly out of focus, that the projectionist refused to fix” (1974 p. 13). Pynchon foregrounds the “ontological implications of thinking of oneself as living as if one is in a movie” (de Zwaan 2002 p. 84) as a prelude to the ekphrastic scene in which Oedipa and Metzger (her co-executor to Pierce Inverarity’s will) watch Metzger as a child performing in the film *Cashiered*. In the movie, child actor Metzger is playing the character Baby Igor who, along with his father, torpedo Turkish merchantmen in a homemade submarine during World War II.

Even though this ekphrastic writing is fragmented, there are passages during the description of the movie in which the framing text – *The Crying of Lot 49* – dissolves away. This is evident when Baby Igor breaks into song. The primary diegesis and hypodiegesis reconnect again when the older Metzger begins to sing a duet with his younger self (1974 pp. 20-21).

Again, like the embedded narrative of *The Couriers Tragedy*, the reader’s ability to enter the “ekphrastic” moment in *Cashiered* is constantly thwarted by an intruding, and at times cynical, narrator. After Metzger alerts Oedipa to the part in

---

1 Although, in this instance the reference is cinema.
the movie in which the boy Metzger sings, the narrator describes Baby Igor, Murray the dog and a “merry old Greek fisherman who [appears] from nowhere with a zither” all standing in front of “phoney-Dodecanese process footage of a seashore at sunset” (1974 p. 21). The vision Pynchon “projects” is familiar to anyone who has watched movies from the 1950s and ’60s. Back screen projection was common during this period for outdoor scenes and as a moving backdrop for tight interior sequences in cars. The technique, in spite of trying to represent reality, more often than not appears fake. It is the ambivalent nature of this cinematic technique which Pynchon is exploiting in this instance. With a nod and a wink, the “Dodecanese process footage” serves to underscores the artificiality of the “worlds” which are constantly constructed in *The Crying of Lot 49* while the announcement of such artificiality amplifies the metafictionality of the narrator’s intrusive comments.

The embedded narrative of *Cashiered* is repeated and commented on during commercial breaks, having the effect of doubling up the narrative while also displaying to the reader the process of metanarrative. Yet, the commercial breaks themselves also speak to the primary narrative. During the first commercial break a new housing development is advertised; Fangoso Lagoons. To which Metzger replies “One of Inverarity’s interests” (1974 p. 21). The commercial ends with a “map of the place flashed on the screen” (1974 p. 21) which seems to function as *déjà vu (mise en abîme)*, reminding Oedipa of a scene she witnessed earlier that day. During the process of watching the film Oedipa and Metzger decide to play “Strip Botticelli” whereby Oedipa “purchases” knowledge from Metzger regarding
the film’s plot developments by removing an item of clothing. This game further reminds the reader of both the separation and transgression of these “mysteriously linked” ontological levels, whereby the desire for knowledge contained in the hypodiegesis becomes bound with the libidinal impulses occurring in the diegesis. The instances of ekphrastically structured *mise en abîme* in *The Crying of Lot 49* are restrained and don’t overtly disrupt the hierarchy of diegesis and hypodiegesis. It is in later novels that Pynchon’s use of *mise en abîme* becomes more profound and explicitly violates ontologies.

**Writing television: conflating television with the “real” in *Vineland***

A much later work by Pynchon, *Vineland* is almost dominated by television. In fact, it can be seen to have infected the text. In this novel television is positioned as a “transcendent force, both revered and externally controlling” (Ostrander 2003 p. 126). The numerous instances of television, which functions as hypodiegetic embedding in the diegesis of *Vineland*, create a more problematic ontology to that of *The Crying of Lot 49*. As opposed to *The Crying of Lot 49*, where television is more or less positioned as something which exists in the novel, in the case of *Vineland*, television and the novel fuse and mutate into a hybridised “TV novel”.

---

1 The chapter concludes “with a triple climax combining sex, film (the young Metzger is electrocuted) and pop music (a group called the Paranoids have been serenading them and finally blow all the fuses in the motel)” (Seed 1988 p. 118). The constant occurrence of overloaded moments such as these, full of coincidences and pregnant with puns, permanently put on hold any possibility – however slim – of the suspension of disbelief.
Although partly set in the ’80s during the Reagan administration, the narrative is also told through flashbacks to the ’60s, where again we are presented with characters similar to The Crying of Lot 49; drug addicts, delusional paranoids, anarchists and various other subversives of American counterculture. Again, like child-star Metzger in The Crying of Lot 49, the inhabitants of Vineland aren’t just consumers of television and cinema but also participate “in the movies”. The spectre of the “tube” is introduced early in the novel when Zoyd Wheeler purchases a “party dress in a number of colors that would look good on television” from a More is Less discount store and then goes on to perform a stuntman-leap through a pane of glass for the cameras (1990 p. 11). This crazy behaviour is pursued in order for him to continue receiving disability cheques from the “mental-health folks” (1990 p. 4). Not only that, Zoyd “made it home in time to view himself on the Tube” (1990 p. 14). It also happens that the mother of Zoyd’s daughter, Frenesi Gates, is a former filmmaker of the radical student movement 24 fps that produces political propaganda films. The book is brimming with filmmakers, bit actors, television and movies.¹ The text is awash with references to television and coated with a TV aesthetic. With such a saturated reference to films and film making – in all its various guises – the book is primed for instances of television ekphrasis whose primary purpose is as ontological destabiliser.

The instance of problematised ontology I will look at in Vineland involves filmmaker-turned-CIA-operative Frenesi Gates’ sexual fantasy realised. Although this example isn’t a clear demonstration of ontological violation it does fall under

¹ Pynchon’s use of television resonates richly with the 1980s, in which the plot is partly set. The story is framed at the time of former-actor-turned-president Ronald Reagan’s re-election.
the rubric of *mise en abîme*; in which a smaller copy exists in a “primary” copy. The first excerpt below provides a “lead up” which Pynchon uses to frame the ontological conflation.

Believing that the rays coming out at the TV screen would act as a broom to sweep the room clear of all spirits, Frenesi now popped the Tube on and checked the listings. There was a rerun of the perennial motorcycle-cop favourite “CHiPs” on in a little while. She felt a rising of blood, a premonitory dampness. Let the grim feminists rave, Frenesi knew there were living women, down in the world, who happen, like herself, to be crazy about uniforms on men, entertained fantasies while on the freeway about the Highway Patrol, and even, as she was planning to do now, enjoy masturbating to Ponch and Jon reruns on the Tube, and so what?

1990 p. 83

She swung the TV set around now, lay down on the sofa, undid her shirt, unzipped her pants, and was set to go when all at once what should occur for her but the primal Tubefreak miracle, in the form of a brisk manly knock at the screen door in the kitchen, and there outside on the landing, through the screen, broken up in little dots like pixels of a video image, only squarer, was this large, handsome U.S. Marshal, in full uniform, hat, service .38, and leather beltwork...

1990 p. 84
The two excerpts above demonstrate the function of television in *Vineland*, both as an instance of ekphrasis and as proxy for phantasy in general.¹ Television in *Vineland* not only arouses one’s sexual phantasies but it also has the ability to manifest such phantasies as “real”. *Vineland* is a “world” in which unconscious phantasies become conscious fantasies and immaterial fantasies become material. Of course, the Marshal didn’t really step out of the Tube; it was, like much of Pynchon’s writing, the result of some “miraculous” coincidence. As the narrator observes in *The Crying of Lot 49*, “coincidences... [were]... blossoming these days wherever she looked...” (1974 p. 81).

Yet, it is the way Pynchon structures the second passage above which reveals the way he imports television – either its aesthetics and/or style/genre – into the text, in order to blur the “world” of *CHiPs* with that of the primary diegesis. The screen door in front of the U.S. Marshal atomises him into pixels.² The diegetic/ontological breach is embodied in the figure of the U.S. Marshal who is a doppelgänger; existing in the diegesis and hypodiegesis.

The “pixelated manifestation” of the U.S. Marshal is the embodiment of Frenesi’s sexual fantasy. Even though the Marshal is “real”, his positioning in the television’s *mise-en-scène* is structured in a way that puts a question mark above his authenticity *and* his ontological status. Again, towards the end of the novel we see similar hints at the possibility of a “real” world residing behind the television.

¹ Moreover, the structure of phantasy, with its binary of internal (television) and external (U.S. Marshal).
² The screen – whether that of a door or a television – also serves to frame the figure of the U.S. Marshal, further reinforcing the conflation.
This is done through Frenesi recounting to her daughter, Prairie, the first time she ever noticed her watching the Tube.

“‘Gilligan’s Island’ was on, Prairie, and your eyes may’ve been a little unfocused yet, but you sat there, so serious and watched the whole thing – “[…] “[W]henever the show came on, you’d smile and gurgle and rock back and forth, so cute, like you wanted to climb inside the television set, and right onto that Island” –

1990 p. 368

In this way, Pynchon consistently positions television culture throughout this novel as both a mirror of, and escape from, “reality” (McHale 1992 p. 117). Through complex narrative framing, Pynchon crafts the possibility – with varying degrees of conviction – that the boundary which separates the “world” of Vineland and the hypodiegetic “world” within the Tube is porous. McHale makes comparisons with the U.S. Marshal sequence and the paradoxical painting technique of trompe-l’œil. This is similar to Robbe-Grillet’s use of ekphrasis to “trick the eye” into “seeing” hypodiegetic two-dimensional shapes manifest into three-dimensional diegetic forms. Although in a strict sense the U.S. Marshal sequence is not an example of trompe-l’œil, McHale’s point is that it gestures – through diegetic interplay – in the direction of this technique.

On the opening page of The Crying of Lot 49, television is represented as menacing. Oedipa Maas stands in her living room “stared at by the greenish dead eye of the TV tube” (1974 p. 5). The character Mr Thoth refers to a television as a
“filthy machine” (1974 p. 68). Conversely, in the world of Vineland, television appears to “miraculously” supply Frenesi with a physical manifestation of her libidinal desire. Yet, television isn’t always such a benevolent force in this novel. At times, it functions mindlessly or panoptically. Such as, when DEA field agent Hector Zuñiga speculates on a world in which “the Tube were suddenly to stop showing pictures and instead announce, ‘From now on, I’m watching you’” (1990 p. 340)¹ – in effect, reversing its intended hypodiegetic direction of information. Ultimately, television in Vineland operates as both a tool of scopophilic surveillance and font for desire. The shared characteristics between these two types of operation raises interesting questions. As we know through social theorists such as Michel Foucault, watching and desiring share primal territory. Also, through Foucault’s broad reading of the implications of Bentham’s panopticon² there is general consensus that being watched – whether actualised or simulated – results in self-censorship, whereby the “critical eye” of the “authority” doing the watching is taken over by the individual being watched. Television in The Crying of Lot 49 and Vineland contain elements of both; watching as desire and as control.

McHale argues that when the structure of television is appropriated – movies broken apart by advertisements, all of which are further chopped up by editing cuts – it resonates with a choppy, multivalent writing style. Although not directly

¹ Odeipa’s world is also one in which the “dead eye of the TV tube” is menacing and panoptic (1974 p. 5).
² Developed by English philosopher and social reformist Jeremy Bentham, the panopticon is a prison design comprised of a central observation area encircled by cells. The design, in which an observer can view all the prisoners without the prisoners being able to see the observer, provided “a new mode of obtaining power of mind over mind, in a quantity hitherto without example” (Bentham 1995 p. 31). Foucault used the panopticon as a metaphor for insights into contemporary social control in which surveillance becomes internalised. (O’Farrell 2005 p. 104)
referring to Pynchon’s writing, but more generally to ontologically plural texts, McHale suggests that the inclusion of television not only “contributes to and further aggravates the plurality of their worlds, but also reflects in miniature the ontological structure of the texts themselves” (1992 p. 130). The “worlds of these texts...have something like the ontologically plural, centrifugal structure of TV itself” (1992 p. 130). McHale’s conclusion is that this “reduced scale-model, of ontological plurality” generates a type of structural mise en abîme. The generation of mise en abîme in Vineland is created through the two diegeses, shared “ontologically plural, centrifugal structure”. As a result, it is difficult to differentiate “scenes” which exist within the hypodiegesis of television to that of the primary diegesis of the protagonist Zoyd. It is the ubiquitous allusions to television in the primary diegesis of Vineland and the ekphrastic writing of television that allows even minor examples of TV ekphrasis to be able to trigger instances of mise en abîme.

While television certainly functions as a site or “generating machine” for mise en abîme, McHale also labels it as an “ontological pluralizer” (1992 p. 130). He suggests that Pynchon’s representation of television doesn’t just function as “one pluralizer among others, but as the figure of ontological plurality itself...a kind of strange loop” (1992 p. 131).¹ The leaking of the aesthetics of television, to and from the diegesis and hypodiegesis (TV set), occur so seamlessly and frequently that they share the same “Klein-bottle” realm. Yet, “TV-en-abyme” (like any placement en

¹ This interesting observation by McHale refers to the complex relationship between the subject and the narrative-driven, moving image of television. Much has been written regarding the interplay and interdependence between television and the constructed subject. Rather than just a passive benign medium, television is both consumed and integrated into our subjectivity.
abîme) only needs part of the “thing” mirrored to create *mise en abîme*. Further, as I have outlined above, this “part of the thing” need only be the style or characteristic shared between two diegeses; in the case of TV-en-abyme this is “plurality”. What becomes apparent, through the cumulative effect of television referencing, is that modest doublings, such as the aesthetics or style of television editing, work in concert with doublings of content to the point at which the *mise en abîme* appears totalising.

The fictional world, which surrounds the various characters in Pynchon’s *Vineland*, is shaped by specific television genres such as TV sitcoms, cop shows and soap-operas (McHale 1992 p. 135). Television not only operates as a device to embed narratives and pluralise ontologies but also as an aesthetic template that can be used to locate the different characters within specific television or cinematic genres. However, as McHale points out, there is a distinct difference between the ontology of TV and that of cinema. Unlike TV, which is “characterised by an ongoing ‘flow’ of segments (commercials, programs of different genres, etc.) projecting worlds of radically different kinds, from verisimilar realism to many varieties of non-realism... making different kinds of truth claims... inhabited by beings of different ontological status”, cinema has a monolithic ontological character (1992 p. 126). Rather than exploiting melodrama as is the case in *Cashiered*, or sitcoms and cop shows in *Vineland, Gravity’s Rainbow*, with its postwar perplexity and disorder, primarily alludes to the frenetic and defamiliarising cinematic genre of the interwar year musical. It will be cinema ekphrasis in *Gravity’s Rainbow* that we will turn to next.
**Gravity’s Rainbow: unstable narration and direct address**

At 760 pages long, *Gravity’s Rainbow*, “[s]upported by a dense intertextual framework... creates a carnivalesque ‘simultaneous fiction,’ which mixes different historical periods and blends World War II with the 1960s” (Schwab 1994 p. 20). Even though *Gravity’s Rainbow* is regarded as a postmodern novel,¹ it is through the complex array of blending fiction with historical periods which also situates the text as historiographic metafiction. The three distinct examples of diegetic/ontological violation through partial or explicit ekphrasis I wish to discuss are the “kamikaze suicidekicks” Takeshi and Ichizo, *Alpdrücken* (the film within the novel) and the “dénouement”, that occurs on the last page; revealing the entire novel to be the extended ekphrastic writing of a movie.² I have chosen these three examples because they are simple, well defined and distinctly located in the novel. Before I discuss these three examples, I will provide a general summary of the constituent parts of the novel and the primary plot. I will follow this with a brief analysis of one example of Pynchon’s “ubiquitous cinematic referencing” as seen through the figure of Shirley Temple.

So much has been said and written about *Gravity’s Rainbow* that is hard to generate fresh statements regarding its central importance to postmodern literature. Another difficulty is to provide even an adequate summary of the

---

¹ The novel is also intratextual through the “recycling” of characters from some of Pynchon’s previous novels. For instance, Seaman “Pig” Bodine appears in *V* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*. A character with the name of Fender-Belly Bodine also appears in *Mason & Dixon* and Bodine in *Against the Day*.

² Of course, framing the entire novel as ekphrastic — when one considers historically the limited scope of this literary technique — is pushing the limits of the definition of ekphrasis.
multiple narrative threads that inhabit *Gravity’s Rainbow* in so short a space. Instead, I will simply supply a list of the divergent thematic elements of this novel and then provide a quick overview of, what many consider to be, the primary plot. The following are just some of the topics and themes which operate within the complexity of *Gravity’s Rainbow*: the German rocket program during the Second World War, Pavlovian psychology, conspiracy and Illuminati, parapsychology, Tarot, Teutonic mythology and the movies, in particular German-American filmmaker Fritz Lang and child actor Shirley Temple. This list demonstrates the disparate nature of the elements (themes, motifs personages, etc.) which compose this novel.

As for the plot of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, it centres on/around Tyrone Slothrop’s pursuit of a mystery that, if true, lies beyond the reach of science and into metaphysics. The mystery goes like this: after Tyrone Slothrop has sex, V-2 rockets explode at the same location as Slothrop’s sexual encounters. Such an unlikely connection – rockets and penises – are made possible by Slothrop’s childhood psychosexual conditioning from crazed German scientist Laszlo Jamf. However, Tyrone Slothrop represents just one of a number of “cast members”. Other cast members include Pirate Prentice (whose dream opens the novel), drug dealer Saure Bummer, comic relief fall guy Teddy Bloat, and others. I say “cast members” because of the novel’s constant reference to cinema in the form of stage direction, lighting, characters performing like actors, descriptive passages unfolding like films scenes and music directions such as “Bridge music” (1973 p. 223), “Fade up song” (1973 p. 534) and “Chase Music” (1973 p. 751).
The omniscient narrator\(^1\) of *Gravity’s Rainbow* functions with free indirect discourse (something that is quite commonplace in realist third person narration). Free indirect discourse is a type of omniscient narrator that has the ability to move in and out of a character’s consciousness; revealing thoughts and feelings. For example, a narrator will shift from describing the actions of a character and then “enter” the character’s mind and describe or comment on what the character is thinking. Yet, the omniscient narrator in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is at times limited. For example, when the character Capt. Geoffrey “Pirate” Prentice responds to an incoming V-2 rocket with, “Incoming mail” the narrator asks “[d]id he whisper that, or only think it?” (1973 p. 6). A narrator who doesn’t know if they have *heard* someone think something or heard someone say something, is one who – at any given time – may not know with absolute certainty, whether they are narrating a character’s thoughts/dreams or something observed that is happening to the character in the primary diegesis. This confusion by the omniscient third person narrator not only places a question mark over “real” events in the novel but also raises questions around the ontological location of the narrator, whether in the mind of “Pirate” or in the primary diegesis. This narrator also periodically directly addresses the reader. On page 588 – after discussing Freemasons and the Illuminati – the narrator helpfully suggests that the reader should “[c]heck out Ishmael Reed.\(^2\) He knows more about it than you’ll ever find here”. This aside isn’t

---

1 Pynchon’s narrator in *Gravity’s Rainbow (The Crying of Lot 49 and Vineland)* is extradiegetic (narrating from outside the story) and heterodiegetic, in that he is not a character in the story.

2 A reference to Reed’s novel *Mumbo-Jumbo* (1972), which also deals with paranoia and conspiracy theories and involves Freemasons and the Knights Templar.
just (fourth wall breaking) direct address but also takes on the characteristic of gloss more often found in non-fiction writing.

The unreliable narrator in *Gravity’s Rainbow* also dispenses with the usual foreshadowing of a “scenes” ontological status. By this I mean that Pynchon often describes the “world” first – whether it is a hypodiegesis (movie) or psychic realm of a dream – and then retrospectively reveals it as *not* part of the primary diegesis. McHale refers to this literary strategy by Pynchon as “world under erasure”. The novel begins with one such instance.¹ The first page and a half of the novel describes the evacuation of drunks, hustlers, women and children from a destroyed unnamed city. This scene is then revealed to be a nightmare (hypodiegesis) in the mind of Capt. Geoffrey (“Pirate”) Prentice. The transition from hypodiegesis to diegesis is another example of confusion suffered by the narrator.

There is no way out. Lie and wait, lie still and be quiet. Screaming holds across the sky. When it comes, will it come in darkness, or will it bring its own light? Will the light come before or after?

But it is already light. How long has it been light? All this while, light has come percolating in...

¹ In the second paragraph of the novel, we are told that “it’s all theatre” (1973 p. 3).

1973 p. 4

Not only does the narrator *not* know if a character is speaking or thinking but the narrator also can’t differentiate between dream, “reality” and – as I will discuss...
– cinema. The “epistemically conditional” world of *Gravity's Rainbow* is one which amalgamates the extradiegesis (direct address), hypodiegeses (dreams, hallucinations, cinema, etc.) and the primary diegesis into a complex, unhinged ontology and exploits what McHale refers to as “[r]etroactive world-making - unmaking” (1992 p. 69) whereby the “reader, invited to reconstruct a ‘real’ single action in the novels fictive world, is forced in retrospect – sometimes in long retrospect – to ‘cancel’ the reconstruction he or she has made, and to relocate it within a character’s dream, hallucination, or fantasy” (1992 p. 62).

The figure of Shirley Temple appears in many forms throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*; dreamlike and overdetermined. Shirley Temple is referenced for her smile (1973 p. 24), as a drink¹ (1973 p. 246), for her hair (1973 p. 304), for her song “On the Good Ship Lollipop”² (1973 p. 466) and for her baby voice (1973 p. 493). In the world of *Gravity’s Rainbow* this figure has the ability to infect people’s speech and – through the sadistic treatment of “[b]eautiful little-girl buttocks [which] rise like moons” (1973 p. 466) – trigger transgressive, libidinal desires. The figure of Shirley Temple exists as a manifestation from a perverse cultural “residue of the cinema”. In this way, Shirley Temple (the product) becomes antithetical to all that she symbolised in the genre of wholesome “family movies”. Yet, the novel is replete

¹This cocktail is a non-alcoholic mixed drink. The drink is composed of ginger ale, orange juice and a dash of grenadine. The cocktail is traditionally garnished with a maraschino cherry. In this instance, while Slothrop is “putting together a Shirley Temple” he drops the cherry and then steps on it. Given Bianca’s age – at one point she is referred to as 11 years yet, as Bernard Duyfhuizen points out she may be as old as 16 or 17 (1991 [15]) – this is a possible reference to taking the girl’s virginity. The term “cherry-popping” having been in existence since the mid-1960s (Beale 2002 p. 205).

²This song is sung in a bar by the nymphet Bianca “on the good ship” *Anubis*. After which, having argued with her mother, she is partially undressed and sado-sexually punished in public, triggering an outrageous “P&O” group orgy.
with references to “family movies” from the prewar period: characters like crooner Bing Crosby (1973 p. 184), Groucho Marx (1973 pp. 210, 246, 278, 386), James Cagney (1973 pp. 222, 599), and the aforementioned Miss Temple. Then there are comparisons to the movies like, “Yes, it is a movie! Another WWII situation comedy” (1973 pp. 691-92), “as nasal and debonair as a movie star” (1973 p. 697) and “Nazi movie villain” (1973 p. 360).

Shirley Temple allusions used in this novel demonstrate the outlandish complexity of Pynchon’s game of “spot the reference”.1 The relentless quoting of popular culture throughout this novel turns *Gravity’s Rainbow* into an engorged metatext; its primary source material being cinema. Further, these relentless allusions – to other filmic texts; other ontologies – throws into question the assumption that what one is reading is *actually* a novel (ultimately serving to foreshadow the “minute-to-midnight” revelation that the novel is ekphrastic writing of cinema).

**Writing cinema: absolute ekphrasis in *Gravity’s Rainbow***

Pynchon doesn’t just promote hypodiegetic figures from cinema (the figure of Shirley Temple) into the primary diegesis he also demotes characters from the diegesis down to the hypodiege. A case in point are the “characters” Takeshi and Ichizo who appear after the intertitle2 *A Moment of Fun with Takeshi and Ichizo*,

---

1 A similar game played by John Barth.
2 An intertitle is any text which appears during a movie. Most commonly, intertitles will appear to provide the audience with information regarding the change of location and/or time e.g. “London,

*(Footnote continued on next page)*
The Komical Kamikazes. Even though the use of an intertitle foreshadows what we are about to read as cinema or television, the sustained contamination of the primary diegesis with film references holds back – or at the very least of obfuscates – such initial assumptions. The “slapstick” antics of suicide pilots Takeshi and Ichizo, which takes place over a couple of pages, ends with a haiku. This is followed with the narrator directly addressing the reader with; “–what? You didn’t like the haiku. It wasn’t ethereal enough? Not Japanese at all? In fact it sounded like something right outa Hollywood?” (1973 p. 691). The narrator then locates who he is addressing; one Marine Captain Esberg from Pasadena. It is really only at this point that the reader can begin to “interpret” that the person speaking is a TV compère and that the Komical Kamikazes is “a movie! Another World War II situation comedy” (1973 pp. 691-92) which is being screened to a live audience of a TV quiz show.1 The reader is now given enough information to understand that the TV compère’s direct address is actually to Captain Esberg, who is sitting in the audience; within the same diegetic level as that of the compère. Similar to the ontological disturbance that results from “Pirate” Prentice waking from his dream, Komical Kamikazes requires a retrospective reading. The question in both instances is whether either example involves ontological violations. Pirate

---

1 Pynchon frequently uses “second-person” throughout his novel Gravity’s Rainbow to problematise who is being addressed, thereby forcing the reader into a retrospective reading. This is done by referring at one point to an implied reader, at another point a character and yet another as a diegetic narratee. When “a text does not choose actively to disambiguate its second person pronouns... [this can lead to] intractable, interpretive problem[s]” (McHale 1992 p. 94). Not only that, such second person address frequently involves abrupt transitions to “downward” and “upward” violation of narrative levels. This strategy, in which second person passages “hover ambiguously among several alternative communicative situations” (McHale 1992 p. 96) or “narratee oriented address... switches abruptly to character oriented address... [leaves]... the reader in the lurch” (McHale 1992 p. 97).
Prentice’s dream clearly keeps the diegetic boundaries in place, whereas the *Komical Kamikazes* sequence – which gets a reprisal on page 697 and again on page 738 (where it is clearly defined as the *Takeshi and Ichizo Show*) functions as *mise en abîme* because it reflects and conflates so much of the style and content of the primary diegesis. As previously pointed out, *mise en abîme* is a particular type of ontological violator.¹

An unambiguous instance of diegetic/ontological violation involving cinema occurs through the sadomasochistic pornographic film *Alpdrücken* (German trans., nightmare). This movie within the novel becomes the nexus for a number of characters in *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Some of these characters, such as Margherita Erdmann (a.k.a. Greta) perform in the film while others (Bianca and Ilse) are borne from the film.² Bianca is conceived through physical violation on set during the group sex scene while Ilse is conceived through a wholly different violation; that of being ontological. It is after watching *Alpdrücken* that Franz Pökler, through some type of cinematic insemination via a fantasy involving the conflation of figures – his wife Leni and the porn actress Margherita (a diegetically violating *ménage à trios*) – results in the conception of Ilse. The “conception scene” is complex. It begins with Slothrop and Margherita having sex on the derelict set of *Alpdrücken* and then jumps to the Ufa theatre where Franz Pökler is watching the film *Alpdrücken*. The description of the sadomasochistic sex scene intermingles

¹The twinning of information (World War II) and style (TV and cinema) from the *Takeshi and Ichizo Show* to the primary diegesis of Slothrop raises the possibility of both levels being equal despite the evidence that there is a hierarchy.
²See McHale’s *Constructing Postmodernism* (pp. 79-80) regarding *Alpdrücken* as a site for the conflating (“mapping”) of characters.
(presumably) with Pökler’s fantasy. The narrator then remarks “… and Leni no longer solemn wife, embittered source of strength, but Margherita Erdmann underneath him, on the bottom for a change, as Pökler drives in again, into her again…” (1973 p. 397). There is no actual description of Pökler having sex with his wife. Instead, the narrator questions “[h]ow many shadow-children would be fathered on Erdmann that night?” The narrator then provides the reader with Pökler’s rumination:

But looking back, he knew that had to be the night, Alpdrücken night, that Ilse was conceived. They fucked so seldom any more. It was not hard to pinpoint. That’s how it happened. A film. How else? Isn’t that what they made of my child, a film?

1973 pp. 397-98

At this point the reader is in no doubt that cinema is the totalising force in Gravity’s Rainbow. Not only does cinema mediate the text epistemologically but it also gives birth ontologically. Yet, as we shall see in the closing pages of the novel, cinema is also a site of death.

Given the “extensive system of filmic ekphrases” throughout Gravity’s Rainbow it shouldn’t come as a surprise that the book is actually a film (Smith 1995 p. 214). As previously alluded to, Pynchon highlights the fictive nature of the characters by “giving them odd names, costumes, and dialects, or by directly commenting on their artificiality”. The characters “conceive of themselves in terms of artificial models – movies, radio, comic books, and other fictions – and they
perform conditioned routines...[such as] break[ing] into song at improbable junctions” of the narrative (LeClair 1989 p. 53). Pynchon does allude to other narrative forms (songs, poetry), however, it is cinema which becomes the main reference. This isn’t the cool removed mimesis of cinematic style used by Robbe-Grillet that appropriates the visual cinematic structure of montage. Pynchon’s references to cinema are much more eclectic and can be seen as a “cinematic discourse”, which includes various film tropes such as “bridge music” – used to transition from one scene to another – and “voice-over parodying that of an old-fashioned travelogue” (McHale 1987 p. 129).

Furthermore, the materiality of film is often used as a metaphor, such as the time delay between an explosion and its sound in which a “piece of time neatly snipped out...a few feet of film run backwards...the blast of the rocket, fallen faster than sound” (1973 p. 48). More broadly, the cinematic palette appropriates stylistic elements and narrative conventions from the mise-en-scène of many movies, with a particular emphasis on musicals. The ontology of Gravity’s Rainbow is given an identity crisis similar to Project for a Revolution in New York; is it a novel or a novel describing a film?

