RUTH MAYER

Looking Forward to Looking Back: Steve Erickson's Retrofitted Future in "From *Arc d'X*"

I. Looking Backward to the Future

> At my feet lay a great city. Miles of broad street, shaded by trees and lined with fine buildings, for the most part not in continuous blocks but set in larger or smaller enclosures, stretched in every direction. Every quarter contained large open squares filled with trees, along which statues glistened and fountains flashed in the late-afternoon sun. Public buildings of a colossal size and architectural grandeur unparalleled in my day raised their stately piles on every side. Surely I had never seen this city nor one comparable to it before. (Bellamy, *Looking Backward*)

Perfectly functional and clean, laid out in neat and regular patterns, Edward Bellamy's utopian city in *Looking Backward* leaves no room for disorder. And still, the panorama of the perfect city-to-be calls up the squalor and chaos of 19th-century cities, as the future scenario makes sense only in view of contemporaneous needs and outlooks. From the perspective of 1888, urban planning seemed to suggest itself as the master discourse for the future, a means of getting a grip on the dark undersides of the modern city. The ugly facts of slums and ghettoes, hybrid sites of chaos and potential disruption did not go together with ideas of social order and universal accessibility.

Today, as we move closer to the year 2000, urban planning has indeed become a powerful discourse, yet Bellamy's blissful vision seems farther away than ever, as processes of "urban enclavization," "ghettoization" and "suburbanization" cut up metropoles all over the world into spatially disconnected, yet economically highly interdependent sectors of affluence and poverty, crime and order (Davis, 244, 302). In view of this development, the utopian texts of the 1980s and 90s are not so much about the radically new, but rather they envision "the new and the very, very used," as Scott Bukatman wrote about Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982), a powerful filmic point of reference for the genre. "Retrofitting" was the term for this technique of enacting the future by way of historical references, cul-

tural quotations, and nostalgic allusions. Drawing heavily on Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* and the 1940s *film noir*, on 1970s comic strips, and on fictional texts such as — yes — Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, Scott's film performed "a nostalgic return, not to the city as a centered and controlled environment, but to the city as a *cinematic* environment, an industrial space poeticized and narrated by the camera" (Bukatman, 9, 29).

In its self-reflexive implementation of established conventions, *Blade Runner* set the tone for countless other filmic, graphical and literary narratives of the 1980s and 90s, which equally look forward to looking back: staging futuristic scenarios in order to come to terms with the experience of globalization, migration, technological innovation and media control. Significantly enough, the enactment of the future in these fictions is often less exotic than the excavation of past imageries — after all, the futuristic high-tech world is already here, around us, so that its fictional exaggeration only enhances the impression of the strangely familiar, of a new world order in the process of unfolding.[1]

One such narrative, Steve Erickson's prose fiction "From *Arc d'X*," will be the focus for my reflections on the techniques of narrating the present by way of the future past.[2] Before I turn to a close reading of the text, however, I will try to map out its context, namely an aesthetic which doubtlessly owes a lot to the discourses of postmodernity, but nevertheless needs to be updated in view of more recent reconfigurations of the discursive field. While the postmodern fictionalization of history and historiography by way of parody, pastiche and metatextual strategies of representation has been much discussed within the last years (cf. Hutcheon, McHale, Jameson, Nünning), references to a postmodern "crisis of representation," a "totalization of the surface" and a "waning of affect" do not altogether capture the effects of recent fictional texts, which clearly draw on postmodern aesthetics yet also seem to reach out beyond.

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[1] Moving to the future to reflect upon the present is, of course, a classical strategy of science fiction. With cyberpunk, an aesthetic genre triggered, as has been argued, by *Blade Runner,* this strategy gained new momentum and a different function; cf. Mayer.

[2] "From *Arc d'X*" is a separately published, abbreviated chapter out of Erickson's 1993 novel *Arc d'X*, 212-234. At the risk of having to neglect some interesting links to the novel, I will confine myself to this fragment here, which figures forth Erickson's technique of creating a network of speculations, suspicions, theories and plot lines running through his entire work. Consequently, the novel itself could be considered a fragment to be taken up, extended and reverberated in later texts — such as *Amnesiascope* (1996), Erickson's most recent publication in which he returns to many of the issues and characters of *Arc d'X*. Hereafter Erickson's story will be referred to with page references from McCaffery's anthology *After Yesterday's Crash.*

II. Pop History

It's the end of the world as we know it — I feel fine. (R.E.M.)

