Theories of the Fantastic:
Postmodernism, Game Theory, and Modern Physics

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This dissertation examines the fantastic mode of narrative as it appears in postmodern texts in a variety of media including literature, television, and film. By analyzing the kinds of changes which the fantastic mode has undergone in order to accommodate postmodern concerns, this project attempts to answer both how and why the fantastic has maintained its popularity and effectiveness. The first chapter seeks to define the fantastic mode by tracing the history of its definition from the early twentieth century up until the present. In doing so, it revisits the contributions of such analysts as Vax, Caillois, Todorov, and Freud. The second chapter discusses the changes to conventions demanded by postmodern discursive strategies, many of which include a back-and-forth movement between equally valid interpretations of the text. A discussion of Armin Ayren’s “Der Brandstifter,” a comparison of a recurring X-Files sub-plot to Bram Stoker’s Dracula, and an analysis of an intentionally self-reflexive episode of The X-Files demonstrate these changes. The third chapter introduces game theory as a way of understanding the back-and-forth movement typical of the fantastic mode. Hanns Heinz Ewers’s “Die Spinne” is used to illustrate the psychoanalytical aspect of this movement.
The next chapter compares and contrasts three vampire films, *The Addiction*, *Lair of the White Worm*, and *Nadja*, in order to demonstrate how the degree to which this back-and-forth movement is present is an indicator of how successfully the fantastic effect emerges. The fifth chapter introduces modern physics as another mode for understanding the presence of the fantastic mode in the postmodern era. The analysis of *House of Leaves* in the final chapter illustrates how postmodern theory, game theory, and physics all work together to explain the fantastic’s effectiveness. This dissertation’s aim is to explain how and why a mode once defined as a specific nineteenth-century phenomenon keeps reinventing itself and re-emerging to continue to frighten and entertain us.
Table of Contents

Chapter One: Defining the Fantastic ........................................ 1

Chapter Two: Postmodern Theory and the Fantastic ..................... 47

Chapter Three: Game Theory and the Fantastic .......................... 118

Chapter Four: Game Theory, Postmodern Parody and the Fantastic ... 164

Chapter Five: The Fantastic and Modern Physics ......................... 194

Chapter Six: House of Leaves: The Whole Fantastic, Postmodern, Playful,

Quantum Experience ............................................................. 230
Chapter One

Defining the Fantastic

In the PBS series The Power of Myth (1988), Joseph Campbell introduces his viewers to a remarkable sculpture deep within the shadows of the Shiva cave at Elephanta in India. One must approach the sculpture in near darkness, waiting for one’s eyes to adjust. Eventually, one sees a face which is neither male nor female. It is expressionless, yet serene. The eyes are closed. It is called the Mask of Eternity. It does not assume to represent eternity itself; it is only the mask. Eternity, God, or transcendence by any other name, cannot be apprehended directly. The significance of the mask is that it locates eternity. On either side of the mask one sees two faces looking away in opposite directions: one male, one female. The point, Campbell says, is that “whenever one moves out of the transcendent, one comes into a field of opposites.” He goes on to make the connection with the Judeo-Christian creation myth: “One has eaten of the tree of knowledge, not only of good and evil, but of male and female, right and wrong, of this and that, light and dark. Everything in the field of time is dual: past and future, dead and alive, all this… being and non-being, is, isn’t….” According to Campbell, the moment of transcendence is the moment when one locates oneself in a “between” state, when one escapes the tyranny of binary opposition – the tyranny of language itself. The mask is a rich metaphor because it speaks so eloquently of our problematic relationship to language, to narrative, and to ideas which we can only apprehend as they are mediated
through language. The very notion of transcendence implies that there is something beyond language. Yet, it is only through language that one can assert this idea and value it. The New Testament writer who says “For now we see through a glass, darkly” (King James Bible, 1 Cor. 13.12) describes beautifully the experience of apprehending all things through language. Is it the glass that darkens the vision, or is it the glass that permits one to see at all? Or is it both?

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, one is taught to revile the serpent for introducing evil into the world. It would be equally valid to revere the serpent for introducing good. What it really brought was binary opposition. Campbell makes the connection between binary opposition and the capacity for language which stems from the ability to discern difference. He calls this “humanity’s coming into experience.” But does one revere or revile this problematic gift of binaries? Or can we do both? Or neither? Is there “a moment between” when one can break free and transcend the binary building blocks of experience? These questions, I believe, are central to the defining moments of fantastic narratives. I will argue that “the moment between” is the key to understanding the nature, the modus operandi, and even the appeal of fantastic narratives. These narratives are exercises in apprehending something beyond language, something unnamable or indescribable that can only emerge when language demonstrates its insufficiencies. Are vampires, werewolves, and ghosts really implied by the serenity of the mask of eternity? Buddhists approach the transcendent through meditation upon koans, puzzles based upon paradox which stymie thought and permit a glimpse of something other than logical thought wrapped in language. The emergence of non-existent creatures or impossibilities, which by definition can only exist within discourse, at those moments in
discourse where language falters, is precisely the kind of paradox which can underlie such a koan. It is my intention to show how the emergence of impossibility through language, which in the fantastic only expresses impossibility through its own faltering attempts, gaps, ellipses, and inadequacies, is the paradoxical moment which connects these monsters to the serenity of the mask. Though the vision may be dark, as in the Shiva cave or through St. Paul’s glass, to move, even briefly, to a space or moment in which language loses its control over experience implies exactly that kind of transcendent moment which belongs with eternity in that space “between.”

The fantastic, as a genre or perhaps even a sub-genre, already occupies a space “between” in that it does not belong exactly with the neighbouring genres with which it is sometimes confused. It is not fantasy – a broader genre that often embraces the marvelous worlds of such creatures as elves and wizards and encourages a certain escapism. Neither is it simply horror, which aims only to frighten, possibly by invoking the uncanny but not necessarily the impossible. The fantastic’s aims and methods are somewhere between the two. Since the ground-breaking work of Tzvetan Todorov, most definitions of the fantastic at least acknowledge his contribution to the description of this rather easily misunderstood genre. While his definition refers specifically to a group of nineteenth-century French texts, the key characteristics he sees in these texts are pertinent to the postmodern fantastic texts that are my focus here as well. What is more, his theory is one of the earliest and clearest examples of the role that “the moment between” plays in the enjoyment and analysis of fantastic narratives. In 1968, Todorov wrote:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be
explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions, either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination… or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality.

(25)

One can see the limitations of this definition within a postmodern context. More recent fantastic texts problematize the notion of any world being “indeed our world.” Is a fictional world our world or is our world fictional? Concepts like reality itself are now used provisionally, so an impossible fictional event functions differently than in the nineteenth century. The notion of the character’s choice between options is what is truly useful even when applied to postmodern texts. Todorov continues:

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event. (25)

In order for the hesitation to function properly, there must be a simple explanation that does not defy natural laws, but it must be “completely stripped of internal probability” (26). The improbability of the possible is what prolongs the hesitation and permits a fuller experience of that moment between opposites: the possible and the impossible. Note that the fantastic hesitation is not just between any binary opposites. Specifically, the character hesitates between possible and impossible when “confronting an apparently supernatural event.”
Todorov goes on to add that it is not the character alone who hesitates. He argues that there is an integration of the reader into the fictional world: “that world is defined by the reader’s own ambiguous perception of the events narrated” (31). The reader’s hesitation, therefore, becomes the defining characteristic of the fantastic. An inability to interpret the narrated events, to choose between possible and impossible explanations, is what places the reader into that moment or space between, where narrative interpretation fails and language temporarily falters. This is the thrill of the fantastic moment. The suspension between opposites of such import is what permits a glimpse at something beyond language, a transcendent moment of sorts.

Todorov was not the only theorist working on fantastic literature in the 1960s. Two other theorists, Louis Vax and Roger Caillois, also published influential analyses of the nineteenth-century fantastic corpus at about the same time. Prior to their work, the definitive text was written by Pierre George Castex in 1947. He refers to French nineteenth-century fantastic texts only, specifically starting with Nerval’s “Aurelia” and ending with Apollinaire’s “L’Enchanteur,”: “Avec ces deux oeuvres… nous avons atteint les limites d’un genre” (“With these two works…we have reached the limits of a genre”; 11). Castex sees the defining element as “une intrusion brutale du mystère dans la vie réelle” (“a brutal intrusion of the mysterious into real life”; Malrieu 38). While this definition seems to locate the fantastic in a story event, rather than in the reader’s response, Castex does see the emotions evoked by the story event as central: the fantastic “permet…d’exprimer ces aspects de l’homme qui demeurent irréductible à la raison logique” (“permits…the expression of those aspects of mankind which remain irreducible to logical reason”; 11). He focuses on the protagonist’s response rather than the reader’s,

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1 All translations will be mine unless otherwise noted.
but this is the first step away from definitions which focus primarily on story events or thematic elements such as werewolves and vampires. As Joël Malrieu points out in *Le Fantastique*, Castex’s main contribution is the idea of the protagonist’s state of mind when faced with the fantastic element (39).

Todorov and his contemporaries build on this notion of the protagonist’s state of mind in different ways. Roger Caillois, writing in 1966, also sees a mysterious intrusion into our world as definitive, but he places even more emphasis on the response:

La démarche essentielle du fantastique est l’Apparition: ce qui ne peut pas arriver et qui se produit pourtant, en un point et à un instant précis, au cœur d’un univers parfaitement repéré et d’où l’on estimait le mystère à jamais banni. Tout semble comme aujourd’hui et comme hier: tranquille, banal, sans rien d’insolite et voici que lentement s’insinue ou que soudain se déploie l’inadmissible. (19-20)

The essential procedure of the fantastic is the apparition: that which cannot happen and occurs anyway, at a precise place and time, within a perfectly delineated world from which one believes the mystery to be forever banished. Everything seems as it is today and was yesterday: peaceful, ordinary, nothing unusual, and then there is the inadmissible slowly insinuating itself into this world or suddenly occurring.

