

THE GEOPOLITICAL AESTHETIC

Cinema and Space in the World System

FREDRIC JAMESON

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Bloomington and Indianapolis



BFI PUBLISHING

London

Introduction

Beyond Landscape

The films discussed here have been selected with a view towards an unsystematic mapping or scanning of the world system itself: from what used to be called the superpowers, across that most industrialized zone of a former Third World now called the Pacific Rim, only to conclude with a confrontation between First World or European technology at its most self-conscious (in Godard) and a Third World meditation on that technology at *its* most self-consciously and reflexively *naïf* (in the work of the Philippine film-maker Kidlat Tahimik).¹

But technology is little more than the outer emblem or symptom by which a systemic variety of concrete situations expresses itself in a specific variety of forms and form-problems. It is not a random variety, and sometimes seems best described in developmental – or better still, in uneven-developmental – language: as when, for example, Edward Yang's film *Terrorizer* seems to raise the question of the belated emergence of a kind of modernism in the modernizing Third World, at a moment when the so-called advanced countries are themselves sinking into full postmodernity. The residues of the modern will then offer one clue or thread for these explorations.

Yet other kinds of relationships also propose convenient figures: the US and Soviet narratives discussed here, as different from each other as the *série noire* from Grimms' fairy tales, both seem to raise the problem of the view from above, and of the invention of new forms of representation for what it is properly impossible to think or represent, and both finally coincide in the logic of conspiracy. But in the North American movies, it is a conspiracy of the espionage-thriller or even paranoid type, while in Alexander Sokurov's stunning *Days of Eclipse* (based on a novel and script by the Strugatsky Brothers) such inverted providentiality becomes on the contrary science-fictional in its resonance.

In fact the theoretical focus of this investigation is modified after the American materials, as the section break indicates. The earlier section sought to document the figuration of conspiracy as an attempt – 'unconscious,' if you follow my loose, figural use of that otherwise

individual term – to think a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves. Space and demography offer the quickest short-cuts to this perceptual difficulty, provided each is used like a ladder to be kicked away after it has done its work. As far as space is concerned, Bergson's warning about the temptations of spatializing thought remain current in the age of the intercontinental ballistic missile and the new infra-red and laser systems of which we are so proud; it is even more timely in an era of urban dissolution and re-ghettoization, in which we might be tempted to think that the social can be mapped that way, by following across a map insurance red lines and the electrified borders of private police and surveillance forces. Both images are, however, only caricatures of the mode of production itself (most often called late capitalism), whose mechanisms and dynamics are not visible in that sense, cannot be detected on the surfaces scanned by satellites, and therefore stand as a fundamental representational problem – indeed, a problem of a historically new and original type.

All of the terms that lie to hand, indeed, are already figural, already soaked and saturated in ideology: this is why demography won't work either, although it is certain, not merely that the sheer numbers of new people on the globe, but even more surely their unprecedented self-consciousness, play their part in the new representational situation. But for most people, demography projects an immediate and subliminal image of the starving masses abroad and the homeless at home, of birth control and abortion. It thereby fixes the theme permanently at the political level and in a form which – all the more so because of its intrinsic urgency – does not move the viewer or the listener, the reader or 'public opinion' itself on to the underlying systemic reality, the root cause of missiles and permanent underemployment, or birth-rates abroad fully as much as break-ins at home. To make your way from those vivid miseries, which offer no problems of figuration since they can all at once be witnessed on your television set – and indeed somehow offer the example of an idea that includes an image, or an image that comes pre-packaged and already labelled with its ideational slogan – to be able to make your way through that level so as to think it together with its deeper, but non-visual systemic cause – this, if it is possible, is what used to be called self-consciousness about the social totality.