Larry McCaffery came up with the label "avant-pop" for this new turn in literature, film and pop music. His "Avant-Pop anthology" includes writers from Don DeLillo, Raymond Federman, and Robert Coover to Stephen Wright, David Foster Wallace, Susan Daitch, William Gibson, William T. Vollmann, and Steve Erickson, among others. The transition from postmodernism to avant-pop is by no means a clear-cut break, as this list already indicates, suggesting a shift of emphasis rather than focus. Where postmodern artists mixed up the high and low, these writers could be said to fuse the low and low, pop culture, subculture, mass culture, since high culture is hard to trace these days. Television and pop songs, comics and Hollywood movies provide a referential framework of "everydayness," defining the horizon of experience rather than contributing to its distortion or limitation, so that the cutting and pasting of pop culture motifs has lost the provocative tint it might once have had, as Mark Amerika pointed out recently (Amerika).

And yet, DeLillo's *Libra* (1988) or Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) or Erickson's *Arc d'X* (1993), just like Pynchon's *Vineland* (1990), do not testify to an arrangement with consumer culture, although their representations of the market, mass media and high-tech neither echo the classical avant-garde rhetoric of intellectual elitism or technophobia. Technologies of entertainment and consumption — television and video, virtual reality scenarios and pop icons, supermarkets and malls — turn out to gain highly ambivalent connotations in these texts, they are always both mundane matters and indicators of some darker, deeper reality.

In light of such ambivalences and paradoxes, the obsession with patterns of the past or fictions of the future in the writings of DeLillo, Coover, Wallace, Erickson and many others should be reconsidered. After all, the insight that history is a construction and that present interests and outlooks suffuse the perception of the past, is a truism these days. While the traditional tenets of self-expression and authentic experience, nature, love and spirituality, have lost their focalizing power, as mass culture has "begun to colonize even those inner, subjective realms that nearly everyone once believed were inviolable, such as people's memories, sexual desires, their unconsciousness" (McCaffery, xiii), the desire for authenticity, immediacy, and totality is far from effaced. In a paradoxical move, mass culture, this epitome of the synthetic and artificial, came to provide scope to the longing for depth, as can be seen most impressively in countless filmic and literary speculations on TV and video culture (Griem, 1996). Looking more closely

at recent fictional approaches to history one finds that while history crumbles and continuity goes to pieces, this might not mean the end of the world, but could indicate its reconfiguration — a turn to the momentary, the fragmented, the accidental.

III. Berlin, 1999 — The Crumbling of History

> When you put an 's' on the end of the word 'future,' you really have to dispense with the old fatalistic thinking about what was always bound to happen. People used to say that, especially intellectuals on the left, after any event of historical importance: 'Oh, that was bound to happen.' Suez? It was bound to happen. American defeat in Vietnam? Bound to happen. After 9 November 1989 one thing, if nothing else, is certain: nothing, absolutely nothing, apart from our own eventual departures from the scene, is *ever bound to happen*. When the Berlin Wall fell, in a sense it fell on all of us, though one of the formations it fell directly on top of was that whole formation of hopelessness represented by that fatal version of postmodernism which saw the end of everything everywhere in everything — apocalypse if not now, then tomorrow or the day after tomorrow through nuclear war, binary logic, television, simulation. (Hebdige, 270)

> Berlin, once again and for the last time of this century, lay at the cross-coordinates of history's indecision [...]. ("From *Arc d'X*")

Writing against the fashionable rhetoric of apocalypse, Dick Hebdige inadvertently falls into an end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it pathos himself: taking the fall of the Wall as a demarcation of a historical break — from determination to openness, from fear to fascinated expectation — replacing history with histories, the future with futures, or rather, replacing the past as a point of reference with the mundane present as a point of speculative reflection: "there is still the dream of the transcendence of the banal through the banal, the dream of the transcendence of everyday life through the transformation of everyday life," he writes and concludes with a reflection on the future "which is pulled sharply into focus as a virtual space — blank, colourless, shapeless, a space to be made over, a space where everything is still to be won" (Hebdige, 278).

