Introduction

Le surréalisme est ce qui sera.

André Breton, “Cause”

The recent Postmodern controversy has often used images of the decay of the industrial city to stress the shift in perception from Modern to Postmodern culture. Long before, the postwar, apocalyptic landscape was adopted by Modernist writers, from the Surrealists to T. S. Eliot, as the most powerful setting for the enigmatic journey and the leading metaphor for the labyrinthine quest in the crowd.

Since Baudelaire, the metropolis has provided the displacing scenario of a *quête* for meaning whose seductive and elusive object is represented by a passing stranger, metaphorizing the city as the feminine Other. Like Poe in “The Man of the Crowd”, Baudelaire portrays the poet immersed in the Parisian multitude, showing the displacement of the Modern poet in the big city and the progressive decline of his privileged role in a world of circulating commodities. In the big city, he at first experiences a feeling of *ennui* and estrangement, but then also the sensory pleasure of *flânerie*, of going through unlimited, ineffable encounters. His failed encounter with the enigmatic object of his desire — the passing stranger in the crowd — dramatizes the urbanite’s inability to maintain semantic control of the urban environment, so that the city simultaneously becomes the setting of a *quête* for the object of desire and of an *enquête*, a quest for meaning.

The Baudelairian poet portrays himself immersed in the urban crowd, a mass of people metonymic for the enormous amount of circulating products that Benjamin describes in terms of phantasmagoria. This fascination with fetishes and images of consuming desire proves erratically epiphanic and is something that American Postmodern writers would later stress without nostalgia for a previous organic and natural order. On the contrary, the entropic environment of the European city provoked a sense of *malaise* and estrangement in the Modern writer, who retreats to a private city of dreams and assumes a position of ironical detachment towards his commodified surroundings, claiming an aesthetic viewpoint in a profane world.
Ennui and retreat into an imaginary world made of “literary labyrinths” constitute the defensive reaction to entropy that characterizes many Modernist writers. Their creation of a parallel world independent of the entropic city represents a late-Romantic answer to the growing urban crowd and its alienation, and gets reflected in Modern plots, which are often dominated by self-absorbed characters exploring an interior world alternative to their surroundings. Thus shaped by allegory and day-dreaming, the city increasingly becomes unreal and ideal.¹

However, Baudelaire is ambivalent about his Modern view of the big city. On the one hand, he experiences the alienation of the subjective, inner life in its confrontation with commodities; on the other, he gains access to Babel, anticipates the urban enthusiasm of the Avant-garde and, despite his melancholy in the face of the commodified urban landscape, at times envisions the crowd as a gigantic source of endless pleasures, in which bohemians and outcasts can live and feel at ease.

The disintegration of the organic city (polis) experienced by Baudelaire in nineteenth-century Paris was inherited before the First World War by the subversive, disruptive generation of the Dadaists and Futurists, and later by the Surrealists, whose impulse was to break the urban territory into the “ruins” of the spatial and temporal order.² They adopted an aesthetic of fragmentation to depict an artificial habitat which was impossible to embrace in its totality.³ The Futurist and Dadaist Avant-gardes got from the crowd plenty of fragments and materials to incorporate in their subversive compositions. In his iconoclastic rejection of the past, for example, Marinetti dedicated his energetic hymn to mechanization to the Modern city.

However, after the tragedy of the First World War, the destructive revolt of the Avant-gardes appeared inadequate and irresponsible. André


2. “In the presence of allegory, life and art are equally subject to fragmentation and ruins [...] They share the dismissal of the idea of totality and harmony in which, according to German idealism and French eclecticism, art and life complete each other.” Cf. Walter Benjamin, Parigi. Capitale del XIX secolo (Das Passagen-Werk, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrhamp Verlag, 1982), it. trans. (Turin: Einaudi, 1986) 426.

Breton’s Surrealist poetics coincided with neither the Dadaist negative gesture nor the Baudelairian temptation to withdraw from metropolitan life. Rather, he tried to read invisible signs and meanings in that flow of commodities which was the city surface. Deeply influenced by Freud’s theories, Breton projected the mysterious map of his psyche and memory on the city, inscribing the experience of the unconscious in the fragmented accidentality of the street. In other words, he tried to subject the entropy of urban space to the power of his analogic interpretations, thus turning the metropolis into a thorough projection of subjective perceptions.