My thesis, however, is not merely that we ought to strive for it, but that we do so all the time anyway without being aware of the process. Critics and theorists have shown enthusiasm for the proposition that figures and narratives can bear many different meanings at the same time, and know distinct, sometimes even contradictory functions. They have been less eager to make an inventory of some of the specific meanings in question, something I try to do here for what

may be called the 'conspiratorial text,' which, whatever other messages it emits or implies, may also be taken to constitute an unconscious, collective effort at trying to figure out where we are and what landscapes and forces confront us in a late twentieth century whose abominations are heightened by their concealment and their bureaucratic impersonality. Conspiracy film takes a wild stab at the heart of all that, in a situation in which it is the intent and the gesture that counts. Nothing is gained by having been persuaded of the definitive verisimilitude of this or that conspiratorial hypothesis: but in the intent to hypothesize, in the desire called cognitive mapping – therein lies the beginning of wisdom.

In Part Two, this orientation is reversed; and a series of 'filmic texts' is scanned for a kind of allegorical thinking which is less ultimate than the cartography of the absolute invoked in the preceding paragraphs, although of a piece with it and sharing common mental operations. At a more local level, indeed, what I have called cognitive mapping – and what Althusser described in his classic model of the three fundamental terms of ideology (the individual subject, the real, and the Imaginary projection by the subject of the former's relationship to the latter)² – was simplified by a Cold War division for which henceforth traditional class categories could largely serve (business classes and managers, factory workers, fieldworkers, and lumpens or unemployed). Now however we revert to a multiplicity of nation states (and fantasmatic nationalisms), not yet culturally and ideologically organized around the categories of the new triumvirate of super-states (the US, Europe and Japan). In the absence of general categories under which to subsume such particulars, the lapse back into features of the pre-World War I international system is inevitable and convenient (it includes all the national stereotypes which, inevitably racist whether positive or negative, organize our possibility of viewing and confronting the collective Other).³

It is also important to stress the fact that these archaic categories will not work for the new world system: it is enough, for example, to reflect on the disappearance of specifically national cultures and their replacement, either by a centralized commercial production for world export or by their own mass-produced neotraditional images, for the lack of fit between the categories of the nineteenth century and the realities of the twenty-first to become apparent. Under these circumstances, the operations of some banal political unconscious clearly continue – we map our fellows in class terms day by day and fantasize our current events in terms of larger mythic narratives, we allegorize our consumption and construction of the object-world in terms of Utopian wishes and commercially programmed habits – but to that must be added what I will now call a geopolitical unconscious. This it is which now attempts to refashion national allegory into a conceptual instrument for grasping our new being-in-the-world. It may

henceforth be thought to be at least one of the fundamental allegorical referents or levels of all seemingly abstract philosophical thought: so that a fundamental hypothesis would pose the principle that all thinking today is *also*, whatever else it is, an attempt to think the world system as such. All the more true will this be for narrative figurations, whose very structure encourages a soaking up of whatever ideas in the air are left and a fantasy-solution to all the anxieties that rush to fill our current vacuum. The films analyzed in the second part of this present book may all of them be taken as exhibits in that process, and as examples of the way in which narrative today (or at least narrative outside the superstate, which need not worry about these problems in the same way, as Part One will show) conflates ontology with geography and endlessly processes images of the un-mappable system.

The issue is thereby joined of representation itself, or rather (since that word has been associated with polemics it may be distracting to recall in the present context) of representability: a term that raises in its turn the fundamental historical question of the conditions of possibility of such representation in the first place. It is a question which necessarily opens out onto the nature of the social raw material on the one hand (a raw material which necessarily includes the psychic and the subjective within itself) and the state of the form on the other, the aesthetic technologies available for the crystallization of a particular spatial or narrative model of the social totality.

For it is ultimately always of the social totality itself that it is a question in representation, and never more so than in the present age of a multinational global corporate network. It is, indeed, as if the imagination included a sound barrier, undetectable save in those moments in which a representational task or program suddenly collapses. Such a sound barrier (if not the speed of light itself) could be thought of in terms of demography, of the sheer quantities of other people, whose figural categories cease to multiply beyond a certain point. But what is that point, in our time: the mob; the masses in the plaza, seen from above in a literal bird's-eye view; the silent wheeling of great armies on foot, face to face (as in *Spartacus* [Kubrick, 1960] or Bondarchuk's *War and Peace* [1968])? Most wondrous of all, the first appearance, on the strand, in carts and on foot, on horse- or donkey-back, in rags and tattered uniforms, accompanied by family and concubines, of the rag-tag and bobtail army of the people itself in Pontecorvo's *Burn!* (1969)? Under what circumstances can a necessarily individual story with individual characters function to represent collective processes?