He also notes that, “avec le fantastique apparaît un désarroi nouveau, une panique inconnu” (“there appears with the fantastic a new kind of confusion, an unfamiliar panic”; 15). Caillois stresses that the setting for the fantastic must be “comme aujourd’hui et comme hier” for the fantastic frisson to take effect. The same elements in
another setting are met with little surprise. This implies the same thing that Todorov states outright: the reader must be able to identify with the protagonist or the fantastic effect fails to emerge. As Malrieu points out, however, Caillois posits the world as a pre-ordained, primary element to which comes an exterior and secondary problem. This overvalues the role of the fantastic being or event and undervalues the protagonist and reader. I would go further than Malrieu’s observation and suggest that the effect of fantastic texts comes from the implication that the world is not primary at all. Certainly postmodern fantastic texts, like many other postmodern texts, point in this direction. It is possibly this view of the world as primary which forces Caillois to limit his definition to nineteenth-century texts. Certainly, he does limit the chronological range of the fantastic to a period between wide-spread religious belief, which permitted the marvelous to be believable in our world, and a more scientifically-minded world-view which disregarded impossibilities entirely: “C’est ainsi, je suppose, que le fantastique s’est substitué à la féerie et que le science-fiction se substitue lentement au Fantastique du siècle passé” (“It is thus, I suppose, that the fantastic replaced fairytale and science fiction now replaces the fantastic of the past century”; 33). Robert Collins’ related discussion of philosophical climate supports Caillois’ chronological limits. By philosophical climate, he means all forestructures, including language, which shape interpretation. Collins argues that this determines the popularity and thematic nature of fantastic texts at different times in history. The climate in which the nineteenth-century French corpus was written was one in which the undercutting of the theological worldview which permitted the miraculous produced a sense of loss. Collins writes: “…the strictures of science concerning the nature of reality were in turn undercut …by authors who sought at least a momentary
acceptance of the ‘supernatural’” (113). The result was a body of literature based upon “the sense of something absent from the metaphysical model of reality” (113). This is the body of literature to which Todorov, Castex, and Caillois refer. The term “paradigm shift,” overused and misused by the media to the point of meaninglessness, would actually be apt here. However, because it so beautifully captures the frisson of the fantastic moment while simultaneously describing the philosophical context of the fantastic, I prefer George Williamson’s term for such changes in the interpretive climate – metaphysical shudder (qtd. in Collins 111). Such a metaphysical shudder, I intend to argue, is pertinent to the existence and nature of a postmodern fantastic corpus.

Caillois, therefore, contributes two significant elements to the ongoing description of the fantastic. He suggests that the reader’s ability to sympathize with the protagonist is a key component by insisting on the story’s being set in a world which operates as ours does: “comme aujourd’hui et comme hier.” Also, he situates the fantastic historically by placing it between the acceptance of the marvelous in fairytales and the advent of scientific skepticism. Notice that, even historically, the fantastic is described in terms of being between opposites. It occupies a liminal position between theological and scientific paradigms.

There is a third idea which Caillois contributes to the discussion which should be mentioned here, though I will return to it in more detail in a subsequent chapter. He draws attention to the playful aspect of the fantastic:

Les récits fantastiques n’ont nullement pour objet d’accréditer l’occulte et les fantômes. La conviction, le prosélytisme des adeptes n’aboutissent en général qu’à exacerber l’esprit critique des lecteurs. La littérature
Fantastique se situe d’emblée sur le plan de la fiction pure. Elle est d’abord un jeu avec le peur. (Images 26)

Fantastic stories are not intended to substantiate the occult or ghosts. The conviction, the conversion of adepts has, in general, no other goal than to intensify the critical faculties of readers. Fantastic literature is situated from the start on the plane of pure fiction. It is foremost a game with fear.

Caillois quotes Mme du Deffand whose words, he feels, describe perfectly the spirit in which the fantastic is produced and received: “’Croyez-vous aux fantômes? – Non, mais j’en ai peur.’ Ici la peur est un plaisir, un jeu délicieux… Il subsiste toutefois une marge d’incertitude, que le talent de l’écrivain s’emploie à ménager” (“’Do you believe in ghosts? – No, but I’m afraid of them!’ Here fear is pleasurable, a delectable game … there remains, however, a margin of uncertainty which the writer’s talent must manipulate”; 26, italics mine). The fantastic then is a game played upon a tightrope of uncertainty – fall off on either interpretive side, possibility or impossibility, and the game is over.

Along with Castex, Caillois, and Todorov, Louis Vax also identifies the fantastic as a specifically nineteenth-century occurrence brought about by the metaphysical shudder between theology and science. He writes in 1957: “The period of unbelief allowed for the emergence of the fantastic literature in the strictest sense” (929). By “strictest sense,” he implies that there also exists a broader genre to which I believe many of his ideas apply quite usefully. Writing in 1965, Vax describes the reader as an important component of the fantastic text to an even greater degree than did Caillois. While he does not go so far as Todorov’s reader identification with the protagonist, Vax
does describe the reader as complicit. The reader’s complicity is part of what creates the ambivalence upon which the fantastic rests (or perhaps shifts from foot to foot). Vax argues that the fantastic element is not a thematic motif but rather a function of the text. The reader’s defense mechanisms, which remind one that one is just reading, add to the already ambivalent experience of the complex explanations offered by the plot. He ties this ambivalence to a sense of immanence which builds along with the protagonist’s fear. He argues that the fantastic being or impossible event is not the subject of fantastic literature. It is the object. The victim or protagonist is the subject. It is the subject who acts upon the object; therefore, a fearful victim creates a terrifying monster. “C’est par moi que le monstre existe. La ‘transcendance’ fantastique habite au coeur d’une immanence” (“It is through me that the monster exists. Fantastic ‘transcendence’ resides at the heart of this immanence”; Séduction 311).

Vax moves even further into the reader’s response to the fantastic in his analysis of the public’s decreasing credulity in general. He stresses the importance of ambiguity in the fantastic, noting that it increases the fear factor rather than decreasing it. Why? An ambiguous fictive monster is more frightening than a “real” fictive monster because it is not the monster which frightens us so much as our inability to know. Undermining our faith in our ability to know crosses over into our everyday lives far more than the notion of a monster ever could.

Vax also agrees that the fantastic effect is a momentary effect which the best fantastic tales prolong for as long as possible. He refutes Caillois’ definition of the fantastic as an irruption of the marvelous into the everyday world. It is not the marvelous that intrudes. The fantastic is rather a rupture in the constants of our world. The rupture
then resolves itself by a decision between possibility and impossibility, and then the resolved rupture becomes part of the new norm. Again, the fantastic resides in a between state – this time between the old norm and the new norm: “le monde quotidien bascule dans le fantastique” (“The everyday world topples in the fantastic”; Séduction 310).

What appeals most in Vax’s treatment of the fantastic is his insistence on the paradoxical nature of the fantastic. In his concluding chapter, he delineates eleven different paradoxes which pertain to the fantastic mode. I would suggest there are even more which pertain to the postmodern fantastic. Significantly, most of them prefigure the kinds of paradoxes which came to be associated with postmodern theory, and so their importance will become clearer in the following discussion of the postmodern fantastic. Briefly, Vax’s paradoxes are as follows.

First, the word “fantastic” is undefinable if one goes to the texts themselves looking for a common thematic or structural element. Secondly, it follows that universal characteristics of the fantastic do not exist because the texts themselves are only the locus of the fantastic which is an effect, not an element. Thirdly, the organization of our world is toppled by the fantastic, yet the fantastic cannot operate without this organization. Also, the opposition of the rational and fantastic is false. The best fantastic tales are classic in their rationality. The fantastic only exists in art, yet purely artistic texts fail to achieve the fantastic effect because they do not conjure the here and now. (They must be, in Caillois’s words, “comme aujourd’hui et comme hier.”) The fantastic must posit its own naturalness to be effective. The feeling derived from the fantastic moment is in opposition to judgement, yet judgement is at the heart of ambiguity. The fantastic is
structured around a fantastic motif, but this motif is only fantastic if it is fantastic within the context of the story. (This is another way of saying, with Todorov, that the reader will not feel the fantastic effect unless the protagonist also feels it.) Thus, motif and context create the effect, but neither motif nor context results in the fantastic. Also, the fantastic being or event must be both consistent and ambiguous. The tenth paradox is one of plausibility. To be plausible, the fantastic element must be allegorically and psychologically plausible, yet allegorical or psychological explanations destroy the fantastic. Finally, no theory of the fantastic can capture its essence because the fantastic is an aesthetic effect (Seduction 128).

Ambiguity, like paradox, is another hallmark of both the fantastic and the postmodern. Many of the observations made by Vax regarding fantastic ambiguity also suggest aspects of postmodern fantastic texts which I will explore further in this study. For example, he suggests a relationship between ambiguity and the illusion that “what really happened” prefigures the text. The fantastic story, he argues, hides nothing from the reader because there never was anything but uncertainty there. The story is not about a fact, but about the evidence of a sentiment of uncertainty (130). Vax also describes fantastic ambiguity very usefully as a kind of instability. The unstable moment arises as an emerging sense of the unusual is met with the effort to suppress it. Simultaneous emergence and suppression create and prolong instability, which is the same, in effect, as ambiguity or uncertainty (131). He goes on to emphasize that the two kinds of ambiguity which create the fantastic effect are not the same but are similar in effect. The ambiguous being or event belongs to the world of the protagonist. The inability to interpret the nature of the being or the event belongs to the world of the reader (132).
These parallel ambiguities add up to what Todorov describes as the two key elements of the fantastic – the reader’s identification with the protagonist and the hesitation between interpretations of a seemingly impossible event.