The transition from the ekphrastic hypodiegesis of Gravity’s Rainbow the film to the primary diegesis of Gravity’s Rainbow the novel occurs on the final page when, due to a technical hitch which has unexpectedly stopped the film, the audience revolts with “rhythmic clapping” and the chant “Come-on! Start-the-

---

1 Furthermore, the 1973 Viking edition of the novel contained rows of small squares on the page suggesting 35mm film sprocket holes. Although there is some debate as to whether this design element was Pynchon’s idea or initiated by the Viking editor, the graphics nevertheless visually reinforces the cinematic concerns of the novel (Moore 1987 p. 30).
show! Come-on! Start-the-show!” (1973 p. 760). Therefore, Pirate Prentice’s “dream sequence” takes place in Pirate Prentice life that takes place in the film which is ekphrastically portrayed in the novel Gravity’s Rainbow. The fact that the “the entire plot of Gravity’s Rainbow turns into a film being shown at a movie theatre in Los Angeles” (Heise 1997 p. 217) shifts all of the hypodiegeses one level down. Pirate Prentice’s dream, which opens the novel, now exists on the level of a hypo-hypodiegesis. The pornographic film Alpdrücken also has the diegetic status of hypo-hypodiegesis, in that the movie, Alpdrücken (hypo-hypodiegesis) is described and watched by Pökler, who exists within the movie (hypodiegesis), which is interrupted at the end of the novel by faulty projectionist equipment (primary diegesis).

There are a number of instances in the novel in which characters are sitting in a movie theatre (1973 p. 150). But there are also occasions in the text which address “you” as having an experience like being in a movie theatre in which “the screen has gone dark, and there is absolutely no more time left” (1973 p. 267). Passages like these offer brief hints at the dénouement which is to come. These passages serve as a precognition of the impending destruction of the cinema, which occurs on the final page of the novel, thrusting the reader from hypodiegesis to diegesis.¹ The whole narrative of Gravity’s Rainbow is “retroactively revealed to have been the world of a movie-within-the-novel, hypodiegetic rather than diegetic” (McHale 1987 p. 116). Given the previous explanation of the whole novel being hypodiegetic,

¹ Reminiscent of that defamiliarising “melting metacinematic moment” which occurs in Ingmar Bergman’s Persona (1966) where the film appears to jam and then dissolve on the screen. This caesura in Persona resonates with other “breaks” during the film such as the drinking glass and the disintegrating psyche of Elisabet and Alma.
Gravity’s Rainbow has a primary diegesis lasting no more than a single page. In another novel, perhaps one with more realist tendencies, the *deus ex machina* trick of using the it-was-all-a-dream (or in this instance, *all-a-film*) device would more often backfire as a tired cliché. However, Pynchon’s placement of his final retroactive “world-making-unmaking” works because the entire novel itself – with its multiple frames of cinematic reference and ontological levels – is an ongoing exercise in “world under erasure” retrospective reading. The diegetic violation at the end of the novel functions as a “metaleptic punch line” in which “the rocket launched within the film-within-the-novel hangs poised above the theatre in which the film itself is being viewed” (McHale 1987 p. 130). The final page of the novel moves to second person narration in which we, the reader, are encouraged to sing along – side by side – with the theatre audience in the text. We are singing together to increase morale and courage. And, in a moment of diegetic/extradiegetic superimposition, we are told that if you – reader or cinephile – are in need of comfort, you can “touch the person next to you” (1973 p. 760).

**Summary**

In the examples given of ontological violations in the three novels that have been discussed, most of the ontological realms aren’t ’habitable’. By that, I mean they are not ontologically furnished like the primary diegesis. For example, the fleeting violation involving the U.S. Marshal and the TV series *CHiPs*. However, what is exploited is a pre-established “world” that most readers would be familiar with (and in a way, have “inhabited”); namely the TV series *CHiPs*. In *The Crying of Lot*
Pynchon frustrates the boundary between diegesis and hypodiegesis when Metzger joins in to sing with his younger self. Unlike *The Crying of Lot* 49 and *Vineland*, *Gravity’s Rainbow* contains not just a hypodiegesis but multiple diegetic layers.

These more complex layered “worlds” in *Gravity’s Rainbow* take on a vertiginous Chinese box structure. This structure reaches such heights that the reader looks down from the extradiegesis – through multiple ontological levels (novel/film/film) to *Alpdrücken*. These diegeses have a variety of ontological values (film, film script, dream, etc.) yet, as is the case with Pirate Prentice’s dream, the ontology resembles that of the primary diegesis. And, when instances of cinematic hypodiegesis take place, such as the *Takeshi and Ichizo Show*, the carnivalesque antics of Takeshi and Ichizo also resemble that of the primary diegesis. Pynchon’s strategy, so it seems, is to structure ontological hierarchies for the sole purpose of exploring the disorienting processes that take place at the limina of these connected “worlds”. The relentless cinematic references in *Gravity’s Rainbow* constantly keep the narrative off kilter and perpetually ready for diegetic/ontological transitions. Working in tandem with – and sometimes counter to – the Chinese box structure of diegetic levels in *Gravity’s Rainbow* is the “Klein bottle” structure, in which the inner workings of the narrative are laid bare through direct address (the Ishmael Reed comment) or *implied* direct address (the comment to Marine Captain Esberg from Pasadena).

As previously mentioned, ekphrasis – when used to create a hypodiegesis – is less paradoxical when the object of the writing is cinema because it is an animated art form. And, while ekphrasis contains an innate ontological duality through its
“relation between domains”, Pynchon problematises this relationship through his diverse and complex application of cinematic sources. For instance, it is not the brief movie scene described from the film *Alpdrücken* which creates the violation; it is through Pökler’s internal musings on “shadow-children”. Furthermore, the celluloid sex scene Pökler witnesses (hypo-hypodiegesis) itself is conflated with Slothrop’s sexual encounter (hypodiegesis).

When taking into account the narrative of *Gravity’s Rainbow* as an instance of absolute cinematic ekphrasis – in which people make love, war and even dream – it is only the theatre audience that “experiences” the hypodiegeses. And, through a 760 page rereading, it is only a single missile which violates the “first order reality” of the diegesis.
Conclusion

In my introduction to this dissertation, I posed several questions such as; how do authors create and violate multiple diegetic levels in works of fiction? What is the purpose of these violations? When do they occur? In addition, what is the author trying to achieve by questioning a character’s existential status when such violations take place? Also, the introduction implicitly framed several questions as assumptions. I assumed that ontological violations must contain some degree of narrative framing. I also stated that ontological violations – by their very nature – impose a degree of self-reflexivity onto a work of fiction. Over the course of this enquiry, I have found that some of these questions and assumptions resist an answer, due to the intricate and bespoke context in which diegetic/ontological violations occur.

The two broad stylistic categories of ekphrastic and epistolary writing I chose to demonstrate framing as a multidiegetic structure are on the one hand arbitrary. There are many other ways to categorise ontologically motivated narrative framing, but ultimately it was my exploration of my three chosen authors that determined my decision regarding the categories of ekphrastic and epistolary writing. The obvious benefit of employing two categories over the course of this dissertation is one of contrast and similarities. Furthermore, a stylistic category provides an opportunity to look at specific historical instances.

To answer my assumptions in the first instance. Do ontological violations rely on narrative framing? Yes, they do. But again, it is by degrees and also dependent on whether the violation occurs one level “down” as is the case with a hypodiegetic
violation or one level “up” in the case of an extradiegetic violation. For a 
hypodiegetic violation to occur, the “world” one level “down” must first be created 
and to do this there is no getting around the necessity of the newly created 
narrative “world” to be embedded or framed within the primary diegesis. Whereas 
extradiegetic violations can occur through a fictional character simply addressing 
the reader. This is due to the diegetic/extradiegetic framing that exists as a self-
evident fact between the text and the reader. Instances of this type of extradiegetic 
violation break the fourth wall. From a postmodern perspective, one could argue 
that our socially constructed lives are just another text; another narrative which is 
as arbitrary and fictional as a story penned by an author. Ultimately, the two 
directions of movement – either “down” or “up” – operate differently. Violating a 
hypodiegesis provides more complex ontological possibilities in that it is an 
extension of the fictional world. These possibilities range from the “Reichenfels” 
etching coming to life to Pirate Prentice’s “dream sequence”. Extradiegetic 
violations, such as that which takes place in Barth’s LETTERS, has a more 
epistemological emphasis through the questions posited around the fictionality of 
life and the authenticity of fictional characters.

My other assumption regarding the inescapable self-reflexive nature of 
ontological violations must also be addressed. It will be helpful to break down this 
assumption into two parts; narrative framing and ontological violations. Narrative 
framing per se, doesn’t self-reflexively problematise a text. This was demonstrated 
in the instances of framing which occur throughout The Heart of Darkness. Stories 
within stories appear across many literary genres throughout history. In fact, it is 
hard to imagine a work of fiction not containing some form of narrative framing.
Yet, narrative frames, when used to create and violate hypodiegeses in some manner, actively become self-reflexive because they draw attention to the frame; to the structure of the text itself. This can be a drawn-out, complex process involving the violation of both the hypodiegesis and the extradiegesis as seen in the case of the TV compère and the screening of the *Komical Kamikazes*. The TV show *Komical Kamikazes* exists as a hypodiegesis and the “narrator” addressing the reader temporarily violates the extradiegesis; until it becomes clear to the reader that he is a TV compère addressing Captain Esberg. Or, the frame may self-reflexively reveal itself with more simplicity and immediacy, as is the case in *Project for a Revolution in New York*, with the cover picture of the detective novel creating *trompe-l’œil* through a keyhole. All ontological violations serve to unveil the fictionality of a text and are, as a consequence, self-reflexive. And, *when* such ontological violations occur it is dependent on the direction; “down” to the hypodiegesis or “up” to the extradiegesis. A violation down requires the initial setup of world creation whereas the extradiegesis exists *a priori*. The specific timing of the violation is also dependent either on *overt* instances of information crossing the diegetic boundary or, as is the case with *mise en abîme*, an accumulative threshold of *mirrored* diegetic information.

I will now draw my conclusions regarding the explicit questions I posed at the beginning of this dissertation. The question of how authors create and violate multiple diegetic levels in works of fiction is obviously limited to the two stylistic categories used in this dissertation; ekphrastic and epistolary writing. However, a universal component of diegetic violations is either the initial creation of a new “lower” diegetic level or the utilisation of the pre-existing extradiegetic level. When
“content” – whether in the form of the repeating motifs which take place through *mise en abîme* or a character accessing the diegesis of the reader – is transferred across diegetic levels the medium (or in this case, the literary device) becomes a messenger. The diegetic violation becomes the content.

And, this gets to the heart of my second question regarding the purpose of these violations. What is the author trying to achieve by either questioning ontological levels or the fictional status of the characters? The examples of diegetic violations I have highlighted through the works of Barth, Robbe-Grillet and Pynchon display a plethora of functions. In the case of Barth diegetic violations have an intertextual bent, questioning the nature of literature and the problems of authenticity. His use of “living” characters and historiographic metafiction places a question mark over our grounding of reality. Robbe-Grillet uses diegetic violations as psychic disruptions or hallucinations which predominantly occur within a character or happen to the narrator. The transformation that takes place in the “Reichenfels” etching functions allegorically; like a dream sequence. Similarly, the click of a lock in *Project for a Revolution in New York*, which triggers the focalisation to switch from external (aural) to internal, whereby the narrator – through his imagination – is now located in another room also tries to mimic and unpack psychological processes. And finally, Pynchon wrestles, distorts and combines the technique of *trompe-l’œil* and ekphrasis to create a plurality of paradoxical hypodiegeses. These hypodiegeses are violated in order to produce “retroactive” readings; as is the case with TV characters Takeshi and Ichizo, who shift from a diegetic “real” status to that of hypodiegetic fiction.
Future Directions

Diegetic violations aren’t just limited to narratives in literature. As seen with *trompe-l’œil* such violations can also be represented visually. Moving away from traditional forms of narrative such as poems, novels and plays there is broad scope for research into ontological violations in both cinema and television. Recent cinematic examples in which diegetic boundaries are blurred, broken and violated are the 2008 film *Synecdoche, New York* and *Adaptation* (2002) both by screenwriter/director Charlie Kaufman (1958), Marc Forster’s 2006 film *Stranger Than Fiction* and Christopher Nolan’s *Inception* (2010). Jeff Thoss, analyses the use of diegetic violations in cinema and television in his chapter “Some weird kind of video feedback time warp zapping thing”: Television, Remote Controls, and Metalepsis”. He cites an instance in *The Simpsons* whereby Bart and Lisa (both cartoon characters) are transported – through the use of a plutonium powered remote control – into the cartoon world of *The Itchy & Scratchy Show* (2011 p. 162). Such occurrences of diegetic violation – in this instance, riding on the back of postmodernism’s favourite ‘gag’ of self-referentiality – are very common in popular culture. This development has been incremental over the last fifty years and, in part, is indebted to the authors discussed in this dissertation.

Unlike the deterministic flow of novels¹, where each word, sentence and paragraph has a prescribed reading direction, or cinema/TV, where one frame

---

¹ Leaving aside experimental novels such as B. S. Johnson’s previously mentioned 1969 work *The Unfortunates.*
follows the next, the complex narrative structures of computer games have the ability to fork off on multiple narrative paths. By all accounts, based on Moores Law (whereby computer processing power roughly doubles every 18 months) and advances in rendering software it is not inconceivable that near future games will reach a level of photorealism comparable to cinema. Narratives within games have the potential for immense complexity. It is the nonlinear nature of computer games, especially open-world sandbox games such as Minecraft (2011), Second Life (2003) or the newly created No Man’s Sky (2016), which set them apart from other narrative forms. For example, the gameplay of No Man’s Sky is created on-the-fly through a combination of deterministic algorithms and random number generation resulting in over 80 quintillion unique planets to explore. Each planet has different terrain, flora and fauna. The multiplayer functionality of Minecraft and Second Life allows several players to “inhabit” the same “world”.

Instances in which computer gamers such as Cody Littley build a functional 1kB “virtual hard drive” within the game Minecraft (Finley 2014) are self-reflexive and fall under the category of mise en abîme. In fact, there is a plethora of forums dedicated to building simple functioning virtual computers and even games such as Pokemon within the game world of Minecraft. This is done through a Minecraft material called Redstone, which functions as a virtual power source in the game. However, in this instance the Redstone is exploited to simulate electrical circuits to create complex coding structures resulting in the recursive scenario of a subordinate game built from the virtual material of a primary game. The game Pony Island (2016) – a mix of late 1980s aesthetics, pastel colours, retro fonts and ponies modelled on Lisa Frank’s sticker books – constantly breaks the fourth wall.
Soon after the game begins, it starts to present software glitches and quickly reveals that Satan is the designer of the game and has taking control of the mouse and components within the game. The player must recode the game in order to avoid Satan claiming the player’s soul. Similarly, the game *The Magic Circle* (2015) is also self-reflexive, whereby the protagonist navigates a partially modelled world and must locate and steal computer modelling tools in order to restructure the game. Along the way the player meets the bickering “artists”, “designers”, and “programmers” of the uncompleted game; a satire on the gaming industry.

Theorists such as Ian Bogost, Marie-Laure Ryan, Janet H. Murray and Dominic Arsenault are forging insights into these new narrative platforms. Areas of consideration range from rhetorical and ontological metalepsis, the problems of using cinema as an analogue to theorise computer games, narratorial location in first person games and the “abdication of authorial control” (Pearce 2004 p. 151).

The ability to “inhabit” the “worlds” of computer games, by its very nature, raises unique ontological questions. It is the area of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) where directions in future research of the diegetic violations and subversive ontologies become increasingly complex and profound. AR involves the mapping of computer generated content onto one’s local environment. This is achieved either through an AR headset such as Microsoft’s HoloLens or through a phone or tablet; the delivery platform for the augmented reality game *Pokémon go* (released 2016). In the case of AR, digital content from a computer game (hypodiegesis) becomes “manifest” in our world (extradiegesis). Whereas with VR, the player enters the game via a 3-D capable headset and surround sound. VR can
also include things like haptic feedback and even simulate the sense of smell and taste.

AR and VR go beyond commonly accepted definitions of diegetic (and subsequently ontological) violations that take place in novels and cinema and traditional computer games such as *Minecraft, Second Life* and *No Man’s Sky*. This is because the game has access either to the player’s *diegesis*, as is the case with AR, or the player’s *physicality*, as is the case in VR, where the player is “immersed” in the computer game. This allows the unprecedented possibility of diegetic information from the game to travel “up” to the player’s exegesis or for the player to enter the narrative “world” of the hypodiegesis.

Over the past decade, developments in brain-machine interfaces (BMIs) have increased exponentially. While much of this blue-sky science is driven by the serious goal of invasively rewiring nerve damage, as is the case with spinal cord injury, aspects of this research and development will filter down into the narrative space of gaming. Already there are non-invasive BMI gaming platforms such as the electroencephalogram driven Epoc+ by Emotiv. What will the confluence of immersive VR and BMI look like in the future? What will it mean for us as individuals when we “occupy” such a narrative space? What will it mean for us when we *truly* “occupy ‘roles’ rather than ‘selves’”? Despite future technological developments, which will either enable more immersive, realistic narratives or transfer and merge narrative content to the level of our shared diegesis, we will be more reliant than ever on theorists such as Dällenbach, Genette, Waugh, Currie, McHale, Bal and their successors to reveal to us where one world ends and another begins.
Bibliography


Is this the end? Everything I’ve ever done, extinguished. And nobody present as a witness. Given the amount of blood I’m losing, I imagine I don’t have long. Oh God, what’s that smell? That’s not just blood on my frock. Maybe I’ll only last until sunset; perhaps dusk. If I knew now what I did then... But it’s not then, it’s now. But if I did, would I have done things differently? But it’s this moment right now that I couldn’t see coming. The right now, slumped against a snakewood tree and no sensation in my legs. At least I have the shade. This is the now that was already written out for me like some Sophoclean plot where things are stated to happen; you know, before they actually happen. The Greeks love that sort of stuff. There are always clues provided. Plot points fall like pins on a map and the characters dutifully walk from one pin to the next. Oedipus, for instance. Every decision he made to avoid his fate sent him in the opposite direction. Did he know that it was his father on the crossroads? Of course not! Cruel irony. All because of the Delphic Oracle and her prophecy. If you just listened to Polybus and Merope. Sleeping dogs lie and all that.

Prognostication always seems to chase its own tail, and more often than not bite it. Did Macbeth understand that the very act of being told the prophecy from the witches created the outcome? That’s what sealed him to his ill fate. Re-enter Macduff, head in hand. And as for me, my current situation, am I still Ebony, or am I Claire? Well, I got what I wanted, despite not knowing who I am. And, given
my current situation, I’m assuming that Nathan got what he wanted too. There’s Jamie and Nathan, fighting over the final ending of Dusk. Nathan never really liked the character of Claire anyway. Here we go, more irony. He found Frances ‘Peggy’ O’Toole — or should I say Oooooh!...Tool? — worthy of living. And me, Claire, originally written as the central character — I get upstaged by her. Fair enough, she’s the type of tragic figure who deserves to survive. A beautiful, filthy animal with those barbell hips, all weighty and solid. My Frances. Such an enigma with that missing right leg. She’s the type of person who could out-riddle the Sphinx.

Wait! I’m digressing. I know I’m losing your interest. If you turn away I’ll dissipate like some fucking probabilistic cloud. Remember Einstein’s question to Pais: ‘Is the moon there when no one is looking?’ Refocus. Keep me alive a bit longer!

A chorus singing out the stasimon would have been helpful. ‘Forget about Frances. She’ll get you killed.’ You could have provided me with some inside information. You could have told me my fortune, and misfortune. I know it’s too late to ask, but it’s been nagging me: what’s it like to be third person limited? Can you explain that to me?

Maybe you’re just like everyone else, from Ajax the Great to Ajax the Lesser, Sophocles, Homer or the Queen of England, you’re just an invention, a construct, social or otherwise. We all have our role to play and our limitations in life. Perhaps you didn’t have any influence over Nathan and Jamie. Maybe your hands were tied by some greater force. Christ, perhaps you are authored by someone also. But, if this isn’t the case then you’re a cunt! Oh fuck, I feel dizzy. I’m
going to be sick. No, it’s going back down. The sour chyme will have to find another exit. Maybe that new hole in my stomach.

Perhaps your limited perspective made my life more interesting. There is power in omission. You see it all the time. If someone like Ajax steps into a room and closes the door, who knows what the sneaky fucker is up to. It’s anyone’s guess. Let’s keep things hidden ... tuck them away. What was he doing in the Temple of Athena? Obviously I’m talking about the Lesser. Well, nobody seems to know except Ajax and Cassandra and, of course, Homer. What I’m trying to say is my current situation sits in a long tradition of ‘if only I had known’ moments. Maybe, nothing can be really known. You didn’t want to reveal, or perhaps you couldn’t reveal, that I was going to die in Dusk. You hid this inevitable fact from me for the same reason that Sophocles toyed with Oedipus on the road to Thebes, quarrelling with his father over whose chariot should go first. I can imagine Sophocles, perched on his wooden stool, goose quill in hand, gleefully wetting himself at this cunning plot twist. But whose twist was it? Was it already hidden among the fragments of the Epic Cycle sung half a millennium earlier? Does that confrontation, which would figure large in chaise-longue analysis 1500 years later, reside somewhere in any one of the thousands of verses told by an obscure Spartan Poet? Maybe. Everything is a retelling.

And, who are you? Just another megalomaniac sitting on your stool, nib held in pinched fingers, dribbling ink and saliva over the page as you giggle like an idiot. You sit back and witness your handiwork – a bullet to the guts. And it’s so fucking typical of you to include every detail. I don’t mind that I’m lying in the dirt with my life draining from me. But you do seem to have a tendency to go one
step too far. Why not have the bullet shoot me through the head or perhaps the heart? Make it quick. But through my guts, ripping my intestine to pieces. All that shit and muck soiling my frock. And the stench! Do you have to go into such detail?! Like most people I am quite comfortable with my own body odours. But, to be covered with the contents of my bowel and just left here, lying in it, dying in it! I just don’t really know what you have against me. And all I asked of you was one simple favour. Something you seemingly achieved with very little effort. And, for that favour, I’m profoundly grateful. This sounds insane but, I would have to admit, today has been the best day of my life. I get it, you’re after realism. Verisimilitude. Especially when it’s part of the climax, if that’s where I am at the moment, chronologically speaking. But the smell. Couldn’t you describe this scene in more general terms? And, couldn’t I have Frances by my side?

And you! Not a word from you. Just the hacking screech from a cockatoo fills the silence. And how did I get into this situation? Where did it all start going wrong for me? Probably, when I first met you. I’m sure I sensed you in Guernsey all those weeks ago. I didn’t know it at the time, but with hindsight, I would have to say it all started at the ticket office. I knew then that something wasn’t right with Beatrice. And... Wait, are you even listening?
Part I

The interior of the booking office is composed of white surfaces, glass and aluminium. Ebony walks through the bleached expanse toward an unoccupied service desk and taps a small brass service bell on the counter. She turns her head to the sound of a horn blast from the dock signalling impending departure. A gentle cough brings her attention back to the desk. Before her stands a prim elderly woman. The woman’s hair is in a Victory roll with only one side pinned. A cameo brooch sits within the filigree of her crocheted collar. Fastened to her blouse, above the curve of her left breast, is a nametag displaying the word ‘Beatrice’. Ebony opens her mouth to speak but is compelled to speak but I stop her. Beatrice has a calm stateliness — a serenity that perfectly matches her age. But her homely attire is foreign in such a clinical setting. Like most objects dislocated from a past era, she exists as an artefact; like something carved in stone long ago and put on display. She addresses Ebony with a silky Welsh accent. ‘Can I help you, madam?’ Her voice has a sweet treble tone, as though it belongs to someone much younger. Her mouth and eyes crease simultaneously into a smile.

Ebony explains that she is running late for the Portsmouth-bound ferry and has lost her ticket. With meticulous grace, Beatrice turns her head to read the time from a brass, wall-mounted marine clock and then consults some papers in front of her. Still smiling, her slender fingers peel their way through a collection of papers. She pauses and then runs an index finger down a timetable. She looks up at Ebony and then nods her head towards the laptop next to her and winces her eyes. ‘I’m allergic to those things.’ Her attention returns to the printed timetable. ‘The day’s
schedule is given to me in ... hard copy every morning. Pen and paper are so reliable.’ Her finger stops and begins to tap as though waiting for the next command. ‘I knew it, but I wanted to check first. Your ferry has been delayed, so there is no rush.’ Ebony’s shoulders relax. She realises that she had been grinding her teeth while waiting for Beatrice. She firmly pushes her thumb into the connective tissue of her right jaw. ‘And your full name?’ ‘Moon. Ebony Moon,’ she says, leaning towards the counter. ‘No middle name,’ she adds. Beatrice’s indignant finger pokes at the laptop track pad. ‘I’m sorry I can’t find your record.’ Ebony feels a hot pressure across her forehead. ‘That’s Moon without an e.’ Beatrice leans up to the screen and squints. ‘There you are.’ Pointing to the screen and glancing back at Ebony, she says, ‘If this entry is true, then Ebony Moon exists.’ She jabs the enter key. The printer hums and then spits out Ebony’s boarding pass. With a red biro Beatrice scrawls something unintelligible across the top. She pauses and looks up at Ebony. ‘I’m glad you can make the ferry,’ she says, handing Ebony her pass. Then she adds, ‘There’s really no rush though. You have plenty of time.’ Beatrice holds up her hand and points. Her skin is the colour of white Italian marble, complete with soft-grey veins. ‘To get to the pier you need to follow this road until it hits Le Val des Terres, then turn left. It’s right down the end on the right.’

Ebony struggles with the straps of her backpack. She hunches forward to counterbalance the weight of the pack and then extracts the handle from her roll-on suitcase. ‘Thank you very much Beatrice. I was dreading the thought of missing the ferry and having to walk back to the hotel.’ Beatrice briefly tilts her head back and closes her eyes, as though in prayer. ‘Oh, my dear,’ she says in falsetto. ‘There is more than one ferry. We would have put you on the next one.’ Ebony hadn’t seen
anything on the Condor Ferries brochure about other ferries for that day. She smiles, wondering whether there are exchange agreements with the other ferry services. When she reaches the door, Beatrice speaks again. ‘No children, eh. Are you barren, madam?’ Ebony pauses and then turns. The skin around her eyes and ears flush with heat. ‘What ... was that?’ Beatrice stands at the counter, poised like a mannequin. She repeats her sentence, her voice sailing across the room on a flowing lilt, ‘Have a nice day and safe travels, madam.’ Ebony keeps her eyes on Beatrice while tightening her grip on suitcase handle. She backs slowly away, thinking about what she has just heard, and collides with a small side table next to the Bureau de Change. Her shoulder bag drops to the floor spilling out a pen, some keys and a manuscript – *The Sign System* by Jacob Sørensen. Kneeling down, Ebony feeds the items back into the mouth of her bag. Beatrice asks, ‘Do you need any help madam?’ Ebony stands upright. One of her hands pins her shoulder bag to her chest while the other white-knuckles the suitcase handle. ‘I’m okay,’ she says, looking down to break eye contact. A force behind the bridge of her nose prompts a corneal reflex. She dabs her eyes with the cuff of her sleeve. Once through the automatic doors she quickly looks back over her shoulder and almost walks into a large Admiralty anchor cemented in the forecourt.

*There’s no chance of giving birth now that my womb is punctured. But why would she say that to me back then? Do I look like the sort of woman that can’t have children? I know I look tired. I had been living out of a suitcase for weeks. Wait! Perhaps Beatrice was just eccentric and not part of your meddling. That could be the case. I had the feeling I was being watched on the ferry back from Guernsey? Were you there behind the scene? Creep. Are you still here now?*
Maybe you’re making me ask these questions. Making me ask the wrong questions. And, if you can make me ask the wrong questions, you don’t have to worry about giving the correct answer...

She works her legs across the hard asphalt to St Julian’s Pier. A horn blast breaks through her thoughts and she looks up at the building ahead. Her mind is so clouded that it takes time to recognise that what she is staring at is a ferry. A number of people huddle on the pier; some of them are carrying flags and what look like rolled-up rugs. *Maybe they’re waiting to wave off friends and relatives.* As Ebony approaches, a solid man in a check shirt pushes the mouthpiece of a megaphone deep into his thick beard and starts to chant, ‘Poverty pay, no way! Make the greedy bosses pay! Poverty pay, no way! Make the greedy bosses pay!’ The others join in with less enthusiasm. Flags go up into the air and banners are unfurled, declaring: ‘International Transport Workers’ Federation’, ‘Rail, Maritime and Transport Union’, ‘Workers of the World — Unity Is Strength’. She flinches at the noise. She can see the boarding gate behind the crowd. As she passes, the master of ceremonies changes his chant. ‘Condor Ferries you’re a disgrace, pay all your workers the going rate!’ They are directing their noise, like some private concert, at two police officers standing by the edge of the pier. It’s a tough audience. The officers, hands in pockets, chat and laugh together, seemingly oblivious of the show. A fresh-faced woman breaks rank and approaches Ebony. She is carrying a swaddled baby on her back. She raises her arms and shouts, ‘They deserve to die! Condor scum!’ She points at Ebony. ‘Don’t get on that boat. Boycott the bastards!’
Ebony’s head is pounding. Her quick pace has now turned into a sprint. The woman’s screams are muted by another deafening blast of the ferry horn. The volume of the yelling diminishes with every pace. Ebony stops before she reaches the boarding ramp and sits on her suitcase. A long-haired teenager in a neon-green, high-visibility vest stands by the ramp cradling a clipboard in one arm. ‘Are you boarding miss?’ Ebony nods. ‘I’ll be with you in a minute,’ she says. ‘I just need a quick rest.’ He smiles, obviously unfazed by the noise, looks at his watch and looks down at his clipboard. Ebony takes out a clear plastic toiletry bag from a side pocket of her suitcase. She turns it over in her hands. Nathan’s minute handwriting is penned on several white plastic bottles. One of the bottles is labelled ‘analgesic’ followed by the word ‘painkillers’ in brackets. Below this is a suggested dose for three situations: headache, lower back pain and acute migraine. She washes down two pills with the last of her water.

She takes long, deep breaths. As she does this she watches the ferry respond to the undulating sea – dipping and rising with a slow, almost imperceptible pitch. A blue mass of a boat, proper looking, like a scaled-up toy. Little silver handrails line the various levels, and brass-rimmed portholes dot its length. Painted in crisp, white uppercase letters across the stern are the words ‘COMMODORE CLIPPER’.