Breton’s oneiric flânerie is expressed by means of analogical prose which explores the urban field to detect epiphanies of the mind. The Surrealist way of reading urban ruins as traces of a concealed order views the city as a space where common sense is often subverted and surface meanings transcended. The world of magical correspondances created by Baudelaire — which basically constituted an aesthetic, literary utopia alternative to the “real”, commodified environment - is turned by Breton into a dream world where the city street, at magical moments, suddenly reveals the signs of the unconscious. In other words, Breton interprets the Baudelairian allegorical city of poetic correspondances as a space of rêverie, whose scattered traces he attempts to read as the cryptic signs of a deeper domain. The objects that he encounters by chance assume, in his view, the status of overdetermined traces, subject to interpretation.

Paris returns in Breton’s Surrealist vision as a fluctuating, allegorical territory of fugitive encounters with beauty, where, in his effort to transcend common sense and name the mute objects that he collects from the streets, the poet reads the traces of a concealed order. In both Baudelaire’s and Breton’s writing, the city is an allegorical space of desire and seduction, “the locus of irrational and erotic femininity,” where the elective encounter, marked by a fugitive moment of recognition (choc as coup de foudre), is followed by an unexpected, ephemeral correspondance. Receptive to this cryptic revelation, the poet manages to exorcize chaos in the urban field, and transforms the immanent scenario of the Satanic Fall into a city in which ambiguous signals turn into epiphanies.

In Baudelaire as well as Breton, the European city remains a hieroglyphic text to interpret, a text whose mysterious meaning is represented by the elusive figure of an unknown, fascinating passante.

encountered in the street. The encounter with "the woman of the crowd" as the embodiment of Modern allegory is the central *topos* of a search for meaning disguised as an object of desire which, after Baudelaire's poems, gets narrated once again in Surrealist writings and, more recently, in Postmodern fiction.

The fugitive *rencontre* of the Baudelairian poet with the unknown passer-by in the crowd actually provides the pre-text of Breton's encounter with the visionary Nadja, the woman who keeps changing shape like an unstable signifier, always escaping the poet's desire to understand/possess her. As Postmodern drifters keep stressing the shifting meaning of an elusive signifier, the narrative becomes more and more an effort to approximate an enigma. Questioned both as an architectural and a rational order, in Surrealist as well as Postmodernist urban writing, the metropolis gradually ceases to be the dystopic, Baudelairian space of *malaise* and *ennui*, becoming, instead, a provisional space of sudden recognition which, starting from Breton's *Nadja*, grows more and more opaque and unable to shed light on individual psychological depths.

Starting another endless quest, Thomas Pynchon puts a detective in the tradition of Poe in charge of making sense out of the changing shapes of another mysterious woman. In *V.*, Stencil is the parodic version of the Modern hero who tries to read meaning into chaos, like the Benjaminian *bricoleur*. Nostalgic for causal logic, he wanders among the trash and debris of post-industrial cities, trying to find in them the residual pieces of a map, the traces of an original architecture, the surviving fragments of the mosaic of a lost order. His obsessive search finally drives him away from the street to a melancholic space of paranoia, which marks the end of his quest for knowledge. Postmodern urbanites react to his defeat and, following the example of the amoral, elusive sphinx in the city (Breton's Nadja, Duchamp's Rrose Sélavy, Nabokov's Lolita), end up embodying the ambiguous features of the stranger in the crowd and scatter like drifters. These erratic figures ceaselessly travel along suburban motorways, in bombed areas, always confronted with the equivocal version of the same, ambiguous event.

The failed encounter with the sphinx in the crowd ultimately resists plotting and interpretation. *Nadja*, as a novel, is itself an erratic narrative, an unfinished quest whose ungraspable object frustrates the narrator's attempt to give his urban lover only one name, confronted as

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he is with the enigmatic power of the unrelated fragments he finds in his way.