The theoretical work of Castex, Caillios, Vax and Todorov, while referring to a specific body of nineteenth-century French texts, is valuable to the ensuing discussion of postmodern fantastic narratives for several reasons. Together they build a strong foundation for any analysis of the fantastic which foregoes the notion of common thematic or structural elements or fantastic motifs. They place the creation of the fantastic effect in the hands of the author and reader equally. Caillios’s reader must choose to play the game, being afraid of ghosts without believing in them. Vax’s reader must engage in a cerebral perversity in order to acquiesce to the text’s demands. That is, one must be the fearful subject who creates the terrifying monster. Interestingly, Vax also describes this as a choice to play the fantastic game: “L’amateur de fantastique jouit de sa peur, mais son jeu ne se corse qu’à l’instant où il se mesure avec elle. Jeu dangereux duquel il n’est pas sûr de sortir vainqueur!” (“The lover of the fantastic plays with fear, but the game only gets going when he confronts his fear. A dangerous game in which he is not certain to leave the victor!”; 244). Todorov’s reader identification is also in the reader’s hands. “To identify” is an active verb. Vax and Todorov, especially, emphasize hesitation or prolonged uncertainty as key to the fantastic effect. This hesitation is triggered by situations both paradoxical and ambiguous. The reader’s importance and the suggestion by all that the French fantastic corpus coincided with a metaphysical shudder imply that other moments in history, other willing readers, and other metaphysical shudders can all contribute to other manifestations of the fantastic
effect. While the works of Maupassant, Mérimée, Nerval, and Apollinaire inspired an awareness of a fantastic narrative mode, they by no means forestalled the creation and reception of other equally fantastic texts since their time.

Joël Malrieu, writing in 1992, provides a useful example of how this theoretical inheritance can be usefully applied to postmodern fantastic texts. He too associates the fantastic with intellectual and social crises, but he argues this backwards from the nineteenth century as well as forwards. He associates the political upheaval of the eleventh century with Lucien, the cultural expansion of the late sixteenth century with the baroque style, and World War I with surrealism. In the absence of collective aims and a unified majority, he argues, the individual can no longer depend on the collective to satisfactorily define reality. “Le fantastique et ses formes les plus proches… étaient l’expression d’une destabilisation intellectuelle collective” (“The fantastic and its most closely related forms... were the expression of a collective intellectual destabilization”; Malrieu 32). Thus, the fantastic emerges in liminal states between eras of collective stability. The plurality of interests that characterizes postmodernism certainly suggests the absence of a powerful, uncontested collective agenda.

Malrieu also emphasizes the prolongation of interpretive uncertainty as a key element, but he sees it not as a creator of the fantastic effect, but as an expression of the social uncertainty which popularizes the fantastic mode: “Une crise suppose une situation où se trouvent réunies un maximum de contradictions auxquelles on n’aperçoit pas de solution” (“A crisis implies a situation where a maximum number of contradictions transpire with no perceivable solution”; 33). The uncertainty of the reader and the uncertainty of an individual living in a society where fantastic texts are emergent
are significant isomorphous uncertainties according to Malrieu. Malrieu disagrees that
the hesitation between opposite interpretations is definitive because it is not peculiar to
the fantastic. In doing so, he ignores Todorov’s key requirement that the protagonist and
reader both hesitate when “confronting an apparently supernatural event.” I would argue
that the hesitation is definitive if one specifies that one interpretation of story events
cedes to the impossible and the other does not. Though this hesitation is not the whole
story, a hesitation between possible and impossible, where the impossible does not
figuratively include the highly unlikely, is one of the definitive elements of the fantastic
mode. Nonetheless, Malrieu’s emphasis on Todorov’s notion of the reader’s
identification with the protagonist is useful, and his definition of the fantastic suggests
another evolution in the significance of the role of uncertainty:

Le récit fantastique repose en dernier resort sur la confrontation d’un
personage isolé avec un phénomène, extérieur à lui ou non, surnaturel ou
non, mais dont la présence ou l’intervention représente une contradiction
profonde avec les cadres de pensée et de vie du personage, au point de les
bouleverser complètement et durablement. (49)

The fantastic story relies ultimately on the confrontation between an
isolated character and a phenomenon, exterior to him or not, supernatural
or not, but of which the presence or intervention represents a profound
contradiction of the frames and thought and life of the character, to the
point that both are completely and lastingly upset.

Thus, according to Malrieu, fantastic uncertainty, more than just an aesthetic effect, more
than just a social crisis, is actually a means of effecting essential change in the
protagonist’s and, thereby, the identifying reader’s frames of reference. He discusses the changes in the protagonist in some detail, while the implications for the reader are less clear, but identification suggests at least a parallel or metaphorically similar transformation. For the protagonist, the changes are quite specific. Typically, the protagonist is very ordinary so as to encourage identification. At the same time, the protagonist must display specific traits. It is important that he be already isolated from society.² I would suggest that in a society in collective philosophical crisis, most readers would feel this to be a point of identification as well. He possesses good sense and is unlikely to be easily misled. In short, the protagonist is simultaneously under-determined (ordinary and faceless) and over-determined (intelligent, solitary, and not fully participating in life). “Le fantastique repose sur cette dualité” (“The fantastic is based upon this duality”; 56). It is just such a duality which allows the fantastic to play with the notion of being in a “between” state. The fantastic phenomenon also suggests a duality. Like the protagonist, it too can be faceless and nameless. It need not be exterior to the protagonist or even immediately identifiable as fantastic. What makes it dual is its position between the world of the living and the world of the non-living, whether it be as a ghost, a vampire, or a dream element. There are examples in postmodern fantastic stories where the fantastic resides between two different worlds, for example, the world of the protagonist and the world of the reader. However, Malrieu’s point about duality is useful. He sees the fantastic as the collision between these two dual, hybrid beings:

Nous assistons ici à la rencontre de deux êtres hybrides qui ne se définissent pleinement, ni l’un ni l’autre, par les categories du vivant et de

² I use “he” in this instance following Malrieu, who argues that in nineteenth-century fantastic texts, women are more likely to be treated as “other” along with the vampires and werewolves.
l’humain…. Le fantastique est avant tout une interrogation sur ces frontières. (87)

We witness the encounter between two hybrid beings who are both not fully defined as living or human… The fantastic is above all an interrogation of these boundaries.

This collision of hybrid beings, real and unreal, determinate and indeterminate, of the living and of the dead, results in the revelation of the protagonist’s limits. The fantastic phenomenon demonstrates the protagonist’s frames of reference to be invalid. The protagonist is reduced to silence because language is insufficient to express this inadequacy of one’s referential frames. The protagonist becomes more alienated and solitary – tossed out of the symbolic system, so to speak. The resulting removal from normative society leaves the protagonist in the position of the other previously occupied by the fantastic phenomenon. What does this mean for the identifying reader? “Le fantastique se fonde sur l’idée que le science et le langage ne sauraient rendre compte de la totalité du réel” (“The fantastic is based on the idea that science and language cannot fully account for the real”; 43). While not actually confronting monsters, the reader is still left with a sense of something other, something faceless, nameless, and indescribable. In short, the reader experiences the moment when language demonstrates its insufficiency via the protagonist’s silence – when it directs one’s attention to something outside of itself.

What Malrieu demonstrates most clearly about the theoretical assessments of the fantastic is that, whether they be structuralist, reader-response, psychoanalytical, or historical, they work together to build an overall picture of a narrative mode which
creates a specific effect wherein the reader finds himself or herself in a position between opposites. Historically, one finds oneself between one collective worldview and an opposing worldview, caught in a metaphysical shudder. Intellectually, one finds oneself caught between an unlikely possible explanation and an impossible explanation. Aesthetically, one is caught between the intellectual awareness of being a reader who knows that he or she is “just” reading and the visceral sensation of having one’s frames of reference knocked out from under one’s feet. This place between can be either metaphorically similar to the moment of transcendence described by the Mask of Eternity in the Shiva cave, or, in especially successful fantastic texts, it can be an actual rupture in the apparently seamless sufficiency of language – a rupture that leaves one’s thoughts and feelings reeling, caught in an impossible web of this or that, or this and that, or even neither this nor that.

There are other postmodern theorists of the fantastic whose work is relevant to this discussion, but an analysis of the junctures where the postmodern and the fantastic effectively meet will wait until the next chapter. I would like to temporarily set aside the French tradition and look now at Freud’s analysis of the uncanny, which also has pertinence to the development of postmodern fantastic narratives.

While Todorov’s popular theoretical work had the effect of making his chosen corpus definitive, of course, the French were not the only ones experiencing a metaphysical shudder in the nineteenth century, and they were not alone in producing fantastic texts. Edgar Allan Poe, M.R James, and E.T.A Hoffmann proved the popularity of the fantastic to be far more widespread. Freud develops his notion of the uncanny through his reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s “Der Sandmann” as well as through an
examination of what we find uncanny in everyday life. His 1919 writings bear some interesting resemblances to the conclusions arrived at by Todorov. And like most theorists of the fantastic, he starts with what is problematic about the word itself. The German word for uncanny is unheimlich and Freud points out right away “daß dies Wort nicht immer in einem scharf zu bestimmden Sinne gebraucht wird” 12: 229; “[that] the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense” Strachey 17: 219). He traces the problem of definition back to the word’s opposite, heimlich, which itself has two opposite meanings. In the first instance, heimlich means homey, familiar, intimate, or arousing a sense of security. By this definition, the unheimlich would be unfamiliar, strange, or arousing a sense of insecurity. This appears to be apt, but Freud does not see this as the whole story. He disagrees with the analyst Jentsch who argues that the uncanny stems from intellectual uncertainty or “etwas, worin man sich sozusagen nicht auskennt” (12: 231; “something one does not know one’s way about in” Strachey 17: 221). Freud does not take the notion of intellectual uncertainty far enough in making this observation; I would argue that fantastic intellectual uncertainty comes from knowing with certainty that one cannot know. However, Freud is right to say that there is more to the uncanny than the unfamiliar, or strange, or even what Vax calls l’insolite (the unusual). The second definition of heimlich describes something concealed, kept from sight, or withheld. Thus, unheimlich would be something exposed or brought to light. However, “Unheimlich sei nur als Gegensatz zur ersten Bedeutung, nicht auch zur zweiten gebräuchlich” (12:235-6; “unheimlich is customarily used, we are told, as the contrary only of the first signification of heimlich, and not of the second” Strachey 17: 225). As Freud’s argument progresses, however, through a psychoanalytical analysis of
the fantastic motif of the double, it becomes clear that the uncanny partakes of both
definitions. The uncanny experience occurs when something intimately familiar, which
has been repressed or surmounted, becomes exposed in an alienated and recurrent form:
“denn dies Unheimliche ist wirklich nichts Neues oder Fremdes, sondern etwas dem
Seelenleben von alters her Vertrautes, das ihm nur durch den Prozeß der Verdrängung
entfremdet worden ist” (12: 254; “for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but
something which is familiar and old – established in the mind and which has been
alienated from it only through the process of repression” Strachey 17: 241).