Allegory thereby fatally stages its historic reappearance in the post-modern era (after the long domination of the symbol from romanticism to late modernism), and seems to offer the most satisfactory (if varied and heterogeneous) solutions to these form-problems.

On the global scale, allegory allows the most random, minute, or isolated landscapes to function as a figurative machinery in which questions about the system and its control over the local ceaselessly rise and fall, with a fluidity that has no equivalent in those older national allegories of which I have spoken elsewhere.⁴ On the actantial level, a host of partial subjects, fragmentary or schizoid constellations, can often now stand in allegorically for trends and forces in the world system, in a transitional situation in which genuinely transnational classes, such as a new international proletariat and a new density of global management, have not yet anywhere clearly emerged. These constellated and allegorical subject-positions are, however, as likely to be collective as they are individual-schizophrenic, something which itself poses new form-problems for an individualistic storytelling tradition.

As for commodification, its relationship to allegory can be expected to be polyvalent; but the fact of the commodification of the cultural product itself can illustrate some of the complications, since, in the postmodern, autoreferentiality can be initially detected in the way in which culture acts out its own commodification. From the generic standpoint, what interests us here is the way in which the former genres (thrillers, spy films, social exposés, science fiction, and so on) now conflate in a movement that re-enacts the dedifferentiation of the social levels, and by way of their own allegorization: so that the new post-generic genre films are allegories of each other, and of the impossible representation of the social totality itself.

Space, representability, allegory: such are then the theoretical and analytic instruments that will be mobilized to examine a variety of filmic narratives from that new world-systemic moment which, gradually laid in place since the end of World War II, has been unveiled in discontinuous convulsions – the end of the 60s, the rise of the Third World debt, the emergence first of Japan and then of a soon-to-be-united new Europe as competing superstates, the collapse of the party state in the East, and finally the re-assumption by the United States of a refurbished vocation as global policeman – and which can indifferently be called postmodernity or the third (or 'late') stage of capitalism.

But by the same token, it is to be expected that the remarkable films which constitute the present set of exhibits will have their own commentary to make on those new conceptual and analytic instruments and will modify them appropriately, as have a number of gratifying readers and listeners, among whom are to be mentioned Colin MacCabe, Esther Johnson, Ian Christie, and my audiences at the National Film Theater in London, in the spring of 1990. The final product owes an incalculable debt to Roma Gibson, Candice Ward, Tom Whiteside, and Kevin Heller.

Durham, North Carolina – March, 1991

Notes

1. If I have not included discussions of films from other national cinemas or non-Western traditions, the reader will I hope not too quickly conclude that this accident reflects lack of interest. I have in fact written on Latin-American films in my chapter on 'Magic Realism' in *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1990); and touched too briefly on African film (Ousmane Sembène) in my essay 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,' *Social Text* 15, Fall 1986, pp. 65-88.
2. The reference is to the well-known essay on 'Ideological State Apparatuses,' in *Lenin and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review, 1971).
3. I discuss the pre-World War I system of national allegory in chapter 5 of *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
4. In the essay referred to in note 1.

Part One

Totality as Conspiracy

Totality as Conspiracy

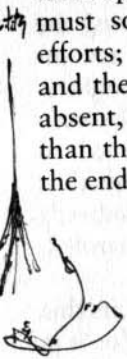
In the widespread paralysis of the collective or social imaginary, to which 'nothing occurs' (Karl Kraus) when confronted with the ambitious program of fantasizing an economic system on the scale of the globe itself, the older motif of conspiracy knows a fresh lease on life, as a narrative structure capable of reuniting the minimal basic components: a potentially infinite network, along with a plausible explanation of its invisibility; or in other words: the collective and the epistemological.