This exploration of Modern and contemporary urban literature, traces the transition from Baudelaire’s and Breton’s city (a mysterious, Satanic underworld basically depending on the model of the initiatory ritual descent into the underworld) to the indifferent, non-epiphanic dispersal of the Postmodern subject in the electronic, dematerialized urban landscape. However, to stress the transition from one mode to the other, it breaks the chronological order of the historical narrative to go back to the moment in which the failed encounter with the “woman of the crowd” — the enigmatic object of desire which constitutes the central *topos* of the Modern quest — was first questioned by Marcel Duchamp.

Starting from the paradigmatic example of Baudelaire’s crowded Paris, going through the psychological meanders of Breton’s Surrealist mind and breaking the chronological order of the historical narrative, at a certain point the argument stresses the crucial role of Duchamp’s paradoxical aesthetics of the incongruous and his creation of an ambivalent, protean man of the crowd as important steps towards the making of a truly Postmodern aesthetics. After his arrival in America, the French artist erases the very possibility of epiphanic encounters in the crowd and fuses gender identities — the female body of the mysterious *flâneuse* and the male body of the *flâneur* — in the condensed figure of the transvestite. The man of the crowd that Duchamp ironically embodies represents the most profane and “de-gendered” of his assemblages, providing a new grammar of indeterminacy and condensation for American Postmodern artists and writers.

At this point, because urban space is a constant reference for the discussion of the shift from Modern to Postmodern paradigms, especially in the treatment of Duchamp’s aesthetics of incongruity, the controversial distinction between the two modes starts blurring. Though widely separated in time, both epochs clearly testify the gradual invasion of technology, which increasingly pervades the mind by erasing the defensive, psychological space earlier perceived by the Modern narrator as a subjective domain independent of external interferences. Moreover, both Avant-garde and Postmodern writers tend to express the experience of urban displacement by means of the Surrealist technique of decontextualizing an object and re-inscribing it in another context.

In such linguistically entropic landscapes, the ironic narrator loses control of the novel’s perspective and surrenders to the crowd of signs,
preparing for the encounter with culturally hybrid figures of condensation he cannot identify with. He becomes a tourist, “humorously ironical” — that is, both external and internal — because, like Zoyd in Pynchon’s *Vineland*, he breaks the fantasmagoric window and enters the artificial world without identifying with it.

What strikes us is that the strategy that Postmodern writers adopt to convey the contiguous presence of the different languages and cultures inhabiting the expanded urban field is, once again, that of Surrealist decontextualization and displacement. Their narratives are still dependent on the Modern pattern of the encounter with the irreducible Other, although with significant variations. For instance, the epistemological uncertainty produced by the encounter with the unknown woman does not lead to a turning away from the city into an inner, self-reflexive domain, but to a non-dogmatic, Duchampian wandering in an extra-territorial field where the inside and the outside, the male and the female are undistinguishable.

The hybrid language of Postmodernity — a *koiné* founded on the interplay of high culture with the profane codes circulating in the information society — is nothing more than a revival of the eclectic style experimented for the first time by the Avant-gardes, as they created their linguistic palimpsests in the face of the massive invasion of the urban field by commodities. In his introduction to the Italian edition of Benjamin’s *Das Passagen-Werk*, Giorgio Agamben speaks of the recent revival of the contaminated forms that marked the second decade of this century:

> The unabridged publication of Walter Benjamin’s unfinished work in 1982 significantly partakes of the recent Postmodern debate. It partakes of the new crisis of ideology and historicism which has been questioning Western culture in the form of a meta-historical eclecticism typical of the Avant-gardes.

Similarly, in his preface to a much-quoted collection of essays on Postmodern art, which played the role of an early Manifesto of Postmodernism in the early eighties, Hal Foster writes that “Although

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7. Giorgio Agamben, “Preface” to Walter Banjamin, Parigi., cit., VIII.
repressed in late modernism, this 'Surrealist revolt' is returned in Postmodernist art."

It might be objected that the subversive spirit of the Avant-gardes is quite subdued in the cooler narratives of Postmodernity, although the latter is a time when there is much enthusiasm for Duchamp and Benjamin as forerunners of the current revival of the Avant-gardes. Without ignoring the differences in time and attitude of these two artistic generations, this comparative study intends to participate in the debate on the influence of Surrealist modes in contemporary American fiction, and compares the entropic city envisioned by Breton at the beginning of the century with its revival by American Postmodern writers, who have clearly inherited the legacy of the European Surrealist expatriates in America during the Second World War.