Clearly, the term “uncanny” has some interesting applications to notions of the
fantastic. First, it describes a paradoxical situation. It is remarkably similar to Vax’s
notion of simultaneous emergence and suppression. Also, as a concept, it resists
definition. Moreover, it describes a particular aesthetic effect – a frisson, a shudder. The
uncanny, however, cannot be used interchangeably with the fantastic for one very good
reason, the one suggested by Freud’s analysis of uncanny experiences in everyday life.
The fantastic deals specifically with what we perceive as impossible. By the definition of
impossible, we cannot have fantastic experiences in everyday life. Todorov and others
have even set the uncanny at one defining boundary of the fantastic. If the fantastic
moment veers too close to the explicable, we find ourselves in the uncanny. If it veers
too far to the inexplicable, we find ourselves in the marvelous or supernatural. The
fantastic sits between, once again.

One reason for the confusion of the uncanny and the fantastic might be that Freud
uses a fantastic text to demonstrate the uncanny effect. Freud himself sees the confusion
he creates by analyzing the everyday uncanny along with the fictive uncanny. He
realizes that there are fictive circumstances when the recurrent appearance of something repressed or surmounted produces no effect at all, specifically in fairytales. He even suggests a distinction between the everyday uncanny and the fictive uncanny, which he does not distinguish from the fantastic. The subtlety of the difference between the apparently impossible and the truly impossible in fiction does not interest him. The wording of his distinction makes it clear that he regards the everyday uncanny as the more important phenomenon from a psychoanalytical viewpoint. “Wir erhalten so einem Wink,” he concludes, “einen Unterschied zu machen zwischen dem Unheimlichen, das man erlebt, und dem Unheimlichen, das man sich bloß vorstellt, oder von dem man liest” (12: 261; “This suggests that we should differentiate between the uncanny that we actually experience and the uncanny that we merely picture or read about” Strachey 17: 247, italics mine). I emphasize the word “merely” because it suggests a hegemony of the “real” that we do not find in postmodern fantastic examples, and it speaks to a development in the fantastic which postdates Freud and, of course, E.T.A. Hoffmann. The former’s discussion of the aesthetic effect of the uncanny is useful, however, because it parallels the aesthetic effect of the fantastic, even though the circumstances of its emergence are slightly different.

Freud makes a point of clarifying one type of uncanny experience which he feels deserves special emphasis:

...es nämlich oft und leicht unheimlich wirkt, wenn die Grenze zwischen Phantasie und Wirklichkeit verwischt wird, wenn etwas real vor uns hintritt, was wir bisher für phantastisch gehalten haben, wenn ein Symbol
...an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on.

(Strachey 17: 244)

Freud gives us the example of when carvings appear to take on a life of their own and move about or act with intention. This is a fantastic moment creating an uncanny effect which can only happen in a fictive narrative. I believe this observation is extremely useful for explaining the uncanny effect of many postmodern fantastic texts. Along with the traditional fantastic motif often arrives the suggestion that the text we hold in our hands is more than a symbol for the narrative action we read within it. It is a symbol taking on a life of its own. One example of this is the horror series by Koji Suzuki which chronicles the adaptation of the smallpox virus into a virus which is spread through the viewing of a videotape entitled Ring. The virus then spreads into novel form when the print version of the narrative is released. Kids think they are watching or reading a horror story which threatens them with death, but then they actually die. It lends a whole new twist to the idea of a film or novel adaptation. The horror comes from the realization that the reader of the novel is holding a novel entitled Ring or that the viewer of the film has Ring in his or her own VCR. Another example is Elizabeth Kostova’s The Historian, a retelling of the Dracula myth. Throughout the novel, it becomes clear that scholarship and a love of books are what put Dracula’s victims at risk. He finds his victims by what
they read, and he replicates himself through publication. Thus, the most vulnerable potential victim would be one with a book about Dracula in his or her hands. The symbol becomes the thing itself. In this context, the notion of “merely” picturing or reading about a fantastic event is problematized. Thus Freud’s distinction between the everyday uncanny and the fictive uncanny becomes blurred, as does the distinction between uncanny and fantastic. This is what the fantastic is about – the blurring of the lines between possible and impossible, between the “merely” uncanny and the fantastic.

Before leaving Freud, I think it is useful to look at the way in which he corroborates Todorov’s concept of reader identification. He starts by saying “daß im Reiche der Fiktion vieles nicht unheimlich ist, was unheimlich wirken müßte, wenn es sich im Leben ereignete” (12: 265; “that in the realm of fiction many things are not uncanny which would be so if they happened in real life” Strachey 17: 250). He then adds,

Anders nun, wenn der Dichter sich dem Anscheine nach auf den Boden der gemeinen Realität gestellt hat....er betrügt uns, indem er uns die gemeine Wirklichkeit verspricht und dann doch über diese hinausgeht. Wir reagieren auf seine Fiktionen so, wie wir auf eigene Erlebnisse reagiert hätten; wenn wir den Betrug merken, ist es zu spät, der Dichter hat seine Absicht bereits erreicht. (12: 265-6)

The situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality….he deceives us by promising to give us the sober truth, and then after all overstepping it. We react to his invention as we would have reacted to real experiences; by the time we have seen through
his trick it is already too late and the author has achieved his object. (17: 250)

So, while Todorov argues that fantastic events in fiction only achieve their effect in our everyday world (i.e., goose bumps) if we can identify with the world of the protagonist, Freud argues the same thing in reverse. The everyday experiences which create an uncanny effect will only operate in the fictive world “die sich auf den Boden der materiellen Relität stellt” (12: 266; “so long as the setting is one of material reality” Strachey 17: 251). Finally, he clearly asserts that the reader must sympathize with the character experiencing the uncanny effect in order to experience the effect as well. Referring to Heroditus’s story in which a princess is left holding a severed hand, thinking she is holding onto a thief who has stolen a great treasure, Freud explains why the severed hand, which achieves an uncanny effect elsewhere, has no effect here: “Der Prinzessin mag das unheimliche Gefühl dabei nicht erspart worden sein... aber wir verspüren nichts Unheimliches, denn wir versetzen uns nicht in sie, sondern in den anders” (12: 267; “The princess may very well have had an uncanny feeling… but we have no such sensations, for we put ourselves in the thief’s place, not hers” Strachey 17: 252).

From Freud’s work on the uncanny, it is possible to take away several useful observations. His analysis of the word “unheimlich” stresses the paradoxical nature of the fantastic effect. He concurs that, as a concept, it is resistant to definition. He confirms from his first sentence onward that the uncanny effect, which is in this instance a correlate of the fantastic effect, is a matter of “ästhetischen Untersuchungen” (12:229; “a subject of aesthetics” Strachey 17: 219). His insistence on the fictive uncanny’s
reliance on a setting “of material reality” concurs with Caillois’s “comme aujourd’hui et comme hier” and with Todorov’s “world which is indeed our world.” Finally, he agrees that the reader must put himself or herself in the place of the character experiencing the uncanny effect. This is effectively the same as Todorov’s reader identification or Vax’s notion that the protagonist and reader simultaneously experience different forms of ambiguity. While Freud’s psychoanalytical explanations of the uncanny are interesting and useful within other contexts, what interests me most is his description of how the fictive or narrative uncanny takes effect through identification, because this is part of what permits me to draw a continuum between traditional fantastic texts and postmodern fantastic narratives in a variety of media.

One final theorist from the English tradition should be considered before I define the limits of what will be considered to be fantastic for the purposes of the ensuing discussion of the elements I will argue to be central to our understanding of the postmodern fantastic: postmodernity in general, game theory, and modern physics. Eric Rabkin proposes the broadest, most general notion of the fantastic thus far. Far from limiting his discussion to nineteenth-century texts, he even eschews the notion of a real-world setting which is key to the definitions of Todorov, Freud, and Caillois. The fantastic event need not be impossible in our world at all; all that matters is what is possible in the fictional world. He defines fantastic literature in terms of ground rules: “every work of art sets up its own ground rules. The perspectives that the fantastic

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3 The term “postmodernism” is used throughout this discussion to refer to those discursive strategies which emphasize textual self-consciousness, provisionality, and plurality, and which include, among other strategies, parody and heightened degrees of intertextuality.
contradicts are perspectives legitimized by these internal ground rules” (4-5). Any contradiction of the ground rules results in the unexpected.