Steve Erickson offers almost the same perspective in fictional form in "From *Arc d'X*," setting his narrative in Berlin at the turn of the 20th century and focusing on an apocalyptic situation which does not so much indicate the end of the world, but, again, the end of the world as we know it. Just like Hebdige, who

casts the fall of the Wall as an emancipatory escape from historical expectations and long-standing rhetorics of fatalism, Erickson conceives of Berlin as the site for a proliferation of history, envisioning the past from the perspective of the future(s). Berlin, the setting for spectacular and ordinary events, grandiose and horrifying historical processes, which took place simultaneously and contradictorily, seems to give the lie to the very concept of history as logical order, let alone as linear progress — shattering history into isolated fragments. And yet Erickson's impression differs dramatically from Hebdige's: for Erickson, openness and indecision hold as much terror as fascination, for him the alternative to the "bound-to-happen" is always liable to be the "worse than imagined." If the future in "From *Arc d'X*" is just as shapeless and colorless as Hebdige's, this indeterminacy tinges the narrative present, 1999, with a vague feeling of dread and insecurity. The accidental and the contingent may work against historical totalization, but they also give scope to the feeling of personal insignificance and to a pervasive loss of control, which is as frightening as were earlier apprehensions of determination and authoritarian supervision.

The story is set in Berlin in 1999, in a city which has become an anarchic space, largely deserted, marked by gang wars and ruled by underground organizations; an urban jungle — even more so since the zoos have been opened and wild animals roam the city. Like the rest of the world, Berlin awaits "DAY X" or "JOUR D'X" or "X-Tag," the turn of the century which is to conclude the processes of erosion and decay in a spectacular event: collapsing time into itself, "crumbling" history (79). Time is out of joint in 1999 or rather "time had escalated almost indiscernibly [and] everything was now caught in the pull of the X" (83). Figuring forth the "psychitecture of the twentieth century," the decaying splendour of Unter den Linden sets the stage for a carnivalesque performance of history, a retrofitted scenario of past, present and future:

> [If] anyone should emerge on the other side of Day X [...], they were all bound to come out on the Unter den Linden, the only boulevard haunted enough to hold all of it: dictators and democrats, authoritarians and anarchists, accountants and artists, businessmen and bohemians, decadents and the devout, each contradicting their lives with their hearts, SS troops with blood running from their fingers wearing the wreath an American president laid around their necks and GDR soldiers wrenched from the vantage point of their towers pulling huge blocks of the Wall behind them, led past the Unter den Linden's grant edifices of delirium and death through the Brandenburg Gate into the Tiergarten by an Afra-merican runner with a gold medal around his neck who sprinted all the way from Berlin 1936 into the Berlin games of the year 2000, followed at the rear by a mute army of six million men and women and children utterly white of life but for the black-blue of the numbers their bodies wore, and at the rear the Great Relativist himself doing his clown act, juggling a clock, a globe, and a light bulb, tangled in a Möbius strip and with a smile on his face that said he for sure knew about Day X anyway. (81)

Like so many more bizarre speculations of the story, the parade turns 20th-century history into a spectacle of contingency, the Möbius strip's twisted loops endlessly reiterating not so much history than rather other, earlier representations of history, established images of pastness, presence and futurism, which have become exchangeable and meaningless, grotesque routines of exhibiting suffering and indifference, parades of pain and performances of pleasure. At heart of this apocalyptic imbroglio is an American author by the name of 'Erickson,' made out self-ironically by Steve Erickson as a middle-aged failed artist, eager for deep experience and always too afraid of the risk to really go for it. Having come to Berlin because it seems the most appropriate place to experience Day X, he will not live to see it, as he meets the young German-American skinhead Georgie, a member of the neo-Fascist organization Pale Flame, who is going to kill him, rendering the "death of the author" a very concrete event indeed.