To put it this way is to understand how this imperfect mediatory and allegorical structure – the conspiracy, not yet even the world system itself – offers the gravest representational dilemmas, since traditional narratives have never been much good at conveying the collective (save in the explosive punctual moments of war or revolution), while the knowledge function as such has never been thought to be particularly compatible with *belles lettres*. Beyond this, the conspiratorial allegory also raises the issue of Value, insofar as it needs to be marked as imperfect in order to serve as a cognitive map (which it would be disastrous to confuse with reality itself, as when Flaubert's Félicité, shown a map of Havana where her sailor nephew has landed, asks to see the house he is staying in).

On the other hand, the cognitive or allegorical investment in this representation will be for the most part an unconscious one, for it is only at that deeper level of our collective fantasy that we think about the social system all the time, a deeper level that also allows us to slip our political thoughts past a liberal and anti-political censorship. But this means, on the one hand, that the cognitive function of the conspiratorial plot must be able to flicker in and out, like some secondary or subliminal after-image; while by the same token the achieved surface of the representation itself must not be allowed to aspire to the monumental status of high art as such (at least until the beginnings of the postmodern, where a new interpenetration of high art and mass culture enables conspiratorial plot-constructions such as those of Pynchon to attain 'artistic' or high-brow standing).

As for the collective dimension of this hermeneutic machine, what clearly trips it into another order of things is the dialectical intensification of information and communication as such, which remains unthematized as long as we are in the realm of the mob, or of Victor Hugo's bird's-eye view of the battle of Waterloo (in *Les Misérables*), but which the hardening into technology problematizes, all the way from that thesis topic called 'the first appearance of the railroad in English (or French) literature' to Proust's embarrassing Vestal Virgins of the telephone. Since the world system of late capitalism (or post-modernity) is however inconceivable without the computerized media technology which eclipses its former spaces and faxes an unheard-of simultaneity across its branches, information technology will become virtually the representational solution as well as the representational problem of this world system's cognitive mapping, whose allegories can now always be expected to include a communicational third term.

We will therefore want to explore the new symptomatic narratives from three general directions: (1) to interrogate them about the ways in which their object-worlds can be allegorically prepared, disposed, and rewired in order to become the bearers of conspiracy, the existential furniture of daily life thereby finding itself slowly transformed into communications technology; (2) to test the incommensurability between an individual witness – the individual character of a still anthropomorphic narrative – and the collective conspiracy which must somehow be exposed or revealed through these individual efforts; (3) the thing itself, namely, how the local items of the present and the here-and-now can be made to express and to designate the absent, unrepresentable totality; how individuals can add up to more than their sum; what a global or world system might look like after the end of cosmology.



So, a fairly clear polarization along lines of De Certeau but distributed widely

If everything means something else, then so does technology. It would be a mistake to reduce the menacing object-world of allegorical conspiracies to that first, fresh fear of spy systems and informants in the 1960s, when right-wingers discovered a whole new generation of just the right gadgets and someone was listening to you, but only to you personally. J. Edgar Hoover would make a most anachronistic mascot for late capitalism; while the anxieties about privacy seem to have diminished, in a situation in which its tendential erosion or even abolition has come to stand for nothing less than the end of civil society itself. It is as though we were training ourselves, in advance, for the stereotypical dystopian rigors of overpopulation in a world in which no one has a room of her own any more, or secrets anybody else cares about in the first place. But the variable that gears the rest, as always, is the more fundamental abstract category of property: here disclosing a fundamental transition from the private to the corporate, the latter unmasking the former and thereby problematizing the very juridical system on which it is itself constructed. How there could be private things, let alone privacy, in a situation in which almost everything around us is functionally inserted into larger institutional schemes and frameworks of all kinds, which nonetheless belong to *somebody* – this is now the nagging question that haunts the camera dolly around our various life-worlds, looking for a lost object the memory of which it cannot quite retain. Older aesthetics guide its fumbling attempts – old-fashioned interiors, and equally old-fashioned nightmare spaces, ancient collectibles, nostalgia for handicrafts – in a situation in which the appropriate new habits have been unable to form and the antique stores (Balzac, *La Peau de chagrin*) have all disappeared. What has happened to the objects of our object-world is neither youth nor age, but their wholesale transformation into instruments of communication; and this now takes the place of the older surrealist metamorphoses, the oneiric city, the domestic space of the incredible shrinking man, or the horror of the organic of so much science fiction, where brushing against an inani-

mate object suddenly feels like being touched by someone's hand.