∞

On board now, Ebony watches a group of children sprawl over the tubular guardrail of the pier below. Two girls hang upside down by their legs. A car horn sounds. Two young men wave their arms in the air from the back tray of a khaki-green Morris ute. They’re waving at two women standing next to Ebony. The women are all blonde hair and bare arms, goose pimples and flushed cheeks. Holding hands, they
jump up and down and shout over the bulwark to the men. Next to the car, an elderly Chinese couple, holidaying from the beautiful and sprawling city of Wuhan, Central China, hug each other in their North Face arctic parkas, their craggy faces framed in a grey plume of downy acrylic fur.

The ferry bumps against the rubber fenders hanging from the pier. Ropes are thrown and the boarding ramp rattles as it separates from the ferry. The men are now sitting in the front seat of the Morris, still waving. Moments later they are gone. The children playing on the guardrail are also nowhere to be seen. The wind has picked up. A woman in a black unbuttoned mackintosh almost loses her scally cap to the wind while securing a chain across the gangway. The last people on the pier are the Chinese couple. They have paused to take photos of what they think are seagulls but in fact are Northern Gannets. The Gannets hover just below the low cloud and then plunge-dive into the water for their prey. Ebony is outside, standing at the stern leaning against the damp handrail. The temperature has dropped. The blue brightness of the morning has transformed into a sullen mixture of charcoal and white ash. Receding from the starboard side is Saint Peter Port. The town appears to emerge from the water only to dissolve into the hazy cloud above. The ferry passes a collection of moored sailing boats; their little white masts tip back and forth, in and out of sync. And, in the distance, the Chinese couple walk in step along St Julian’s Pier.

But, if we could step back in time to the point at which the ferry was pulling away from the pier and observe Ebony, we would notice that her attention moves from the two girls playing on the guardrail to the protesters yelling further up the pier. Perhaps now, with the painkillers taking effect, she is relieved enough to
watch them as they continue their demands. The ferry has left the pier and is now throttling its engines on the starboard side in order to face the open sea. Ebony notices that the young ticket inspector is being jostled by the protesters on his way to the goods shed. He clutches his clipboard in front of him for protection. The police officers walk over at a leisurely pace. They hold out their hands as if to say, ‘Quiet down and we will continue to do nothing.’ Ebony can hear the woman with the baby is screaming something at them, but the information contained in her screams get lost in their journey across the water.

Her attention is now on the distant buildings of Saint Peter Port. The gothic prongs of Elizabeth College stand out above white facades and slate tiling. Below the college she can see the curved, silver-finned roof of the ferry booking centre. Ebony imagines Beatrice standing behind her white service desk like some ancient exotic object preserved and protected in her cleanroom office. She walks to the other side of the ferry and sits on a large oak bollard. On the port side she can make out two faint grey smudges of land which seem to bleed off the waterline – the islands of Herm and Sark. She closes her eyes and relaxes to the gentle yaw of the ferry. She imagines herself somewhere warm. She is in the country. It’s a place that doesn’t exist; or at least, if it does, she has never been there. She is lying in the sun on freshly mowed lawn. The scene changes slightly. Instead of lying flat she is now on an incline and lying on a blanket. She can hear the sound of running water. She knows that the sound is coming from the prow carving through the ocean but in her mind it has the lightness and character of creek water gurgling across rocks and tree roots. She thinks of Nathan lying beside her. The creek disappears. Now it’s just Nathan; his efficiency and fuss. She misses him.
She opens her eyes to look at the time. 9:45. She should be in Portsmouth by 1 o'clock. A young couple step outside and sit on the low metal lid of an emergency access hatch. He talks quickly, punctuating each sentence with a Norfolk glottal stop followed by a muzzled, adenoidal laugh. His companion smiles and then looks over at Ebony. He pulls out a packet of cigarettes and elbows her for attention. With cigarettes in place, they both light up. Ebony gets up and walks the length of the ferry looking for a porter. With her ticket, photo ID and cash, she upgrades to a Club Class seat. Brown leather chairs are fixed to lengths of railing on the floor and a large, tiered newspaper stand occupies the centre of the room. Most of the seating is taken. She buys herself a glass of beer, finds a seat, and, with her bags stowed under her table, begins to relax.

The muffled scream of the ferry horn wakes her through her earplugs. Far away, like a returning cry, another horn can be heard. Out of the window she can see another ferry through a haze of sea spray. Looking around, she realises the room is empty. She checks her bags and then steps outside onto the decking. Several people point down at the water. Beside her, a young girl sits hunched on a man’s shoulders, bouncing up and down. Her heels tap gently against his chest while her fists shake. Her bouncing becomes more erratic and she points at the water, shouting, 'Whale!' Ebony hears the word through the foam rubber in her ears. She steps up to the bulwark and looks down. She watches an enormous grey shape moving underneath white, churning foam. This dark form moves further away from the hull. As it does so, its fin breaks the surface and the girl squeals.

Another horn blast, this time from the mainland. The ferry is turning to enter Portsmouth Harbour. Apartments and then gantry cranes pass by. Further on is the
**HMS Victory.** This old lady — her stern shaped like the backrest of a rocking chair — fought with Lord Nelson in the Battle of Trafalgar. A webbing of ropes and tackle hang between the masts. After the *HMS Victory*, destroyers and frigates moored in front of a row of Edwardian red-brick buildings and finally shipping containers and a clutter of saw-tooth roofs.

No... *Wait! It was on the plane coming back home. It’s true, I didn’t hear you on the plane but I knew you were there. I knew that something wasn’t right. If I had to choose a moment, that would be it. Sure, it may have been the side effects from the sedatives but this is about an accumulation of evidence ... mounting coincidences that, on their own, can be put down to happenstance. But, when you put it all together, such evidence becomes incontrovertible.*

**Answer me, for Christ’s sake! Are you still there? At least you’ve given me a beautiful sunset; as corny and clichéd as that is. It’s interesting how many variations there are to the sunset cliché. For instance, you have the kissing couple, the death sequence – which would be me. Oh, and ‘they rode off into the sunset’! Now there’s a phrase. But, if you were to ride up to those good ol’ boys galloping on their steeds in the Arizona desert after having gunned down a gang of bloodthirsty cattle rustlers... if you were to ride along next to them through the tumbleweed and rattle snakes into the setting sun and tell them that this moment for them is empty and meaningless because it’s a cliché... well, you’d better hold on to your ten-gallon hat because I can guarantee you that one of those boys is bound to pull out his Colt 45, point it at your head, and remove your brains.*

**Where was I? The plane and that dream of butterflies! What sort of message were you sending me? Even now, I have no fucking idea. Surely you intended the**
reoccurring motif of butterflies as a plot point. Maybe a metaphor. But, it went nowhere. You’re breaking the rules. We both know that a gun must be shown in the first act if it’s to be used in the last.

Standing in the queue at Gate 9, Ebony looks at the departure board. Flight LH772 Departure Gate 9 17:10. She has 15 minutes. She reaches into her suitcase for her toiletry bag. Immediately after the sleeping tablet has travelled past her pharynx, oesophagus and reached her stomach she hears an announcement: ‘Passengers flying on Lufthansa flight LH772 please be advised that there will be a 45-minute delay in boarding your plane. Please check the departure board for any updates’.

She waits, resting an elbow on the extended aluminium handle of her suitcase. She is finding it difficult to stand so precedes to shift her body weight from one leg to the other to keep herself alert. The Xanax has turned her body into a dead weight by the time she collapses into her window seat. Her mouth is dry, probably due to the wine she had with her early dinner. A flight attendant settles his folded arms across the top of the backrest of the seat in front of her. ‘Are you feeling okay?’ he asks with genuine concern. Ebony stares, mesmerised by his beautiful face. Neat porcelain-white teeth show through a smile. Under the dim cabin downlights his burnt umber irises are indistinguishable from their black centres. These two dark dishes swim in white pools. As her head teeters and then falls back against her headrest she thinks of Mamoru from *Sailor Moon*. ‘I’m fine, really. I’m just tired.’ Her eyes follow the attendant’s face as it slowly lifts from the backrest and appears to float away.
She senses someone moving in the seat next to her but doesn’t turn her head. She drops her eyes. They come to rest on an in-flight magazine poking out of a vinyl pouch in front of her. In the top right corner of the magazine is a picture of a jungle. It’s actually a photograph of a painting by Henri Rousseau. Large, colourful flowers punch through gloomy, dark-green leaves. To the right of the image three black, silhouetted figures stand among dark foliage. Further down to the left, hiding among thick undergrowth, a tiger bares its sharp teeth. These three figures raise their spears to the moon above. A tagline below the picture reads: ‘Don’t just dream of jungles… Get on a plane and go there!’ She blinks her eyes several times and then chooses to keep them closed. The German pre-flight announcement gives her the unpleasant sensation of being reprimanded. An English translation immediately follows:

‘If you stow any luggage in the overhead compartment, please ensure that it cannot fall out. Heavier items of hand baggage should be placed under the seat in front of you. Please fasten your seatbelt and check that your belt is tight’.

Her hand blindly hunts behind her back for the belt buckle.

‘To unfasten your seatbelt, simply pull up the flap. As turbulence can occur unexpectedly at any time you are required to fasten your seatbelt as soon as you have taken your seat. This is in the interests of your own safety’.

She pushes the stainless-steel tongue into the mouth of the buckle. Click.

‘In the unlikely event of a loss in cabin pressure...’

Ebony is asleep before she is told what to do in this unlikely event. She sleeps. She sleeps and dreams. She dreams of three dark figures walking through a jungle. They are not dark skinned but more like walking shadows. She is walking with
them in bare feet, listening to their deep voices, but understanding nothing. The dry path soon becomes soft and damp. Off the path, moonlight reflects in the glassy surface of small pool of water. The soil yields under her feet. She is now on her hands and knees crawling backwards down a slope. She looks over her shoulder. The three figures have already reached the bottom. Their distant voices are joined by more voices higher in pitch; perhaps women or children. Her knees slide beneath her. Her fingers stab into the mud to slow her descent. She comes to rest at the bottom of a gully beside a wide pond. Standing close by are more shadowy figures, some of them small. No faces or clothing; just blackness and voices. The smaller ones walk waist-high through the water to get to the adjacent bank. Someone next to her beckons and calls out, ‘kommt schnell, Kinder.’ The small figures turn, disturbing the water. The reflection of the moon ripples out an electric fork across the pond which continues along the mud beneath her feet and terminates at the base of orange and yellow Proteaceae flowers. As though lit from within, the colour from the flowers glows vivid against the dark vegetation.

Silence. Everyone has left. The flowers begin to flicker. A black manifold mass blocks out the light. Wings pat against her face. Black wings attached to slate-grey abdomens. One of the creatures settles on her wrist. Needle-thin legs articulate for balance. The wings twitch and then fold up and close like hands in prayer. She brings her arm closer to her face. The legs nervously move, seeking traction. From its head, just below creamy-pink antennae, a tubular form of the same pink colour protrudes. It initially hangs limp but quickly stiffens and extends down to Ebony’s skin. This appendage cautiously probes the salty surface. She jumps at a sound behind her. The creature takes flight and is gone. She turns to face the dark veil of
undergrowth on the other side of the pond; a tangle of vines and ferns. From behind a crosshatch of tendrils and fronds emanates a low snarl intermittently punctuated by a series of harsh rhythmic clicks. She is in the water now, edging towards the sound. All she can see is the undulating surface of the water extending towards the dim outline of the muddy bank. The ground vibrates beneath her feet, sending ripples across the water. The snarl is now a constant rumble and the clicks have changed tone. Instead of being harsh and percussive, they have softened, as though created by tapping the F# key on a piano, each one tapering off before the next one begins. The sound becomes soothing. There is a pause and then they recommence – *Ping, Ping, Ping*. She can hear the growl of the plane engines and then an announcement: ‘Ladies and gentlemen, the Captain has turned on the fasten seatbelt sign. We are experiencing some turbulence. Please return to your seats and keep your seatbelts fastened. Thank you.’

She opens her eyes and peels her face away from the plastic cabin wall. A flight attendant in the aisle steadies her tray of drinks against a shuddering vibration. Glasses and cutlery rattle briefly. Ebony fumbles with the bottom lip of the window shutter and slides it open. It’s night time. Seats B and C next to her are unoccupied but are covered with clothing, blankets and pillows. A light meal is offered. She chooses scrambled eggs and pomegranate juice and listens to an audio book about a young sleuth with Asperger syndrome. Through the gap between the two seats in front of her she watches a middle-aged woman reading a magazine. Without moving her eyes from her magazine, the woman lifts her head slightly to give attention to someone talking next to her. She tilts her head and murmurs, ‘it’s late afternoon, whatever that means.’ The cabin lights dim briefly and then turn off,
prompting Ebony to slide down the shutter of her window. Again, she sleeps; but it’s dreamless.

She wakes to the realisation that she doesn’t feel any sensation in her right leg. Her other leg tries to reposition her slumped posture but her arm is wedged under the armrest. She removes her arm. With her one good leg she pushes against the base of the seat in front of her, shunting her body into an upright position.

Something moves under her thigh. Ebony throws a quick look at a young man sitting next to her. He apologises as he gently pulls at the cord of his earphones, which have somehow snaked their way around Ebony’s thigh. He gives another tug as though teasing a fishing line. Their hands touch as they both grab for the earphone. She lets go. He moves his eyes up her bare arm, eventually coming to rest on her gaze. As she returns his gaze, her neck prickles with heat. His boyish face is offset with lazy, black stubble. He grins, ‘The one thing I hate about flying is...’ With a crash of cutlery the plane abruptly free-falls, then gives a long shudder, banks to the right and levels out. Ebony can hear a moaning sound, almost as though someone were ecstatic. The noise is coming from a grey-haired woman sitting on in seat C. The woman looks pale but that could be the white foundation she is wearing. She is humming through purple painted lips, which are pursed and pleated at the edges. Her bottom lip tucks under the top, suggesting an overbite. Her loud humming is atonal and repetitive; the sort of thing you hear in between contractions during labour. Her fingers claw the ends of her armrests and her elbows appear to be locked into the angles of the seat. Her void eyes stare ahead.

The young man next to her in seat B places a reassuring hand on the woman’s arm. Such noble concern. So sweet. His voice is deep and reassuring. ‘That’s just a
bit of turbulence. There is no need to worry,’ he says, all the while stroking her hand. Her droning vocalisation has now relaxed into a whimper and then stabilises into a whisper. She repeats the names of countries, airline companies, numbers, dates and percentages. ‘What’s she saying?’ Ebony asks the young man. ‘Plane crashes,’ he says leaning over with a hand cupping the side of his mouth. ‘She just mentioned the crash that happened last year, the Boeing 777 in San Francisco and a Boeing 737 in Indonesia and another crash in Bolivia.’ The woman’s voice becomes clearer and her eyes soften. She looks at the hand on her arm and begin to blink rapidly.

‘I’m okay,’ she says in a tight voice as she removes her arm. ‘Uh, it’s not like I’m a novice flyer. We’re okay in the air. Um, oh God, speech disfluency. We are okay while we are coasting.’ She side-glances Ebony. ‘What I mean is, according to the 2003 American study by Sivak and Flannagan, 95 percent of air travel accidents occur during take-off and landing. That means, once we are coasting there is only a 5 percent risk of something going wrong.’ Her shoulders drop and her hands unclench but her lips remain in a crumpled pucker. ‘In the same study it was calculated that the fatal risk of driving approximately 11 miles in the country is an equivalent risk to that of a single average international flight. Therefore, once you remove the take-off and landing from this current flight, we face the same risk as driving from St Albans to Luton.’ She gives her tongue a little click, which is followed by a short suck of air. ‘This is further mitigated by the fact that we are sitting at the back of the plane. The only ticket I could get was in the front section but after we took off they let me move back here. You see, passengers in the tail end of the plane are over 40 percent more likely to survive a forced landing than those
in the front. Although, Shultz and Bormann suggested in a paper they put out a
couple of years ago in *The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* that
the survival rate past the wing, here in the rear cabin, can be as high as 64 percent.
I know that I’m being quite loose with my figures. Of course there are stochastic
processes to consider.’ Her eyes examine Ebony. ‘By that I mean random variables.
Statistically, we are in the best position for plane travel.’

She clasps her hands together, just under her chin, and smiles. Two dainty
teeth sneak out from under her top purple lip and then disappear. ‘I’m Alison. I’m
sorry if I gave you both a scare. I usually go through data points when I’m anxious.
I’m an actuary – it’s in my blood.’ Seat B holds out his hand, ‘Peter.’ Alison shrinks
away slightly as she extends a hooked hand. Her other hand reaches up and briefly
touches her chin and then, as if for something to do, flattens itself out on her chest
just below her throat. From Peter, she reaches her hand over to Ebony, who has
been watching on in silence. ‘Alison,’ she says as they touch. Ebony’s fingers
connect with the dry surface of her skin. She can see the boundary, just under the
jaw line, where the white foundation ends. Alison continues, ‘Ebony. Ebony Moon,’
still holding Ebony’s hand. ‘Oh, I’m sorry,’ Allison adds, retracting her hand away.
Ebony shifts in her seat and gives Peter a quick look. ‘Have you seen me in
something?’ Ebony asks. Alison’s teeth are back out again and her eyes blink in
rapid burst. ‘Earlier this year I went with my daughter to see *The Staircase to My
Home* at the Regent. You were in it, right?’ ‘*Staircase to the Penrose Home,* yes
that was me. What did you think?’ Ebony asks, noticing Peter’s gaze. ‘I loved it. It
was so sad.’ Alison squints at Ebony and gives another click of her tongue. ‘There
was one thing I didn’t understand though, and that was your sister in the play. I
couldn’t work out how she was alive at the end.’ Ebony pauses to consider her answer, ‘The play doesn’t run in chronological order so that bit at the end actually connects back to the first act, just before the sister Helen gets killed. That’s possibly why you were confused. Or the fact that the sisters are twins. You may have noticed, I played the part of Helen and Hannah.’

Peter, now disengaged from the conversation, is looking down at the in-flight magazine. Ebony continues, ‘In fact, the author specifically wrote the parts of Helen and Hannah for two actors who are twins. Have you heard of the Grobel twins? They didn’t do any film, they only worked in theatre.’ Alison raises her eyebrows and draws a sharp breath. She exhales slowly and replies, ‘I’ve not heard of them. They don’t act anymore?’ ‘No... no, they died during the first run of the play.’ Peter reclines his seat and closes his eyes. ‘In fact, some people have said that the play is cursed.’ Ebony says this in a hushed voice, hoping that Peter might open his eyes and perhaps join in the conversation. ‘There have been numerous fatal accidents that have happened to actors playing the characters of Helen and Hannah. Fortunately for me, the curse only occurs when the play is running.’ Ebony pauses for effect. ‘I don’t believe any of it. People in my industry are pathologically superstitious. If it’s not astrology it’s Odic forces.’ At this point, the plane lunges again. Alison’s face changes from its relaxed, buck-toothed demeanour back to pursed lips and frown lines.

Wait! The first time I actually heard you, the first time I sensed your presence, was when I was in bed with Margot. To know now that you were watching, that you were controlling... It turns my stomach! That, and the bullet that’s ripped me open. Can you hear me?!
Ebony is sitting in The Terrace Bar. She cups a hand around the lower end of her mobile phone. ‘Christ, Nathan. I’m just glad you’re home. No, I’m in Sydney. The flight was delayed in London and I missed my connecting flight in Doha. Yeah, Doha. Not until the morning. 11:30. I’ve called Margot, I’ll be staying with her tonight.’ She cradles her phone between her ear and shoulder and downs the last of her carpe diem. ‘You’ve gone quiet. I can hardly... oh, sorry, its flight number LH422. That’s right, 11:30 in the morning. I’ll see you then. I can’t wait to get home... to see you.’

She looks up and notices Peter sitting at the table next to her reading a newspaper. A nervous compulsion prompts him to repeatedly flick his fingers against the top corners of the paper. The main article on the front page reads: ‘Bar-Headed Goose Kills Plane Engine at 30,000 Feet.’ Several newspapers are spread out on his table. ‘Do you mind?’ she asks, reaching out to grab one with the thought that he will turn and notice her. ‘Go ahead,’ he says without looking up. She grabs the closest paper and retreating behind its pages. Her eyes move from an article by Diarmuid Gavin on rooftop gardens to the torn, jagged edge at the top of the page, above which appear the head and shoulders of Margot.

∞

‘Oh my God, “Paper Moon”! I haven’t heard that in years.’ Margot gets off the couch and opens two doors on a low side cabinet. She kneels in front of a pile of records and speaks, as though to herself, ‘That was our song. I bought the record because of that book you were reading.’ Ebony leans back in her chair and smiles. ‘Murakami.’ Margot robotically turns to face Ebony, her face hangs with mock dread. ‘The moon did not answer,’ she says as she converges her pupils on the tip of
her nose. She adds in a high pitch, ‘Murakami... That’s right.’ She hauls out the stack of record covers and, with dramatic aplomb, spreads them in an arc across the carpet as though performing a card trick. ‘Brilliant. This is it. Ella and Her *Fellas.*’ She slips the black vinyl disc onto the spindle of the record player and lowers the needle onto the record. Cracks and pops from the scratched vinyl are soon accompanied by the jaunty beat of snare drum and piano. Margot stands up and starts clicking her fingers to the beat. She then moves her lips in sync to the song.

‘Say it’s only a paper moon
Sailing over a cardboard sea
But it wouldn’t be make-believe
If you believed in me.’

Ebony leans forward and puts her head in her hands. When she looks up, Margot is dancing a slow-motion Lindy Hop.

‘Yes, it’s only a canvas sky
Hanging over a muslin tree
But it wouldn’t be make-believe
If you believed in me.’

She paces a rhythm towards Ebony while holding out both hands in invitation. Ebony offers up a limp hand and in one move Margot pulls her upright.

‘Without your love
It’s a honky-tonk parade
Without your love
It’s a melody played in a penny arcade.’
They smile at each other with a misguided certainty of what the other is thinking.

‘It’s a Barnum and Bailey world
Just as phony as it can be
But it wouldn’t be make-believe
If you believed in me.’

Two bodies embrace and dance out of the lounge and down the hall while the backing chorus repeats the lyrics.

They are in bed now. A lamp on the floor sends shadows to the ceiling. ‘Baby, its Cold Outside’ is softly playing in the living room. Ebony has taken off her jeans; but that is all. She pulls on the blanket to cover her bare legs. Margot snorts a laugh and tugs the blanket back. She moves closer to Margot and immediately feels a hand settle on the thigh. ‘It’s great having you here,’ Margot says, running her fingers over Ebony’s hip. ‘I’m grateful that you could put me up for the night.’

Before her, in the muffled half-light, is the familiar outline of Margot’s face. The cotton pillow rustles as the face edges closer. An encouraging hand moves around her shoulder to her nape. ‘I wouldn’t have had time to come up to Sydney before heading west for filming. Fate had other ideas.’ Margot runs her fingers over Ebony’s hip and then sends them under her shirt. ‘What I meant was, it’s great having you here in bed with me.’ Ebony catches Margot’s hand through her shirt and holds it still. ‘You know that we are just sleeping together... in the same bed... nothing more.’ The hand pulls away. ‘Okay...would it be such a big deal if something more happened?’ Ebony waits for Margot’s slow exhale to finish. ‘It’s different now. I couldn’t do it to Nate.’ Margot rolls onto her back, taking the
blankets with her. ‘That’s funny. You know... I actually thought Nathan was just something you were trying out. I’m really surprised.’ Ebony swings her legs off the bed and sits up. ‘Trying out? I’ve been with him for a while now... a long trial period.’ Margot grabs her by the arm. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’ Ebony looks over her shoulder, ‘If you want me to stay then I’m going to need more of the blanket.’ From the living room come the lines:
‘I must confess what you say is true
I had a rendezvous with somebody new
It’s the only one I ever had
Baby, baby, don’cha go ‘way mad.’

Margot pulls on her arm. In compliance, Ebony falls back onto the bed. ‘Nathan has actually proposed to me. I said yes.’ Outside, conifers hush in the wind. ‘Marriage? So it is serious?’ Ebony continues, ‘The funny thing is, ever since the engagement I’ve had thoughts of leaving him.’ Margot draws breath and says a single word, ‘I.’ She starts again, ‘I imagine that’s pretty common.’ Ebony looks at her to read any sarcasm, but it’s too dark to see. ‘Maybe it’s my fear of commitment. But it’s also his possessiveness. Staying here tonight will be a big problem for him.’ Margot stifles a yawn. ‘I’m sorry things are so complicated, Ebony.’ They lie together, as piano from the record gently cascades down a scale, punctuated by soft brass.

‘That new movie. Is it finishing up soon?’ Ebony rolls onto her back. ‘In a few weeks.’ And then adds, ‘That’s if Nathan can keep his hands away from the script. He’s constantly rewriting the ending. It makes it impossible for me to give my character grounding.’ Margot moves closer. ‘What’s the story about?’ Ebony snorts
a laugh. ‘It’s a period piece set in the Pilbara. 1888. A colonial lesbian drama, with a murder.’ She laughs again and adds, ‘I know, right. It’s different. The benefits of working with an independent filmmaker.’ Ebony abruptly sits up in bed. ‘What was that? I just heard a voice.’ Margot’s hand reaches up to Ebony’s shoulder. ‘That’s just the record in the living room. It’s the last song.’ As she says this, the music climaxes with the brass section. This is followed by a click as the tone arm trips a switch and is returned to its cradle. ‘There it is again. A voice... It just described the record player stopping. It’s like... Wait.’ Margot props herself up on her elbow. ‘Are you serious?’ There is a long pause. Ebony lowers herself back down onto the bed. ‘It’s gone... The voice has gone.’
Part II

Like hypnotised subjects they sit staring ahead; mute and still. The rumble from the car engine fills the space between them. They’re not brooding — not yet anyway. And, it’s not that they’ve just finished arguing or they’re bored with each other’s company. Their silence is merely one of a number of strategies to endure the long car trip. In fact, only five minutes earlier they had been laughing — albeit unkindly — about their friend Lionel. They set off just before sunrise and the drive so far has been a mixture of trivial personal banter and observations on the transient scenery. Nathan’s question abruptly ends this silence. ‘What did you get up to with Margot the other night?’ Ebony considers the question. She knows what’s coming. ‘Do you think this is the right time to have this conversation Nathan?’ He looks at his side mirror and then at her with his chin pushed forward. She shakes her head. ‘You want an argument? You want to do this before we get to Paul’s?’ He raises his shoulders. ‘Yes! I want to know what you both got up to.’ She immediately retaliates, ‘Whether we had sex?’ Her shout fills of the car, halting further conversation. She assumes such a direct challenge has settled the matter. But, to prevent any further enquiry she snatches her sunglasses from the dashboard, slips them on and turns to watch the passing countryside. ‘Well, did you?’ He turns to watch her response but doesn’t get one. ‘I want an answer.’ He shifts his attention back to the road and waits. Eventually, she speaks. Rather, she mumbles incoherently, as though talking to herself. Finally, audible words, ‘No... Nothing happened. You know what? I’m the one who should be angry. But I’m not. I’m still jetlagged and I don’t want another fight.’ Nathan reaches down to the
window switch on his centre console. With a tap, he inches his window down, breaking the seal to the outside world. Through the gentle bluster of air he murmurs, 'I'm sorry.' Nothing more is said, so they both face the windscreen and watch the approaching landscape.

∞

The car is now parked on a scrubby embankment. The morning sun has lifted the mist from the bitumen ahead. Nathan turns on the windscreen wipers. Soapy jets of water soften the dirt and dead insects, which are then smeared by rubber blades across the glass in perfect arcs. Ebony leans into the boot of the car in search of the chamois. The smell of oil fumes is soon joined by cigarette smoke. It's always a bad sign when Nathan ignores the embargo on smoking in the car. She is now standing on the passenger side of the car working her fingernail against something on the windscreen. The chamois sits on the bonnet like stiff, folded parchment. Through the blotchy glass she watches him; one hand hangs pendulously out the window with the cigarette clipped between two fingers while his other hand struggles with a foldout map. Always old school. A true Luddite – he prefers cardinal points, scales and topography lines to a GPS.

He calls out, ‘Have you looked at the script yet? I know enough to feed you some lines while we’re driving. You could practise those long passages, the monologues.’ She leans against the hood of the car to remove leaves from the cowl grille. ‘We’ll see Nate. I’m tired. I’m not in the mood for work.’ With a yelp she throws down a handful of leaves and twigs. A butterfly twitches on the bonnet; its sooty black wings shudder. She slides the injured creature onto a dry leaf. The butterfly’s abdomen is lead grey and its antenna a fleshy pink colour. She walks
over to Nathan with a look of disbelief. ‘What is it, Eb? Let’s just get the window clean.’ She leans down to show Nathan the butterfly. He looks briefly. ‘And...?’ he says, as though waiting for a punch line. The butterfly no longer moves its wings. She places one cupped hand over the other. Her eyes blink, perhaps from tiredness but more likely through uneasy suspicion. ‘This butterfly...I’ve seen this type of butterfly before, in a dream.’ He lets his cigarette slip from his fingers to the ground. ‘You’re not going to keep that dead thing, are you? Don’t tell me,’ he says with mock surprise. ‘It’s gilded.’ She raises an eyebrow at the reference. ‘We’ll live, and pray, and sing, and tell old tales,’ she intones, while walking around the car, her hands solemnly clasped together.

∞

Again, she is in the front passenger seat. Cellophane from his cigarette packet is repurposed as a transparent coffin for the dead butterfly. The coffin is interred in the open ash tray. The radio is on. Nathan’s fingers tap away on the steering wheel. ‘We have over three hours of driving ahead of us, Eb. Don’t you think you should go through the script?’ He turns to her. ‘The school holidays begin next week and we’re looking after Lillian on Monday?’ She slaps her forehead. ‘Oh, shit! What an idiot! I completely forgot.’ She drops her hand and quickly adds, ‘Of course I remembered. I’ve got her booked in for the horse riding thing in the afternoon.’ He narrows his eyes and exhales. ‘You really need to work on this audition Eb.’ She heaves a leather satchel up from the floor. ‘Okay. I’ll do it.’ She digs around in the contents of the satchel and then stops, her arms elbow deep in a rumpled sea of leather. ‘I want the part. It’s a strong play. It’s just the idea of working with Sasha again – I can’t stand him.’ She removes the manuscript and begins thumbing
through the pages. He turns off the radio and looks over to her. ‘I can’t remember. Is it Barlow’s work?’ ‘What? The Sign System? No, Sørensen wrote it. He also did that other one about the puppeteer.’ He throws her a blank look. ‘The one where the wife is a marionette. She bites through the strings and chooses to fall to her death.’ Nathan stifles a laugh. ‘Oh God, I remember. That was one of his earlier works. It was terrible.’