Rumor has it that Georgie is the son of a legendary figure, an East-German dissident who is said to have vanished in 1989, in a desperate and futile attempt to escape from a system that was already as good as gone. Presumably entering a half-finished tunnel from East-Berlin to the West, this man was never seen again. He became "the Tunneler," digging his way through the dark underside of the city. Part gossip, part modern myth, the tale of the Tunneler gains a momentum of its own: "Erickson began hearing this absurd story everywhere, from anyone still left in the city" (74). What fascinates people most is the suspicion that the Tunneler no longer wants to leave the tunnel, preferring the useless labyrinth below to the confusing insecurity and unreliability above ground and setting the tautological simulation of order against the notion of no order at all. The same opposition discloses itself in the activities of the Neuwall Brigade, an underground movement fighting the Pale Flame:

> The Neuwall was built in the dead of the night. Begun in 1995 by a coalition of Stasi victims and Stasi informers, its mortar was made from the paste and pulp of old Stasi files, which numbered in the millions. The members of the Neuwall Brigade long ago agreed never to identify among themselves who had been informers and who had been informed upon [...]. They began the Neuwall not to eliminate freedom but to resurrect the promise that freedom held only when it was denied; they continued the Neuwall as a tribute to the way the old Wall was the spine of the world's conscience, without which humanity was left to its own worst impulses in considering the final resolution between authority and freedom, order and anarchy. (75f.)

The new wall's course, its "inebriated, slapstick zigzag through the city, rocketing wildly up this street and down that" tautologically replicates historical constellations and thus turns everybody into a Tunneler: "For all that the Berliners of the year 1999 knew, any one of them might go to sleep at night only to find himself barricaded in the next morning, a wave of old Stasi files petrified in his

doorway, through which the only recourse was to tunnel" (76). Reading this as an allegory of ongoing totalitarian control would be to miss the point. It is not the unacknowledged ideology of the old regime that fences in a new order, but the senseless, unreadable relics of the past, which are frightening precisely because they are so easy to overcome, so insignificant and contingent. In the face of the dissolution of all social norms and conventions, dissent and rebellion become meaningless, so that the social boundaries and normative borderlines have to be established by the very persons who then set out to violate them. Historical dates and ideological stances no longer provide means of orientation in a world where "every nineteen-year-old with a computer was a reich onto himself. He created his own German state and programmed it to last not a thousand years, but ten thousand. [...] all he needed was the right software" (72). Seen that way, neither the Neuwall Brigade nor the Pale Flame are political movements, since politics, just like political systems and ideologies — fascism, communism, democracy — have been reduced to mere gestures, styles to don and shed at a whim.

The very language of Erickson's text, this weird mixture of German and English, further enhances this impression — most of all for the German reader. His Berlin is not a geographical or historical location, but an indeterminate space, a crossing, an X indeed. All attempts at making sense of the urban chaos and global dissolution are shown to be in vain, bringing about momentary and fragmented configurations, "random orders" as Heinz Ickstadt called similarly fragile condensations of meaning in Don DeLillo's *Libra*. Reflecting upon the central metaphor of "patterns of coincidence" in this text, Ickstadt pointed out the "tantalizing" (Ickstadt, 311) ambivalence of this concept, an ambivalence that seems to suffuse Erickson's writing just like DeLillo's, if with different consequences.

Whereas in DeLillo's work both options — conspiracy and randomness — are precariously balanced, in Erickson's writing the scales tip in favour of the latter. As history shatters into — not histories, but rather arbitrary effects, actions and impressions, the manifold attempts at reordering never amount to much more than the "slapstick zigzag" of the Neuwall. The random and the accidental take over, time and again disrupting temporality and undermining order, rupturing the network of collective history into the bits and pieces of personal recollections, subjective experiences, and momentary impressions.