Rabkin divides the notion of the unexpected into four categories which signal degrees of the fantastic. At one end of the spectrum is the irrelevant. Unexpected irrelevant events have no fantastic effect. Neither do the not-expected, though they create more interest. The fantastic is approached when the dis-expected occurs. The dis-expected are “those elements which the text had diverted one from thinking about but which, it later turns out, are in perfect keeping with the ground rules of the narrative” (8). Depending on the nature of the dis-expected event, one might mistake it temporarily for the fantastic until it becomes clear that the ground rules were not opposed. The event is still possible in the fictional world. Only the anti-expected accounts for the truly fantastic: “In our world, and in Wonderland, the dead do not speak. Their speaking is unexpected in the sense of anti-expected. When the anti-expected happens, we are in the presence of the fantastic” (10). The anti-expected is what Rabkin means by the contradiction of ground rules: “the perspectives enforced by the ground rules of the narrative world must be diametrically contradicted. The reconfiguration of meanings must make an exact flip-flop…” (8).

Rabkin suggests three ways in which a reader can know if the ground rules are broken. The fantastic contradiction can be signaled by the protagonist’s astonishment, a diametric reversal of internal logic, or the statements of a narrator. This is a very useful notion for making a distinction between the fantastic and magic realism. In the works of such authors as Gabriel García Márquez or Jorge Louis Borges, one encounters a world very like our own world, and a protagonist with whom the reader identifies, and an event
which contradicts the ground rules of our world, and also, we believe, theirs. However, the breaking of the ground rules is not signaled by the protagonist’s astonishment or a sign from the narrator. A virgin hanging out the bed linens on a windy day can be gathered up to heaven amidst the billowing sheets and the reader is signaled by the behaviour of the characters and the response of the narrator to receive this news with equilibrium, not shock. Thus, there is no fantastic moment.

Another useful aspect of this definition is that it permits the fantastic effect to occur in other genres, such as science fiction. One example that comes to mind is “The Unquiet Dead,” an episode of Doctor Who, the British science fiction series. The two main characters are the Doctor, a time-traveler, and a woman from Earth who, except for her friendship with the Doctor, which permits her to travel to other galaxies and times, is very much from our world as we know it. Apart from the Doctor’s ability to travel in time and a few appearances by other aliens who are out to meddle with earth’s history, the rest of Earth’s ground rules stay the same. Death functions as it always has. There are no ghosts or vampires. So when, in an episode set in Victorian England, one sees the dead rising from their coffins and ghosts walking the streets, the effect is uncanny, and one is forced into a fantastic hesitation between an impossible interpretation of story events (ghosts) and a possible interpretation of story events (aliens). The effect is every bit as chilling as in a traditional ghost story. When the Doctor tells the character Charles Dickens that his favourite story is “The Signalman,” a classic ghost story by the real Dickens, we know we are meant to be accessing our intertextual knowledge of the fantastic genre. Only Rabkin’s use of internal ground rules can explain the presence of the fantastic in a science fiction setting.
The one area where I feel Rabkin’s definition is too broad is his inclusion of narratives where the ground rules are contradicted and the protagonist is astonished, but where we feel no uncanny effect. For example, he includes Alice’s astonishment in Wonderland when she wishes that flowers could speak and then they do. Her wish signals the ground rule that flowers do not talk. Her astonishment when they do signals the contradiction of the ground rules (7). The reader feels nothing except, perhaps, interest in the plot at this point. There is no uncanniness. I believe that Rabkin undervalues the reader’s need to identify with the protagonist. One can understand and sympathize with the protagonist of *Doctor Who* because she comes from a world just like ours but simply has more information about aliens. Alice we do not identify with in the same way. She is moving about in a world too different from our own with dream-like qualities, and so she ceases to be in a situation to which we can relate.

Also, Rabkin does not associate the aesthetic effect of the fantastic with the uncanny:

> The fantastic is a quality of astonishment that we feel when the ground rules of a narrative world are suddenly made to turn about 180°. We recognize this reversal in the reactions of characters, the statements of narrators, and the implications of structure, all playing on and against our whole experience as people and readers. The fantastic is a potent tool in the hands of an author who wishes to satirize man’s world or clarify the inner workings of man’s soul. (41)
So the quality of uncanniness gives way to mere astonishment, a far less unsettling or unnerving effect. Far from being a visceral experience, it can be a purely intellectual one. To satirize or clarify are both intellectual aims. The fantastic is an even more powerful tool, in its truest forms, in the hands of an author who wishes to leave an audience reeling, with no clarity but the realization that we can only see “through a glass, darkly.”

At this point, it is possible to identify those aspects of all of these theories of the fantastic which work together to explain the presence, the effect, the limits, and the strategies of the postmodern fantastic narrative.

First, it is important to stress that the fantastic is an aesthetic effect. This explains its resistance to definition. It is not signaled by any specific story event, theme or fantastic motif. For example, a ghost is a fantastic motif, but its presence is not fantastic in a fictional world where ghosts are a common occurrence. There are also fantastic conventions, but the manner in which these conventions are used to confuse or distract the reader is more significant than the presence of the convention itself. Louis Vax discusses conventions in terms of primary and secondary fantastic texts. A ghost at midnight is a convention of primary fantastic texts. A ghost appearing at midday is a convention of secondary fantastic texts because a conventional ghost at midnight has ceased to be believable (Vax 138). As each new break with convention occurs, the break can potentially become a convention itself until, in postmodern fantastic texts, we are well beyond tertiary fantastic texts. The conventions and breaks become too layered for the reader to keep track. The ghost appears at midnight because a ghost appearing at midday is too obvious an attempt at believability because we expect it at midnight, and it might just say as much so that nobody confuses it with a conventional ghost... which it
just might be…. So, conventions must be present for the fantastic to function, but they
must be used in an unconventional manner to prolong the believability of the impossible
interpretation. In fact, for the fantastic effect to emerge, there must be narrative elements
present with no other purpose than to create and prolong the hesitation between possible
and impossible interpretations of an apparently impossible event.

Todorov and Freud are correct to point out that the reader must identify with the
cracter experiencing the fantastic effect, or we are left with Rabkin’s much weaker
effect on the reader of mere intellectual astonishment. Rabkin makes a valid point when
he suggests that the world of the protagonist need not be exactly like our own, as was the
convention in nineteenth-century texts. I would argue, however, that in the cases in
which the fantastic is achieved through settings which differ from ours, the differences
are not significant enough to prevent our identification with the character who also
experiences the effect. Thus, the “world which is indeed our world” is not definitive
itself, but merely contributes to the definitive element of reader identification with a
cracter who is experiencing the breaking of the ground rules of his or her own world.

It is also important to stress that the breaking of ground rules involves an
apparently impossible event. The reader is being led to hesitate between possible and
impossible interpretations, not between likely and highly unlikely. Once one loses track
of the significance of impossibility, the definition becomes too broad to be meaningful.

Finally, the fantastic is a mode which speaks to the experience of a metaphysical
shudder. Christine Brooke-Rose describes the postmodern shudder in A Rhetoric of the
Unreal. She suggests that the postmodern inversion of the real/unreal binary occurs
because the ‘real’ seems unreal. The inverse proposition is related: the unreal becomes
real to us (4). The pace at which our reality collapses and must be refilled with meaning is fast enough that, for the first time, we are aware of how we are manipulated into forming a reality (10). This is remarkably similar to Malrieu’s description of the moments in history which he sees as fantastically productive – those in which the individual can no longer depend on the collective to satisfactorily define reality.

For the purposes of the ensuing analyses of fantastic narratives in their relation to postmodern theory, game theory and modern physics, a useful working definition of the fantastic is as follows. **In response to a philosophical climate in which the individual is aware of the need to rely on his or her own interpretation of experience in order to form a reality, there arises a narrative mode in which the reader is forced, through the presence of ambiguously used motifs and conventions and through an identification with a character also undergoing an ambiguous experience of the apparently impossible, to hesitate between possible and impossible interpretations of a story event or events.** This hesitation results in the fantastic effect, an aesthetic effect, both intellectual and visceral in nature, in which the reader paradoxically (while reading) experiences the insufficiency of language in the form of an inability to choose between opposite and apparently mutually exclusive interpretive options. The logic of discourse fails to provide coherent, rational meaning.

An example of how the fantastic operates within the postmodern climate might be useful at this point. Since so much about the fantastic is liminal, concerned with the boundaries between opposites, I have chosen an example that sits on the edge of actually being fantastic. It pushes at the boundaries of my definition because the effect is so brief. Yet, ultimately, there is no other way of describing the pivotal scene except as fantastic.
One mainstream film of 2006, *Stranger than Fiction*, provides a light-hearted but temporarily very unsettling example of the postmodern fantastic narrative. In fact, it is a comedy, a genre that theorists of the fantastic have for the most part ignored. Speaking to the postmodern theme of forming one’s own reality, it is quite literally about the writing of a life. While it involves no traditional motifs such as werewolves or vampires, it does use fantastic conventions in new ways to confuse and mislead the viewer. Though it is not as overtly self-conscious as some metafiction, it is nonetheless a story about stories. It becomes clear early on that the ground rules of the fictional world are slightly different than our own; however, we are later introduced to another layer of narrative in which they appear to be the same, a layer which eventually melts into the first. Thus, there is ample opportunity for identification in both narrative layers, so the fantastic effect can emerge in an apparently impossible moment.

The film is about an ordinary man named Harold and his wristwatch. Harold is living an ordinary and responsible life as an IRS auditor. However, one morning he suddenly becomes aware of a voice narrating his life. That same day, coping quite well with the distraction of having another voice in his head, he meets and starts to fall in love with a woman whom he is auditing. The plot is complicated by his learning from the narrator that he is about to die. Wishing to forestall this event, he seeks the help of a literature professor in hopes of identifying and contacting the author who is about to kill him off. In the course of events, we see before us, all within the fictional world of the film, the author, the narrator, the protagonist, and the reader. Within the fictional world of the film, we have the fictional world of the novel in which Harold is a character. This novel is still being written by the character Karen Eiffel, and it is read at one point by
Professor Hilbert, who as a specialist in “literature theory” represents readership in its most authoritative form. The notion of authoritative readership is not used naively here, though it proves to be as untrustworthy as any other interpretive act within the text.