Up ahead, columns of rain fall from low, turbid clouds. He closes his window and taps a lever down to turn on the windscreen wipers. ‘Read the monologue towards the end. The part where she’s at her sister’s grave.’ She puts her feet onto the dashboard and props the manuscript on her lap. After a moment of scanning down the page she begins, ‘I’m sorry it’s been so long, Grace. I’ve been meaning to visit for weeks now. Maddie has been keeping me busy. You would be proud of her. She wrote another letter for me to read to you. I’m sure she’ll come here when she’s ready. It’s just not the right time for her yet. She hasn’t been arguing as much with Tom lately. We both made a decision. Actually, it was Tom’s suggestion. We agreed to stop asking Maddie how she was coping. He’s right, we were smothering her. Every time we asked her if she was okay it would push her back to the start; to why she is with us and not you. So we stepped back and it worked.’ Ebony takes a long pause and then speaks in a hushed tone, ‘I saw her laughing for the first time on the weekend. Really laughing. After so long. It was such a relief.’ Her voice becomes breezy and warm, ‘Mum’s finally joined an aerobics class. Think of that. After years of promises she ends up joining water aerobics at her nursing home.’ Another pause and her voice changes tone again, this time wavering and hesitant. ‘Mum keeps asking about you as though you were still alive. I can’t bring myself to break
the news to her again.’ She places a hand across her mouth. She inhales through her nose in wet, convulsive bursts. ‘For Christ’s sake, she remembered Tom’s birthday but she can’t remember the death of her own child.’

Nathan interrupts, ‘Wait, Eb. It makes more sense for me if the whole passage continuously builds up on an emotional level to the mother’s memory loss. I think you’re switching the character of the voice back and forth too much. Perhaps downplay the bit about... What was it? ... aerobics... Continue with the feeling of burden that’s established around taking care of Maddie and bridge across to the prospect of having to break the news to the mother again.’ Ebony leans back in her seat and closes her eyes. ‘I hate this part of the play,’ she says, as though talking in her sleep. ‘The problem with these graveside things is they aren’t a monologue or soliloquy. The character is addressing someone who isn’t there, who isn’t listening.’

‘Eb, don’t think about it so much. If there is a tombstone as a prop treat that as your object of address. Just picture the mother in front of you.’ She slaps the manuscript onto her lap. ‘But what is it? A soliloquy or a monologue or perhaps both at the same time.’ Her voice is louder now, ‘And, could you stop smoking in the car?! It stinks!’ He slows the car down and begins to pull over to the side of the road but then accelerates and turns on the radio again. She looks at him and notices a muscle above his jawline rise and fall. He looks at his watch. ‘I’ve had enough. Euroa is the next town. Let’s stop, I need a break.’ Ebony knows they have already passed Euroa but, given the situation, she decides not to say anything. She simply nods as she puts the manuscript back in her bag. She’s annoyed with herself for raising her voice and furious with Nathan for making her do it. She holds up the cellophane coffin and, with her head cradled on the backrest, stares absently at the
butterfly. Her thoughts jump from the soliloquy to death and then to Nathan and his sister. She closes her eyes and the image of Nathan’s sister comes to mind. *Joan... with that cat-arse look she gets on her face... Oh, and she’s so particular with Lillian. She doesn’t trust me with her. But when she needs help... If she’s busy that day, it’s always ‘Can you pick her up from school? Nathan’s home tonight, isn’t he? Oh, by the way, will Nathan be around?’ Okay, single parent under pressure. I get it. Every fucking day I get it. What was Nathan saying about her? Last weekend, after the phone call... Who rang? I can’t remember... It was something about the tragedy of Joan Shakespeare. I laughed at the joke... but I can’t remember the setup.*

‘What’s this?’ His voice catches as he throws his hand up to a passing sign. ‘Violet Town. I must have made a wrong turn at Seymour.’ ‘You’re fine... Violet Town is the next town after Euroa,’ she murmurs with her eyes closed. He taps out a beat on the steering wheel and says, ‘We would have probably got a better coffee in Euroa but Violet Town will have to do.’ They turn off the Hume Highway onto Urmston Street, and then Cowslip Street. Ebony needs a toilet so they pull up outside a hotel — a two-storey, red-brick building with a deep balcony spanning the footpath below. It’s closed, so they drive on. They park outside a squat, single-storey building – The Black Dog Hotel.

Nathan says he will wait in the car but when she comes out of the toilet he is at the front bar ordering drinks. ‘I hope it’s okay,’ he says, dropping his shoulders and smiling. ‘They’ve got 18-year-old Laphroaig. I ordered two.’ Ebony looks up, considering her response. ‘Not too shabby for such a small town.’ They both wait in silence for the drinks. He leans against the bar, elbowing the counter while she
faces the other way, watching wild patterns of water streak across an expanse of glass at the front of the pub. With a tumbler in each hand Nathan gestures with a flick of his head to the open door at the end of the front bar. They enter the lounge. ‘We have the room to ourselves.’ On the other side of the lounge is a fireplace crackling with burning pinecones and split gum. In front of the fire are several mismatched single sofas. At the other end of the room is a low, unlit bar counter extending down to a dining area. Brown, formica-clad pine tables and black, bicast leather dining chairs patiently wait to be used. Wall-to-ceiling blinds are drawn across the dining room windows. On the wall behind the gloomy bar counter rows of bottles appear as a pattern of smudges. Nathan hands Ebony her drink and then slumps into a plump, beige leather armchair. She stands with her back to the fire while her eyes examine the room.

‘This is homely,’ she says. Her comment is either a response to the fireside warmth or part of her continued attempt to distance herself from her outburst earlier in the car. ‘Look at that crazy poster, Eb,’ he says, pointing to the wall behind her. She twists around. Before her is a gorilla with a Pickelhaube strapped to his head. Under his left arm he carries a fleshy brunette half his size while his right hand pulls firmly on a leash holding back a black Alsatian. Both animals have their mouths open, displaying rows of incisors flanked with curved canine teeth. Behind the gorilla is a map of Europe with rivers of red flowing out from Germany across the continent. ‘What does the writing say? Bête... It’s something about a beast?’ She takes a sip of her Laphroaig and then replies, ‘Fight the Hun, kill the beast... Let’s see, liberté, freedom.’ She turns to face the open fire and adds, ‘That
stuff is really bad taste.’ Nathan’s muffled answer comes midway through a yawn, ‘C’mon... It’s antique. A relic from history. I like it.’

Leaning against the lip of brickwork, which runs up the side of the fireplace, stands a pair of heart-shaped bellows. Next to this is a chubby pouffe. This gaudy custard-yellow object — which by definition should really be referred to as a footstool, given it stands on three small, bulbous wooden knobs — is textured with chesterfield humps and deeply studded with mint-green ‘crystals’. Ebony gives it a kick with her foot and then walks into the dining room and picks up a chair. ‘Don’t get that chair too close to the fire,’ says a soft voice from the counter. ‘Okay,’ she says, squinting down the length of the bar. As she walks back with her chair, the voice adds, ‘And put it back when you’re done, please.’

Nathan holds his tumbler up to the muted cove lighting above the fireplace, swirls his Laphroaig and inspects the streaks tearing down the glass. ‘What was that, Eb?’ She drags her chair next to his. ‘What? Oh, somebody at the bar asking me to replace the chair when I’m done.’ Nathan looks over his shoulder at the empty bar and then turns to face Ebony. ‘I’ve had a thought about your monologue... I know of someone who will be at Paul’s party, Ari. He’s a dramaturge over from Europe. He’s working with Paul on some side project... he’ll definitely be there.’ She moves her chair closer to the fire and sits; the foam rubber yields to her weight with an asthmatic sigh. ‘I’m sorry for raising my voice before. I’m sure this person will be helpful. I don’t know what’s up with me. I know I can be cranky when we talk about...’ Her mouth remains open on her unfinished sentence. She is completely motionless. What were we talking about? Her hand is frozen in the
process of bringing her drink to her mouth. Her rigid fingers remain mannequin-still.

A pocket of high-pressure steam builds in the cambium layer of one of the red gum logs and explodes. Embers spray across the floor. She jumps up, brushing her jeans with her free hand, and inspects her clothes for any burns. Nathan is also on his feet, stomping at a smoking cinder on his shoe. He holds his arms out to his sides. One hand grips the now empty tumbler; his jeans are wet with Laphroaig. ‘Fuck me. That was expensive,’ he says, upending his empty glass and giving her a blank look. She grins and points over her shoulder. ‘I thought it was the Hun.’ Nathan gives a snort, as he kicks some glowing coals across the floor back into the hearth. A few of the cinders have fused with the acrylic carpet. His shoes smear charcoal over pink and taupe floral motifs. He looks up to see her staring vacantly at the flames. ‘Don’t stand so close, Eb.’ He moves over to her and walks her back a few steps. She complies, with slow movements. They both stand together facing the fire. She brings her glass to her lips and downs her remaining Laphroaig.

He takes her glass and she looks at her empty hand and then back at the fire. ‘That butterfly... I saw something similar in a dream recently. It was like an omen.’ She looks at him blankly. He walks over and places the two empty tumblers on the fireside mantle. ‘Dreams are more haunting than life.’ Looking up at the gorilla he adds, ‘You have to stop making these strange connections, Eb. As though there is some plot or scheme against you. That butterfly isn’t an omen; it’s just a coincidence.’ She crosses her arms and looks at the floor. ‘I’ve been meaning to ask you about the film script for Dusk...the ending.’ He leans back defensively. ‘What about it?’ ‘Jessica said you and Jamie have been making changes. Something to do
with my character being killed off at the end.’ He returns to his armchair. ‘That’s true,’ he says in a monotone. She takes a step forward. ‘Jessica is pretty angry... and so am I.’ He looks up at her. ‘It doesn’t matter, Eb. The producer says the script stays the way it is. Frances kills Charles and she runs away with Claire to Perth.’ Her tone softens, ‘I’m glad it’s staying that way. It makes more sense for Claire and Frances to end up together. Otherwise, their struggle would have been pointless.’ She watches him watching the fire. He turns to her and says with a smile, ‘Well, I think the change would give the film a darker meaning. Claire still gets to be with Frances, but just for a brief moment before she dies... *ars longa, vita brevis.*’ He pushes his hands onto the armrests to stand. ‘Wait. You’re not going to keep pushing for that ending, are you?’ Ebony asks. He slowly raises himself to his feet. ‘No, Eb. The producer has the final word. Let’s get going. We’ll be late as it is.’

As they step into the front bar Ebony remembers to return the chair. She walks back over to the fire, picks up her chair and carries it into the dining area. While setting down the chair she notices a man standing behind the far end of the bar, hunched over a notepad. It’s hard to tell in this light, but he seems to be wearing a blue and white striped shawl collar robe. Shoulder-length black hair hangs over the thick towelling collar. ‘Oh, I didn’t see you there.’ He puts his pen down and looks up at her through the round lenses of his glasses. ‘Been here the whole time.’ She turns to face him as she slides the chair under the dining room table. Stepping back from the table she realises her palms are damp. ‘I’m sorry about... our conversation,’ she says, raising her arm in the direction of the fireplace. His lenses flare into golden reflection as he turns towards the fire. Still looking at the fire, he licks his bottom lip and says, ‘Life is full of strange absurdities that often
seem implausible yet are true.’ He turns back to face her and smiles. ‘Don’t quote me on that,’ he says, as he drops his gaze and picks up his pen. ‘Ebony!’ Nathan is standing in the doorway across the room. ‘We need to get going.’ As she walks to the door she looks over her shoulder. The man behind the bar nods his head and sigh as he scribbles out something on his notepad.

∞

Paul’s kitchen is sparse and clean. Bolted to the wall, next to a Modigliani print, is a long magnet enclosed in stainless steel. The magnet holds half a dozen Wüsthof knives, starting with a 3½-inch utility knife and finishing with a 7-inch Hollow-Ground Santoku. The back wall of the kitchen glows in honey-yellow accents from fervid light mediated through the stained-glass French doors that lead out to the balcony. The knives also blush with these colours; as does the squat fused-quartz tumbler of water held by Ebony with pinched fingers. She turns her head towards Nathan, as though she is about to speak, but then lifts her tumbler to her lips. Shapes of refracted yellow light twist and shrink through the thick quartz. He patiently waits. She shifts her weight on the bar stool and places her glass on the kitchen table. Okay, if Ebony isn’t going to say anything, then Nathan will. ‘It’s interesting how Paul has linked the colours together in his kitchen. The yellow in the Modigliani and the lead lighting. He has quite an eye.’ The sound of smashing glass in the adjacent room makes them both jump. An apology can be heard and then laughter. ‘Actually, I find this kitchen barren and airless. I couldn’t do anything in it for fear of making a mess.’

They turn to the sound of shouting. A group of men enter the room, all wearing dressing gowns and slippers. One of the men, in short-cut light-brown
flannel, leans forward into the group and booms out a pretend whisper ‘and then
the guy at the bar says, “What’s the big deal? She’s my sister-in-law”.’ Several of the
men laugh. A thin, gaunt-looking man with a silver moustache continues to laugh
after the rest have stopped. He wipes at his eyes and then loosens the silk belt of his
dressing gown. He is the only one wearing pants – dark-grey houndstooth. ‘Ari,’
Nathan calls. Ari looks over, smiling, ‘Cholera! Good day, Nathan.’ He approaches
with an extended hand. ‘And you must be Ebony. Nathan mentioned earlier that
you’re having a problem with a script.’ She holds his hand. ‘Nice to meet you, Ari. I
do have something I want to discuss.’ She looks down at the floor. ‘Have you seen
my bag, Nate? Oh, damn it! I’m sorry Ari, I think I left the script in the car. We’re
actually parked all the way down the hill. Are you going to be here all afternoon?’
He replies, ‘My regret... I can’t hear through my right ear. What were you saying?’
She leans to one side and repeats, with deliberate slowness, ‘I’m afraid I left the
script in the car and we parked a long way from Paul’s property. I was wondering if
you’re going to still be at the party later on tonight.’ A smile breaks out across Ari’s
face and he sweeps his right arm out to his side. ‘I’ll sleep here tonight.’ Ari leans
forward and his robe falls open, revealing a pillow of grey hair. Most people assume
incorrectly that he is Russian. When strangers ask about his ancestry, Ari lies and
tells them he’s from Germany. ‘What is the play about?’ he asks. Ebony frowns. ‘I
suppose it’s about death... and motherhood. The protagonist’s sister dies so she has
to take on the role of parenting her niece.’ Ari puts a hand to his chin. He stares off
into space, nodding. Ebony continues, ‘And the problem is the graveside scene. I
don’t know whether I should be delivering my lines as a soliloquy or whether it
should be a monologue, to someone.’ Ari interrupts, ‘I see the problem. If the
protagonist has faith, a belief in the afterlife, then the sister is listening and it’s a monologue. If the protagonist lacks faith, then, even though she is addressing her sister, she is merely speaking to herself – hence a soliloquy.’ Ebony looks to Nathan, who then joins the conversation, ‘If the character has faith... That makes sense.’ Ari scratches his moustache and grins. ‘Of course it makes sense. But I’m not sure if it solves your problem. Because you always have a witness.’ He taps his temple. ‘Your homunculus.’ Ebony looks up at him to see if he is joking. He looks back at her, tight-lipped and nodding.

‘Ari, Ari!’ One of the robed men calls from the conclave. He holds up his hand to indicate he is coming. ‘Sorry, Ebony, I have to go. Bring me the script later tonight and I’ll take a look at this... soliloquy.’ He takes a step back and then stops. ‘You need to read Bostrom and his work on ancestor machines. That could be the answer to all of our problems,’ he says, holding up his hands with a shrug. ‘Don’t leave it too long getting back to me,’ he adds from across the room. ‘What’s the saying about sheets in the wind?’ Nathan turns to her with his head on one side. ‘He’s drunk.’ Ebony continues looking at Nathan and her smiles fades. ‘Let’s talk.’

∞

They are now on a balcony strewn with deckchairs and umbrellas. Far below, the grounds of the property extend to small hills in the distance. In silence, they walk down a zigzag of timber stairs that hug the wall of the three-storey house. At each turn of the staircase a walkway continues horizontally along the side of the building. On the final landing Nathan suggests they walk to the rotunda at the end of the property. He points to the distant structure – a white dome pushing through treetops. Two naked, squealing boys below run across a path followed by a gasping
woman in a cocktail dress. ‘You’re not going in. It’s too cold,’ the woman yells between breaths.

Now at ground level, Ebony and Nathan walk together along a gravel path. Ebony can hear water splashing up ahead accompanied by shrill giggling. The path curves around a wall of hedge and then opens out to a large paved patio. In the middle stands a fountain. Its base is an elegant fluted plinth and it is topped with three life-size, naked muses. These green copper figures pour water from jugs held close to their breasts into three large marble basins below. The two children swim in one of these basins, ignoring the pleas of the woman. Ebony looks across the neatly mowed grounds beyond the patio bringing a hand up to shield her eyes from the setting sun. She can see a family of elephants standing beneath a Canary Island date palm. The youngest elephant grasps his mother’s tail with his trunk, *Jungle Book* style. To the left of the elephants, a tiger crouches near some rose bushes, ready to pounce. Nathan follows her gaze. ‘Oh... they’re fantastic props. Paul got to keep them from a job he was working on last year. They’re realistic, aren’t they?’ They walk past the fountain and tiptoe through a boundary of flowering agapanthus. Ebony takes a step and her shoes sink into the wet turf, throwing her off balance. A hand moves in and holds her elbow and then moves down to her wrist. They hold hands.

From the vantage point of the decking at the top of the house the grounds below form a symmetrical design. The central gravel path cuts through rectangular garden beds, which are patterned with flowers to form a mosaic of colourful circle and diamond shapes. This path ends in a large paved cul-de-sac with a fountain in the middle. The two children are being dragged back towards the house, wailing
and thrashing. Ebony and Nathan can also be seen. They appear toylike as they teeter down a sloping expanse of green lawn away from the path.

They walk on opposite sides of the rotunda and meet at the entrance. He recites, with checklist disinterest, the few details of knowledge he has on the building – cost, materials and stylistic influence. He goes into detail regarding Paul’s inspiration to build the structure. Apparently the rotunda was partly based on the ruins of a seventh-century cathedral Paul had visited in the city of Vagharpashapat in the Armenian province of Armavir. Nathan points out the Armenian ionic capitals, which sit on polished columns. They then proceed to engage in a terse exchange regarding the building’s classification. Ebony suggests that the structure should be called a gazebo because it isn’t completely walled in like a rotunda. It seems to be a valid argument to me. The very fact that the two are bickering over something so trivial and obtuse gives me pause to suspect one of them — or both of them — are still holding on to tension from the day’s earlier conversation. But, maybe more of that later.

Nathan fumbles with a crumpled packet of cigarettes, taps one out and lights it. Ebony walks into the middle of the gazebo; her footsteps echo off the cupola. An inscription can be seen on a frieze at the base of the cupola, which reads ‘Our Fate Cannot Be Taken From Us; It Is A Precious Gift’. She sits down on the short stone balustrade and rests her back on a column. He watches her from the entrance. ‘What did you want to talk about, Eb?’ She starts to speak, ‘Look... Nate.’ Nathan interrupts with a raised voice, ‘Is this about Joan? Christ, she’s my sister! Her teeth and gums become visible with anger. ‘Shut up!’ He flinches, draws heavily on his cigarette and throws it to the ground. He looks down at his engagement ring and
rotates it slowly with his thumb. ‘What do you want to tell me, Eb?’ She stands and walks to the centre of the gazebo. Her arms are stiff by her side. ‘It’s not about Joan.’ She places a fist gently against her temple. ‘You are going to think I’m mad when you hear what I’m about to say.’ Her voice lowers, ‘It’s... I think... I’ve been hearing this voice in my head.’ She looks at his face, calm and composed, and then turns away. ‘It’s been happening since Europe.’ He walks over to her. ‘Eb, why didn’t you mention this before?’ She looks down at the palms of her hands which visibly tremble, and she slowly inhales. ‘The first time, at least I think it was the first time, I heard the voice was when I was getting my ticket reissued... the day I left Guernsey. This polite old lady was serving me. We talked about the ferry timetable. Some mix-up with my name. She initially couldn’t find me on the system. She reissued my ticket. We said goodbye, and as I was leaving she said I wouldn’t be able to have children. I asked her to repeat herself but her reply was completely different.’

Nathan holds out his arms but she recoils. ‘Wait, I haven’t finished. I brushed the whole incident aside, but it’s plagued me. I think maybe what I heard was something she was thinking. It was as though I had read her mind.’ His eyes crease in the corners and he grins. ‘Eb, where are you going with this?’ She looks up at him, opens her tight, grim lips and inhales unevenly. ‘I’m serious. This isn’t a joke. This voice also described things that were happening around me.’ He kneels beside her. ‘Eb, this doesn’t make sense.’ She raises a hand to her lips and looks at him through swollen eyelids. Her hand firmly cups her mouth for a brief moment and then drops by her side. I’ll let her speak. ‘It happened the other night at Margot’s.’ Nathan’s voice drops in tone. ‘At Margot’s. ‘Where is this voice now, Eb?’ He moves
closer and embraces her. She rests her face in his chest and closes her eyes. ‘The voice is gone’.

A sound. Someone moos like a cow and then calls out, ‘Nathan!’ A gangly woman waves and then looks down, pacing awkwardly towards them as though scoping out landmines. With each step, her stiletto heels sink into the ground. ‘Oh Christ, not Sally,’ Ebony murmurs in a thick, low voice. Nathan catches Sally’s attention and slowly shakes his head with deliberate exaggeration. Sally takes the hint and, through a slow process of pulling out each embedded heel before taking the next step, turns around and walks away.

Two figures huddle in the gazebo, holding each other. ‘We’ll work this out, Eb. We’ll work this out together.’
Imagine a perfectly still late summer afternoon. The air is thin from the heat. Now picture a landscape packed with trees; small mallee and wattle huddled around towering red gums. Skeletal, angular limbs; biding their time until the next rainfall. If you had a good understanding of Australian geography then these elements coming together in your imagination might prompt you to think of a place like the Tanami desert. But no, it’s not that flat and desolate. Is it the Kimberley? Perhaps, but the Pilbara seems a better fit. Yes, the Pilbara is what you can see. Now, view this scene from above. From the gods, so to speak. From up here, the trees form a patchwork pattern of green and grey. From this lofty position, it is as though rings of green trees stand guard around clusters of grey, stooping giants. Yet, over there to the left, one gets the impression the buckled limbs of these grey elders are protecting the verdant saplings from the harsh heat above. It’s unclear whether this pattern is something you project onto this landscape to impose order. There is comfort in systematising something that is chaotic, foreign and indifferent. Perhaps this pattern reveals some deeper scheme. It may expose a mechanism or process taking place out of sight, in another world. After all, it has been known for a long time that nature loves to hide.

Over there, a path of red sand weaves its way between mottled clumps. No movement. Up here, you might draw the conclusion all the trees below — the ones living that is — coexist in peaceful accord. But, what of the trees that are barely living? Look closer and you’ll notice brittle foliage, hardly capable of photosynthesis. You’ll also notice branches interlock from one tree to the next. In
fact, over there, by that sturdy bloodwood, the contorted limb of a red gum supports its neighbour’s splintered, diseased bough. Despite such appearances of goodwill, there is a fight for survival below the surface. Roots plummet deep, vying for precious moisture residing between the strata of clay, silt and rock. It’s a race to the bottom playing out over decades. These cord-like tendrils splay out through the earth like blind fingers. With fractal discipline the roots fork off and reduce in size. Each fork creates a new generation, until the roots are as fine as hair. Deep below, thirsty filaments push through minuscule fractures in the mute rock.

Aboveground, the silence is broken by a series of looping warbles from a grey butcherbird. This call is answered in the distance. The butcherbird edges his way along a low branch. Up close now, it is apparent his attention is drawn to some rustling below. He looks down the length of his beak to the source of the noise. At the base of the bloodwood, a female western pebble-mound mouse is busy reordering her pebbles near the opening of her burrow. The sound of scratching from her litter in the cool burrow below prompts her to pause momentarily. The small stone in her mouth needs to be placed somewhere. She resumes her task. The butcherbird has left his branch and is gliding silently down. He locks his beak around the neck of the struggling mouse and is back in the air. The hind legs of the mouse kick briefly and then stop. Perched back in the same tree the butcherbird wedges the mouse into a split in a branch and proceeds to tear away at his meal.

Another sound now; rhythmic, dull and faint. Actually, the rhythm isn’t entirely regular; it’s slightly syncopated and offbeat. It’s the sound of horse hooves on uneven ground. Between the distant trees, a figure on horseback can be seen. In the heat haze the horse and rider shimmer as one form. The butcherbird gives a
warning cry and takes flight. The horse now moves from a canter into an ambling gait as she passes the bloodwood. The rider, dressed in a sky-blue frock and white broad-brimmed hat, pulls back on the reins, stopping the horse in a small clearing. Hooves thud against the ground and the horse gives off a series of low grunts. The woman soothes the animal’s dusty neck, all the while surveying her surroundings. Up ahead she notices movement near a thick clump of saltbush. Through the scrub she can see someone tending to a tethered horse. The figure — a woman — looks up from behind a low Acacia tree. She steps out into view. She is wearing a check shirt and a tight belt around her waist. Claire lowers her eyes to the woman’s jodhpurs. Just below the right knee, the jodhpurs have been shortened, exposing a wooden leg. She has one hand tucked in her back pocket while the other carries a weathered saddlebag. ‘Mrs Claire Trindall,’ she says, dropping the bag to the ground. ‘My goodness. What are you wearing?’ A cloud moves across the sun, dimming the scene. ‘Frances, you know I don’t possess any riding breeches. I didn’t have a chance to go home; I’ve come straight from town,’ Claire says. Frances walks over to Claire with an asymmetrical lope, all the while shaking her head. ‘I suppose you’re going to want me to help you down from up there.’ The horse, disturbed by some movement in the distance, stomps the ground and tries to turn her head. Claire’s smile drops as she pulls tight on the reins. ‘I rode here in a dress. I’m sure I can dismount in a dress,’ she says, dismissively looking over Frances’s shoulder at a man standing to one side of the clearing. Frances holds out her arms. ‘I insist.’ Again, the horse hoofs the ground and strains against Claire’s pull. ‘Easy, easy,’ Claire says, as she reaches down and strokes the flank of the horse. She straightens
her posture and swings her leg across the saddle while Frances moves in to catch her around the waist.

They stand facing each other. Even though Claire is smiling, her eyes hold concern. She gives a quick look past Frances again. The man behind her is rubbing the back of his neck. She can’t decide whether it’s out of worry or just the heat. ‘I’ve brought some supper in my saddlebag,’ Frances says, still holding Claire’s waist. They look at each other in silence. Claire opens her mouth as if to say something and then looks down at the ground. The broad brim of her sun hat hides her whole face and neckline. Frances moves in closer, sliding one arm across Claire’s shoulder. ‘What’s wrong?’ Claire raises her head sharply and looks away. Her moist eyes betray distress. Claire’s voice is low, almost childlike. ‘Are we going to do this?’ Frances puts a hand to Claire’s face and smiles. ‘Sweetheart, we don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. Although I insist you try some of my fresh cornbread.’ Claire wipes her eyes with the back of one hand. She turns to Frances. ‘I want to be here... with you,’ she says, removing her hat. Claire leans forward to kiss her on the cheek. In one quick motion Frances turns her head so their lips come together. Claire closes her eyes. She parts her lips for Frances to explore the curves and contours of flesh that mark out a threshold. There is no going back once this boundary is traversed. She opens her eyes and notices a second man behind Frances. He holds up a notepad to the first man, who shakes his head and frowns. Frances pulls away and whispers, ‘I’ve been waiting a long time to do that.’ The two stare at each other in silence. Claire moves first. She licks her bottom lip, reaches back and grabs the reins. Frances holds out her hand and leads her, and the horse,
to her saddlebag. The two men have moved out of the clearing now. The women walk slowly; the only sound a distant rolling warble from a butcherbird.

‘Cut!’ shouts a man standing on the edge of the clearing. Both of the women slowly turn around. ‘Jessica. Ebony. That worked really well. It was terrific. But we have to do another take. It was nothing to do with either of you; it was your horse, Ebony. It ruined the shot.’ Ebony hitches up her blue frock and walks over to the man. ‘Christ, Jamie, that horse! It completely threw my focus. The only true truism. Working with animals. Am I being too rhetorical for you?’ Jamie holds up both his hands. He’s recently begun to dislike actors. ‘It’s the camera movement during the panning shot that’s distracting the horse.’ He looks down at his watch. ‘Fuck the unions. We have to break. There’s only going to be enough light for one more take today.’ He grabs a megaphone from his assistant. Holding it in the air, he sounds off the siren and then puts it up to his lips. ‘Everyone take a break and eat. We’ll meet back here for a re-shoot at around 6:30.’ He turns to his assistant. ‘We’ll have to get Mitchell to move the dolly further back or perhaps bring in a small jib.’

Jessica is on the ground unbinding her shin. She gets up and walks towards Jamie, wielding the prosthesis as though it were a weapon. He pulls a weary face. She drops the leg and puts her hands around his neck and pretends to choke him. ‘Stop Jessica. If you kill the director, who’s going to finish the film? How will you get paid?’ ‘Oh yeah,’ she says, letting go. ‘My precious little pay packet.’ A young woman with a two-way radio clipped to her front pocket walks over. ‘Ebony, Nathan is waiting for you over at catering.’ Ebony’s eyelids fall. ‘Tell him to wait. I need ten minutes alone in my trailer.’ She turns and makes her way down a dusty track. She pauses for a moment on the drop-down stepladder. *What the fuck.*
Frances... and that missing leg. She white-knuckles the handle on the door and turns it. *I can’t stop thinking about it.* Standing inside, she grips her dressing table. She slowly exhales as she leans towards her vanity mirror. Her eyes look back at her.