As the explanatory systems of history and ideology vanish, memory too loses its power to constitute continuity, both on a personal and on a collective level, to focalize isolated impressions and thus to establish meaning and identity. In "From *Arc d'X*" memory is made out to be another random force at heart of the crisis of history: due to "memory's dislocation from time," (78) Day X is brought about

in the first place. The independent dynamics of recollection, which suspend time, go back in time, transfix and totalize past moments and discard others according to unconscious and incommunicable conditions, create a surplus of time that cannot be accounted for in physical terms and effects a "slowing [of the] cosmic timepiece, out of which seeped into the millennium the lost seconds and then minutes and then hours" (81). Reduced to the individual and subjective level, memory functions not as a focalizer, but as an instrument of dispersal and constant deferral, preventing not only the experience of the past, but also the cherishing of the moment by way of its distracting effect.[3]

This comes to the fore in 'Erickson's' love life. With the end of his marriage and the collapse of a love affair "his heart had crumbled in time to the crumbling of history" (79). The connection between the breaking heart and the crumbling history is no mere analogy, but causal. The personal loss and its mourning form one of many impulses which effect the fatal eruption of time, Day X. 'Erickson's' melancholic conclusion expresses the text's central predicament:

> Never having been practiced at living in the present, nonetheless he'd been silently shocked by the prospect that his father may not have spent enough of his life being happy, and the son was doing the same. [...] There wasn't much to do but pursue the purely sensual moment. He might have been better at this if he'd only been without conscience. (79)

This dichotomy between the sensual moment and the moral conscience demarcates a fundamental conflict, the opposition of fragment and totality, personal experience and collective history, the substitution of larger truths and certainties by momentary, arbitrary insights and impressions, an opposition that the text endorses time and again. 'Erickson's' conscience is reminiscent of that momentous "spine of the world's conscience," the Wall, which the Neuwall Brigade means to replicate, and just like that older demarcation of orientation and value it seems irretrievably lost, a nostalgic recollection at best, a memory which can never recuperate what has been lost, but effectively prevents the totalization of the present, the moment, the "sensual" experience. When 'Erickson' finally manages to "live in the present," this is a highly ambivalent experience: "memory broke free once and for all, floating above him like a balloon a child lets go. In that moment the writer was neither quick enough for escape nor afraid enough for panic" (85). The

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[3] This is precisely what Renate Lachmann criticizes in view of postmodern enactments of memory, which, according to her, turn memory into an "ornamental simulacrum" and thus drain it of any meaning or function (519). And yet, in Erickson these drained memories are invested with new functions, even if *Arc d'X* does not return to modern or premodern conceptions of memory.

purely sensual moment — neither remembering nor anticipating, neither looking back nor forth: it is also 'Erickson's' death.

Before, it was precisely this experience of utter concentration, the dissolution of time and the totalization of the moment which 'Erickson' tried to achieve in his love life. And Berlin presented the perfect setting for this quest. At one time, the writer is called up in his hotel room by a woman he does not know, she seduces him to phone sex, then calls back several times to continue the anonymous affair. In her last call, when 'Erickson' argues for a personal encounter, she pins down the fascinating implications of random sex:

> "It was so random like this," she explained. "I called several numbers that first time. Sometimes I got a woman, sometimes I got a man who sounded ... wrong, and I hung up. Then I called your number, and when they answered they said it was a hotel, and they asked what room, and I just said a room number, and they put the call through and it was, by chance, you. I could have dialed any other number instead. When I got your hotel I could have hung up, as I almost did. I could have given a different room number or the number for a room that didn't exist, or they might have asked for the guest's name, and I wouldn't have been able to give them a name. And it seems quite perfect like this, so perfectly random, so perfectly by chance." (82)

Perfectly random, perfectly by chance — it seems that this is the only kind of perfection that can still be thought in a world tumbling into disarray. Yet once again 'Erickson' cannot fully give himself to this arbitrary, momentary way of life. He arranges a blind date with the woman and is killed by Georgie and the Pale Flame, in another purely random act, before he even makes it to the meeting. And it is Georgie who takes his place and sets out to meet the woman. "From *Arc d'X*" breaks off at the moment when he is about to enter her room.