Surrealist and Postmodern urban narratives seem to share a permanent questioning of the value of signs in the city and the urban theme of the man lost in the crowd, a theme originally borrowed by Baudelaire from Poe and later transformed into the pursuit of a fugitive lover in Paris. In both epochs, the vision of the city (or rather the imaginary geography of fragmentation that Surrealists and Postmodernists provide of it) testifies the crisis of a rational order. The metaphors of displacement and the loss of a map often recur to convey the inability of both generations of urban writers to represent the city by means of a linear narrative.

In both essays and fiction, the rhetorics of Surrealism and Postmodernism show the recurrence of apocalyptic landscapes of "debris", "ruins" and "dismemberment", which clearly belong to the vocabulary Walter Benjamin used in his reflections on the Modern metropolis. Now celebrated as the prophet of Postmodernity, the German philosopher saw a close connection between technological innovations and the subversive experiments of the Surrealists. Working within the Jewish intellectual tradition — which conceives of the cosmos as an endless network of mysterious correspondences and Kabbalistic

connections — he developed his project of historical materialism out of his vision of a technological urban environment disrupted by war and social revolutions. Of course, this project was already familiar to Breton. During the period 1926-28, Benjamin spent a long time in Paris, where he participated in the Collège de sociologie — the circle of dissident Surrealists founded before the war by Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, and Michel Leiris — and always credited Aragon’s Surrealist novel *Le paysan de Paris* as the most direct inspiration for the “Arcades Project”, the series of notes he worked on from 1927 until his death that would eventually become the vast, unfinished project later known as the Passagen-Werk. Published posthumously, this book provides a Surrealist social commentary on Modernity and its commodified landscape as a place of profane enchantment and surprise. Written in the form of sketches and meditations, it constitutes an archeology of meaning which prefigures current Postmodern novels, whose catastrophic landscapes also consist of fragments in the form of incongruous linguistic debris gathered according to the arbitrary logic of Breton’s bricolage.

A neo-Surrealist vision of a broken landscape has recently reappeared in the ruins of Postmodern architecture — from which the term “Postmodern” actually comes — as well as in the coeval narrative *collages* of Donald Barthelme, William S. Burroughs’s neo-Surrealist cut-ups, and Kathy Acker’s juxtaposed quotations. And isn’t *bricolage* — the technique that the Surrealists adopted to reduce their discourse and their vision of the environment into bits and pieces — after all the fundamental mode of the Postmodern “poetics of ruins”?

After the Second World War, when the nuclear bomb became an obsession in American fiction, the cross-purposes and puzzles inscribed in the ruins of European cities became even more pervasive. Postmodern American writers actually witnessed the end of the war and some of them, who were personally involved in the Korean war, depicted more landscapes of debris. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, Pynchon shows war zones and the ruins of the European cities (London, Berlin, La Valletta), taking Benjamin’s prophetic vision of urban debris to its extreme consequences.


According to Benjamin, in the commodified city of the early 20th century, the semiotic “catastrophe” produced by the circulation of fetishes, the breakage of space-time linearity and the collapse of rational order found appropriate representation in the fragmented vision of the Avant-gardes. In his essays on Baudelaire, he relates the mass circulation of goods in the industrial city to the destruction of the bourgeois values of stability and reason. The entrance of mass-produced commodities in the city, along with Haussmann’s demolition and modernization of large areas of the historical center of Paris in Baudelaire’s time, produced a catastrophe in an urban space previously perceived as an organic community, provoking a sense of disorientation and loss in the overwhelmed individual. In the nineteen-fifties, at the beginning of the Postmodern age, mechanical rhythms and the flux of merchandise became even more invasive, because of the development of the cultural market.

Compared to the vision of the First World War by Breton and Benjamin, the atomic catastrophe confronted by Postmodern writers assumes the features of a greater disaster. They cast serious doubts on the methods and aims of science and question the very meaning of progress, thus re-emphasizing Heisenberg’s principle of indeterminacy that the Surrealists were already aware of. Fredric Jameson envisions a further catastrophe — the collapse of all preceding narrative paradigms and the loss of a common language — making Benjamin’s description of the rise of Modernity “singularly relevant and singularly antiquated” in light of this new, unimaginable stage of technological alienation.11

In Postmodern times, consumerism and information overload have caused a further break in the Modern sense of linear space and time, and the critique of progress, which Benjamin started in terms of historicism, has been pushed further. The rise of the information society, immigration from ex-colonies to the Western world and the consequent circulation of mysterious, new codes in the city have led to a catastrophe in discourse and a renewed reflection on the city as a displacing technological landscape.