Yet in hindsight, and with the appropriate rewriting, all of that might have been an anticipation of this, whose fundamental precondition is the disappearance of nature as such. Once its eclipse is secured, oppositions like those between animate and inanimate are themselves relegated to a historical lumber room that looks less like a museum or a junk-shop than the place information goes when a word-processor is accidentally erased. Once plants have become machines – and even though not a breath of wind has ruffled the selfsame landscape equal to itself – every object changes and becomes a human sign (not unexpectedly drawing all the theories of language and sign systems after it). Now not the magical speaking beasts or the 'flowers that look back at you,' but the marching automata of *Blade Runner's* last cavernous private apartment (Ridley Scott, 1982): these are anachronisms that overspring the present into the far future of android technology; and now all of our things, of whatever fabric and purpose, are inhabited by the possibility of becoming nasty dolls with needle teeth that bite (*Barbarella* [Roger Vadim, 1968]).

This is the intuition embodied by the new magic realism of Derek Jarman and Raoul Ruiz: that surrealism was both impossible and unnecessary, since in some other sense it was already real (such had been Alejo Carpentier's original formulation of the style in the preface to his *Kingdom of This World*, which he attributed to the uneven development of Latin America, but which now seems to belong to all of us). Even late Buñuel (*The Discreet Charm* [1972], *The Obscure Object* [1977]) is closer to this than to the heroic period of surrealist desire and Wagnerian longing: *L'Age d'or* (1930) remains a breathtaking relic from the age of gods and heroes, but it is no longer for us, since it would be comical to wish the social burden of bourgeois respectability and elaborate moral taboo back into existence merely to re-endow the sex drive with the value of a political act.

Nonsynchronicity was also the condition, in the surrealist Europe of the 20s, for the eruption of archaic moments of Spanish feudality, French medieval romance, or even Rousseau's state of nature itself, into an incompletely modernized present staffed by the grande and the petite bourgeoisie. All that seems to remain of such effects are the simulations of occult film, which accompany the so-called religious revival like its wish-fulfillment. In Jarman and Ruiz, however, the most 'surrealist' moments are those in which modern technological artifacts – a pocket computer, say, or a once mint roadster covered in dust and housed beneath the grand staircase – are inconspicuously planted among the Renaissance splendor of Roman prelates, their costumes and palaces (*Caravaggio*, 1986); but Buñuel's mumbling bishops turned to bones, leaving only their robes behind them on the rocky promontory where the city was to be founded. That flight into deep geological time takes a different direction from this particular

future shock: indeed, insisting that his work has nothing in common with surrealism, Ruiz has cherished incongruities of the type exemplified by the shot in *Cleopatra* in which an airliner can be glimpsed in the distant sky above the togaed actors.¹ This is no longer Breton's 'objective chance,' I think, but rather a Nietzschean affirmation that there is no past, and thus, finally, no time at all – something one often feels in Ruiz's films when this or that chance marker abruptly 'situates' their magical events in modern chronology once more.

Communicational and information technologies – the scientific machineries of reproduction rather than of production (which, however, then trail the latter in their wake and turn it inside out, as their misunderstood predecessor) – foreground and dramatize this transformation of the object-world like its material idea. But they themselves become magical only when grasped as the allegories of something else, of the whole unimaginable decentered global network itself. The new ingredients are already registered in the opening credits of *Three Days of the Condor* (Pollack, 1975), elegantly telexed in stylish computer graphics. Indeed, in postmodern film, the credits have become an inconspicuous yet crucial space in which the desired perceptual habits of a viewer are, as in the old musical modes, generically cued towards either techno- or deco-graphics, respectively.