IV. Random Acts of Sex and Violence

'Erickson' fails to live what he envisioned as the only way to happiness and self-realization in a world that does not allow for regular life-styles, lasting relationships or stable social systems. Georgie, however, not only takes his place in the end, but also seems to live precisely what 'Erickson' had in mind. Embracing the momentary and the momentous at the same time, he epitomizes the disconnected existence of the urban savage, instinct-driven and unpredictable, innocuous and perverted, primeval and ultra-modern — if these distinctions still make sense in the retrofitted scenario of "From *Arc d'X*." When 'Erickson' first comes across Georgie, it is his aura of innocence and craze that strikes him most:

> He was a twenty-year-old skinhead and reputedly one of the leaders of the Pale Flame, but with a face that was almost pretty, his mouth delicate like a girl's, Georgie had a

> serene sweetness, sitting at the table laughing at jokes that didn't include him, told by strangers standing around talking to other strangers. Every time Georgie laughed at one of the jokes, someone looked at him in dismay and moved to another part of the bar. This didn't seem to perturb Georgie either. (75)

The passage's perspective is significant in that to the end it is from the outside that we get to know Georgie or rather don't get to know him: his sweet face obviously does not stand for an angelic character, his behavior is unmotivated, strange, erratic. Socially disconnected and weirdly self-contained, Georgie re-creates the world around himself from scratch, constructing his own reality like the computer kids in Kreuzberg. The only persons whom he seems to relate to are his legendary parents, the unreachable Tunneler-father and the equally absent American mother whom 'Erickson' takes to belong to the Neuwall Brigade. Yet his efforts at reconnecting with his personal and genealogical past are as weird as they seem futile. Just like any other attempt to rescue history in this text, Georgie's turn to the past brings about nothing but simulations, cardboard replications that nobody in his right mind would fall for. A case in point is Georgie's "furiously mystic obsession with the idea of America":

> Ultimately [Georgie] didn't discriminate between Thomas Paine and Crazy Horse, between sex goddesses and television stars and soul singers. It didn't seem possible Georgie could have listened to that blues tape of his and somehow heard a white man singing. Yet Georgie's corrosive racial romanticism burned the black right off the singer until all that was left was the scarlet muscle of a beating heart. (77)

As artificial and as hybrid as this "America" obviously is, it is perhaps not as far from the real one as 'Erickson' liked to think. After all, Georgie's concoction of vague imageries of political icons, Hollywood stardom, and pop music lines up the repertoire of "Americanness" quite neatly, a repertoire that not only distorts reality, but also constitutes it. The white-burnt blues song calls to mind a long history of cultural appropriation and marginalization confounding the very idea of an American nation.[4] By extension, "the scarlet muscle of a beating heart" — this decontextualized abstraction from actual appearance to pure sensation — curiously echoes 'Erickson's' desire for the sensual moment in its ahistorical totality. And Georgie seems to face unflinchingly what the American only tackles.

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[4] In contrast to the short story, the novel *Arc d'X* sets out as a crypto-realistic historical novel focusing on Thomas Jefferson's relationship to his black mistress, Sally Hemmings, in Paris, and thus on another effort at "burning off" the "black" and laying bare the "heart." As this fatal relationship is made out to constitute the idea of American national identity, Georgie's construction might not be all that wrong after all — if no less perverted for that.

Yet while 'Erickson' sought happiness, Georgie's quest seems to aim at something else. But then again, perhaps it is only his idea of happiness that differs from 'Erickson's' in the first place. They first talk to each other briefly after 'Erickson' purchased a piece of the Wall, which is completely blank except for a graffiti writing — strangely enough on its scraggy inside — which runs "*pursuit of happiness.*" This "fragment of rhetoric" (76) will seal 'Erickson's' fate: Georgie kills him for the splinter of stone, which instead of memorializing the past once more epitomizes the crumbling of history, as it can by no means emulate or even substitute the former "spine of the world's conscience." While Georgie's merciless pursuit of the piece for once might refer to the tale of the Tunneler, captured within walls and searching a happiness absorbed by the search itself, it also reverberates the arbitrariness of the very category "happiness" in view of the shattering of larger social affiliations and of reconfigurations of meaning and sense. As remembering the past and speculating about the future is futile, it is the present that comes into focus, yet the present moment is boiled down to ever shorter and ever more fragmented splinters, tautological confirmations of sense and purpose: *the pursuit of happiness* might very well have turned into the *happiness of the pursuit.*