Pynchon represents the cities destroyed during the Second World War as unmapped territories and displays, often using the scientific metaphor of entropy, the “exquisite corpses” produced by military technology. However, the war ruins that he describes are injected in the trans-historical, syncretic context of the Postmodern narrative, which simultaneously refers to the “ruins” of an advanced semiotic stage, thus

marking the transition from the industrial to the electronic age. In his work, the Waste Land of Berlin is divided into “zones”: four sectors controlled by four different armies which, in their multiplicity, prove immediately isomorphic to the post-industrial, multicultural environment, whose debris takes the shape of the information trash of a globalized world.

From the subject’s dreamworld the emphasis moves to the enigmatic object in the street, to the objet trouvé that Duchamp turns into aesthetic objects. As he opens the way to the Postmodern eclectic use and recycling of lowly materials, Duchamp moves from Breton’s epiphanic and subjective approach to the celebration of a profane art suggested by the disruption of citiescape. Objects in the city streets fail to illuminate the darkest sides of the human psyche, referring the flâneur back to chaos and entropy. This coming to terms with an immanent, anti-aesthetic field is also at the origin of Robert Venturi’s experiments in Postmodern architecture.

In Pynchon’s narratives the city displays disquieting bidonvilles where heaps of trash pile up like the ruins of European cities during the Second World War. The stories they tell are stories of displacement among the linguistic debris of collage cities, where information circulates and proliferates like commodities.

In this Waste Land, endless quests among ruins and fragments take place and protagonists are doomed to remain eternal tourists in a foreign land. Faced with the mass of indices and clues that they find on the road, their wanderings coincide with an endless effort to translate the ambivalent signs they encounter. Their quest does not lead to the recognition of an urban center or to the reconstruction of a full view of the city, but to the collection of ambiguous messages pursued in a hieroglyphic landscape similar to the mythical Babel: in Benjamin’s words, “a linguistic cosmos,” synchronically unifying distant times and spaces. In the foreground of displacing sites such as decentered cities and highway labyrinths referring to distant continents and languages, Pynchon parodically represents the final defeat of the detective in the pursuit of the unknown, multiple woman of the crowd (V.). His quest takes him far from the road, into a final exile in the obsessive (and wholly mental) space of conjecture.

Streets thus become highways, crossroads and turnpike junctions which, as in the San Narciso of The Crying of Lot 49, strongly evoke a sense of urban displacement that is ultimately semiotic. Cities have

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12. Walter Benjamin, Parigi, cit., 674.
turned into no-towns; expanded urban fields have grown beyond the city limits and peripheral malls, the new temples of consumerism and flânerie among commodities. The Baudelairian magasin is replaced by the store of used-cars run by Mucho Maas, which has no eye-catching show windows and rather resembles a trash dump. Considered the quintessential technological fetish until the fifties, the car turns into a wreck, a second-hand commodity, an inert, empty carcass in the foreground of a polluted suburban landscape of abandoned factories showing the first signs of industrial decay — of an entropy still unknown at the beginning of the century.

Compared to the Modern metropolis, the Postmodern city is a more extra-urban territory. It gives an impression of both spatial and semiotic indeterminacy. Postmodern fiction presents highway labyrinths, xenomorphic metropolises, and decentered urban areas as ideal settings where the Modern quest for the fugitive beauty and epiphanic reading of urban fragments finally comes to a close. In Pynchon’s V., Barthelme’s short stories, and Laurie Anderson’s post-urban apologetes, the detective engaged in deciphering urban signs still survives, but the sphinx in the street — the elusive trace of meaning which constitutes the central topos of the Modern search for identity — physically disappears. As Burroughs notes, human bodies become landscapes and art increasingly becomes environmental as it erases any significant trace of subjective perception.