The relationship between this technology and death itself is then inscribed in *Condor's* opening sequence – the apparently mistaken liquidation of a whole bureau of minor espionage researchers and specialists – by the clacking of the word-processors among the silence of the sprawling corpses as the machines continue to affirm their mechanical existence and to go on producing 'text' in a haunting sonorous surcharge (which it is instructive to juxtapose with the organic menace of vaguely flapping wings and chicken scratches in the attic during the opening scenes of *The Exorcist* [Friedkin, 1973]).

But who says 'media' traditionally includes and encompasses transportation as well. Not the least beautiful and pertinent feature of the Pollack film is its incorporation of the great traffic networks: not merely the outsized bridges and highways of Manhattan, but also the New York–Washington shuttle in flight, and the dialectical extremes of the helicopter and the little truck, along with the residual insertion of the railway system that infers the other end of this spatial map somewhere in the snows of Vermont.

This X-ray of functional mediations in space was completed, as a kind of program, by John Schlesinger's *Marathon Man* (1976), a virtual anthology of types of space and climate, which suggests the totalizing vocation of such a geographical collection, often required as a kind of backing or after-image for those narratives that set out to map the social totality in some more fundamental structural fashion.

It may, however, be convenient to take a masterwork of the older

aesthetic, Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*, as a genealogical precursor in this development. As its title suggests, the narrative grid of this film, which propels us from one empty hotel room to another across continental North America, re-enacts that empty outline of the forty-eight states that all good American citizens carry like a logo etched into their mind's eye.² From Mies' newly built Seagram Building in Manhattan to a famous cornfield in Illinois, from the CIA headquarters in Washington, DC, to the balding stone crown of the figures of Mount Rushmore and a cantilevered modern house on the Canadian border – indeed on the very edge of the world itself (its planes taking off for the darkest Iron Curtain) – this sequence makes moves in which the various landscapes emit specific but complementary narrative messages, as though in a return at the very end of modernity to the semiotic landscapes of those tribal or oral narratives Lévi-Strauss de-crypted for us in such studies as *The Epic of Asdiwal*.

The frenzy of the pursuit, however – notoriously, in Hitchcock, motivated only in the most perfunctory way by the espionage intrigue, but more basically by the love triangle – lends this displacement something of the passion and the value of the epistemological itself: wanting to grasp the beast itself, as Mailer has said of that desire called The Great American Novel; covering all the ground and all the bases in the distracted feeling that this gigantic *objet petit a* somehow contains the very secrets of Being itself: comparable in that only to the desperate ride, in Philip K. Dick's novel *Ubik* (1969), from a formerly La Guardia Airport in New York City to a Des Moines, Iowa, funeral home, in which historical time is relentlessly disintegrating around the hapless protagonist, jet planes of the future downgraded to small bi-planes, high technology fading away as in a dream, space enlarging ominously as the means of transport become ever more primitive – the most brilliant of all Dick's nightmares, in which each incremental progress back into time enlarges just ever so more slightly your distance from your heart's desire.

Condor, however, deploys such geographical motifs as a mere signal of the 'intent to totalize'. As for its plot in some literary sense, the neatly tied themes (Redford is a 'reader,' the CIA wargames are structurally connected and opposed to the deciphering of codes in printed stories and novels) are trendily inappropriate for its thriller context, and are thereby trivialized. Alongside this ideational window-dressing, the concrete and more genuinely filmic and spatial working through of these themes can be found in the descent into the interior of the telephone central. Redford as informational mechanic and industrial worker is more interesting than as English major and intellectual, and the great banks of switches and synapses recall again the ghostly proletarian content of other contemporary films such as *Alien* (Scott, 1979), if not indeed of the heist genre itself – always in one way or another an inscription of collective non-alienated work