∞

*Every year it’s the same fucking thing. Why do I do this to myself? What’s wrong with me? The same fantasies... but with someone different. Always a woman though. My little secret. I’ll never go through with it. Not all the way. Not like with Margot all those years ago.*

She walks to the small kitchen and fills a glass with water. She drinks a mouthful and then carries the glass back to the vanity.

*What was that thing Jenny used to always talk about? Some sort of rule for lesbians or maybe it was more about cherry popping. Smoking cigarettes behind the sports shed at school with Jenny. Oh God, Jenny. Jenny Jell-O Thompson really liked me. In fact, she liked me so much she tried to pull my top up and squeeze my tits. She grabbed at the bottom of my sweater and wouldn’t take no for an answer. In the struggle, the stupid cow almost stuck the dog-dick end of her cigarette in my eye. She told me she just wanted to play about. ‘It doesn’t really count if nothing goes in,’ she said, kicking the corrugated-iron shed with her scuffed-up Pumas. That was Jenny. Her wandering eyes would always be on the space between your skirt and your Mary Janes; and on the arrival of any fresh tits. I actually didn’t mind her attention. I found her attractive... physically. But her breath. I don’t know what was going on there but it smelt as though something had died behind her second molar.*
I wish I had courage to tell people what I really thought back then. Those days, I mostly did the right thing; apart from smoking... and occasionally shoplifting with Jenny. I would push her away and she’d give me that look. That ‘you’ve-got-a-bug-up-your-arose’ look. She felt inferior. She admitted as much. She said it was because her mum slapped her around. At least, that’s what Jenny used to say before I called her a lying bitch. I said that right to her face... Right here, in fact, in the same place we are now behind the sports shed. What am I saying? I’m not standing behind the sports shed right now. Back then, when I was there with my friend Jenny. Also, I didn’t call her a lying bitch... But the thought crossed my mind as she was telling me her bullshit story. Jenny’s mum... as described by Jenny. Most of the day my mum has her hair in rollers, and she’s always fagging. On pension day, she always comes home with a bottle of Riesling and tins of corned beef. My mum loves corned beef. She spends most of the time getting drunk and watching daytime television. When I get home from school mum’s usually asleep on the sofa. When she’s awake, there’s a good chance she’ll be drunk and when she’s drunk she argues with me and that’s when I get slapped around. Jenny pulls up the hem of her skirt and shows me a long black and purple blotch on her hip. I reach out to touch it. ‘Fuck off,’ she barks as she slaps my hand away. She continues. Anyway, I poured half a cup of my piss in her bottle of Riesling and I watched her and her brother drink the whole thing as they gawked at some game show and chowed down on cheese toasties. Jenny coughs up some phlegm and spits it onto the hot corrugated iron. It clings to the metal with gelatinous tenacity. Oh... That was another thing I found off-putting with Jenny – her bad breath and her spitting. Now, what were some of the other things I didn’t
like? She did talk a lot of bullshit. I don’t think her mother hit her at all... It was probably her uncle. He was always trying to get his hands on her. That was the gossip at school back then.

Ebony blinks at her reflection in the mirror. The figure before her comes into focus. Now...What got me onto all this? She picks up her hairbrush. Ah, yes, it doesn’t really matter if it doesn’t go in... Sounds like something her fucking pervert uncle would tell her. She drags the plastic bristles through her hair. And here I am now, years later, flirting with Jessica. Thinking that I’m only being disloyal to Nathan if something goes in. Well, fuck Nathan. She stops her brushing. That hasn’t happened in a while. Is our relationship finished? It’s probably only a matter of time. If I could just simply fuck Jessica and get it over with... Maybe then I wouldn’t think about her. Perhaps that’s all I need. I just need to feed that craving. The amount of time I’m wasting with my life just thinking about her. And the fucked-up thing is it’s not Jessica I want but her character, Frances. I actually couldn’t care less about Jessica. Lie! She gives me those far-away fuck-me eyes. I know she would hump me in a heartbeat. But she does nothing for me. I look at her and I go dead and powdery between the legs. Lie! Lie! She comes back from Sydney with stories of her young tribe of dykes...going out to their birdcage night at the ZanziBar to slurp down rounds of Wet Pussies at $15 a glass. I can see them now with their pixie cuts and pencil-thin ties, neat, starched cuffs... Smooching about like prepubescent boys; thin wrists and hips. Or perhaps they’re all off to Hunters Bay with an Esky and straw hats, board shorts and rash vests. Okay... so she likes young dykes... There’s nothing wrong with that. Anyway, that’s Jessica — her life of privilege and comfort. Am I jealous?
Jealous of the money... Of course. But as for her bony cronies. Skinny, shapeless and an expression screaming ‘get me away from this tedium’. Jealous, yes. Jealous of the way she is out. The idea of someone thinking of me as a lesbian makes my skin crawl. What am I? A self-loathing bisexual... Like Jenny. My only experience is Margot. But, Frances is a different story. What can I say? I’m proud of the part I played in creating her. And now all I have are my fantasies. One of which is the disembodied character Frances, who is herself only partially embodied.

Nathan and I cooked Frances up late one night over a jug of whiskey sour. Scriptwriting seems to be the only intimate thing we do together at the moment. Which is ironic really, given the industry is so incestuous. Everyone is usually fucking someone who ‘knows a guy’ who can get them a gig. ‘I’ll have my guy talk to your guy.’ Well... It turns out that the director got Nathan to adapt the novel Dusk for him. And, I ended up being the guy who got the part because I was fucking some guy. In the novel Frances was a little less rough around the edges. In fact, she came off the page like Cat Ballou – denim jeans, gingham and a tussle of blonde hair. That certainly wasn’t going to work, even for Nathan. We started to kick around a few ideas. Where was she from? Was she straight off the boat from Old Blighty? Perhaps she was one of those rare animals – a woman convict. That could work. Instead of hanging her, a kindly judge decides — with the help of a little ‘bees and honey’ — to spare her life and send her to a penal colony. And what was her crime? Well it wouldn’t be something as pedestrian as petty theft. Two whiskey sours later it was decided she was convicted of the crime of buggery. A crime not usually punishable by death, but, given that the other participant, one
Lady Patricia Hollingworth, who was a very close friend of Lady Louisa Isabella, wife of Charles Henry Mills, 1st Baron Hillingdon of Glyn, Mills & Co., the matter needed to be handled discreetly in order to avoid a scandal. Apart from her occasional penchant for strap-on dildos — which makes me think of Michael Haberlandt and then back to the ZanziBar — she now also has an eye patch. The patch remained while Nathan sat on the steps of the back porch smoking a cigarette. I had talked him out of it by the time he was finished.

Another secret I have is my desire for amputees. A desire never to be fulfilled. That’s not to say it can’t be explored. The landscape of my fantasies are populated with dark, mysterious creatures. I was thinking this is as Nathan stood up and lost his balance. He started to lean back over the porch steps, circled his outstretched arms several times and regained equilibrium. As we walked to the back door, I slapped my hands together: ‘Frances has a missing limb!’ After all, I’m going to be doing a lot of scenes with this character, some of them love scenes. Why not shape the character to fit my particular tastes? Nathan decides to go along with it but draws the line at Frances missing an arm. ‘How is she going to ride a horse with only one arm? I’m going to have to rewrite the second act if she only has one arm.’ In the end, we both agreed that she is missing her right leg and in its place will be a length of carved wood. It’s a wooden leg from a small oak coffee table made by Thomas Sopwith — builder, cabinetmaker and self-described civil engineer. The table is a family heirloom and — apart from the clothes on her back — was the only possession she was allowed to bring with her on the clipper. Perhaps she lost her leg on the long voyage over. Gangrene or maybe it was severed in a rigging accident. Laundryman Ling, with a knack for using black
powder, cauterises the pulpy stump. It would be an opportunity to present — purely as back story — Frances's high pain threshold. Lying on her back, biting down hard on a length of downhaul, she waits with her pulpy, blood-soaked stump in the air. Nathan looks at me as though I'm talking shit and then belches. His eyes are red and his chin has a light sulphur-coloured dusting from the corn chips. I go on. Ling puts down his salt pork and with a fingernail picks out some meat lodged between his front teeth. On each side of his mouth hangs a long cord of black hair — a customary tradition. He staggers forward, adjusting for the pitch and roll beneath his feet, cradling a small keg of powder under one arm. Frances screams at Ling as three men hold her to the floor. The ship's yeoman, peeking out of his greasy, cannonball head with crow-feet eyes, yells at Ling to get a move on. They've got rum to drink and O'Malley is already starting up with 'Jack's the Lad' on his tin whistle. The black powder goes on, the captain lights some twine from his glowing corncob and... Poof! The cabin is illuminated in one brilliant moment, exposing the grimy sleeping quarters filled with a dozen gaping mouths, tangled lanyards, hammocks and shoeboxes. That's how she survives her leg amputation. She's one tough bitch of a sea dog. We name her Frances O'Toole and, as an afterthought, put the nickname Peggy in the middle.

And what does she do when she arrives in Australia? We quickly check the internet for ideas. Nathan leans into the glowing screen, his head swaying from side to side. It's either prostitution or factory work. We go for prostitution. The next morning, with heads that feel post-op numb, we have another look at Frances. She's really messed up. By the time we'd finished with her the previous night she had sodomised the ship's second mate with a brass belaying pin, hogtied
the resident naturalist Edmund Bampfylde down in the steerage deck and had the shape of a keyhole tattooed around her belly button with an arrow pointing down to her crotch. Most of these digressions had to go. In fact, Nathan didn’t see the need for her to have a wooden leg but I was insistent. She had to keep the wooden leg and I wanted her to have a tattoo but something across her bicep. Something simple; perhaps a heart with a crack down the middle.

Ebony looks at herself holding the brush above her head. Her tight frock pinches under her arms. She turns her shoulders, tilts her head and sends herself a demure photo-shoot look. She places her hands on her hips and then bats her eyelids. With exaggerated slowness she says the word, ‘Frances.’ She raises her shoulders, narrows her eyes and says the word again, ‘Frances.’ Two horn blasts signal that catering has opened its kitchen. She watches herself back away from the mirror and then out of frame. She kneels on her bed and collapses on her side. She clenches a pillow, drags it to her chest like captured prey and then smothers it with her limbs.

I’m exhausted. Fantasising about Frances... And that stump of a leg. I’d fuck her right here. Everyone leave the set... pack the rigging into the trucks and pull out... drive away and leave Jessica stranded here with me. Leave her stranded in costume. The temperature drops as night approaches. This gives us an excuse to hold each other for warmth. Alone in the bush we comfort each other. We can hear dingoes snarl and grunt; perhaps fighting over a carcass in the grey covert landscape beyond the hunched dry mounds of ribbon grass. All we have is each other as the air becomes crispy cold.
What about Nathan? He wouldn’t just pack up and leave without me. He gets an emergency call from Joan to come back to Melbourne. She’s unwell and needs him to look after her daughter, Lillian. Awww... let’s give Joan gastroenteritis. She’s lying on a gurney in the emergency unit; rehydrating intravenously through a catheter needle in her arm. Wait, maybe that’s too much. Fuck, I’m a bitch. All it takes is the slightest health complaint from Joan and Nathan buries his face in his copy of Taber’s Medical Dictionary and from there its onto Dunmore and Fleischer. Then, it’s off to the specialists. Yes... some abdominal problem for Joan would be just the medicine... nothing too dire. Bacteria living in an old ham sandwich; he only has to be gone for the night, just one night.

Come to think of it, fucking in the sand and twigs sounds uncomfortable. I’d prefer a bed. Okay, this is what happens. The whole crew takes off. They all pack up and go back to town. By this stage Nathan is out of the picture. Jessica asks Jamie to leave the wardrobe trailer. The one with Frances’s clothes and the wooden leg. She could wear the baggy nightgown. The one that appears in that scene where the dog gets beaten to death. No... Not that outfit. The washerwoman outfit where the two girls sing, ‘Way down the road where nobody goes.’ One girl with her hand over her eyes while the other girl shakes a finger. ‘There’s a boogie-woogie washerwoman washing her clothes.’ She’ll tell Jamie she’s driving me back to town later this evening. We need to go through some lines. We can do this while we’re driving. On the way, the radiator boils over. We stop for half an hour while the whole box and dice to cool down.
Jessica is now in character as Frances, with washing smock and her wooden stump. The bonnet’s up and she’s leaning over the engine. She hobbles over to fetch some distilled water and then back to top up the radiator and check the oil. I try the ignition again. We radio Jamie and he explains that they are all back at the hotel in Karratha. It’s too late for someone to come back out and pick us up. We will just have to bunk down in the trailer for the night. Nathan is busy on the phone in the hotel lobby arranging his plane ticket. Jamie and the editors are now going through the dailies while the rest of the crew are drinking beer somewhere in town. I lift myself out of the driver’s seat and step out of the cab. I walk into the galley and turn on the light. The fridge is fully stocked. Oh, and includes a bottle of Krug Grande Cuvée.

Because we’re parked on a slope, Frances places makeshift chocks under the tyres. She’s so sensible or maybe nervous, occupying herself, thinking through the possibilities. I walk down past the makeup mirrors and clothes racks to the bedroom. I push down on the mattress. It feels firm enough. On a side table is a plastic Betty Boop novelty lamp. I turn it on. The light bulb glows just behind Betty’s midriff. She’s wearing a bikini. The bikini top is decorated with red and white stripes and the bottom is covered with white stars on blue. She’s bending over with both hands on her knees.

God, is that Frances at the door already? I sit down and notice a blonde wig pegged to a white, dropped-waist evening gown. I pluck it off the peg to give myself something to do with my hands. ‘What are you doing all the way back there, Eb?’ Frances says, wiping her hands on her white smock. She reaches up and unfastens half a dozen bobby pins and lets down her dark hair. ‘Did you hear
me, Eb?’ She’s taken possession of this diminutive ever since she overheard Nathan use it. Initially she called me this as a private joke to mock Nathan. That’s stopped now. She now owns my name. Frances clip-clops her way across the linoleum towards me... Towards the bed at the end of the trailer. There she is, standing in front of me, standing over me, now leaning over me. Looking up at her, all I can do is murmur the word, ‘Frances.’ She grabs the blonde wig from my hand and throws it to the floor. Holding on to the clothes rack for support she lifts her pole of oak and kicks me back onto the bed. She grips my arm and pushes it onto the mattress while her other hand, with the precision and dexterity of a sly, swabbie pickpocket, sets about the task of unbuttoning my frock. Oh yes, I forgot, I need to be in costume too. I’m dressed as Claire, the lady in this equation. With the last button free, the frock loses my shape and falls away, leaving me raw and exposed. Now firmly holding both my wrists, Frances forces my arms over my head, extending them up back to the headboard. Now, what can she tie my wrists with?

No, wait. She lets go of my wrist. My top is back on again. I allow her to ease my frock off my shoulders, away from my chest. ‘Eb.’ The word seems distant. I fall back onto the bed. Frances is now kneeling next to me on her left leg. Her wooden peg rests diagonally across my chest between my tits. I lick and suck its dirty, bulbous end. My frock is bundled up and tangled around my waist, pinning my arms in the sleeves. Frances’s smock is now completely unbuttoned down the front. I try to edge myself up from the bed to look at her body but the oak lumber holds me down. Frances slaps her hand between my legs, again and again. I bite into the oak and notice a small brass plaque no bigger than a thumbnail
surrounded by a delicate carved pattern of flowers and tendrils. Inscribed around the upper edge of the plaque are the words Sopwith and Co. Around the bottom are the words ‘Newcastle-on-Tyne’. Frances rolls over to one side and swings her wooden leg back behind her, smashing Betty Boop to the floor. She then eases her way down the length of my body, hunched and breathing rapidly. I close my eyes and hear my name again – ‘Eb.’ My tangle of clothes is gone now. I’m completely naked. Untethered and ready to join in. My hands clutch her head and I pull down. Handfuls of her dark hair bunch in my fingers. The ball of my left foot runs across arabesque carving. I open my eyes to the room. Her body, now miraculously lit by candlelight, is completely naked. Her wooden leg is gone... she is straddling my thighs. She arches back and looks at the ceiling. Her left leg jack-knifes its way up my body, her foot resting against my face. I move my hand down her leg. Such a thing of singular beauty. With my left hand, I reach out and ease an index finger over the hard scar tissue of her stump tracing around puckers of lumpy, purple skin. Frances looks down. She knows what I want. She shifts her weight off my hips, grabs me by the shoulders and pushes me down the bed, past her hips and thighs.

My tongue is now within reaching distance of the bunched-up knots of collagen, hairless and shiny like colourful plastic slag. This isn’t just regular scarring that you get from a pub brawl glassing. Something like that just leaves a thin pink ridge. If you’re lucky, the ridge is patterned with white creases from the stitching. No... This is keloid scarring, resulting not just from the size of the wound, the sheer enormity of damage, but also from the ensuing cauterisation. Frances moves this wondrous rubbery mass up to my face. Ruddy-brown nodules
ripple, fold and join through interconnected scar tissue. ‘Ebony, what are you doing?’ I can’t see her face. The question comes again but seems to emanate from the other end of the trailer. Or perhaps it’s even further still. ‘Ebony, are you in there?’

The hammering on the aluminium door brings Ebony into focus. ‘Nathan wants to know how long you’re going to be,’ Jessica yells from outside. ‘I’m coming!’ She unlocks her arms from her pillow and swings her legs off the bed. The hammering starts again. ‘Okay!’ She gets up and opens the door to Jessica. Jamie is waiting behind her smoking a cigarette. ‘I’m sorry. Were you busy?’ Ebony runs her fingers through her hair. ‘I was just lying down. You mentioned Nathan.’ Jamie interrupts, ‘We just saw him at the catering tent. He looks a bit lost sitting there by himself.’ Jessica patiently waits for Jamie to finish. ‘He’s got a plate of food set aside for you. He looks miserable.’ Jamie gives a staged cough and then taps his watch. ‘We are re-shooting in about five minutes. Nathan is going to have to wait. Eric is over at makeup. Get him to look you over before he drives you to your horse.’ She goes back inside and closes the door. Through gauze curtains she spies both of them talking near one of the technician vans. She watches Jessica. She is still in costume but without her wooden leg.

What was I doing? I was in the middle of a fantasy. A fantasy... Can’t I have one of those without someone interrupting? A fantasy... Where you have exactly what you want but you don’t actually get it. And there’s Jessica with Jamie, throwing her head back with a laugh. Oblivious that she is also in here with me. That smile. She’s sweet-talking Jamie for something. Just playing another character, I suppose. That’s all we do. And it’s not just the people in front of the
camera. The technicians and the catering girls, the head of photography, the boys from sound and the chief grip, the two ladies from the costume department, Jake from props, neatly laid out like a cast list, all part of a team fulfilling their assigned roles. I imagine they are all dutifully tending to tasks, some of them packing equipment, others seeking shade under the marquee. And over there... my Frances... in her check shirt and jodhpurs.

Unlike Jenny, Frances’s breath is sweet. The smell of it last weekend at our hotel in Karratha. Do you want to go through a few lines with me? She leaned in so close to ask the question I could feel her body heat. At least that’s what I imagined as I lay sweltering on my hotel bed. I’m facedown turning over the idea of giving her a call. All her flirting since filming began was real, not imagined. Well, as real as anything in this world. Suddenly, she rings me. Yes, she rings me... imagine that! She rings, even though her room is next door. When I open her door she is sitting on her bed pulling off a leather boot. I’m surprised to see the club of wood sticking out of the right leg of her tight black jodhpurs. The props department were reluctant for her to wear her wooden leg off set but Jamie intervened. He is all about verisimilitude and getting in touch with the authenticity of the character. He is a firm believer in Method Acting – more Strasberg than Stanislavski. She offers me a drink and I decline. If something is going to happen I want to be sober. She hands me several pages of dialogue and then walks over to the fridge. ‘We’ll start from the top of the page,’ she says, as she flexes the plastic ice tray. Cubes of ice clatter into her glass. The lumbering ceiling fan churns the thick air. She pours in the vodka, takes a mouthful and then cries out her lines. ‘If he catches us together we’re both dead.’ She puts down her glass
and walks up to me. ‘You know that, don’t you, Claire?’ I’m thrown off guard. I look down at the notes. ‘How much time do we have, Frances?’ She comes in closer. ‘Charles will be back in half an hour.’ She puts a hand on my shoulder, her fingers move across the back of my neck. I pull her closer and we kiss. I drop the notes to the floor. I pull up her cotton shirt and ease the fabric out of her jodhpurs. I try to get my hands to her breasts but her arms are in the way as she fumbles with my belt buckle and sends her fingers down the front of my jeans. So much expended energy. Such a clutter of limbs and the stomp, stomp, stomp of her wooden leg as she shifts her weight back and forth. Heaving and pulling and stomping.

Hold on, that’s not her leg on the floorboards, that’s someone pounding at the door. We stop still. Frances and me. I don’t need to worry. Nathan is still in Melbourne. He doesn’t arrive back in Karratha until next week. But if it gets out, whatever it is that’s happening, Nathan will soon find out. Our engagement will be finished. Maybe that’s a good thing. I’m a coward; not honest enough to call the whole thing off. Again, another knock. I’m hiding in the kitchen now. Someone yells from the other side of the door that Jamie wants Jessica to look at one of the dailies. It sounds like Jake, but it’s hard to tell. I wait in the kitchen while Frances opens the door and checks the hallway. ‘Whoever it was has gone,’ she says walking up to me. She comes up close, purses her lips and blows across my face for what seems like a weekend. Her nostrils flare as she inhales. Again, Frances blows across my forehead, over my eyes and then to my mouth. I breathe her air. Air that comes from her lungs, up through the bronchi, past the trachea and the larynx over her epiglottis and out through her mouth into mine. That beautiful
smell. Ripe and pungent; the smell and warmth of cheese and vanilla. With my eyes closed I drink in her breath.

I open my eyes. She is across the room emptying her glass of vodka. Where was I? Or more to the point, where am I? I’m certainly not in that room with Frances. I’m not inhaling the spice of her breath. I never was. I know what her mouth smells like from the lines she has delivered to me over the past week of filming. It’s the sort of smell I get from the crisper drawer in my fridge, all carrots and celery. I wish she had called me last weekend. I wish I’d gone to her room. I wish she had come up to me and cooled my perspiring skin with her breath. But it didn’t happen. No... Instead we stayed in our respective rooms. I said goodnight to her and she entered her room as Jessica and she remained that way through the night. And, it was Jessica who met me in the dining room for breakfast the next morning with the rest of the crew. The only time I see Frances is on the film set. The only time I get to experience Frances — that character I created, that woman I created — is when the clapperboard comes down. That’s when I’m really living, between the sound of the clapper and Jamie crying, ‘Cut. Cut. That’s a wrap.’ The same thing for the past week. And it’s Jessica having breakfast across the room. There she sits in her denim shorts and off-the-shoulder crop top. The director of photography and a couple of the sound guys stand up. They continue the conversation as they walk to the door. I watch Jessica get up from her chair. I watch her tight brown stomach flex and twist above the bulk of her hips. Those hips, which have the audacity to sit on two legs.

A siren blasts from Jamie’s megaphone and then his amplified voice:
‘Everyone on set. Where is Michael? Where’s my runner?!’
Ebony is standing at her door, looking vacantly out through the flywire. Jamie walks over to her holding his clipboard above his head for shade. ‘What the hell? I need you on location right now.’ She opens the door slowly and inhales. Jamie repeats the end of the sentence. ‘Right now!’ She flinches. ‘I’m sorry Jamie. I’m ready.’ He looks down at his watch and then back at Ebony. ‘Go straight to makeup. Get Eric to adjust your frock; it’s not sitting right,’ he adds, before walking away.

Ebony edges around the dolly track and cameras on her way to costume. ‘Eb!’ Nathan is pacing behind her. She stops and turns. ‘Nate, I’m so sorry. I’ve been busy preparing my lines,’ she says walking backwards. ‘Jamie wants me right away. We’re about to shoot.’ He wipes a hand across his wet temple. ‘I’ve been waiting for half an hour! I wanted…’ She turns and walks away to cut off any further conversation. ‘Eb!’ Up ahead, on the other side of the clearing, Jessica is standing by her horse.

When Ebony arrives at makeup, Eric is talking to Angus. ‘It’s amazing how you can transform your accent. You’re American, right?’ Angus visibly winces. ‘Canadian actually. But my mother was born in England.’ Without breaking the conversation Eric guides Ebony, turning her around to adjust her shoulder straps. ‘How did you get the role of Charles?’ Angus replies in a cultured English accent, ‘You see, my good fellow. Before I came to this savage land I was living in London making TV commercials with all my Chelsea chums.’ He drops his accent. ‘Long story short, Jamie is a friend of my manager.’ He leans over to get Ebony’s attention. ‘Happens all the time in our line of work.’ Eric pats her on both shoulders. ‘Right, now. I’ll just get the keys and I’ll meet you at the jeep.’ He puts
on a large straw hat and sunglasses and points over towards the clearing. ‘It’s parked behind those trees.’ He looks over to Angus. ‘Want to come for a ride?’ Angus lifts up his nose and says, ‘Sorry old man, I have to do some diaphragm work.’

Holding up both sides of her frock Ebony paces across the clearing. Her foot catches on the dolly track and she falls. ‘Shit. Fucking shit.’ She gets up, aware that all the crew is watching... aware I am watching. What? Who is aware of what? She lifts the white lacework hem of her frock to pick out a twig and brush off the remaining dirt. She stops and whispers, ‘Who the fuck is saying that? You’re repeating what I’m saying ...describing everything.’ She straightens herself and looks around. Jamie is in position at the edge of the clearing. He’s talking to one of the horse handlers on a two-way radio. ‘Yes...that’s right. Ebony’s horse needs to start from behind the ridge. Yes...so it’s not in the opening shot.’ Some chatter comes through the radio. Ebony hears everything as narration. Jamie answers, ‘Further off, beyond the clearing. Jessica will be waiting with her horse at the edge of the clearing.’

Her eyes check the lighting crew setting up equipment. She starts to walk, but in no particular direction. Eric calls out from the jeep. ‘Hop in,’ he says, slapping his hand against the rollbar above his head. She turns to him. ‘Did you hear that?’ She walks over to the passenger side. ‘What? I said hop in. What are you talking about?’ Her heart rate increases. ‘What is that voice?’ It’s probably the shock. However, I wouldn’t know; I’ve never had a character hear me before. Who the fuck are you? Understandably, she feels dislocated. Sitting in the front seat of the jeep, she can feel the vibration of the engine and hear Eric’s words but it’s as though
those sensations are taking place from a great distance. ‘Are you okay, Ebony? You look stressed. I’ve got some beta-blockers if you need one.’ For the time being it’s probably best Ebony doesn’t discuss what she is hearing. Even with her speechless she is still motivated to communicate. She looks at Eric with her mouth open, pointing frantically at her throat. ‘Christ Ebony, you’re scaring me!’ She keeps pointing, only now — mouth still open — her head is giving a slow sideshow-shake. ‘Are you okay?’ Her head changes direction and starts going up and down. ‘You’re freaking me out. Say something.’ She needs to close her mouth, put both hands in her lap and relax. She needs to think through what she is going to say next, otherwise she may not be given the chance to say it. She needs to decide — and don’t think of this as a veiled threat — whether what she thinks is happening will be believed by Eric. She needs to think about the consequences of sounding a little crazy and the real possibility of being sectioned for such beliefs. Ebony brings a hand up to her mouth and growls out a muffled cough. ‘You’re right. Something was caught in my throat.’ She manages a smile and then says, ‘Let’s go Catesby, to my horse.’

A horse handler is waiting beside Ebony’s mare when they arrive. Her horse is a caramel-coloured Appaloosa with milky blotches across her rump. She gets out of the car. Eric gives a short burst on his horn and holds out her white sun hat. ‘You’ll be needing this, Claire.’ All this noise makes the horse paw the ground and pull at the reins. She puts on her hat and walks over to the horse. With scripted movements, she puts her left foot in the stirrup and throws herself up onto the horse. She looks down at her assistant, who has removed his radio from his back pocket. He fingers the device and it hisses to life. ‘Dario here. Ebony is on the horse
and ready.’ Jamie’s distorted voice can be heard in a blanket of static, ‘I’ll let you know when we’re ready this end… we will probably be another five minutes.’ Even though she has a secure grip on the reins, Dario continues to hold on to the noseband of the bridal. He looks up at her. ‘She’s still a little bit skittish after all of Eric’s noise. I find she settles down quick when her bridle is being held. She wants to throw her head around, have a tantrum. She is a beautiful horse.’ This whole story from Dario regarding the horse’s temperament is a fabrication. In truth, he wants an excuse to stand as close to Ebony as he can. In fact, he only took the job on the film because he was told he would be one of the horse handlers for Ebony Moon. He has been fantasising about her for years. What? That’s interesting to know. A man like this could convince me that I’m straight. She parts her lips to say something but nothing comes out. He smiles in preparation for her words but, when nothing eventuates, he looks away.

Recomposed now, she decides what she is going to say next. She speaks, ‘A horse having a tantrum makes for a strange image. What’s her name?’ He looks up with his black eyes. ‘Her name is Andante.’ Dario’s eyes confirm what Ebony knows. She corrects her balance as Andante shifts her weight. Dario moves closer, reaches up and runs his thumb across Andante’s poll. Again, she thoughtfully considers her next words. ‘Andante… like the tempo… A walking pace… It’s Italian, isn’t it?’ He looks up at her. ‘She has a graceful gallop but her beauty is in her walk. The way her whole body moves. The motion of her flank and her withers shifting and rocking… like a slow dance.’ Ebony thinks as she runs her hand across Andante’s moist flank, Okay, so he’s got a strong passion for Andante … there’s nothing wrong with that per se. ‘Andante … Wouldn’t that be a boy’s name?’ He
wipes his fingers across his moist neck. ‘It is. But I’ve had no complaints from her so far.’ Andante lowers her head to the warm red earth and gulps in air through flared nostrils.