From Baudelaire’s search for the mysterious passante to the pursuit of Nadja and finally the enigmatic disappearance of V., there is a clear transition from the symbolic-psychological mode of expression to the hermeneutic-allegorical one, which culminates in the end of the quest for meaning and of the pursuit of the mysterious woman of the crowd. In a city evolving from a place of passion for the desiring subject into a space of indifferent promiscuity, libertinism and the blurring of sexual roles become metaphors for the dissemination and multiplicity of objects of desire — i. e., of meaning.

Postmodern authors do not seem to share the Modern writer’s preoccupation with commodities, but rather make a constant effort to read the signs coming from their technological environment, as if discourse had replaced goods as carriers of alienation. In both cases, however, the extroverted attitude of the Avant-gardes as well as of Postmodern writers to come to terms with the city field, poses the problem of an expanded participation in, and access to, the city. An authentic urban spirit animates the Modern as well as the Postmodern search for meaning — embodied by the woman of the crowd — which ultimately becomes the object of desire, the main metaphor for the
investigation of an environment which constantly resists plotting and interpretation.

In the transition from the industrial to the information society — from mechanics to electronics — the big city keeps on standing in the fictional background as a fragmentary, elusive field which still poses the problematic relation between the subject and the enigmatic signs that he finds on his way. This study moves along a genealogical line, showing how the Postmodern drifters are the direct descendants of Baudelaire’s poet in the city and the self-centered flâneur conceived by Breton. They are urbanites who are perhaps less obsessed than Surrealist heroes with the recognition of hidden meanings and self-identity, but still engaged in the interpretation of the different codes which surround them.

The incongruous contiguity of dissimilar signs, which Duchamp conceived in his full, humoristic recognition of life’s paradoxes and variety, radically differs from the idea of “metafictional” and self-reflexive space usually based on the paradigm of repetition (parody) and the use of semantically exhausted fragments. After Duchamp, the Postmodern self is physically contaminated and committed to the electronic, plurilingual world, adopting a participatory position which seems able to solve some paralyzing aporias that are typical of purely fictitious genres, such as “metafiction”. The abstract, metalinguistic nature of the latter seems to entrap the reader in a totalizing, literary labyrinth, which is wrongly considered the essential feature of Postmodern writing. In many regards, however, such introverted and elitist forms seem to suggest a return to Baudelaire’s Modernist search for l’art pour l’art or T. S. Eliot’s retreat into an encyclopedic “city of words”, a redemptive domain of language far from the dystopic urban environment they envisioned.

The “Postmodern writing” considered in this study is not the neo-parodic, self-reflective literature that has developed under the influence of Jorge Luis Borges, Umberto Eco and Italo Calvino, but rather centrifugal narratives such as Pynchon’s, Barthelme’s and Anderson’s pastiches, which borrow the collagistic techniques of the Avant-gardes and consciously transfer their disjunct, fragmentary mode into the context of a technologically advanced, multicultural city. Compared to their art of assemblage, Borges’s “literary labyrinths”, which are often considered representative of the Postmodern literary scene, strike us as less urban in spirit. The latter works show the retreat of the Modern hero into a literary domain and ultimately refer back to the late Modernist tradition of “encyclopedic” writing, which is a form of ventriloquism — an inter-textual dialogue within literature conceived as a privileged code. Such labyrinthine, self-reflexive fictions do not
confront urban entropy or our ongoing adjustment to information technology and an increasingly multiracial society. Rather, they recreate more wholly “literary”, “unreal” cities: new versions of the Baudelairian cité des rêves, which reactivate an ethnocentric world of Western myths and imagination alienated from the complexity and extension of the contemporary metropolitan environment. Far from being entrapped in the narcissistic reflection of themselves (metafiction), the Postmodern narratives discussed here are indebted to the “high Modernist tradition” and to their contamination by an enigmatic open field of meaning irreducible to any interior perspective, capable as it is of including the heterogeneous, post-colonial language of the crowd.