Three Days of the Condor

that passes the censor by way of its rewriting in terms of crime and sub-generic entertainment. Archetypal journeys back beyond the surface appearance of things are also here dimly reawakened, from antiquity and Dante all the way to Goffman's storefront/backroom, with its canonical form in Marx's great invitation to 'leave this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in full view of everyone, and follow [the owner of money and the owner of labor-power] into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there hangs the notice "No admittance except on business"'.³ This promise of a deeper inside view is the hermeneutic content of the conspiracy thriller in general, although its spatialization in *Condor* seems somehow more alarming than the imaginary networks of the usual suspects: the representational confirmation that telephone cables and lines and their interchanges follow us everywhere, doubling the streets and buildings of the visible social world with a secondary secret underground world, is a vivid, if paranoid, cognitive map, redeemed for once only by the possibility of turning the tables, when the hero is able to tap into the circuits and bug the buggers, abolishing space with his own kind of simultaneity by scrambling all the symptoms and producing his messages from all corners of the map at the same time.

But no matter how systematically reorganized and postmodernized, telephone technology is still marked as relatively old-fashioned or archaic within the new post-industrial landscape (we will find that representation seems to have demanded a similar regression in the technologies of *All the President's Men*). Whether representation can

draw directly, in some new way, on the distinctive technology of capitalism's third stage, whose video- and computer-based furniture and object-world are markedly less photogenic than the media and transportation technology of the second (not excluding telephones), remains one of the great open questions of postmodern culture generally. Surely the newer spy novels, with their bewildering multiplication of secret or private espionage operations within public ones, their dizzying paper structures (more philosophically dematerialized and ideal than the stock market) turning on the facile but effective device of the double agent, so that whole teams of villains can be transformed into heroes at the flip of a switch – surely these go a certain way towards declaring at least the intent to construct a narrative which is in some way an *analogon* of and a stand-in for the unimaginable overdetermination of the computer itself. But in representations like these, the operative effect is confusion rather than articulation. It is at the point where we give up and are no longer able to remember which side the characters are on, and how they have been revealed to be hooked up with the other ones, that we have presumably grasped the deeper truth of the world system (certainly no one will have been astonished or enlightened to discover that the head of the CIA, the Vice President, the Secretary of State, or even the President himself, was secretly behind everything in the first place). Such confusions – which evidently have something to do with structural limits of memory – seem to mark a point of no return beyond which the human organism can no longer match the velocities or the demographics of the new world system. That the symptom betrays some deeper incapacity of the postmodern subject to process history itself can be argued from a variety of other, related, but less officially political, phenomena. One noted long ago, for example, in Ross MacDonald's oedipal detective stories, that it was growing harder and harder to keep the parental generation separate from that of the grandparents: the feeling is now endemic in a whole new generation of detective stories that betray the need to incorporate history.

In high literature, Pynchon comes to mind unavoidably as a body of writing which does not avoid the weaknesses in plot construction of the spy novel (although it negotiates them at a greater level of quality and intensity), but which is marked out for our purposes as a matter of a somewhat different kind of interest, as a space in which new cybernetic figures are forged and elaborated: static op-art after-images spun off the bewildering rotation of just such cyberplots. Kenneth Burke's narratological categories, in which *scene* is pressed into service as a form of *agency*, seem extraordinarily apt for those now distant but still hallucinatory 60s California moments in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), when the conspiracy of property development suddenly resonates with some well-nigh runic message:

She drove into San Narcisco on a Sunday, in a rented Impala. Nothing was happening. She looked down a slope, needing to squint for the sunlight, onto a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narcisco, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. Smog hung all round the horizon, the sun on the bright beige countryside was painful; she and the Chevy seemed parked at the centre of an odd, religious instant. As if, on some other frequency, or out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken.⁴

The representational ingenuity of this novel lies in its identification of the conspiracy with the media itself, here the postal system, in which the contradiction between private ownership and social production is redramatized by way of the enigmatic reappearance of 'private' mail delivery systems. Yet the force of Pynchon's narrative draws not on the advanced or futuristic technology of the contemporary media so much as from their endowment with an archaic past: the pseudo-histories of the various postal systems and postage stamp substitutes, the traces left in old books, the archival remains of what the present imagines itself to have left behind. Indeed, the most ominous doubt inspired by this novella, which wants to contaminate its readers and beyond them to endow the present age itself with an impalpable but omnipresent culture of paranoia, is the conjecture that if the fossil record were complete, we would be likely to find the Thurn-and-Taxis post-horn on hominid artifacts as far back as the Pleistocene. Still, it must be observed that it is not the patterning system of the computer circuits that conveys this remarkable effect, but rather the archeological hermeneutic itself which endows cybernetic objects with a suggestive power they cannot muster on their own.