Impossibility arises in both layers of the text. While we are invited to identify with Harold, the ordinary and reliable protagonist of traditional fantastic fiction, we only identify with the ordinary emotions of love and fear which he experiences. We do not experience his fantastic moment. It plays as comedy. We are not invited to identify with the author, an eccentric and difficult woman, yet when she experiences a fantastic moment, so do we. The professor, who, as the interpreter of narrative, occupies the position most like that of the viewer of the film, elicits virtually no identification whatsoever, and he experiences no fantastic effect even though he is aware of all of the events. Why do these narrative positions operate so counter-intuitively? To a significant degree, it has to do with the handling of fantastic conventions so that fantastic hesitation arises in unexpected ways.

Identifying the conventions is a good place to start. Three conventions which appear in the film are the truth claim, the isolated yet reliable protagonist so clearly described by Malrieu, and layered and/or unreliable narration. Conventionally, the truth claim is offered up by one of the narrators at a remove from the most immediate account of the impossible event. It usually goes something like this: “This actually happened to one of my mates back at school. He was a reliable, stand-up sort of chap whom I would trust with my life. The story is so unbelievable that I don’t trust myself to convince you that it actually happened. Let me read you his letter….” The truth claim usually uses words like “actually happened,” “reliable,” and “trust,” but also “unbelievable.” It is thus
itself somewhat ambiguous. As already noted, it is also traditionally placed in the mouth of a narrator who sometimes uses it to distance himself from the fantastic event. In *Stranger than Fiction*, the narrator’s tone is very matter-of-fact and suggests no ambiguity at all regarding her audience’s belief. We are in a traditional narratee’s position where we are expected to suspend disbelief for the enjoyment of what is obviously a fiction.

The first words we hear are narrated by the same voice Harold will hear inside his head, though he does not hear it yet. “This is a story about a man named Harold Krick and his wristwatch. Harold Krick was a man of infinite numbers, endless calculations and remarkably few words… and his watch said even less.” In short, it is a story, and the narrator does not care if her quirky treatment of his watch might make her less reliable. As the story progresses and we become caught up in the relationship between the two worlds of the novel and the film, we are distracted from thinking about the relationship between the film world and our own, yet it is in this relationship that the fantastic moment emerges, and it is here that we locate the truth claim. It lies in the film’s title – *Stranger than Fiction* – that part of the film that mediates between the moment of sitting down with our popcorn and becoming immersed in the story. It is easy to believe from the title that this is a fiction even stranger than other fictions, and in many ways it is, but every speaker of English knows that “truth is stranger than fiction.” Therein hides the ambiguous truth claim. Strange but true. It has migrated to an unexpected level, and that is one clue as to how to treat the inter-relationships between the other narrative levels presented by the film. Nothing is where it is expected to be.

The second convention is the reliable yet isolated protagonist, a protagonist who is not fully alive because of an unwillingness to seize life and live it fully. Harold Krick
seems to fill this role perfectly. The narrator describes his solitude very simply. Harold lives alone, he returns from work alone, he eats alone, “and at precisely 11:13 every night, Harold would go to bed alone.” Within minutes of the film’s opening scenes, we know that he is both alone and as reliable as clockwork. The irony of that becomes clear when we consider his watch. The watch is the first clue that we are operating within different ground rules in Harold’s world. The first reference to the wristwatch’s personality can be taken for a quirky narrative style – “and his wristwatch said even less.” However, while we listen to the narrator describe Harold’s tie-tying routine, we learn more. “The wristwatch thought the single knot made his neck look fat, but said nothing.” This is the first impossibility of the narrative, but the protagonist is oblivious. We are placed in an ambiguous position in regards to ground rules. The clues from the narrator suggest they are different from our world’s ground rules, but the actions of the protagonist suggest he does not know this. In fact, even after hearing the narrator’s description of the watch’s feelings and motives later in the film, the protagonist never once acknowledges that his watch is any different from any other. He continues to behave as if being narrated is odd, but an opinionated watch is not even part of his reality. At one point, we briefly see Anna Pascal, the object of Harold’s affections, through the glass of Harold’s watch, as if through the watch’s eyes. Harold, however, treats his watch as we would treat our own. This is part of the ambiguity of attempting to identify with Harold. He is intent on living as if he is part of a world exactly like ours even after we know, and he should know, that he is not. When we hear, “On Wednesday, Harold’s wristwatch changed everything,” we are prepared for the wristwatch to be the fantastic agent. In fact, we later learn that Harold merely sets the correct time when the watch
stops out of frustration with Harold’s obtuseness. Because the watch had been three
minutes out up to this point, this changes Harold’s routine enough to bring about his
death. Harold’s reaction to his watch and the ordinary, not even remotely supernatural,
way in which the watch plays its part in Harold’s accident make this impossible aspect of
the narrative a bit of a red herring. It does function, however, by distracting the viewer
from the more threatening way in which impossibility lurks within the film.

The reliable, isolated protagonist actually becomes more alive as the narrative
progresses. Malrieu suggests that a fantastic event leaves a protagonist even more
isolated. Harold, however, prompted by the news of his impending death, becomes more
complex, more socially aware, and more connected. He experiences love. As the
professor tells Harold at one point, “a tragedy, you die; a comedy, you get hitched.”
Harold, while fearing a tragedy, is actually living a comedy. Since he missed our
encounter with the impossible wristwatch, Harold’s first encounter with the impossible
comes later when he first hears the voice. When he does, it is comic. He is brushing his
teeth. We see him waving his toothbrush by his ear and calling out: “Okay, who just said
‘Harold just counted brushstrokes’? And how do you know I’m counting brushstrokes?”
While Harold experiences fear and confusion and has difficulty interpreting the presence
of the narrative voice, because we know so much more than him, having tuned in to the
narrative voice earlier, we do not identify with him. As the film progresses, the isolated
protagonist eventually moves out of his position between life and death – he becomes
fully alive: “He no longer ate alone. He no longer counted brushstrokes…. Instead
Harold did that which terrified him – Harold Krick lived his life.” There is another
isolated character, however, and it is not her reliability that allows us to identify with Karen Eiffel, the author.

It is a common mistake of naïve readers to confuse the narrator with the author. The difference, it is usually explained, is that the narrator is a function of the text and the author is a real person. The novel/film in Stranger than Fiction confounds this distinction in several ways. We conflate the narrator and the author because they have the same voice. They are both played by Emma Thompson. Also, the narration proceeds as the book is written. At one point, we hear the voice as we see the words being typed. What is more, this author is definitely a function of the text. Yet, the narrator and the author are very different. The narrator describes only Harold’s world. The author, however, looking for inspiration, stands on her desk imagining dropping off of a tall building, or sits in the rain imagining driving off a bridge and drowning in her car. Harold awkwardly tries to explain this to a psychiatrist. He says that it is “like I’m a character in my own life” and the voice comes and goes “like there are parts not being told to me, and I need to find out what those other parts are before it’s too late.” Harold experiences the difference between the narrator and the author in the same way that a reader experiences the difference between the ambiguous words on the page and “what really happened.” There is an illusory authority behind the text. In this film, we see through Harold’s illusion to an author who is as much in the dark as the character, Harold, and the reader, Professor Hilbert. However, it is the old distinction between the narrative function of the text and the real person who wrote it that allows the viewer to identify with Karen Eiffel, the author. It is a commonsensical assumption that she is from our world, since readers and authors traditionally occupy the same plane of reality. However, it is the reader,
Professor Hilbert, who occupies the same plane as Karen Eiffel. We also know she is just another character in the film. She is situated between Harold’s fictional world and our world. Also, the relationship between the worlds is isomorphous. We and the filmmakers are to Karen Eiffel and Professor Hilbert what they are to Harold Krick. This creates a mise-en-abîme effect which invites one to speculate on the nature of the next level. Who is writing me? Have I ever written someone without knowing it? It also allows us to identify with the author as she experiences her fantastic moment.

Even when Karen Eiffel snaps at Penny, her assistant, “I don’t know how to kill Harold Krick and that’s why they sent you,” the viewer is still free to think something strange but possible might be going on. The possible always seems highly unlikely if the fantastic hesitation is being properly prolonged. As unlikely as they seem, there are still possibilities at this point. Maybe Harold is delusional and, somehow, he has read the manuscript and is imagining himself to be Harold Krick. Maybe it is all just coincidence. Maybe the author, as well as the narrator, is just a figment of Harold’s imagination, and we are viewing his imagination. We are, after all, able to view the author’s imagination when we see her jump off office towers and drive off bridges. The fantastic moment arrives, however, as Karen Eiffel describes Harold’s phone call to herself. How she arrives at this point in the novel is unclear, but the moment is unsettling. She types: “The phone rang.” The phone in her office rings. She types: “It rang again.” It rings again. Then, she pauses for much longer than any phone ever does and types: “It rang a third time.” When it rings again, she experiences the impossible and so do we. All other explanations collapse and the impossible becomes the only explanation. The duration of the phone’s ringing is the fantastic moment in which the
effect is achieved. When she answers and hears, “This is Harold Krick,” the impossible wins out over unlikely possibilities and the hesitation is past. Words abandon the author. She can only scream. And so, another convention – Harold, the isolated protagonist – is just another diversion from the real fantastic element. Just as ghosts at midnight are not as frightening as ghosts at midday, so a hesitating protagonist is not as unsettling as a hesitating author.