Extroverted and truly urban in nature, the tales considered here cope with the fragmented, plural perception of the city and the problems of interpretation that arose in Babylon after man’s mythical Fall from language. In the transition to an elusive, intersemiotic and dematerialized world, the Postmodern vision of the city keeps questioning the relation between the subject and the unstable referents that constitute the surrounding urban field. However, unlike the Modern quest, Postmodern narratives provide more optimistic and inclusive perspectives, as well as the oceanic view of the crowd that constituted one of the more liberating aspects of Baudelaire’s ambivalent vision. Pynchon, Barthelme, Anderson and J. G. Ballard take the allegorical dismemberment of the Modern urbanite to an extreme, and start from the moment in which the flâneur in Paris momentarily suspends his sense of identity to jouir de la foule. As the Postmodern hero interrupts his erratic pursuit of the mysterious stranger in the fourmillante cité to become part of the landscape, the narrator turns into a Duchampian assembler of heterogeneous elements, inventing a language of condensation where mind and landscape — the pursuing subject and the object pursued — stand in a libertine relation of non-fusional contiguity. Faced with the electronic city, the urban writer — or rather the complicated crossroad of languages that he now happens to be — is forced to abandon the obsessive space of his mental and fictional constructions. He enters a depersonalized, complex dreamworld — a textualized landscape — created by his mediation of the contradictory signals encountered in the city. Confronted with borderless cosmopolitan zones, the new flâneurs drive on circular highways, metaphors for a never-ending quest for meaning. Throughout their stories, Postmodern heroes discover hybrid and decentred cities whose architecture, sculptures and shopping centers speak the conceptual language of inconclusive quests for meaning. These characters are first of all decoders, bricoleurs. They do not retreat into a purely mental
space, but situate themselves in the midst of a variety of languages and cultures, always suspended — like the Duchampian ambivalent subject — in a transitional space located between the internal and the external, man and machine.

Zavarzadeh defines postwar American writing as a “bi-referential” narrative mode, simultaneously referential and self-referential, paradoxically combining the “factual and fictional”, and prepared to come to terms, as Francesco Binni argues, with “the elusive function of fact and fiction, which is the matrix of today’s experience”. Far from representing another, apocalyptic “loss of meaning,” these narratives constantly question the modes in which meaning gets produced in a plurilingual environment seemingly without absolute certainties and fixed value-systems. In Mary Ann Caws’s words, the labyrinthine (Post)modern narrative is a “built-in maze” suggesting “the idea of amazement” and implying an epistemological challenge.

Pynchon, Barthelme and Anderson adopt a feature of Surrealist art and writing, incorporating random linguistic materials (“trash”) in their narratives: advertisements, street “white noise,” and scraps of mass-culture such as pop songs and television commonplaces. As in Avant-garde aesthetics, they mix high and low languages, elitist dialogue with literary tradition and the fragmentary implosion of pop culture. Treating narrative as a synesthetic, Neo-Surrealist form, Postmodern fiction — like Rauschenberg’s combines and mixed-media art — incorporates different semiotic materials and the trash of industrial civilization. It immerses the reader in a myriad of media messages and ultimately tends to transcend the written mode and carry on an intermittent dialogue with the new mixed-media art and architecture. This study thus ends with a discussion of the


isomorphous, multimedial work of a performance artist like Laurie Anderson, who points to the creation of a form of synesthetetic art that goes well beyond the written page.

In this expanded metropolitan field, the integrity of individual identity is questioned, but the possibility of the tolerant coexistence of incongruous cultures is enhanced. The hybrid discourse of linguistic contamination does not select the polis (the monumental and historical center of the city) or metropolis (the congested center invaded by crowds of signals and passers-by) as a representative space. It envisions a less distinct, open-ended field, a Duchampian n-dimensional space, which often appears in the guise of no-towns, empty areas of car transit and multiethnic conglomerates, in which the subject no longer witnesses the perfect encounter of signal and meaning. This is a point that Pynchon makes clear by enacting the dilemma of his late quester in the urban “forest of signs”. Language inhabits the urbanite and dominates his space, leaving him suspended in a field of nonsense (which de-genders him, but does not necessarily engender nihilism).

The city surface exhibits multicultural ambiguity and entropy described by Pynchon in terms of not only communication failure, but also Conradian darkness: an obscure underground of marginalized people that the Western world has failed to come to terms with. However, in the “linguistic wilderness” of the Postmodern metropolis, this presence of the unknown is not merely uncanny and disturbing. Unlike Conrad’s wilderness, it adds to the multiplicity and richness of the urban field, as the work of Laurie Anderson and Donald Barthelme also shows.