Dario looks out across the desert and then back up. ‘I like what you did in that series last year. The one where you played the nun. It would have been such a difficult role. You know, going against the church like that.’ She cringes as soon as she hears the word nun. This flirting was going so well and now he wants to turn the conversation to Sister Josephine. She thinks of something to say to keep the conversation on track; back to Andante and Dario. She must make her answer brief regarding her role as the wayward nun. ‘Thank you for the compliment. That role was challenging. I’ve actually been in a television movie and a film since that series. All small parts,’ she says. She shifts her hips for balance. Andante decides to defecate. Half a dozen fibrous muffins hit the ground, perfectly conforming to the last six notes of the Persian scale, complete with half steps and augmented seconds. She continues, ‘And now, this movie; it’s going to be incredible.’ Dario nods and then checks the squelch on his radio. ‘You know, I never found out what happened to the nun. I was watching the show right up until the point when she got together with that prisoner. I caught a few episodes months later but you were no longer in the show.’ One more muffin hits the ground with a thup. She forces a remorseful frown. ‘She died.’ Again, Dario looks off to the horizon. As though addressing the wilderness beyond, he says, ‘God... It must be difficult if you’re enjoying the role to have a writer come in and kill you.’ He strokes Andante’s shoulder and foreleg. ‘It didn’t bother me. It cleared my schedule for other opportunities,’ Ebony replies. His hand moves down Andante’s girth and stops just above her thigh. ‘Still, I really
liked the nun character. Perhaps because I’m a lapsed Catholic myself.’ She notices 
the delicate silver chain around Dario’s brown neck. A string of fine metal spans the 
gulf from shoulder to collarbone, only to disappear under his blue T-shirt. She 
suspects there is a crucifix on the end.

‘So, how did she die?’ His words pull her away from the rise and fall of joints 
and sinew which shape troughs and escarpments of skin. ‘The nun. Sister 
Josephine. She became infected with HIV.’ Whatever flirtatious energy existed 
between them is now dead. She drops her shoulders into a comfortable hunch and 
continues, ‘After she is infected she quickly develops AIDS. I didn’t appear on 
camera much after that. I was regularly referred to by the townspeople in 
conversations which either began with, “Poor Sister Josephine … suffering from 
that dreadful disease” or, “Josephine, and to think she was a woman of the cloth”.’ 
As an afterthought she adds, ‘It really divided the town.’

The radio in Dario’s hand chirps to life. Parts of words are heard but nothing 
meaningful. He adjusts the squelch and Jamie’s voice comes through. ‘You can tell 
Ebony to start riding.’ He looks up at her. ‘It was nice meeting you. I suppose I’ll 
see you again. You know, somewhere on the set.’ She pauses and then reaches 
down to shake his hand but he has dropped his eyes to his radio. She brings her 
hand back up to the reins and then slaps the leather straps onto Andante’s neck. 
‘Likewise, Dario… See you around.’

Andante begins his slow walk down the narrow dusty track. “Are you there?” 
Yes. ‘That’s it, I’m insane. I’ve lost my fucking mind.’ Keep your voice down. You 
don’t want to be seen talking to yourself. You seem to know everything about me … 
everything about everyone. She pulls the brim of her hat down and whispers, ‘Does
Nathan suspect that I’m falling out of love with him?’ Be quiet. Do you see that ridge ahead? She turns. Not that one, the other way, to the left. There is a cameraman positioned on top of that ridge and you’re going to be in view in a few seconds. Put this conversation aside and get your attention back to the film.

A long establishing shot from the top of the ridge. The landscape across the plain is sparsely covered in tufts of silky bluestem. Rising in between these blue-green cushions are squat, cone-shaped termite mounds, neon red in the sun. In the distance, a horse ambles its way down a red, dusty path. With each footfall, the horse kicks up dust that is then carried away in the light breeze. The horse is a milk and caramel-coloured Appaloosa and riding her is a woman in a sky-blue frock. A Mathews cockatoo screech repeats in diminishing cycles in the distance. A reply is heard much closer. A second camera takes over from a lower angle. It slowly zooms in to the point at which the horse and the woman fill the frame. The woman takes one hand off the reins and, with a lazy swing of her arm, removes a fly from her forehead. Her head turns back and forth as though she is searching for someone and the expression on her face seems to constantly change. At first her jaw is slack and then her lips tighten and her forehead rumples up raising her eyebrows into a plea. But to whom? Zooming in now for a medium close-up. There; her lips part and then come together. The bottom lip rolls up and the tip of the tongue works against the bottom lip. Her mouth puckers and then forms an O. She’s talking to herself.

∞

The hurricane lamp on the table illuminates the mosquito-net tent like a Chinese lantern. Jamie and Nathan sit cocooned inside the glow. There are several empty
glasses on the table; evidence that it was a larger gathering earlier in the evening.

Ebony is lying in bed, still awake. She can hear their exchange outside over the
gentle chug of the camp generator. ‘It’s just not going to work Jamie.’ She edges
across her bed closer to the window. ‘I’m sorry Nate, Tony has changed his mind.
We have to remove the Butcher Inlet scene.’ She hears the sound of a hand slapping
down on a hard surface followed by the rattling of glass. ‘Christ! I’m only the writer
here. It’s going to take me at least a week to rewrite the final act. This can’t be just
thrown together. I thought we had an understanding; you, me and Tony. We all
agreed on an equal say in the script. You specifically said, “Hierarchies won’t exist”,
and yet here we are.’ One of them laughs. Most likely it’s Jamie. ‘Hierarchies. What
are you talking about, Nate? The reality is that Tony is funding the film!’ Nathan’s
voice gets softer. ‘I made all those changes with Charles’s stockmen, Owen and
Victor. What’s their role now if they don’t hunt someone down? And their back
stories won’t make sense. Frances’s motivation for killing Charles needs to change
if the stockmen don’t go after her. All these pieces are interlocked. If you change
one thing everything else needs to be reassessed.’ She slowly turns the window
handle to let in more of the conversation. Jamie answers, ‘I’ve gone over some of
the dailies with the post-production guys. That problem can be resolved through
editing.’

What are they talking about? Getting rid of the Butcher Inlet scene. Frances
recuperates and then kills Charles in a beach shack at Butcher Inlet. ‘We’ll have to
break for at least a week while I sort out the script.’ She turns the handle one more
revolution and the window hinge snaps into place. Clack. The conversation stops
briefly and then resumes.
The voices are low now, hardly discernible over the sound of the generator. ‘And what happens next?’ Her eyes are now closed. She only hears the occasional sentence. ‘Okay. Now that could work.’ Their conversation continues but Ebony isn’t listening; she’s asleep. ‘She dies in the clearing. And it’s Charles who fires the gun.’ The generator coughs to a halt.

Ebony wakes. She is alone in bed. There is a note beside the sink. Eb. I’ve gone to Roebourne. I’ll be back later this morning. Love, Nate. She puts on a cotton robe, opens the door and immediately recoils from the heat and light. The overexposed scene outside eventually gathers detail. Vans, rigging and people emerge from the brightness. Her bare feet quickly skip down the hot metal steps to red sand. She notices Jessica sitting under the awning of the costume van. A woman is putting Jessica’s hair up in a bun. Her face has been roughed up with grey eyeliner, giving her skin a weathered, leather look. Jamie is there too, standing under a tarp extending out from the van. As she walks over, she notices Jessica has her washerwoman’s smock hitched up. Jake is kneeling in front of her, gluing the latex wound to her right knee.

_The porch scene! It’s today... the scene where Frances first removes her wooden leg and shows me the point of amputation. I get to sob into her lap while listening to her story. How she was wrongly convicted in England and sent to work as a whore in this god-forsaken place. The monologue about her journey over and how she lost her leg. In a fierce storm one of the pulleys snap in half, sending a line of running rigging around her leg, cutting it clean off. That’s the cue for me to start weeping. A tender moment about healing the body and the_
heart. It gives me some time to get close with Frances. No sign of Jessica – just a washerwoman’s smock and a knotted bundle of scar tissue.

Are you listening? Can you remind me what music Jamie wanted to use? It was something sombre, wasn’t it? Beethoven’s Symphony No. 7... the allegretto, or was it Wagner’s Götterdämmerung, Act III? I remember at one point it was going to be Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten. But Tony would not allow it. He said it was an indulgence and would impact the film’s budget. Slow takes with several close-ups. All seven minutes of the Cantus was going to be used. From the sun hitting the horizon, a crimson sky and then sombre darkness. Jamie talked about stopping the lenses down to accentuate the star effect. He wanted to create diffraction with small apertures and a shorter focal length. The stars in the night sky simulated in the wineglasses, the bottle and the porch lamp. The cellos go low. The violins swarm across two faces moving closer. It’s a crescendo, but it’s diving down. And then the last bell strike. The take ends on a kiss. Lips touch, the strings drop away and leave a bell to ring out its final call.

Jamie reads the script; his pupils the size of ant heads. Jake is now sitting with his legs crossed, dipping his brush into a tin of liquid latex. He’s an artistic genius when it comes to replicating scar tissue; from the initial carving in wood to the plaster cast that becomes the negative form which he then paints with latex. Once the latex is set, he peels it out of the plaster mould and places it back over the carved original. He then gets to work adding detail; colouring with a mixture of wet latex and paint. Thick protruding nodes are painted cherry red. Extending around it is a thick ridge... a deep, knotted line which he paints in dark purple. Next to this he uses ochre colours... reds and rich maroons and even some black in
the recesses and folds. He really has quite the touch. There he is, whistling away as he pushes his fine tipped brush over that landscape of trauma. Apparently he used to work in a Craniofacial Prosthetics Unit at some hospital in Brisbane. He met his wife there... Now, what was her job title? A concealment therapist... No. A camouflage therapist. Something like a makeup therapist but instead of hiding wrinkles and sunspots she hid keloid scars and third-degree burns, stretch marks and atrophic skin damage. Hellooo! You have nothing to say?

‘Ebony. Ebony!’ Jamie waves a hand in front of her face. She blinks herself into the moment. ‘Are you okay?’ She looks up at him and then down at Jessica, who is now having her wooden leg fitted over the latex scarring. ‘Oh, I’m sorry. I was up late. It’s so hot.’ She rubs her eyes and gives a yawn. Jamie looks up from the script. ‘The film crew are setting up at the homestead,’ he says, as Ebony drags a canvas deckchair into the shade. He adds sharply, ‘I need you to be ready in 45 minutes.’ She lowers herself onto the seat. ‘Okay. Is Nathan back?’ Jamie looks up from his phone, mumbling something about coverage. ‘What? Nathan? No.’ He holds his phone above his head and squints at the screen. ‘Why has he gone to Roebourne?’ she asks. Jamie answers while staring up at his phone, ‘Yesterday I noticed one of the prop crates had gone missing; the one with the old Colt pistol. We need it for a scene this afternoon. We were lucky to locate someone in Roebourne who has one for sale.’

Jessica stands and teeters. Jake gets up and supports her. ‘I’ll be happy to have a couple of weeks walking on both of my legs.’ Ebony looks from Jessica to Jamie. ‘What do you mean?’ Jamie cuts in, ‘Oh, sorry Ebony. We had an informal meeting earlier this morning. We’re going to break from filming while Nathan
rewrites the third act. Unfortunately, we won’t be finishing filming as early as we intended.’ She looks up at him and spits out the words, ‘We’re breaking for two weeks?! I have an audition in Melbourne next week. I need...’ ‘Hold on,’ Jamie interrupts, taking a step back. ‘I don’t have the budget to keep everyone in Karratha for the next fortnight. You can make your audition. Most of the gear will stay up here, but believe me, it’s cheaper to fly you and Nathan and the rest of the crew back to Melbourne. You leave tomorrow.’
Ebony is standing in darkness. Her hand pads the air for the lamp on the office desk. Her other hand holds her phone to her ear. ‘Which drawer is it in?’ She finds the switch and turns on the lamp. ‘Well, why didn’t Jamie hold on to the DVD?’ She places the phone on the table and puts Nathan on speaker. ‘The left-hand drawer,’ he tells her. She pulls open the drawer. ‘Yes, it’s here.’ She picks up the DVD case. ‘What do you want me to do with it?’ ‘Nothing, Eb. Just leave it there,’ Nathan replies. ‘Okay... I’ll leave it where it is.’ She puts the case back in the drawer and slides it shut. ‘Why did Jamie have Dusk edited without an ending?’ She reaches for the lamp and turns it off. ‘Eb, I told you this the other day. It’s for a screening this weekend at the Cartesian theatre. Jamie wants to watch a rough cut. He’s invited the crew along.’ Her fingers pause on the lamp switch. ‘He thinks it will boost morale before we all head back up to the Pilbara. Eb... Are you there?’ She can hear him but she can’t answer. She is thinking about the rough cut in the drawer. ‘Eb?’ With her fingers still on the lamp she flicks the switch back on. ‘Yes, I’m here. Are you still getting home late tonight?’ She walks back to the drawer. ‘I’ll be home around 10 o’clock.’ She opens the drawer. She is looking down at the translucent DVD case. Across the front, written in blue permanent marker is the word Dusk. ‘Eb?’ Without looking away from the contents of the drawer she reaches over and picks up her phone. ‘Yes, Nate. I love you darling. I’ll see you later.’ Her thumb drops onto the virtual red button on the screen.

She walks into the living room, turns on a small radiator and adjusts the angle of a large television towards the couch. She pours herself a glass of red wine and
lights several candles, which line the mantelpiece above the fireplace. The candles are bent and warped from the heat of previous open fires. They initially remind her of a queue of hunched, old men. She takes a sip of wine and thinks again, *flaccid cocks*.

_Are you there?_ She waits for a reply that won’t be coming. _I’m assuming you know what I’m about to do._ She dims the lights but then decides to turn them off completely. _You’re not going to answer me?_ She brings the DVD up to the slot in the player. The disk is hungrily ingested. _That’s fine. Go ahead and just watch, pervert!_ She sits down on the couch and presses fast forward on the remote. The narrative skips ahead at 4x speed. Different scenes from _Dusk_ appear as rapidly changing tableaus; silent, arrested moments. A close-up of woodchips suspended around an axe head embedded in a log. A wide shot of a woman in a sky-blue frock frozen midway from dismounting her horse. A _POV_ of a riding crop striking a cowering dog. A close-up of a fist embedded in a fleshy cheek and buckled nose. In the background, a boy squats, his face buried in his hands. A mid shot of a woman in a long, fitted, mauve bodice, who sits by an open fire tilting a glass of wine to her lips followed by a medium close-up of a woman in a check shirt framed in a doorway. Ebony pauses the DVD. She looks at Frances. She looks at her face on the screen, motionless and full of concern. She presses play.

Frances moves through the doorway. ‘Claire, I’m so relieved you’re here.’ She puts her glass of wine down on the side table. ‘Of course I’m here,’ she says with a smile. With small, uneven steps Frances walks over to a chair. She runs her thumb under the leather harness which travels from the top of her wooden leg and over her left shoulder. Bending her left leg, she lowers herself into the chair. She elbows
the armrests to slow herself down. ‘I was worried, Claire. I was beginning to think...’ She turns to face Claire who is grinning and pressing a raised index finger against her lips. ‘Shhh.’ Claire picks up her wineglass and offers it to her. Frances leans over for the glass and lifts it to her lips. Now, in profile, Frances’s facial details are thrown into shadow by the firelight behind. As she drinks, golden highlights glint on the rim of the wineglass. Near her lips, a lens flare expands into a diaphanous ring, then disappears. Ebony lifts her glass, holds it under her nose and inhales. Claire stands and walks over to Frances. Ebony fills her mouth with wine and puts the glass on the floor. She reclines back onto the pillowed armrest. Her jeans feel tight on her thighs. On the other end of the couch, by her feet, is a red and cream, pinstriped bolster cushion – last year’s Christmas present from her sister-in-law, Joan. She leans over and drags the cushion between her legs and with her right hand applies a gentle steady pressure.

‘When is Charles getting back?’ Claire sinks her fingers into Frances’s hair. ‘He won’t be back from Roebourne for another two hours,’ she says kneeling down on the floor and reaching for the leather harness. ‘Let me make you more comfortable.’ Frances pulls away defensively. ‘Leave it, please. Give me a minute.’ Ebony picks up her glass and drinks another mouthful. Claire notices a small brass oval locket hanging on a course piece of string around Frances’s neck. ‘What’s this?’ she asks, slipping her fingers under the locket. ‘Oh, this,’ she answers in mock surprise as she lifts the string over her head. ‘A client gave it to me last year. That man had money. He was one of the lucky ones up at Halls Creek back in ‘85.’ She hands the locket to Claire. ‘I wore it tonight to give to you.’ A close-up of soft fingers turning over the locket and then a long fingernail activating a release
button. The locket flips open. Inside is a cyan-blue photograph of Frances wearing a straw boater hat. With staged drama, she clutches a single tulip to her chest. The hat, decorated with pheasant feathers, is angled precariously on her head. Perhaps to compensate for this asymmetry her head leans in the opposite direction. Behind her is a painted backdrop of gum trees and a windmill missing several blades. The locket becomes bigger until it fills the entire screen. Frances’s eyes look out of the photograph and out of the television at Ebony, who is now moving her hips against the cushion in short pulses. Claire puts the locket on, then brings her hands down to rest on Frances’s right thigh. ‘Please, let me take this off,’ she says, running her palm along the fabric of jodhpurs and then wood. Now, a front-on POV of Frances as she brings a hand up to her mouth. The surface of her forehead creases and her eyes close. ‘I can’t… I don’t want you to see what’s under there.’ But it’s already too late. Without resistance, the leather strap is unhitched and the leg is removed. Frances presses a shuddering hand to her mouth and looks away. ‘How can you look at that, and still love me?’ Thigh and scar tissue now fills the screen. Claire’s caressing hand moves into view. Starting on the soft thigh, her fingers move lower towards harder terrain. The scene pulls away to a medium shot. Knotted tissue fills the lower half of the frame while the upper half is filled with Frances leaning down. She slides her hand under Claire’s caressing palm and then looks out of the screen with damp, languid eyes.

Ebony presses the pause button. She needs to be closer. She moves to the floor. Her right hand pushes down under the waistline of her jeans. She walks on her knees to the television and with the left hand grips the bezel of the screen. Her thighs squeeze together. She bunches her buried right hand into a fist to apply
more pressure. Her face is close to the plastic screen, close to Frances’s glowing eyes. The movement of her hips takes over like an involuntary muscle, autonomous and with purpose. Closer now. Her eyelashes stroke the plastic surface with every blink. This close, Frances’s face is a pixilated constellation. Her eyes are no longer flecks of green and gold but a glowing pattern of RGB. She feels a convulsion in her stomach. Now, at this very moment, her innate comprehension of time as a steady flow of moments collapses into something more fractured and complex. Time ceases to progress but becomes a conflated instant, a juncture of images and thoughts. Another convulsion and she looks down from the screen. Her attention locks onto the wooden legs of the coffee table. She closes her eyes and sees images of stirrups, an old leather bridle, blue and red taffeta, and the face of Frances. These visions infuse to form her present tense, subjunctive mood. Her left hand tightens its grip on the television and the impossible world it contains. Her right arm begins to fatigue but she is close. She opens her eyes, leans in and kisses Frances.

Her knee bumps the remote and the screen flickers back to life. Phosphorus cells fire on and off. A pattern of static coloured dots pulses to life, organising themselves into moving shapes. At the same time, dark dormant regions behind Ebony’s eyes flicker to life. Her lateral orbitofrontal cortex begins to shut down. Pudendal and vagus nerves fire. Most of these signals terminate in her ventral tegmental area and pituitary gland, while other signals continue on their journey; telegraphing information to places yet to be discovered. She releases her hold on the screen. Lying on her back now, with her eyes closed, she listens. ‘I look at your leg and I see your strength. I look at your leg and I love you more.’
Blindly she locates the remote and hits the off button. Thoughts pass but she doesn’t notice them. She is immersed in a sea of neurochemistry flooded with dopamine, prolactin, endorphins and endogenous opioids. Slowly she emerges from this fluid state and her thoughts coalesce. What if Jessica fell victim to Body Integrity Identity Disorder? Now that could fix things for me. Jessica could lose her integrity, lose her body-map. Together we would navigate our own journey. We would travel to one of those countries where laws are a little less burdensome. I’d pay for the surgery. The cut would be just above the knee, although of course that would be up for discussion. There may be something appealing with the amputation being just below the knee...to have a solid, rounded mass with the ability to articulate. The location of the cut may determine whether she can use a wooden leg? I’ve never thought of myself as a fetishist. I’ve heard stories about people turned on by harnesses and wheelchairs. I’m not interested in having sex with a wheelchair... but a ménage à trois with Frances and her wooden leg...

And, this is how I imagine it. How I see it when it happens...if it ever happens. Are you listening to me? Can you make it happen? There’s Frances in her washing smock, hemline pulled right up, sprawled out on a bed... a muddle of flesh and fabric; limbs, pillows and bed sheets. Over there, emerging from a rumple of cloth, is a left leg and next to it, curving off from her gorgeous firm arse, the trunk of a thigh which ends in folds and webbing the colour of mahogany and ochre and lumps of crimson. The overwhelming tension created when something present serves as a reminder of what is absent. That smooth, perfect skin topped off with damage and history and pain. Christ! I’m sick. I’m not normal. But what is normal? Having a voice in your head narrating your life!
And if I'm someone else’s story or dream then my deviant interest isn’t mine. But, then again, neither is my life. I know what I feel. I want Frances to step through my front door. And when I wake in the morning I don’t want to see the hair and muscle of Nathan or the perfection of Jessica but the complicated abstraction that is Frances.

∞

Nathan is cooking breakfast to the sound of Sidney Bechet. ‘How many strips of bacon do you want, Eb?’ Ebony walks past the kitchen. ‘Two please,’ she says as she turns down the hall and enters the study. She closes the door behind her. Ugh... I can’t stand clarinet... And it’s even worse with vibrato. With the door handle still in her grip, she thumbs the lock button down, walks over to a table lamp and turns it on. She looks out through a low sash window at the back garden. Her eyes take in a clutter of plants and unswept concrete. Beyond that, an apricot tree and a trellised grape vine in need of pruning. But this information doesn’t register in her thoughts. She is thinking about something else. Her mind is busy constructing a question she is about to ask. A question she is going to present to me. She turns. Now facing the centre of the room, she raises a hand.

‘Why didn’t you answer me last night? Are you there?’ Yes I’m here. And you don’t need to speak. I can hear your thoughts quite clearly. To your question, I didn’t answer you because it actually strikes me as quite absurd addressing a character. Oh, and I didn’t want to interrupt your fantasy. Well, it may sound odd, but I would prefer to know you are present, rather than watching in silence. In fact, I find it comforting to hear your voice again. What about other people? Do you know what they’re thinking? I’m sorry, I’m rambling... Can you tell me what
Nathan is doing right now? I’m not all-powerful, if that’s what you mean. I create but I can’t see something if it hasn’t been constructed. Another thing – your descriptive passages. I mean, why did you have Andante defecate while I was talking to Dario? Get rid of that stuff. Do you think my life is a comedy? And the Guernsey scene with Beatrice. What on earth made you create her? Well, I wanted to challenge you with a figure both passive and menacing. Beatrice was originally the actuary on the plane but I soon came to realise she was asking you the wrong questions. No matter how I worked it, though, I couldn’t get her to question you about the play The Staircase to the Penrose Home. Beatrice always seemed to have a full understanding of the play whereas Alison didn’t. What?! You don’t control your creations? Well... no. Unfortunately, I’m third person limited. And I actually really struggle with transitions. Transitions? What do you mean by that? Well, for instance, when a character has to travel from one side of the house to the other. It can become laboured and tedious. I get bogged down trying to decide which actions or moments to emphasise. Do I have someone walk the length of the room, open the door and go down the corridor, open another door and go up three steps and turn left, just to get to the kitchen? I find it difficult to abbreviate such moments. I end up with a whole detailed list of actions. And the list always tends to grow. There are always moments between moments, like one of Zeno’s paradoxes. You know, I can see your problem and I think I have a solution. In movie pre-production...a storyboard is made of the script. You could sketch out the transition to give you an idea of the key points. How are your drawing skills? Actually, I can draw quite well. I think that’s a great idea Ebony.
I'm more than happy to help.

Wait... you're drawing me.

Are you insane? Do that some other time.

Insane... that is the question.

I'm a black and white sketch!

I can hear Nathan coming. Quick, stop drawing...

...you idiot!
‘Eb, are you in there?’ She freezes, staring at the door. Her left hand is shaking and she realises her heart is pounding. She places both hands on her diaphragm and takes a deep breath. ‘Eb, have you locked the door?’ She exhales. ‘I must have bumped the latch by mistake.’ She raises her right hand. It’s steady. She unlocks the door and opens it just wide enough for Nathan to lean into the room. ‘Are you okay? I thought I could hear you yelling.’ She releases her grip of the door handle. ‘Just rehearsing my lines.’ He holds out her phone. ‘You just got a text from Jessica. She wants to know if we can go to Eric’s party tomorrow night. I might not be able to make it. I have that dinner thing with Joan.’ Her heart rate elevates again and her ears and neck become hot. She takes the phone from his hand. ‘Eb, are you sure you’re okay? Any more voices?’ She diverts her attention to her phone, ‘No, nothing. Just rehearsing my lines.’ He narrows his eyes, looks down at the floor and sniffs. ‘Shit! The bacon.’

∞

Nathan is reading The Sign System. Prior to reading the manuscript he took the opportunity to schedule afternoon sex. She is annoyed his offer to feed her lines from the script now comes at a cost. A handwritten list sits on the kitchen bench outlining the day’s tasks: 10:00 am read the entire play, 12:30 pm lunch, 1:00 pm work on Ebony’s dialogue, 2:30 pm shower, 3 pm make love, 3:30 pm ring Jamie, 4:30 pm supermarket, 5:30 pm prepare dinner.

Ebony realises she is holding the list in her hand. She had drifted off, which is unnerving enough in itself. But she actually can’t recall where she has come back from. Her mind is blank. Splashing from the bathroom reminds her of what is to take place next. She reluctantly makes her way to the bedroom and closes the
Venetian blinds. The room is still too light. She draws curtains across the window and drapes a scarf over the bedside lamp. She unbuttons her dress and lets it fall to the floor. Her hands reach around and she fingers the hook of her bra strap. She leans forward, holding her arms out and the bra falls away. *Am I losing weight? How long has it been since we’ve had sex?* She’s forgotten the protocol. She is certain of one thing – the need for lubricant. *There is some Liquid Silk down the back of the side cupboard of the dressing table.* She pushes aside plastic bottles of vitamins and old bangles and notices a publicity photograph for *Dusk.*

She kneels underneath the down light of the bedside lamp and studies the photograph – a close-up of her and Jessica in period costume as Claire and Frances. Claire is in profile looking at Frances, who stares out through a film of plastic laminate. Above their heads is a timestamp and across their shoulders, in semi-transparent, red sans serif lettering is a watermark which reads ‘Do Not Copy’. Slowly, meticulously, she studies Frances’s face. She moves down her right temple and across her cheekbone. Across skin that measures exactly 26 on the Fitzpatrick scale. From her cheek, her attention moves out to the profile of her jawline and then in again to her neck, stopping at her collarbone. From here, up to her chin – a perfect place to pause for a rest before moving to her lips. These aren’t fleshy, full lips; they’re course and functional and practical. A dry split cleaves the centre of the top lip just below the deep pit of the philtrum. Her nose, slightly snubbed, harbours a single, small petechia on its left side. Delicate folds of skin cup the bottom of each eye. The eyes; that’s right, they’re last. Why? Because that’s where the character Frances lives. In those eyes among the flecks of green, gold and rust which appear saturated by a glassy, wet veneer. These submerged colours
radiate from the pupil and sharpen into lines and shapes of composition. Ebony imagines the red, oxidised metal ribbing of a ship’s hull corroding on the ledge of a yellow coral outcrop. She imagines wading, thigh deep along the spongy golden surface. The water is warm on her feet. Leaning down, she steadies herself with her hands on a rocky ledge and then makes her way onto one of the rusting ribs protruding out of the water. It looks like most of the wooden hull has perished. What wood remains is either covered with algae and tubeworms or is bleached to the colour of sand. Up ahead, on the flat caerulean water, just beyond what was once the ship’s bow, is an eddy of black water. This dark maelstrom generates a steady gurgle, punctuated with congested slurps and gulps. Compelled to move closer, she edges her way to the keel which is thicker and easier to traverse. She stumbles. Her foot pushes through paper-thin wood. She reaches for a handhold and grabs onto a wooden beam – part of the gunwale which snapped and buckled at the time of the shipwreck. Her fingers hook onto a protruding bronze cleat, still holding firm after years of weathering. She angles her foot to remove it from the breach in the wooden hull. Ahead, the keel dips down into the depths. The water is motionless and clear yet she can’t distinguish between the reef and the decaying metal beneath the surface. It’s hard to determine where to tread. She feels compelled to get closer to the black draining vortex. She squats down onto the metal prow, straddles the beam and, with her hands, edges her way forward. Ahead, she can see that the black gurgling whirlpool curves down into a central point of white, foaming bubbles. She edges further along the prow and leans over the dark, rippling fluid. She lowers her hand and feels the water pull her fingers towards the centre. She notices her own distorted reflection – her short black hair,
her face and shoulders, and her breasts. Ebony is surprised to see she is naked. She hears a voice and footsteps and then the turn of a door handle.

Light from the hall floods into the bedroom. Kneeling by the table lamp, Ebony peers over the bed to the door. A ghostly figure stands in a backlit frame. ‘What are you doing down there? Aren’t you going to shower?’ She drops the photograph to the floor, gets up and sits on the bed. ‘This time, I think I’ll pass. I showered last night.’ Nathan’s head turns to profile. ‘I thought we had an understanding about that.’ She isn’t going to back down. ‘We don’t have time if we are going to keep up with today’s schedule.’ ‘Oh Eb,’ he says, through a slow exhale as he steps into the room. He removes his robe, hangs it on a hook behind the bedroom door and then proceeds to flick his fingers through his hair to remove the last of the water. She watches him, thinking about how to lighten the situation. She decides to be playful. ‘I wouldn’t bother about that. I think we’re going to get wet with some fucking.’ No reply.