The third convention of fantastic texts is a confusion of narrative voices. In a conventional narrative, the fantastic event occurs in a story told within another story, possibly told within yet another story, so narrative layers sit within each other like Chinese boxes or marushka dolls. Originally, this was a vehicle for the truth claim and also a way of introducing ambiguous reliability. In *Stranger than Fiction*, it goes much further. We have the filmmakers presenting us with visual images and dialogue, but no narration. Nobody narrates Karen Eiffel and Professor Hilbert’s lives. Then we have the story of Harold Krick, as narrated by Karen Eiffel’s narrator. We also have the story of Harold Krick which escapes Karen Eiffel’s narrative control. We also have tidbits from Karen Eiffel’s imagination which are presented visually without narration, but which do not enter into Harold’s experience. With the exception that all of the other narrative layers fit within the film itself, none of the layers fit inside each other. They interact and shape each other, but they behave less like Chinese boxes and more like a tangle of threads. Because there is no clear structure as to how the character relates to the narrator, and the narrator to the author, and the author’s character to the filmmaker, ambiguity arises constantly as to who is shaping the information, who is receiving it, and in what
context it is being received. A description of several different knots in the tangle will
demonstrate the impossibility of knowing “what is really happening.”

The relationship between Harold and the narrating voice is a good place to start.
After Harold starts to hear the voice, the voice begins to mention, quite frequently, how
distracted Harold is. The voice implies various reasons for this: because it is
Wednesday, the day that will change Harold’s life; because he has met Anna Pascal, the
woman with whom he is falling in love; or because he feels the need to change his life.
We know the distraction is her voice. When we meet the author, it becomes clear that
she does not know that Harold hears her. Various interactions between Harold and the
voice demonstrate how little this omniscient third person really knows. When he is
running for the bus, Harold hears the narrator mention the sound that his shoes make
against the asphalt, so he stops to listen to the squeak of the leather long enough that he
misses the bus. The narrator continues as if the missing of the bus is part of the plot, yet
he would have made it if not for the distraction of the narration.

Later, leaving Anna Pascal’s bakery after the voice has caused him to behave
inappropriately, Harold hears the voice say: “Harold suddenly found himself beleaguered
and exasperated outside the bakery.” Harold looks up and screams: “Shut up!” The
narrator continues: “…cursing the heavens in futility.” Harold yells: “No, I’m not! I’m
cursing you, you stupid voice!”

The distraction of the voice also moves the plot forward in very significant ways.
A fellow auditor gives Harold Anna Pascal’s file to audit because he thinks Harold is
exhibiting signs of a breakdown and therefore cannot handle another, more complicated
file. If it were not for the voice, he would not have met Anna Pascal. If it were not for
the voice, he also would not have taken the time off from work to learn the guitar and live his life. He would not have gone to a psychiatrist whose advice leads him to Professor Hilbert who eventually helps him to identify Karen Eiffel. He would never have run to phone Karen Eiffel to ask her to meet with him. Yet, we hear the narrator describing his search for a payphone. We see Karen Eiffel typing the words, “The phone rang.” If neither the narrator nor the author knows that Harold hears the voice, what is Harold’s motivation within the novel for finding Karen Eiffel? How did she reach that point in her novel’s plot? We cannot know. Neither can Harold. Yet, when he reads the manuscript of the novel, he comments on events we witnessed that were triggered by his hearing the voice.

Of all of the knowledge gaps within the film, the author’s are the most unconventional. She does not know that Harold is walking about, interacting with a professor who teaches her work, and accessing her IRS file. So, the act of storytelling is problematized beyond Vax’s description of a story where nothing is hidden from the reader because there never was anything but uncertainty there. The situation is taken to a new level within the film, because we see that the author is not hiding what actually happened but does not know herself. The fantastic moment occurs when the author, feeling herself to be finally in control of her work, over her writer’s block, sure of her material, hears the phone ring and must wonder: “What is really happening here?” At this point, Eric Rabkin’s ground rules have done the complete reversal which he sees as definitive of the fantastic. The author is in the reader’s place, hesitating. Also, the viewer of the film is in the position of knowing more than the author. Even though the author is a character, because of the authoritative impression that her narrative voice
creates, the effect is still uncanny. The viewer’s identification with Karen Eiffel still functions, even though we know more than she does, because we still do not know enough. When we realize that she does not know, we also realize how little we know about how this moment could have transpired.

Another aspect of the tangled narrator/narratee relationships that should be discussed is the role of Professor Hilbert. It has already been mentioned that he is in the position of the reader. He does literally read Karen Eiffel’s novel. He also makes his living reading literature and teaching others how literature “should” be read. Like the author, he also finds himself in an unusual relationship to the text of the novel when he befriends the main character. While any postmodern theorist would agree that each reading of a text is a different narrative because the interpretive act shapes the experience of the narrative, Professor Hilbert moves the power of the interpretive act to another level. He is also consistently wrong, or apparently so, and this is probably because he is never given enough information. He chooses incorrectly between opposites. When he first meets Harold, he must choose between literal and metaphorical interpretations of Harold’s story. Metaphorical interpretations always kill the fantastic effect. Because he does not take Harold literally, he experiences nothing uncanny. He tells Harold, “As far as I can tell, there isn’t a single literary thing about you.” Yet, what can be more literary than literally being the protagonist? Hilbert sees only the metaphor. We are all protagonists in the stories of our lives. For the metaphor not to be unsettling, however, it is best not to wonder who the metaphorical author is. Postmodernism suggests that we create our own reality through the narrativization of experience, and, in this sense, author and protagonist are conflated. The film prompts us to consider the possibility that it
might be otherwise, which is as unsettling as the suggestion that it might be true. Many people are ambivalent about where to locate control of their own lives. This is the same question that is at the heart of most metaphysical shudders – can one trust consensus reality and accept dominant religions and philosophies, or must one forge one’s own reality? The film’s script signals this ambivalence by pointing out the irony in the way we use literary metaphors to describe our experience. Hilbert treats Harold as if Harold’s experience is the same as everyone else’s, but, because he is an accountant with nothing literary about him, Harold has mistaken the inner voice which interprets reality for a real voice. Hilbert thinks Harold has missed the finer points of metaphor. He asks: “How long has it given you to live?” “I don’t know.” “Ah, dramatic irony… it’ll fuck you every time!” How can one author one’s own life and still be the victim of dramatic irony? Hilbert’s answer comes in response to an experiment in stalling the plot. Harold does nothing. As the viewer watches him sitting on the couch, not even getting up to relieve himself, change the television channel, or answer the phone, it becomes clear how the minute details beyond our conscious control can bring about unforeseen plot changes. When a wrecking ball crashes through the wall, because a demolition crew foreman has read the address incorrectly (another minute detail), Professor Hilbert declares: “Harold, you don’t control your fate.” But it is never made clear who actually does control it. If it is Karen Eiffel, why does she not know that he will phone her?

Professor Hilbert’s specialty is omniscient third-person narration. It is when Harold tells him the exact words by which he learned of his imminent death that Hilbert takes an interest: “What? I’ve written papers on ‘little did he know.’ I used to teach a class based on ‘little did he know.’ I mean, I once gave an entire seminar on ‘little did he
know.’” And so begins the search for the omniscient third person. They find her by coincidence, not by any of Hilbert’s methods. Harold sees her in a ten-year-old television interview where she is discussing the book in which Harold is a character. When Harold identifies her, Hilbert is distressed for two reasons: “First, she wasn’t on my list… [and] she kills people. In every book, they die.” Again, Hilbert is on the wrong track because of insufficient information. Harold should have mentioned Eiffel’s English accent. Also, it turns out she is not omniscient.

The final way in which Hilbert is wrong is in his assessment of the ending. Having read the novel before Harold and, therefore, temporarily knowing more than the protagonist, Hilbert tries to choose for Harold. In a scene that plays like a doctor breaking bad news to a terminally ill patient, Hilbert tells Harold: “You have to die. It’s her masterpiece.” The book’s aesthetic effect will be diminished if Karen Eiffel changes the ending. Even Harold agrees. Yet Karen Eiffel cannot do it. She lets him live, not killed by his watch but saved by it. It is her voice we hear narrating his survival of the bus accident, and we find it aesthetically pleasing. The viewer is pleased that Harold lived. Hilbert, however, pronounces the new ending merely “okay,” saying that it does not fit with the rest of the book. In fact, the new ending of the book is the only part of the novel we ever hear that makes her ten-year-old television interview make any sense. Describing her book Death and Taxes, Eiffel says it is about “intercollectivity, the looming certainty of death… and men’s fashion accessories.” Harold’s looming death and his wristwatch we know about. Intercollectivity, however, plays no part until the new ending describes the small wonders of everyday human interactions. The new
ending goes with the film and, we suspect, with the novel. Hilbert, the reader, is wrong again.

The film ends with the conclusion of Death and Taxes. Just as truth is implied by Stranger than Fiction, certainty is implied by Death and Taxes, suggesting that truth and certainty hold up the film like two bookends. However, since Harold lives, we lose the certainty of death and taxes. Ultimately, this is what Stranger than Fiction is about – not truth but the loss of certainty. This is what creates the fantastic moment; it is not the unknown but the realization that we do not know even what we believe we know. At times, the protagonist knows more than the author. At other times, the author, Eiffel, knows more than the reader, Hilbert. At other times, the reader knows more than the protagonist. Knowledge becomes relative, like victory in the children’s game of “Rock, Paper, Scissors.” While the film is, for the most part, a comedy, the fantastic moment embedded in the collision of two different narrative frames is unsettling enough to shape the way the viewer comes away from the film. While the author is transformed by her experience of the impossible, the viewer experiences the sensation of having been temporarily knocked off balance, confronted with the inability to know, yet left with the sense of having learned something. Unable to describe what actually happened, the viewer, like the protagonist and the author, experiences something meaningful which resists being put into words. Language falters, but experience does not.