Seen that way, the quest for the sensual moment turns into a highly ambivalent project, and Georgie's cold-blooded violence demarcates one of its darkest excrescences. If this turn of the narrative is doubtlessly extreme, it is also far from unusual. After all, the killer could be said to be the most popular figure in contemporary fictions, filmic just as well as literary. The exotic figure of the psychopath not only gives scope to Erickson's enactment of an aesthetics of the moment, but also dominates Stephen Wright's *Going Native* or Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994), while professional killers turn into cult figures in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) or Joel Coen's *Fargo* (1996), a paranoid political killer becomes the focus of attention in DeLillo's *Libra,* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* casts a terrorist organization in a quite sympathetic light.[5]

In Erickson's text Georgie, the killer kid, stands for a horror beyond expression, a senseless, gratuitous violence which can affect anybody anytime. Over and over again, arbitrary acts and accidental impulses paradoxically provide certainty in a world where the only absoluteness still given is negative. However, the quest for this horror is not associated with the psychopath, but with the writer figure,

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[5] Reflecting upon the function of violence and killing in Wright's *Going Native*, Julika Griem comes to a conclusion which could very well be extended to many other texts: Griem maintains that for Wright death is the only reference point of a society which has lost its traditional demarcations. Death is absolute otherness, but as such it offers at least a negative certainty both to the author and to his fictional figures (Griem, 46f.).

'Erickson,' whose desire to break through the surface to some deeper experience is momentarily fulfilled when he is killed in a senseless outburst of cruelty.

If this conjunction of the "sensual moment" with death and writing calls to mind the experiments of Romanticism, both the ironically doubled writer figure and the banal circumstances of the killing qualify such associations. 'Erickson's' ultimate experience is not related, and could thus be both meaningless or utterly meaningful. The denial of a satisfactory conclusion and the omission of any final resolution might, however, constitute the only means of enacting the extraordinary these days, as a prefabricated rhetoric of immediacy and authenticity has long taken over the task of expressing the most spectacular and the most incredible. Countless and all-pervasive imageries for killing and being killed, for going crazy and going wild render the loops of negation and appropriation ever tighter.

In William Gibson's *Neuromancer*, a group of media terrorists, the Panther Moderns, has found another strategy of contesting these processes of cooptation and appropriation: "Terrorism as we ordinarily understand it is inately media-related. The Panther-Moderns differ from other terrorists precisely in their degree of self-consciousness, in their awareness of the extent to which media divorce the act of terrorism from the original socio-political intent" (75). If the media turn terrorism into a mere spectacle, dismissing its political interests and social critique as irrelevant, the Panther Moderns turn the spectacle into terrorism. "Chaos [...] is our mode and modus," explains their leader at one time, accentuating the tautological quality of this resistance, which is an end in itself, displaying nothing but the potential to disrupt the ordered, to shatter conventions. This calls to mind the performative politics of the Neuwall Brigade and the Pale Flame in "From *Arc d'X*" with their tautological displays of older orders and their consecutive disruption. Resistance and negation are either left unspoken or become tautological in the fiction of the 1980s and 90s.

The aesthetics of experience, the totalization of presence and sensation, which Erickson's text sets against a culture based on fake sensations, false feelings and simulated histories, is highly precarious as we have seen. The momentary and the momentous, while promising self-realization and depth, also always threatens to collapse into perversity, into the tautological display of violence and pain for their own sake. And still this totalization presents the only means of counteracting the destructive pull of the X, as a return to larger ideas of historical and ideological closure seems equally problematic, if not worse. The negativity of this scenario remains almost unchallenged, only at one point, in 'Erickson's' phone sex relationship, an alternative mode of communication and contact is indicated, which contests the gravitational force of the 'X' and allows for some kind of suspension, bracketing sensation.

The phone, epitome of an alienating communication technology, momentarily restores contact and intimacy against all odds. The accidental contact, the chance encounter is utterly banal in its setting and circumstances, and yet when lived through seriously the trite can be replenished with depth and significance, and thus flip into its opposite, bringing about "the transcendence of the banal through the banal," as Dick Hebdige had it:

> The thing he would remember later was that, immediately after it was over and he lay spent on the hotel bed, she asked if he was all right. Not whether the sex had been all right but whether he was all right, his intensity having betrayed itself to her. (71)

This is as close as these lovers will get to each other, and already the experience is turning into memory, but the intimacy that briefly lights up here hints at the utopia of a sensual moment without the perversity of cruelty or egotism. Perfectly by chance — perfect by chance.

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