She stretches out on her back and twists her torso to exaggerate the curve between her hip and floating ribs. Nathan glances over with a familiar desperate look. She drags her fingers across her upper thigh, leaving white trails on the pink surface. Her thumb hooks into the elastic on her underwear and then releases with a snap. He watches with dumb fascination as he steps to the side of the bed. She reaches for his arm and pulls him forward, guiding him onto the bed next to her. Within moments she is lying on her back, straight like a tin soldier, with him straddling her on top. Up close now, she notices his look again – hungry almost panicked. His eyes roll up and down, taking in her body. She extends her arm to the lamp and turns it off. He is visible now as a silhouette. Ghostly limbs move across
her shoulders. Stubble and breath travel across her neck. The image of the photograph appears before her, Frances’s face. She is back there, traversing the surface in detail. Crossing the length of her parched lips, reaching the edge where a pucker of skin creates a ridge. She feels small in this terrain, dwarfed by mountains of flesh. And now, up along the nasolabial fold to the edge of her nose. In this enclave, the oily skin becomes difficult to negotiate. Lipids from subcutaneous glands seep out of the puckering mouths of pores underfoot. She kneels down. She can hear him groaning but all she can see, all she can feel with her hands in front of her, is the undulating texture of skin. On all fours, she examines a pore. She moves her index finger to its edge and then with a slow, circular motion eases the finger in. The mouth of the pore opens hungrily, gumming at her knuckle. She forces in a second finger and then a third. She can hear Nathan’s breath quicken. Sebum spills out around her fingers. With each push, she feels a pressure behind her eyes. Using her full weight, she eases her fist in. She opens her hand and slides the palm along the spongy inner surface of the gland tubule, caressing the yielding membrane with her fingers and thumb. She explores the dermis within, and all it contains – vessels, corpuscles, nerve fibres and the undulating spread of dermal papilla. She knows where this is going. She’s there right now. She tries to hold it... to keep it a little longer... but then it’s gone.

With vague awareness, she lifts her hand. She can smell herself on her fingers. He is almost there too. One hand grips the bed head while the other holds her shoulder. She opens her eyes. Above her, she watches the grey figure working hard. Cartoonlike, his head moves to one side, bobbing up and down and then it turns to the other side and does the same. The pressure on her shoulder increases and she
hears a snort, which almost resembles a laugh. He releases his grip on the bed head and slowly guides his face into his lumbar pillow.

They lie in silence; dull, dead post-coital silence. For a time, her fantasies remain in the room but eventually they dissolve. She briefly thinks of Nathan next to her but her thoughts shift to Frances and then to Jessica. She thinks of Eric’s party. *Who will be there? Not Nathan, he can’t get out of his dinner arrangement with Joan. But, who in the cast will be there? It’s formal, so I can wear my new backless evening dress. As I enter the party Jessica will be standing on the other side of the room. I’ll pretend I haven’t noticed her. In fact, I’ll sip through a whole glass of wine with Jake before I go over and talk to her. The crowd thins out as the night rolls on. The music is down low. I’m talking to her now. With a few drinks, it’s easier to imagine that I’m with Frances. It’s late, and it’s mainly the sound technicians who are left. Jessica asks me to dance. It’s the perfect opportunity but I don’t act. I decide to catch a taxi back home. I can summon Frances at will when I’m alone, but in the presence of Jessica, out of costume and character, it becomes difficult. Jessica only serves to remind me of what isn’t there.*

She can hear Nathan breathing heavily next to her. A slow, heaving rhythm which usually precedes snoring. On her back, in the darkness, she returns to the party. She runs through the night’s events again, as though it were a film playing in her mind. She spends some time thinking through the establishing shot, followed with close-ups in soft focus. She decides to change the end. Instead of ringing a taxi and going home to Nathan she’ll leave with Jessica. She pauses her narrative. She wants it to be more theatrical, maybe more intriguing, something leaning towards
noir. She starts the story again, but this time in grainy black and white. I ring for a taxi. It arrives in front of the apartment. As I step onto the footpath I hear a woman’s voice calling my name. I turn to see a figure standing under a small lamp, which hangs beyond the porte-cochère. It’s a clear evening. No, something more dramatic. I’ll add some rain. As my hand moves to the taxi door I hear the woman’s voice again. The rain is harder now and I struggle to hear what the voice is saying. I look over. Jessica is waiting near one of the porch columns. She’s wearing bright-yellow hotpants, a white singlet and a Glock 30 on her hip.

Unfortunately, the yellow hotpants clash with the broody, monochrome chiaroscuro of her surroundings. That’s okay. Jessica is closer now. Her shoulders are rounded and she’s holding out her hands, palms outward, pleading, ‘Don’t get in that taxi. Come home with me.’ Her wet hair clings to the sides of her face. Her sodden top, almost transparent now, reveals the contours of her breasts and nipples. I apologise to the taxi driver, turn and walk over to her. As the taxi pulls away from the footpath, the headlights sweep across Jessica, lighting up her face. Two bright star-bursts glisten in her large Manga eyes. Jessica now resembles Faye from Cowboy Bebop. How did she end up as such a jumble of parts? Let’s move this to the Pilbara. We are back in the wardrobe trailer. Faye is wearing a cowboy boot and a wooden leg, nothing else. Betty Boop comes to mind. Instead of the Manga look maybe some Betty Boop eyes and a little Betty Boop heart-shaped mouth. I stretch out on the bed. ‘Sing for me Betty.’ Ms Boop rolls her right shoulder to adjust the leather harness to her wooden leg, then walks down the length of the trailer; her hips roll in a lopsided rhythm. With each step, she pauses and delivers a line.
‘Lovin’, I have to have lovin’, but when I’m having my lovin’, I have to have boop-boop-a-doo.

And have, Lovin’, Oh, I must have my lovin’, But when I’m having my lovin’, I have to have you.

I’m so blue, Waiting for you, To take me, Oh, I can’t go on like this, Give me a kiss, huh, and make me, Boop-boop-a-doo.

Whooppee, I want to make whooppee, and if I want to make whooppee, I have to have boop-boop-a-doo.’

A cold light appears on the side table followed by a repeating two-beat chime. It’s Nathan’s phone reminding us to move on to the next item on the list.
Part V

Ebony hasn’t spoken to Jessica since Eric’s party on the weekend. To not have access to Frances is just a fact; she doesn’t exist. She can accept that. But she has come to realise losing contact with Jessica means losing access to a grounding configuration which can then be reassembled in her mind as something else. The more she hungered for Frances the more repulsed she is by Nathan. When she becomes aware of a free evening with him she makes other arrangements. This is exactly what she is doing at the moment.

‘Jessica, how have you been?’ she asks, in a light, steady tone. ‘Ebony, I’ve been well. Did you enjoy the party the other night?’ ‘It was great. I’m sorry I had to leave so early.’ Her eyelids feel heavy and she tries to focus. ‘I was wondering what you’re doing this evening. Do you want to go out to that new bar? The one you were talking about the other night.’ ‘I’m sorry. I’m going out to dinner with George.’

‘What, George the casting director? The one that dresses up as Mr Sulu? Are you kidding?’ There’s a long silence. ‘Don’t judge, Ebony. He says he has a film role for me. It’s some retelling of Oedipus Rex set in a future dystopia. I’ll be playing the part of Jocasta. You know what, why don’t you have dinner with us.’ Ebony thinks through her limited options. ‘I don’t...’ Jessica interrupts, ‘I won’t take no for an answer. Meet me at The Waikiki Bar and Grill. 7 o’clock. Don’t be late.’ The phone hangs up.

∞

Ebony’s focus is on a freestanding fish tank behind George. Two golden coral reef fish pursue each other from one end of the tank to the other. Across the top of the
tank is the word ‘HUMUHUMUNUKUNUKUAPUAA’. Jessica clears her throat, leans across the aluminium table and gives George a generous smile. ‘I was reading through a Brecht script this morning and it made me think of you. It reminded me of that conversation we were having a few months back in Sydney about *Ferris Bueller’s Day Off*. Anyway, Brecht does the same thing with his plays that Matthew Broderick’s character does in the movie and it made me think of that conversation.’ ‘Really? Yeah, *Ferris Bueller* is a classic,’ George replies, looking up from his octopus poke. Jessica coughs again prompting Ebony attention. ‘Apparently Hughes wrote the screenplay in less than a week,’ Ebony says, with slow deliberation. George stops midway through sucking tamari sauce from his thumb and turns to her. His thumb leaves his mouth with a wet slurp. ‘Is that right? I didn’t know that.’ He pauses and then points a damp forefinger at Ebony and says, ‘Hey, I’ve only just realised, you’re the woman playing Claire in *Dusk*.’

The conversation moves from Mike Mignola’s graphic novel *The Amazing Screw-On Head* to grip equipment and 80s director W.D. Richter. George offers Jessica the role of Jocasta and then lays out a passionate argument for the unrecognised merits of *The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension*. He laughs through a mouthful of French fries. ‘It’s not my fucking planet, Monkey Boy!’

∞

It’s dark but the street lighting provides enough visibility to read the sign – Moira Street. This street is lined with a mixture of houses; duplex, Queen Anne style and Victorian. Two figures converse at the front gate of a late-Victorian style, double-fronted house. ‘Thanks for driving me back. I can’t believe you drag me along to the
Meadhead for dinner with George.’ Jessica draws in the night air and sighs through a smile. ‘I’m so relieved to have that role.’ She takes a step towards Ebony and adds, ‘I appreciate you coming. There’s no way I could have survived the night alone.’ In the half-light Ebony finds it hard to tell if she is being genuine but it also makes it easier to imagine she is talking to Frances. ‘You’re welcome,’ she says. ‘I’m glad you’ve got more work.’ She moves in and kisses Jessica on the cheek. She turns to kiss the other cheek but Jessica moves closer and their lips touch. Upon contact, they stay together; long enough to remove any doubt as to what is happening. Their mouths open briefly. Finally, withdrawing her lips, Ebony realises Jessica has her arms around her. A minivan turns onto the street. Halogen headlights sweep across to briefly highlight this tender moment. The door to the house opens and the embrace falls away. ‘Is that you out there, Eb?’ She steps back and turns. ‘Yes, it’s me Nate. I’ll be in soon.’ The door slams shut.

∞

Ebony turns her key and hesitates. She looks over her shoulder down the path to the front gate where, moments earlier, she had shared a kiss. She turns her hand and steps through. The door closes. The porch light turns off and the interior hall light turns on, illuminating the stained-glass window above the front door. From the front gate it is easy to see that the lead lighting is of a single Calla Lily set against a spray of green. The large, rectangular window to the left of the door lights up. The open-plan design of the house allows full view through the lounge room and all the way down to the dining room and kitchen. Sofas, bookcases, coffee tables and a wide brick-arched doorway appear as lines and shapes within the window frame. This still life animates as Ebony walks into view. She is shaking her
handbag, as though it’s misbehaving. She holds her other hand against her mouth. She turns, drops her hand and starts talking. Or is she yelling? She looks away from whomever she is addressing and then turns back again and puts her handbag over her shoulder. Almost immediately Nathan steps into frame. He enters slowly but with his last step lunges forward, grabs Ebony by her shirt and drives her into a bookcase. His other hand pinches around her throat.

The sound of gagging briefly fills the house. The only other sound is coming from the wall-mounted CD player in the kitchen, playing *If Dreams Come True* by Benny Goodman. The player is a long, white rectangle with a thin horizontal slot in the middle. Below the player is a wide, speckled terrazzo kitchen bench which extends half way across the room. More gagging can be heard. On the other side of the kitchen, framed in the large, arched opening to the lounge, Nathan stands, arms outstretched, pinning Ebony against the bookcase. She slaps the front of his face and his grip loosens. ‘Get your fucking hands off me!’ She grabs his arm and kicks his thigh. His leg crumples beneath him. As he falls, he grabs her, and she falls with him. Her knee, elbow and chin hit the floor in that order. He stands holding his leg and reaches down to her with his other hand. She throws out a fist at his offer and screams, low and guttural, ‘Get away from me.’ He does what he is told. ‘Eb, I’m sorry. I’m just... I love you. I saw what you and Jessica were doing, at our front gate.’ His arms hang limp and pendulous by his sides. ‘And I know what happened at Jessica’s party. Eric told me that while you were dancing you were all over each other.’ She gets to her feet. ‘You must be drunk. You must be so drunk to attack me like that.’ She steps back slowly. ‘Well, Nate, that’s it,’ she says in a clipped tone. ‘You think I’m having an affair? It’s all in your head. You’re
delusional.’ She checks her handbag for her keys. ‘I’m not staying here tonight.’ She keeps digging in her bag. ‘Christ, my keys,’ she says, as she walks to the kitchen bench. She returns to the lounge to check the coffee table. Sitting on the table is a handgun. ‘What the fuck is this? You have the gun from Dusk?’ She hears his footsteps behind her. She grabs the handle of the gun. He grabs the barrel. She yanks her hand and it slips from his fingers. Looking down at the weapon she mumbles. ‘Why do you have this? Have you lost your fucking mind?’ He reaches for her and she steps back. ‘Give me the gun, Eb.’ He lunges, takes hold of her arm and holds a clenched fist in front of her face. ‘You, calling me crazy,’ he says, shaking her. ‘Coming from you, the one who is hearing voices and talks to herself.’ He lowers his fist and pulls the gun from her hand. ‘My sister was right. You live in a dream. She always thought you were unhinged,’ he says, waving the gun in the air. Ebony flinches. ‘I just want to leave,’ she says defensively, with her hands in the air. ‘I’ll sleep at a hotel tonight. We can talk about all this calmly tomorrow.’ Nathan laughs through pursed lips. His puffy eyes blink. ‘Oh, of course you will. Or maybe you’ll go straight to Jessica’s bedroom.’

His attention is on a sapphire shining from the fourth finger of her left hand. His grip loosens on the gun and it falls to the floor. ‘That belongs to me.’ Initially she doesn’t understand what he wants. She looks down the length of her arm to her hand. ‘Oh, this...’ She raises her hand and then raises her ring finger slightly above the rest. She straightens the finger further. Her eyes soften as she smiles. ‘You want it? You can have it.’ With thumb and forefinger she twists the ring off and throws it onto the carpet. The ring bounces once, twice and comes to rest beside a leg of the coffee table, just under the words Newcastle-on-Tyne. He kneels, picks up the ring.
and quickly slips it into his pocket like a dirty secret. She continues to stare at him as she backs away towards the kitchen. Her hands reach behind for the edge of the dining room table. ‘Please, Ebony. I’m sorry. Don’t go.’ Her hand connects with the table. She edges along its length towards the front door. ‘Eb, listen to me,’ he says, taking a step forward. ‘I didn’t mean what I said.’ She has left the support of the table and is now back-stepping to the entrance hall. He stops in the kitchen and lowers himself onto his knees. Genuflecting from the tiled floor, he looks up at her with slack-jawed hope. ‘Please stay,’ he murmurs. Her heel clacks against the metal weather strip at the base of the front door. With her hand behind her back she fumbles then grips the handle. She pulls down on the handle and, in quick succession, turns, throws open the door and runs. She hears screaming from the house as she reaches the front gate. The cries fade as she sprints down Moira Street.

∞

She hears a knock. ‘Ebony, are you sure you’re okay?’ From her bed she can see shadows move across the strip of light at the bottom of the door. ‘I’ll be fine.’ The door handle rattles. ‘Can I come in?’ She drags a pillow across the bed to her chest. ‘Wait Jessica, I promise I’m fine.’ The rattling stops. ‘Are you still coming to the screening tonight, Eb?’ Jessica waits for a reply and then adds, ‘Jamie has promised me that Nathan won’t be coming.’ She looks at the clock on the bedside table which reads 2 pm. ‘Thanks for ringing Jamie. And for letting me stay the night.’ The shadows are still visible under the door. ‘Are you still coming? It starts at 7 o’clock.’ There’s a long pause. ‘I’m coming. I’ll do some shopping this afternoon
and then I'll meet you there at the theatre.’ The shadows disappear. ‘See you tonight at the Cartesian.’

∞

Ebony leans over the rubber handrail of the escalator, watching the shoppers below. People herd around plinths and glowing glass cabinets which display sunglasses and wristwatches and handbags. Occasionally a person stops to inspect something, dreams of ownership, and then moves on. She looks to the approaching fourth floor, steps off the metal step and walks straight ahead. She stops, holds out her left hand and splays out her fingers. She focuses on her forefinger, in particular a pale indent that circles around its base. She drops her arm, puts one foot forward and then the other, repeating this action until she arrives at a glass sales counter. Behind the counter sits a woman dressed in what appears to be a white, double-breasted chef jacket. She watches Ebony hunched over the glass display.


‘Creed Aventus. Clive Christian No. 1,’ Ebony blurts out, then moves to the adjoining cabinet. ‘Living in the Pilbara. Perhaps Tom Ford Tobacco Oud. Rough skin. Well, some may consider it rough.’ The assistant stands and steps to the counter. ‘Excuse me, can I help you with something?’ Ebony lifts her head with effort. ‘I need a recommendation on some cologne, something you would wear in the bush.’ The assistant smiles and tips her head to one side. ‘To wear in the bush.’
the assistant repeats. ‘I’m assuming you want something robust.’ Her hand gestures to the end of the service desk where a collection of bottles stand on several silver trays. ‘We have samples you can try. The person you are buying for, do they prefer warm woody colognes or something more cool and citrusy?’ Ebony continues to stare into the bright glass cabinet. ‘Are you after cologne, or eau de toilette? I noticed you looking at the Calvin Klein... Are you after something like that?’ The assistant waits for a response. She decides to ask again, ‘Miss?’ Ebony lifts her eyes. ‘Yes. Something woody. I think that would be perfect. The assistant coughs, and extends her right arm towards the samples. She walks the length of the counter and Ebony follows. The assistant picks up a small bulbous bottle full of lime-green liquid. ‘Try this first before we move on to the woods. It has a beautiful rich tangerine fragrance. It’s very popular.’ The assistant takes off the cap, places her forefinger over the top and tips her hand back and forth once. She trails her fingertip down Ebony’s wrist. Ebony holds her wrist under her nose and draws in the scent. Cake. Freshly baked cake. Raisins. Citrus fruit. Dates and burnt sultanas. ‘It smells like gâche. Fruit bread my mum used to make when I was a girl. I haven’t had that memory in years.’ The assistant hums in agreement and replies, ‘That’s interesting. I’ve had people discover all sorts of hidden aromas in our fragrances. Smell is such a primal sense. It has an ability to reach into your past and pull out all sorts of forgotten things.’

The assistant picks up another bottle. ‘This one is by Creed. Have you heard of it?’ The bottle is shaped like a small flask. On the label is a black-and-white image of a figure riding a winged horse, below which is printed the word ‘Aventus’. ‘Aventus is a very popular cologne. But I must warn you, it’s expensive,’ the
assistant says, as she unscrews the lid. ‘Would you like to try?’ Ebony doesn’t reply. Her eyes chase the image of the mounted horse in the assistant’s hand. The assistant places her finger in the mouth of the bottle and gives a quick shake. She then leans over the counter and runs her fingertip down Ebony’s forearm. Ebony brings her arm to her nose and inhales. ‘I can smell cream... No, vanilla.’ She holds her arm out and the assistant leans across the counter to inhale. ‘That’s right. Top notes of black current and bergamot, dry birch mid note and a vanilla and musk base,’ she says, inhaling the volatiles above the warm skin. Ebony brings her arm back to her own face, caresses the back of her neck and inhales again. ‘Vanilla and cheese’, she says, with closed eyes. The assistant smiles. ‘I’ve never picked up that note in Aventus before. But I believe we seek out and find aromas we desire.’ Ebony removes her credit card from her purse. ‘I’ll take this one,’ she says, reaching out and touching the horse. ‘She’s going to love it.’ The assistant stops midway putting the bottle back on the tray and looks up. ‘You’re buying for a woman?’ Ebony holds out her card. ‘Yes, didn’t I mention that?’

She descends the escalator holding the string handle of a small mauve paper shopping bag. On the ground floor she follows a chequered linoleum path to the exit door and steps outside into neon and fluorescent lighting.

∞

The lights dim. There is only one projector and the next reel must be mounted. Expert fingers weave and thread the acetate film around sprockets and between rollers. A thumbnail runs along the edge of the film and picks at a bur. The nail clicks back and forth to determine the necessity for repair. An arm’s length of film is drawn out from the spool and laid out on a table under a reading lamp. With a
magnifying glass the projectionist inspects the minute hairline tear on the edge.

‘That’s strange,’ he says to himself. ‘Tears in a rush print.’ The length of film is
rolled back onto the spool. The spool is snapped back onto the spindle and hooked
into place. The film is again threaded back into the machine through sprockets,
guide pins and rollers through the film gate over the shock absorber and into the
film take-up. Both the upper and lower magazines are loaded now. The gauge
pressure plate is loose and will need attention – work for tomorrow. He can add
that to the growing maintenance list. One of the lamp house reflectors is dim on
one side; possibly a dead insect. All of the drive belts need looking at and the
Geneva drive needs adjusting. Little by little, all of these jobs have been accruing,
but the whole thing should hold together for tonight. The projectionist squints
through a glass porthole and readies his finger on the switch. Seated below, the cast
and crew are facing the screen.

Nothing happens until light is pushed through the lens of the projector. Once
the light is thrown, that’s when the characters, static and frozen in acetate, are
released from their prison. Once freed from their minute individual cells they are
thrown through the curvature of the lens, travelling at a speed in which time
doesn’t exist. Travelling at a speed in which the concept of twenty-four frames per
second is meaningless. These characters are carried in a shower of photons towards
a pristine white rectangle and then reflected back. They are massless echoes; or,
rather, echoes of echoes. They return from where they came, and scatter across the
theatre, across rows of seats and into dozens of greedy lenses. Every sphincter
papillae contracts simultaneously. The photons continue through intraocular fluid
towards rods and cones, triggering photoreceptors, which in turn leave the eye
through the optic canal. This complex coded information journeys on to knotted clusters of nerve endings and through a myriad of gates and channels to exchange ions which fire synapses and excite neurons.

The screen comes to life with tone and colour. In an instant, the shapes have meaning. There’s a woman in a sky-blue frock swinging a broom at a hanging rug. Now we are above a farmhouse. Below, another figure can be seen hobbling down porch steps carrying an empty cane basket. Cut to Claire and Frances folding linen sheets together, pulling at the corners and then stepping in towards each other. Fold, step, pinch, back step. Fold, step, pinch, back step. The scene begins to track slowly around the women, revealing the homestead in the background. The sound of boots pacing on the porch can be heard. Charles comes into view behind them. ‘When are you ladies going to be finished with those chores?’ He puts his cigar in his mouth, bites down and hitches up his pants. A close-up of Claire. ‘I'll be with you soon, Charles.’ He leans against the porch rail, watching the two women folding the linen as though he were waiting for the next dance. Fold, step, pinch, back step. Fold, step, pinch, back step. A close-up of Charles in profile. Embers glow as he draws back on the cigar. Lazy smoke pours out of his mouth as he removes the cigar and grinds it dead into the porch railing. He blows out the remaining smoke as he turns to leave. A medium shot now. Frances carries the basket between her arm and hip while Claire unpegs the last of the clothes. Charles walks down the length of the porch, turns and calls out, ‘I need my supper. I’m in a hurry. I’m going over to the McCarthys’ place tonight. Young Tom is in trouble again.’
Jamie leans across the back of his seat to look at Ebony. ‘Don’t worry,’ he says. He then cups one hand up to his mouth and adds, ‘I’ve told Nathan he’s not to come tonight.’ He looks over to Jessica who rests a hand on Ebony’s thigh. ‘I’m sure this whole thing can be sorted out, Eb.’ Jessica looks down at the small shopping bag in Ebony’s lap. ‘What’s in the bag?’ Ebony looks at her with a smile ‘It’s a gift.’ Jessica leans close and whispers, ‘A gift for who, Mrs Trindall?’ Still smiling, she looks from Jessica back to the screen; back to Frances. ‘Well now Frances, that would be telling.’

The foyer doors swing open. The screen is instantly washed out with light. A dark figure is briefly framed in the doorway before it closes off the light again. In the dim projector light, Ebony watches the figure tentatively navigate down the aisle. A flashlight comes on and is pointed at the audience, sweeping its way down each row of seating. Jamie stands up and turns around. ‘Whoever the fuck that is, you’d better turn that light off now.’ The figure stops and the flashlight targets Jamie. ‘Get that thing out of my face.’ From behind the lights comes a faltering voice, ‘It’s...me, Jamie. It’s Nate.’ Jamie looks down at Ebony. The light follows his attention, revealing her hunched frame. She looks back at him as she gets up from her seat. Her shopping bag falls to the floor. She edges her way past Jessica and Eric to the other aisle. Nathan shouts, ‘Eb, stay where you are.’ She walks backwards down the aisle towards the screen. ‘Claire, I left Charles’s shirt on the fencing wire. Could you bring it in please?’ Nathan shuffles his way through empty seats and then paces down the aisle towards her. ‘I’ve already got the shirt Frances.’ She is looking at the exit door, on the other side of the theatre. The flashlight continues its hold on her. Duffel bags, backpacks and tech equipment clutter a clear
path along the front row. The only way to the exit is across the stage. Jessica calls out, ‘What are you doing, Nate? Get out of here. Leave her alone.’ The light shifts from Ebony to Jessica. A soft voice behind the torch says, ‘You'll be next.’ The light returns to Ebony, still backing down the aisle. Nathan’s profile shifts in detail with the changing light on the screen. He quickens his pace towards her. His right hand holds the torch while his other hand is hidden in his jacket pocket.

*Where are you? I need your help.* Her thoughts are racing. *Talk to me. Get me out of this mess.* She steps back and her heel clips the bottom rung of the carpeted stairs that lead up to the stage. She walks up the stairs backwards, all the while watching Nathan advance. She is on the stage now. Several of the crew have started calling out. ‘Take it outside.’ ‘Get off the stage.’ ‘Turn off the...’ Nathan screams, ‘Stop there, you bitch!’ She backs her way across the stage, looking around to determine the distance to the exit door. *If I run, can I make it?* She looks at the screen and notices the motion of the film seems slower. I have found a way out for you Ebony. *Is that you? At last.* She looks out into the audience and yells, ‘Well, what are you going to do?’ With the torch lowered Nathan makes his way up the stairs. He looks up. ‘What am I going to do? Is that what you want to know, Eb?’ His breath catches. His next words are stilted and choked, ‘You fucking bitch. I asked you to marry me.’ She turns to face him. Nathan’s voice seems strange. Its pitch is too deep. Her attention shifts to his eyes which are midway through blinking. They remain closed for too long and then open slowly, like he is emerging from sleep. On the screen, Frances is standing next to a cast-iron pot, which is hanging from an iron lug-pole over the fireplace. Dust and scratch marks jump in and out of existence above her head. She sluggishly moves a wooden spoon away
from her lips. Her tongue emerges at the corner of her mouth like a wet finger and languidly travels across her bottom lip, removing a smear of gravy. As her tongue slowly retreats back into her mouth a thread of black hair falls away from her ear in slow, fluid detail. At the speed of life, such minutiae are hidden. But, when slowed down, more information is accessible. Ebony looks at Jamie, who is still standing by his seat. His raised arm must have dislodged a pen from his breast pocket. The pen is falling to the ground, slowly making its way past his belt buckle. She returns her attention to Nathan. His movement appears to defy gravity; the tip of his left foot is the only thing connecting him to the floor. Pasty skin collapses around his lifeless eyes.

Ebony hears the sound of rustling fabric and feels a shift in pressure around her shoulders and hips. She is now wearing a sky-blue frock, the same one as Claire. She steps back towards the screen. It’s a perfectly normal step. Lift, move and step. Over her shoulder she can see the film has further slowed. Each swipe of the rotating shutter reveals a new individual frame on the screen. Nathan’s arm extends towards her, with the torch still gripped tight. His left cheek distorts like sinking dough. Both his feet slowly move through the air, just above the carpet, as though treading on invisible sponge. Ebony looks back at Jamie and then the pen which is now frozen just above the armrest of his seat. Nathan stands in a dramatic, comical fashion, arm outstretched pointing the torch towards Ebony. His whole body is perched on the tip of his left shoe. His right hand bulges in his jacket pocket. Members of the audience, her colleagues and friends, are motionless like full-size cardboard cut-outs. She turns to face the screen. In front of her is a low-angle scene of the homestead kitchen. In the distance, standing near the stone
fireplace is Frances, her hair off her shoulders in a loose bun. The cast-iron pot hangs on a curved lug-pole over the fire. Frozen flames under the pit splay out like orange flower petals. With the scene now static it becomes apparent the projector needs attention. There is obvious vignetting around the edges of the frame. It’s not as though Ebony can signal the projectionist. And even if she did, is he also frozen, stretched out on that threadbare couch of his, caught midway through turning a page of *Metro*?

Taking up a large part of the foreground of the homestead scene is the back of Claire in her blue frock. This figure is standing with her hands on her hips and her legs slightly apart. Ebony walks up to the screen and looks down at Claire’s grubby bare feet. As she walks closer, her shadow falls alongside the figure on the screen. She positions her arms, torso and legs to register her shadow with the image of Claire. She kicks off her high-heeled shoes and takes a step closer. She hesitates. She needs to step forward. There is nothing left for her here. She moves her face closer to the screen. Cross-eyed, she watches her nose move effortlessly through the PVC-coated fabric. She continues moving forward. Her eyes make contact with the screen. She feels pain and then numbness across her entire body. Everything goes black and then her eyes fill with light and motion.
I’m here. Oh, fuck! Frances. Right there smiling at me. What do I do? I’m inside the homestead. I’m here. Frances picks up a piece of rag and nudges the lug-pole. The cast-iron pot swings away from the fireplace. She reaches around to undo her apron but pauses. ‘What are you looking at, Claire?’ Ebony stares over her shoulder at the rough timber wall behind her and then looks back at Frances. ‘I…’ What shall I do? Laugh, cry? I’m not sure. I need to sit down. Frances walks across the room. There’s that comforting two-tone beat on floorboards. She is right here, beside me.

A hand on my shoulder. Her apron is filthy. But this isn’t filth invented by Eric in the makeup van. This is real charcoal and grease. If this is real, then underneath that apron her wooden leg must connect to real scar tissue. Ebony runs her hand down the grimy apron. Through the soiled fabric she can feel soft skin terminate on something hard. ‘Claire! Are you mad? Have you forgotten that Charles is outside?’ Frances fingers the apron strings. ‘No, leave it on,’ Ebony says, her hand still gripping through the fabric. ‘I’d better not. Charles wouldn’t like to see me cooking for him.’ She moves her hand around to the back of Frances’s leg. ‘Maybe, but I like watching you cook.’ Ebony’s fingers grip the back of her thigh. Her thumb catches on a rivet connecting wood to leather. ‘You do have an appetite. Didn’t you have enough of me yesterday?’ Yesterday. What’s she talking about? The script... when we met in the clearing. Ebony drops her hand. ‘Is it the afternoon? Have we been outside together folding the laundry?’ Again, Frances moves to undo her apron.