Unlike the Modern hero, the Postmodern drifter no longer seeks an elective encounter with the city in order to shape his dreams and identity. Language inhabits him and permeates his space, disseminating its puzzling and puzzled presence. Not only does the inquiring Postmodern urbanite join the crowd; realizing the irresolvable dissimilarity of the objects and languages surrounding him, he embodies it. This attitude, however, does not necessarily engender nihilism, because, as soon as he gives up the quest for an organic, individual identity, he is a voice among other voices, a mixed, transitional body. He is a participant in a city of heterogeneous beliefs and codes, linguistic aberrance and semiotic instability: a new pluralistic world Barthelme humorously calls a “City of Churches”. In this multiple perspective, Postmodern mapless cities represent a critique of the monological retreat to organic communities and pure (political and literary) utopias which, like Callisto’s conservatory, easily degenerate into closed, self-centered worlds. The cumulation of linguistic trash in
Postmodernity does not have the negative value attributed by the alienated Modern hero to the commodified metropolis. In Pynchon, it is a sign that unfamiliar idioms from social and ethnic minorities are opening up a dialogue with cultural paradigms imposed by ethnocentric Western culture. In Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, the metropolis significantly assumes the disfigured and cosmopolitan guise of post-war Berlin. Divided into four zones, it is a new Waste Land traversed — in fiction as well as in fact — by four armies and cosmopolitan figures speaking a variety of languages: an extreme geographic “spatial phantasmagory,” simultaneously recalling different places and cultures within a single, expanded field.

One might say that the transition from Modern to Postmodern aesthetics is marked by a shift from the interior perspective of the subject to a more scattered, hybrid linguistic interplay with the environment. In this transition, the city expands as a field of communication and thus gradually loses the traditionally dystopic features of Babylon. It becomes a domain which subverts the binary logic of antithesis: fusing object and subject, male and female, it dissolves fixed categories and identities. This movement implies the suspension of the ironic position — the subjective, anthropocentric view of the world (i.e., the city) experienced by Baudelaire — and the emergence of the deeper, humoristic involvement of the Postmodern hero with the environment in his effort to recycle materials encountered by chance. The new narrator is a dissolved individuality (Barthelme), a dispersed voice among other voices (Anderson), in a city of heterogeneous beliefs and codes, where ontological instability characterizes a new, inclusive utopia far preferable to the secluded, aesthetic ones embodied by monologic inner worlds. Once decentered and dispersed in a tangle of word-play, paradoxes and of de-gendered selves, the individual enters a crowded field of cross-purposes and puzzles. He gradually transforms the city from a menacing, Satanic underground into an open space of performance, where marginal and hegemonic cultures problematically coexist. Now part of the entropic information landscape, he loses his ironic stance and questions fixed categories, including his own identity. The movement from Modern to Postmodern aesthetics is thus characterized by a shift from the subjective, ironic perspective on

16. The risk of misunderstanding and the desire for power often lurking in the dialogue with unequal, non-Western cultures is discussed by Vincent Crapanzano's "The Postmodern Crisis: Discourse, Parody, Memory", *Cultural Anthropology*, VI (Nov. 1991) 4, 431-45.
space to a more scattered, humorous interaction with a technological, multicultural landscape.

From Baudelaire’s *passante* to Breton’s libertine Nadja, from Duchamp’s “man of the mob” to Pynchon’s unnamable V., there is a transition from a symbolic-psychological paradigm to a hermeneutic, allegorical mode, leading to the end of the quest and to the final disappearance of the woman of the crowd. In the meantime, the city progressively evolves from a space of passion and monogamous desire to a space of promiscuous indifference and desire — an indeterminate space of non-fusional contiguity which, after Duchamp, produces the Postmodern, cognitive space of tolerance. The emergence in Postmodern writing of a more tolerant commitment to the entropic environment always seems subject to an act of subjective dismemberment and the creation of new “queer” entities, such as cyborgs and “transformers”. In its endless recycling and reassembling of scattered linguistic materials encountered by chance, Postmodernism partakes of a realm of indeterminacy which is never exhausted by a synthetic, individual viewpoint and ultimately refers to no absolute grammar or map of the territory, which endlessly questions the ultimate meaning of urban encounters.