Later Pynchon, who sinks further back into the 50s and the rather different conspiracies of the McCarthyite period, stages the conspiratorial epiphany in a rather different way, eschewing the mystical for the little repressions of the bureaucratic everyday:

She drove on downtown, being extra careful because she felt like

doing harm to somebody, found a liquor store with a big Checks Cashed sign, got the same turndown inside. Running on nerve and anger, she kept on till she reached the next supermarket, and this time she was told to wait while somebody went in back and made a phone call.

It was there, gazing down a long aisle of frozen food, out past the checkout stands, and into the terminal black glow of the front windows, that she found herself entering a moment of undeniable clairvoyance, rare in her life but recognized. She understood that the Reaganomic ax blades were swinging everywhere, that she and Flash were no longer exempt, might easily be abandoned already to the upper world and any unfinished business in it that might now resume . . . as if they'd been kept safe in some time-free zone all these years but now, at the unreadable whim of something in power, must reenter the clockwork of cause and effect. Somewhere there would be a real ax, or something just there would be a real ax, or something just as painful, Jasonic, blade-to-meat final – but at the distance she, Flash, and Justin had by now been brought to, it would all be done with keys on alphanumeric keyboards that stood for weightless, invisible chains of electronic presence or absence. If patterns of ones and zeros were 'like' patterns of human lives and deaths, if everything about an individual could be represented in a computer record by a long string of ones and zeros, then what kind of creature would be represented by a long string of lives and deaths? It would have to be up one level at least – an angel, a minor god, something in a UFO. It would take eight human lives and deaths just to form one character in this being's name – its complete dossier might take up a considerable piece of the history of the world. We are digits in God's computer, she not so much thought as hummed to herself to a sort of standard gospel tune. And the only thing we're good for, to be dead or to be living, is the only thing He sees. What we cry, what we contend for, in our world of toil and blood, it all lies beneath the notice of the hacker we call God.

The night manager came back, holding the check as he might a used disposable diaper. 'They stopped payment on this.'

'The banks are closed, how'd they do that?'

He spent his work life here explaining reality to the herds of computer-illiterate who crowded in and out of the store. 'The computer,' he began gently, once again, 'never has to sleep, or even go take a break. It's like it's open 24 hours a day. . . .'⁵

But in this, far and away the most politically radical of Pynchon's texts, and a belatedly 60s anti-authoritarian attack on the Reagan decade, one wonders sometimes whether the stereotypical wiring that



Youji Watanabe, Sky Building no. 3 (Tokyo, 1971)

is the classic Pynchon inner form has not been reversed, so that the moments of fear are derived from what we already know about the Nixon/Reagan years and their internal conspiracies, rather than the other way round, projecting a fresh breath of hitherto unexperienced anxiety onto plots that seem as comically inept as they may be prophetic. It is a question that will have to be posed again when we come to *All the President's Men*.

The structural alternative, then, to a situation in which technological objects are endowed with symbolic power by their narrative contexts, can be expected to lie in objects whose very function itself generates the narrative and produces the conspiracy in their own right, and in such a way that attention is diverted from their visual inadequacy. Those Japanese apartment buildings constructed like stacks of audio-cassettes can now no longer be inserted into the tape player of the macrocosm; but the media in *Blow Out* (de Palma, 1981) do not merely write their own check, they rewrite the world itself – or at least its soundtrack – and release as many alternate histories. The telltale sound of the assassin's rifle shot can be excised or replaced, while the 'true' or documentary soundtrack of a real murder can be spliced into a fictional horror film, so as not to let anything go to waste.