‘You’re beginning to worry me, Claire.’
Both women jump at the sound of the latch on the door. Charles enters the room. ‘What’s going on?’ The two women move apart. ‘Angus…’ Ebony blurts out. Charles leans forward. ‘What?!’ Ebony puts her hand to her temple. ‘Charles, I’m sorry. I don’t know why I said that.’ She watches Charles; formerly a Canadian TV actor who, just the other day, was talking about his Chelsea chums. ‘I’ll ask you again. And this time, if I don’t get an answer, there will be consequences.’ Frances quickly limps her way across to the stove. ‘I decided to take over the cooking for Claire. She seems so tired. I thought I would give her a rest.’ Charles slams the door shut, making Ebony flinch. I don’t remember this being part of the script. I can’t remember what happens next. Let’s think… He enters the room but I’m cooking. I should have taken over the cooking. He doesn’t slam the door. ‘I don’t want you to do my cooking, Peggy. I want my wife to cook for me.’ Frances holds her ground and continues stirring the pot. He steps forward, pushes her away from the stove and turns to Claire. ‘Get over here and finish cooking for me, Claire!’ She walks over to the stove and picks up the ladle from the floor and stirs. Charles drags his feet over to the table. He sits with a stoop, staring at Frances. ‘You come around too often.’ He waves a hand around the room. ‘Always sharing secrets with my wife.’ He points to the door. ‘Get out of my house.’ Frances looks over to Claire. ‘Don’t look at her, you whore! She’s not going to give you permission to stay. I am telling you to go.’ She undoes her apron string and folds the apron over the back of a chair. At the door, she turns. ‘My name is Frances. I never had no other choice for work in this country.’ Slapping her wooden leg, she says, ‘I wouldn’t be a whore if I’d been given a choice.’ She spits at the floor before she swings the door shut. Charles pushes the table away and jumps to his feet. He clips his head on a hanging cast-iron skillet as
he scrambles to the door. ‘Wait! Charles, please leave her.’ Ebony moves in front of him. Charles raises his clenched hand to strike her. This close, his body odour catches in her throat – a mix of stale cigar smoke and sulphur. She steps aside as soon as she hears the sound of hooves hitting the dry earth. With his fist still in the air, he says, ‘You better think good. If that woman comes back here again, there’ll be hell.’

They eat in silence. Yesterday... Yesterday was the clearing sequence. Then this afternoon is the scene when Frances and I go back to the clearing. She gets shot by one of Charles’s stockmen on the way – a graze to the arm. Any moment now Charles is going to get up and say something like, ‘Young Tom has killed one of the locals. The black bastard was trying to steal one of their horses. The McCarthys are going to round up the rest of those dogs tonight. They want me to look after their property. I’ll be back in the morning.’ He is then going to check his rifle and leave. I go out onto the porch as he is mounting his horse. He yells back at me, ‘Stay inside. Check that you’ve locked the doors before you go to bed.’ Once he’s gone, Frances returns and we set off for the clearing. After recuperating for a couple of days from her bullet wound, she rides to Cossack. She tracks Charles down at the shack at Butcher Inlet and shoots him dead. The ending... What was Nathan’s final draft? That’s it, the last scene. It’s dusk as Frances and I ride south for Perth.

Charles lets out a scream. He brings a hand up to his jaw, his eyes watering. He leans over his plate and spits out his food. Some of his spit stains the white tablecloth red. ‘My tooth!’ Ebony moves around the table to help but he slaps her away. He picks around the stew and removes a dark-grey molar. ‘I should have got
it pulled in Roebourne when I had the chance.’ From across the table Ebony notices some of his teeth are actually rotting. No makeup needed there. Angus has flawless white teeth that needed to be stained yellow and black before each shoot. But this isn’t Angus. This man is a psychopath soon to be put out of his misery. She looks closer, inspecting his face. The corner of his mouth is inflamed. At the edge of this welt is a small parcel of yellow skin. A dark layer of filth covers his ears and neck. His brown forearms are covered in dirt and there is a thick black line under all of his serrated fingernails.

Charles stands. ‘Young Tom has killed one of the locals. The black bastard was trying to steal one of their horses. The McCarthys are going out tonight to get the rest of those dogs. They want me to keep an eye on their property. I’ll be staying the night. I’ll be back by the afternoon.’ He walks over to a wooden chest in the corner of the room and removes his Colt, his Snider-Enfield and a handful of cartridges. He opens the breechblock of the rifle and loads one of the cartridges. He snaps it shut and turns to Ebony. ‘Check that you’ve locked the doors before you go to bed. Oh, some men have a boat moored on the Harding, about three miles up from here. You’re not to go anywhere near there until they’ve moved on.’ She pauses midway through picking up his dinner plate and looks at him. ‘Did you hear me?’ he yells. She regains her thoughts. Why is he asking me that? Something is wrong. He isn’t meant to say that. ‘Of course I’ll lock up the house.’ He watches her as he places the Colt in a leather satchel. ‘I worry about you, Claire. You spend too much time with that woman.’ He hangs the satchel over one shoulder and his jacket over the other. ‘Come here.’ She puts down his plate and walks over to him. ‘I don’t know what I would do if I lost you,’ he says, holding out his hand. She puts her hand on his.
'You’re not going to lose me, Charles,’ she says, looking down at his scarred, weathered hand. She notices a worn band of gold on her ring finger. He drops her hand and slaps dust from his felt slouch hat. ‘I don’t want that woman around here again,’ he says, giving her a tired look as he opens the door. She tries to placate him. ‘I rarely see Frances. Today was the first time...’ He picks up his rifle. ‘Don’t sell me a dog. Owen told me he saw you both riding together yesterday.’ His eyes remain fixed on her in silence. He steps onto the porch and, without turning around adds, ‘No lies, Claire. You don’t want to do that.’ She watches him walk down the stairs. Through the side window her eyes follow him on his way to the stable, his shuffling feet kicking up plumes of dust.

‘Are you there?! What’s going on?’ She looks around the room – a futile exercise. Yes, I’m here. ‘What’s happening? This doesn’t seem right. This whole thing is going off script.’ Calm down, Ebony. The differences are only minor. Most of the dialogue is the same. But there is a noticeable delay in events. You were meant to be cooking before Charles entered. You must stay focused. ‘You mean something as small as where I’m standing, what I’m doing, can alter the script?’ I don’t know. I think the best thing for you to do is to stick as closely to the script as possible. Charles will die in a few days. Just watch out for any other small changes.

She walks to the door and takes a deep breath. Charles is mounting his horse by the stable. The horse snorts as he pulls back on the reins. He kicks a heel into her flank and she bolts forward into a canter, then a gallop. Ebony looks west across the landscape – a mix of dull greens and ruddy highlights extending all the way to a grey-blue range in the distance. Nothing has changed in over 100 years. The landscape is still the same. But am I even in the past? I’m living and
breathing. That much I know for certain. But exactly where am I living, and when? Does it really matter? By the weekend I will have a new life with Frances. When we get to Perth I'll get a good job and Frances can be a woman of leisure. Christ, with what I know I can do anything. I can be anyone.

Ebony jumps at a knock on the window. Her first thought is that it might be Charles. She pulls aside the curtain. Frances. They are now at the door in each other’s arms. ‘I didn’t know if it would be safe coming back. Your husband’s a bludger.’ Frances pulls back and narrows her eyes. ‘If I ever see him hitting you, I’ll take off his tallywags with an axe.’ Ebony holds her at arm’s length and snorts a laugh, ‘You’ll take off his what?’ Frances holds out a hand and slaps herself on her crotch. ‘With an axe.’ Ebony moves her fingers up Frances’s neck and stops at the jawline. ‘It will all be over soon. We’ll see what the future brings,’ she says, holding her head with cupped hands. Her eyes widen with an idea. ‘A new life, and... a new name. From now on call me Ebony.’ Frances raises her tone an octave, ‘Miss Trindall, now I’m confused. That would have to be one of your more fanciful ideas.’ Ebony puts her fingers to Frances’s lips. With her other hand, she takes her wrist and walks her across the kitchen towards the bedroom. ‘No, wait,’ Frances says, coming to a stop. ‘What do you think we are doing?’ Ebony turns, a little surprised. ‘Well, I was thinking we could lie down together. You can stay the night. Charles won’t be home until tomorrow afternoon.’ Frances takes a step back. ‘I’m not spending the night here. If you want to spend the night with me, It must be at the clearing.’

∞
The women ride in silence away from the homestead. The afternoon sun bites their skin. *Oh Christ, the script! Frances gets shot on the way to the clearing. What do I do?* Just travel a different way. *But you said not to deviate from the script.* You’re doing that already by accompanying her. *The night that Jamie and Nate were talking, they were working on a different ending. What did they eventually decide on?* I don’t know what they decided in the end. If you remember, there was an abrupt scene change from you going to sleep to waking up in the morning. I missed their final decision. *What, so you’re telling me that they may have changed the ending of Dusk?* They could have. Ebony calls over her shoulder, ‘Let’s go along the river trail instead.’ Ebony pulls her reins to the left. Frances protests, ‘But that takes longer.’ Yet her horse follows. The horses work their way down into a gully that connects to a trail running parallel to the river. The buzz of a Desert Screamer begins. Within moments others join in. The percussion from cicadas stops as they approach, then gradually the timpani begins again behind them.

Ebony calls from up ahead. ‘Listen, can you hear that?’ Frances pulls on her reins to stop her horse. She looks over to the shoreline further down on the other side of the river. ‘Just over there,’ she says, pointing. ‘Can you see the boat?’ Frances shelters her eyes with her hand. ‘I see them. Let’s keep moving. Down this way,’ she says, turning her horse off the trail. ‘We’ll circle around through the scrub and then join the trail further down.’ Their riding becomes slow as they navigate their way through paperbark trees and thick tussocks of grass. They stop and look through the trees. On the other side of the river, half a dozen men have set up camp on the sandy shore. Just out from shore is a small flat-bottomed dory. Two men in the boat are wrestling over a bottle. One of them gives up and falls back on his seat.
and hollers to shore, ‘Jim! Sing “The Fire Ship”.’ The other one brings the bottle down from his lips and screams, ‘No, give us the one about the lily-white thighs!’ A squeezebox starts up from shore. Its harsh notes cry out a chaotic scale, then settle into a rhythm. One of the men shouts, ‘Yes, that one Jimmy! Open your sauce-box and sing!’ The squeezebox blurs out the verse several times and then Jimmy joins in.

‘As I walked out one evening upon a night’s career,
I spied a lofty clipper ship and to her I did steer.

She hoisted up her sig-a-nals which I so quickly knew,
And when she saw me bunting up she immediately hove to.

She had a dark and a roving eye, and her hair hung downs in ring-a-lets.

She was a nice girl, a decent girl, but one of the rakish kind.’

The squeezebox gives a honk and is silent. Then, one by one, more voices join in until the whole camp is singing.

‘I eyed that girl both up and down for I’d heard such talk before. And, when she moored herself to me I knew she was a whore. But still she was a pretty lass; she shyly hung her head.

“T’ll go along with you, my lad,” was what to me she said.’

Ebony dismounts. ‘What are you doing?’ Frances whispers. She beckons Frances off her horse. ‘Get off. Let’s walk further into the trees.’ On foot now, they lead the horses away from the river. The singing continues in the distance.

‘I took her to a tavern and treated her with wine.

Little did I think that she was one of the rakish kind.
I handled her, I dandled her, and much to my surprise,
turns out she was a fire ship rigged up in a disguise.’

For a few paces, all they can hear is a single voice shouting, ‘La, la, la le. la la..’
This is broken by a rousing finale of screaming men, ‘Then rammed that fire ship’s
waterline until my ram was bent.’ A burst of laughter is followed by a slurred cry,
‘Now, “Lily-White Thighs”!’

∞

With the men far behind, Ebony and Frances walk out of the trees, mount their
horses and ride back up to the trail. They weave their way through a long mass of
wattle and then over a rise. On the other side of the rise the landscape levels out.
The trail continues into the distance. Up ahead a small track cuts off to the right,
towards a drab blue-green wall of trees. They turn down the track and enter a small
opening in the wall. Ebony twists around to face Frances. ‘We would have had a
soft mattress if we’d stayed at the homestead,’ she says as they ride under a canopy
of branches. ‘But it’s safe here, Claire,’ Frances replies. The track opens out onto a
clearing. Bloodwood trees span out both left and right in a crescent shape,
screening off any view from the trail. Ebony dismounts. ‘What about those guys on
the river? We won’t be able to light a fire tonight.’ Frances swings her wooden leg
over the saddle and it punches into the sand. She looks at Ebony. ‘I’m sure we can
keep each other warm this evening.’ They hitch their horses to a low branch and
remove their saddlebags and swags.

I’m here. The clearing. The sanctuary I’ve been dreaming about but without
the cameras and crew. Just me and Frances. No one watching or judging. She sits
down on her swag, removes her shoes and pats down the hem of her white frock
across her outstretched legs. A warm breeze enters the clearing, carrying moisture and the scent of river mud. Ebony watches Frances roll out her swag. Behind her she can see the full moon, a pale disc against the blue sky. Frances leans over, places both hands on the ground and, with a roll of her hip, drops herself into a sitting position. She lays out a white linen cloth on top of her swag and begins to unpack food from her saddlebag – an apple, some smoked sausage and some hard cheese wrapped in brown paper. A piece of cheese falls out onto the linen. She picks it up and puts it in her mouth. She’s aware she is being watched. She pushes wet hair off her brow and begins to unfasten the top button of her shirt. Ebony looks up. ‘Keep going.’ She undoes the second and third button. ‘It’s so hot all of a sudden,’ she says. Ebony examines her weathered face. She leans in and reaches over Frances’s shoulder and loosens her bun. She closes her eyes, allowing her fingers to explore the folds and texture of hair. She feels a cool sensation across her face, across her forehead and over her eyes. It moves down to her mouth. She breathes in the smell of cheese.

She opens her eyes. Those eyes. That face. Terrain I know so well. And lips, which in the past have been offered up to me from someone else. Lips that are waiting to be touched. Ebony’s fingers work on the last remaining buttons. With Frances’s shirt open, she moves a hand around her waist. She pulls at the sleeves and the shirt drops to the swag. A leather strap, pinching down on her shoulder, flattens her right breast and disappears down her jodhpurs. The strap digs into Frances’s flesh as she reaches for the water bottle. Shadows and light play across her naked torso. Her right bicep hardens, distorting the black-inked outline of a fractured heart.
Ebony takes hold of her forearm. ‘That tattoo, where did you get it?’ Frances looks up in surprise. ‘Oh, this thing. I got it... I got it on the voyage over. I think.’ She moves her hand across the rough skin up to the cracked black heart and thumbs it. ‘You think, but you can’t remember.’ She moves her arm away from Ebony’s grip. ‘No, I can’t. The trip over was a nightmare. It’s something I don’t dwell on. I’ve already told you as much as I can remember of that voyage.’ Ebony lays her hand on the leather strap and guides her fingers up to a large brass buckle. ‘Can I undo this for you?’ Frances looks at her, but doesn’t answer. She pushes the tongue of leather back through the buckle and undoes the clasp. The strap falls away. ‘Apart from those men on the clipper, you are the only one who has seen my leg. I try not to look at it myself.’ Ebony kneels in front of her and moves a supporting arm around her back. She gives her a gentle push and then lowers her down onto the swag. ‘I assure you, madam, you will never have to show your leg to anyone ever again,’ she says, quickly standing and pulling down her drawers. ‘We can leave for Perth tomorrow night.’ She undoes the buttons of her frock and pulls it over her head. ‘I’m going to earn money and look after you.’ She tears her petticoat, as she forces it down over her shoulders. Frances watches on. ‘Claire, what are you talking about? You’re sounding like a lunatic.’ Naked now, Ebony gets down on her hands and knees and fumbles with the buttons on Frances’s jodhpurs. ‘We’ll see what tomorrow brings.’ Her fingers hook around the waist of her jodhpurs and pull down. Frances’s wooden leg falls aside.

There is the sound of rustling at the edge of the clearing. Ebony lunges protectively on top of Frances. Skin to skin, they listen to a series of sharp breathy hisses. In between thick pillows of grass, two male bilbies wrestle. Ebony relaxes
into the contours of the body beneath her. Slightly offset forms interlock, one breast in the cleavage of the other. With both hands Ebony palms the face before her – a face at once familiar and strange. It's an image she has seen so many times before, but only in her imagination or as theatre. This weathered skin is real. Ebony draws a thumb across Frances’s top lip and then up further, travelling the curvature of her cheekbone. She moves her face closer. Frances responds by reaching around and hauling her in, guiding her lips, which eventually touch. This point of contact triggers the movement of hands, that now behave like fossicking creatures, intuitively exploring the undulating environment for crevices. Smooth, dry mounds dip into moist folds. Flesh and tendons terminate against hard cartilage. Ebony moves her face across the heated surface of a broad shoulder, and then over the rise of a breast, to rest her head on the side on Frances’s stomach. She brings her left hand up between Frances’s thighs to the point at which it can go no further. Her fingers apply gentle pressure. She feels a hand from above grip her neck. She runs her right hand across an endless curve of hip and then further down her leg to survey the boundary between skin that is pliable and yielding and tissue that is smooth and hard. Two different surfaces connected by a division that marks a moment from the past. ‘Don’t touch me there.’ She moves her left hand faster, cutting the protest short. Frances’s quickening breath drops in tone. Ebony presses her temple hard against her ribs. Through bone conduction she listens to a muscle, deep inside, racing like an animal towards prey. Both hands articulate in two separate rhythms. The left hand works a quick cadence to pleasure Frances while the right moves at a slower self-indulgent pace, searching out the webbing and hidden cavities of fibrous connective tissue. She feels Frances’s thighs tighten
between her fingers. And then her body slumps. Her hands slow and then stop. She continues to listen as the rhythm of the sprinting animal within changes from a gallop to a trot and then sleepwalks away.

The two slumbering women lie in motionless silence. From above, they appear as one tangled form.

∞

Ebony wakes to the call of a butcherbird. The waning sun throws shadows from the bloodwood trees across the length of the clearing. The blanket underneath her feels rough against her skin. She can hear the sound of a fire crackling. She rolls over onto her side. Frances, fully dressed, is facing away from her, pushing kindling into the flames. Ebony picks up the smell of apple and sausage. A skillet is held above the fire on rocks. Off to the side, coal-charred onions and potatoes sit on a length of flat bark. She hums to herself as she pokes into the skillet with a stick. Unaware of being watched, she sings some words.

‘When I’d rattle in the morning and cry “Milk below”

At the sound of my milk cans her face she did show

With a smile upon her countenance and a laugh in her eye

If I’d thought that she loved me I’d have laid down to die.’

She hums again briefly and then returns to the lyrics, ‘And proud as a Queen, was pretty little Polly Perkins of Paddington Green.’ Ebony calls out, ‘Can we have less singing and more cooking?’ Frances throws her stick to the ground and, with her back to Ebony whispers, ‘Did you hear all of that?’ She turns around but keeps her eyes to the ground. ‘I’m not normally one to sing out loud.’ She lifts her chin and raises her eyebrows. ‘But, Miss Trindall, your presence may turn me into a lady
yet.’ Ebony stands up, clutching her petticoat and frock to her chest. ‘That smell is making me hungry,’ she says, pulling the fabric over her head. Frances walks over and puts down the skillet next to the swag. They eat in silence. A single cicada begins to chirp for a mate. By the time they have finished their meal other cicadas have joined in, flooding the clearing with a lazy droning rhythm.

They decide to take a ride further down the river before the sun sets. Ebony bends down, tightens the breast strap on her horse and then fastens her saddlebags. She looks over at Frances buckling her harness. Her body moves with muscular purpose. Ebony mounts her horse and rides across the clearing to the large opening on the other side. She turns in her saddle and gives a quick laugh. ‘Saddle up, Frances,’ she says, sweeping an arm through the air. ‘Let’s ride this country.’ Frances shakes her head. ‘Like I said, you’re a lunatic.’ She watches as Frances puts her left foot in the stirrup and pushes off with her wooden leg. With poise, she throws herself up onto her horse. She hears a whinny, but not from the horse she is watching. And then another sound, some twigs cracking in the distance on the other side of the clearing. Frances flicks down her reins and her horse canters to Ebony. The click of a closing breechblock carries across the clearing. A figure moves behind the low scrub and a voice calls out, ‘Ride back this way Claire or I’ll shoot your whore.’ Her thoughts skip around from one narrative to the next. 

*We should have been safe in the clearing. Charles is meant to be away all night. How did he find us? ‘Come back over here, Claire. I’m not going to ask again!’ If I go to him he’ll shoot me. And, if I don’t, he’ll shoot Frances.* She looks back at Frances sitting motionless, gripping her reins. Her hands come up and slap down against the neck of her horse. Ebony drives her shoes into the flank of her horse.
and screams, ‘Ride to the coast.’ She hears a gunshot and looks over to see Frances
whipping her horse with her reins. Almost side-by-side with Frances, Ebony
shouts, ‘He’s not after you. He wants me. I’ll lead him away. I’ll meet you in
Cossack.’

Hunched over her horse, she watches Frances veer off across the desert. As
the sound of one set of hooves fades away, another set quickly takes its place. She
looks behind. Charles is riding with one hand; the other, held away from the horse,
holds his rifle. She turns to the landscape ahead, looking for the path back to the
river. He is yelling something but it can’t compete with the drumming of hooves.
Her mind calculates possible outcomes. I’ll ride down to the river and, from there,
I’ll follow the Harding to Cossack. He has to give up. Are you there? I need help!
Do we ride up to Broome or down to Perth? Where are you? You motherfucker!

She recognises the gully ahead. She is close to the river. A crack of gunfire
echoes across the desert. She yanks the reins sharply to the left. Her horse bolts
back up the ridge. She pulls with her right hand and leans but the mare resists her
directions. Instead, she gallops along the ridge and down the other side to another
gully which leads away from the river. Leaning low, she rides her horse slowly
along a wall of trees. The trees diminish in size. She is back at the clearing. She
looks around for Charles. Do I hide here and wait him out? What do I do? She
rides into the clearing, keeping close to the tree line and stops. There is a long
silence, then gunfire. Her horse rears up, throwing Ebony to the ground.

She lands on her hip and a sharp pain punches its way up her left leg. Her
horse releases several short snorts as he paces around her. She reaches up for a
stirrup but the horse takes a step back. She reaches out again. ‘Come here, girl.’
Behind her, she can hear another set of hooves. She can also hear boots dragging in the sand. And then a voice, ‘I told you not to leave the homestead. I made it clear I didn’t want you to see that woman.’ She turns her head to face him. Charles looks from Ebony to his saddle as he pushes his rifle back in the scabbard. ‘I should have listened to my father,’ he says, reaching into his satchel. ‘He never liked you.’ He pulls out his Colt and thumbs back the hammer. \textit{Click}. ‘He told me you were trouble. Not normal. You and that filthy whore. It disgusts me.’ He steps forward, extends his arm and raises his sight, aligning it between his eye and her. ‘Get up, dog,’ he says in a low voice. \textit{This is ridiculous. I escape from my psychotic fiancée only to end up here. I don’t even know his back story. How do I talk myself out of this?}

She lifts herself up on an elbow and then, manoeuvring her right leg under her, she stands. ‘Charles. Just stop and think about what you’re doing. You’re not going to shoot me.’ Pain radiates from her hip down her left leg. ‘Killing me will haunt you for the rest of your life.’ He takes another step and calmly says, ‘You’re wrong on both counts. I am going to shoot you and it’s going to give me great pleasure.’ He steps forward. ‘You’re a disgrace. You think people in town don’t talk? I know what you’ve been doing with Frances.’ Ebony reaches down and grips her left thigh. She holds out her other hand. ‘Wait. Listen to me. I’m not your wife. You are a character. Just someone’s idea. I’m not your wife. My name is Ebony Moon. I don’t belong here. This is all just a big...’

The gunfire stops her sentence. Still standing, but only just, she hears her horse sprint away. She tries to lower herself to the ground but her knees buckle and she collapses on her back. She can hear the dying four-beat drum of her horse. She
kicks out a leg to move away from Charles. Her back connects with the rough trunk of a snakewood tree. Blood flows from an opening low down in her frock. A bullet to the leg. She hears another crack of gunfire and watches a second hole magically blossom red just left of her naval. She sucks in breath, only to smell something putrid, yet familiar. Her head rolls to one side. Her world is now on a 90° angle. She watches as Charles’s horse defies gravity by standing on the vertical red desert wall. Charles, also with powers that flout the laws of physics, hops onto his horse. The horse walks towards her. She rolls her eyes to look up. Charles leans down from his horse, his arms casually folded on the silver horn cap of his saddle. He seems to be chewing on something. He leans his head back and then thrusts forward with pursed lips, releasing a spray of phlegm. ‘I hope you have time to make peace with God,’ he says, wiping his mouth with his sleeve. She looks down at her desecrated body covered in an assortment of fluids and solids. The pain is fading. Perhaps my spine is severed. That would be some consolation. Charles stands up on his stirrups, yanks the reins and his horse rears. It’s a trick Charles learnt from an officer during the second Anglo-Afghan War. She watches as he trots away on the gravity-defying, wall-walking horse. In the distance, hooves playfully kick up clouds of red desert dust which dissolve away, along with the horse and Charles. Looking out from the clearing, the only thing interrupting the horizon is an old bloodwood tree and a flash of white from the wings of a sulphur-crested cockatoo.
I can just make out the white flicker of a sulphur-crested cockatoo cutting its wings down hard and landing on the crooked limb of a bloodwood. The tree looks like it’s in pain too, its scrawny branches all twisted like an arthritic invalid. And down there, on the ground underneath, are dead limbs and curled lengths of bark. That tree will be dead by the time the film crew arrive and prepare this area as one of the settings for Dusk. And what of me? When the crew arrive here over a century from now, what are they going to find? Will they find my remains? Will the production be put on hold for a week while the forensic team cordon off the area and eventually work out the bones they found are from the late 1800s? And what’s your logic in that? Is it some sort of conservation of energy? Like the First Law? Am I in a closed system? And if that’s the case, are you in here with me? If my bones are found, will you have them found for irony? Or perhaps, like the warning words from an ancient oracle or those weird sisters musing with Macbeth and Banquo, my bones will function purely as foreshadowing.

I can see it now. There will be a scream on the set when my bones are found. A rubber-gloved forensic team will use their tweezers and spatulas to pick at my remains, my skeleton. The scream will rip through the clearing and through the ages. There we are during filming, picnic things spread out in the middle of the clearing. Frances’s wooden leg, propped up against a bloodwood. Me, massaging her right thigh, while she reclines on her swag. And then a scream. Eric runs into the scene. ‘A skull! There is a human skull at the other end of the clearing!’ Jamie yells, ‘Cuuuuuut!’ The sound crew, the cameraman and key grip – everyone
abandons their equipment and moves en masse, following Eric. When I arrive the
crew are gathered around a low, depression lined with clumps of native
lemongrass. There it is. My skull, bleached and lying on its side; the left eye socket
and jawbone stand out with high-key intensity against the ochre sand. A number
of vertebrae protrude to form a white arc in the shallow red basin. I move closer
to Frances for comfort as worlds collide. Jake steps over the lemongrass and his
foot disturbs the ripple-patterned surface of the sand. He crouches down and
reaches for the skull. I grab him. ‘Wait! What are you doing? Don’t touch that!’
Nathan steps forward, giving Frances a sidelong glance. ‘Ebony’s right. Get out of
there. You could be disturbing evidence.’ My heart sinks with the dread and
burden of knowledge. But... What am I thinking? Am I mad? None of that has
taken place. And, if I die here right now, it never will happen. At least, not like
that because I won’t be there as a witness.

Perhaps I haven’t been shot through the spine. I can still move my right arm.
But what does it matter? This is it. My whole life ends here. No one around to hold
my hand. If Frances were here she would wipe the dirt from my brow. She would
bring water to my lips. And you! You’re not even here to keep me company!
Completely forsaken. Oops! Oh God, more vomit. The last of my lunch, sausage
and apple. Maybe I should be thankful I am alone. The humiliation would kill me.
Are you listening?!

The sun is almost below the horizon; its last blush of colour before dusk. I’m
so tired. Probably blood loss. The moon is getting brighter. Up there, so far away.
It’ll become my only source of light after sunset. A disc of detached passive light.
But. There’s something wrong with my eyes. The moon seems to be pulsing. What
are those bright flecks? This must be it. Death is approaching. The moonlight is becoming more intense. And it’s flickering. Is it the moon or a sign? Or perhaps a tunnel of light to the hereafter? It’s getting brighter... changing colour... and flickering...
Addendum

‘...it’s flickering.’ The stage is set. Viewed from above, a circle of people enclose Ebony; some are crouching while others stand. She is propped up in Jessica’s lap. Her hand is raised and her fingers extended, reaching rather than signalling a direction; but one can never tell. ‘The moon... what’s happening to the moon?’ she says, barely moving her lips. Jessica holds her other hand which is wet with blood. More people spill out either side of these onlookers, down the stairs and further up the aisles. To the left, held to the ground by unknown men, a figure is sobbing – Nathan. A Colt pistol, still warm from action, has come to rest near the screen. Acrid wisps of smoke seep from its barrel. Ebony’s eyes are turned to something beyond her hand. It won’t be long and those eyes will close forever. But, at this moment, still hungry and hopeful, they look to the shimmering light from the projection room and into a story travelling at a speed in which time doesn’t exist.
Author/s: Senior, Alex Reece

Title: Challenging and violating ontological “worlds” in the fiction of John Barth, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Thomas Pynchon

Date: 2017

Persistent Link: http://hdl.handle.net/11343/212090

File Description: Challenging and violating ontological “worlds” in the fiction of John Barth, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Thomas Pynchon

Terms and Conditions: Terms and Conditions: Copyright in works deposited in Minerva Access is retained by the copyright owner. The work may not be altered without permission from the copyright owner. Readers may only download, print and save electronic copies of whole works for their own personal non-commercial use. Any use that exceeds these limits requires permission from the copyright owner. Attribution is essential when quoting or paraphrasing from these works.