Stranger than Fiction is an example of a postmodern text in which the fantastic resides only marginally and briefly, yet it exemplifies how the postmodern fantastic operates. It takes the overturning of conventions to greater lengths. It uses textual self-consciousness to create interpretive hesitations in new spaces. Yet, it fulfills the
requirements of the fantastic to allow the aesthetic effect to emerge, however briefly. It responds to a metaphysical shudder – the postmodern awareness of how individuals form reality through interpretations of experience. It also uses literary conventions ambiguously to force the viewer to hesitate between interpretations. Finally, it encourages identification with a character who also experiences a hesitation between possible and impossible interpretations of a story event. The hesitation creates an unsettling, uncanny effect which is both intellectual and visceral. While we puzzle over how Harold’s search for the author came to be in a novel where the author does not know he is looking for her, we can simultaneously sympathize with the author’s scream.

Having demonstrated both what is meant by the fantastic and how it can still operate in a self-conscious postmodern text, I will, in the next chapter, explore the relationship between other postmodern strategies and the fantastic narrative mode which allow the postmodern and the fantastic to serve each other’s agendas so successfully.
Chapter Two

Postmodern Theory and the Fantastic

Clearly, defining the fantastic is no small feat, and, while I have settled upon a definition, I am aware that my definition works best within, and is most suited to, this particular frame of analysis which strives to consider simultaneously the contributions of postmodern theory. The fantastic is one narrative mode that forces its definition beyond the notion of an end product towards a notion of a dynamic process. The fantastic is something one experiences. Another narrative mode which shares this quality is postmodern fiction. It is no wonder, then, that upon reading a postmodern fantastic text like Herbert Rosendorfer’s Der Ruinenbaumeister (1991) or upon watching television programs like Twin Peaks (1990) or The X-Files (1993), one is confronted with a series of questions. How was that postmodern? How was it fantastic? Why are my answers to those questions so similar? Does this mean the postmodern and the fantastic are the same? The answers are, like many postmodern truths, multiple, provisional, and dynamic.

While a number of theorists, such as Christine Brooke-Rose and Donald Morse, have gone so far as to equate the postmodern and the fantastic, I would argue instead that they are similar and compatible and that the few ways in which they counteract each other’s strategies can be turned to serve both of their somewhat different purposes. In fact, since both the postmodern and the fantastic are so resistant to definition, it is probably most useful at this point to turn instead to a comparison of their most typical
strategies, many of which they have in common. It is intended that such a discussion of
strategies will bring my notion of the postmodern into focus, but in order to set some
broad boundaries (which in the postmodern and the fantastic alike are meant to be
crossed), I would suggest that postmodern refers to a number of aesthetic and political
strategies used in the discourse of the late 1900s which emphasize deconstruction,
plurality, irony, parody, subjectivity, and, above all, self-reflexivity. I do not include the
current decade for, although postmodern strategies still abound and I will refer to their
use in such post-postmodern texts as Fringe, these strategies have become commonplace
to the point of losing much of their potency. Children are well-versed in the strategy of
self-reflexivity. A favourite cartoon of my own children has a title sequence that ends
with a tattle-tale sister yelling, “Mom, Phineas and Ferb are making a title sequence!”
The annoying ditties sung on field trips have been replaced by a tune self-reflexively
entitled “I know a song that gets on everybody’s nerves...” which also has the, in this
case, unfortunate quality of resistance to closure. In short, when postmodern strategies
are accessible to the school bus crowd, we can occasionally, though not necessarily
consistently, use terms like post-postmodern. So, in broad terms, the word “postmodern”
will refer to strategies popularized during the latter part of the last century, though these
strategies may be embedded as conventions in more recent texts such as Stranger than
Fiction, or used self-consciously but to a lesser effect in post-postmodern texts such as
Fringe. While most of my discussion here focuses on the nature of postmodern strategies
as opposed to postmodern politics, I will return to the politics of postmodernism in
Chapter Four.
As a way into comparing postmodern and fantastic strategies, I would like to return briefly to the equation that Brooke-Rose and Morse draw between the two discursive modes. In *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, Brooke-Rose frames her argument around the notions of real and unreal. She suggests that the postmodern and fantastic inversion of real/unreal stems from the seeming unreality of late twentieth-century experience. The real seems unreal. The inverse proposition is related: the unreal becomes real to us (4). She also suggests that, for the past few decades, the pace at which our reality collapses and must be refilled with meaning is fast enough that, for the first time, we are aware of how we are manipulated into forming a reality (10). To this experience of reality formation within a context wherein real and unreal are deconstructed, Brooke-Rose adds the element of ambiguity. Both fantastic and postmodern texts rely on ambiguity to create plurality of interpretation and, thereby, opportunities for subject formation. Brooke-Rose states that, if the fantastic is only distinguished from the uncanny and the marvelous by its ambiguity, it shares this feature with non-fantastic fiction (65). Thus, any ambiguous text that thematizes the real/unreal binary, as do many postmodern texts, can be considered by Brooke-Rose to be fantastic. The problem here is Brooke-Rose’s use of the notion of the unreal. She uses it metaphorically, while treating it as though it were a literal concept. By definition, the unreal does not exist. While we may go about describing awe-inspiring or vertigo-inducing experiences as “unreal,” the adjective is meant metaphorically. The experience is so unfamiliar as to be compared to something that cannot exist. What occurs in our physical world, however, is by definition “real.” The unreal of the fantastic cannot be
experienced any way but discursively. A similar problem occurs with Donald Morse’s equation of the fantastic and the postmodern.

In “Postmodernism, Modernism, Premodernism, and the Fantastic Meet the American Consciousness and Literature Midway in the Twentieth Century,” Morse draws several parallels between postmodernism and the fantastic. Both thematize the reader’s failure (which often mirrors the protagonist’s failure) to arrive at a complete and appropriate response to story events. For Morse, this extends to the semiotic activity which permits us to interpret everyday life: “This universe is, in the postmodern consciousness, decentered, rather than centered, and of all the possible, known responses humans might make to it, none appears adequate in light of its possible (probable?) erasure” (70). He goes on to make several statements equating the fantastic not only with postmodernism but with postmodern realism: “…in a world where what was thought to be inconceivable happens; where what is impossible, is not only possible, but often proves probable; where the fantastic arrives each morning in the guise of the daily newspaper, is then the fantastic the form of literature most uniquely suited to reflect its consciousness?”(75). Also, “[l]ooking at [the] spectrum of fiction from the mimetic to the marvelous, what is postmodern appears coincident with what is fantastic” (78). Lance Olsen, in Ellipse of Uncertainty, would agree with this observation: “The fantastic becomes the realism our culture understands” (14). There is a connection between the fantastic and postmodern treatments of realism. It is important to note, however, that the impossible events to which Morse refers are such events as the election of Ronald Reagan to president of the United States or other such improbable events as one might read in “the daily newspaper.” Like Brooke-Rose, Morse blurs the literal and metaphorical
meanings of key terms. The impossible, by definition, is not possible and, therefore, will
not appear in our daily newspapers. He means the improbable, to which we might react
by exclaiming “Unreal!” Morse’s “impossible,” like Brooke-Rose’s “unreal,” however,
is not the impossible of the fantastic. Even in postmodern society, the dead stay dead,
and time moves forward rather than backward. In the fantastic, the dead may be undead
or time may move in indeterminate ways. The difference between the highly improbable
of the postmodern and the impossible of the fantastic is the difference between the
intellectual reaction to postmodern discourse and the visceral reaction to fantastic
discourse.

Morse and Brooke-Rose do suggest some very useful parallels between the two
modes; however, by losing track of this most significant difference, they blur a boundary
upon which the fantastic relies for much of its aesthetic effect. The intrusion of the
impossible into our everyday reality cannot actually happen, and when it appears to do
so, our reaction goes beyond an intellectual response to ambiguity to encompass a
physical/emotional response that surpasses simple intellectual confusion.

That said, such parallels between the two modes exist because the postmodern
and the fantastic do coincide in a number of ways and for a variety of reasons. Veronica
Hollinger, in “Playing at the End of the World: Postmodern Theater,” sees the blurring of
the boundary between high and low culture (Jameson 314) as an important, shared quality
of both postmodernism and the fantastic. She sees the “contemporary inclination to
question the distinctions conventionally taken for granted” as contributing to the
breakdown of both the high/low distinction and the fantasy/reality binary (185). She
regards the two modes as compatible, however, not indistinguishable: “When
contemporary theater...turns to the fantastic, it does so not in opposition to reality; rather, the fantastic has become the new *mise-en-scène* of that reality” (186). The fantastic is a mode by which the postmodern expression of ambiguity can be realized. The visceral effect of fantastic ambiguity, while different from the intellectual effect of postmodern ambiguity, can be viewed as contributive - just as setting can be contributive to theme.

Another area in which the postmodern and fantastic are isomorphous if not the same is in their treatment of the notion of “an accessible historical referent” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 46). Jean Baudrillard mourns this postmodern loss of the notion of the referent when he states that “simulation is master” and all that is left is the “parodic rehabilitation of all lost referentials (372). The fantastic also undermines the idea of an accessible referent by demonstrating the impossibility of answering the simple question: “What really happened?” The fantastic does this by problematizing both reality and realism. According to Helene Diaz Brown, fantastic texts work by gradually removing all of the fundamental elements of reality (32). By these, she means such concepts as linear time, causality, or our notions of space. She also sees the fantastic as a challenge to the conventions of realism: linear plot, motivation, etc. Malrieu also sees the fantastic as an attack on realism; for Hoffmann and the earlier French writers of fantastic texts, it was about dismantling the classic rules of composition. Later, Henry James and Jorge Luis Borges took on this reworking of conventions (11). Along with this dismantling of conventions came the loss of the idea that one could follow a linear plot to a logical conclusion based on reasonable motivations. One text which demonstrates nicely the compatibility of the postmodern questioning of the reality/realism binary and the fantastic attack on reality in general is Ramsay Campbell’s “The End of a Summer’s Day” (1987).
It thematizes and literalizes Lyotard’s attack on Habermasian consensus reality by making the protagonist a victim not only of the impossible event but also of the refusal of her companions to acknowledge her reality. The protagonist is an unhappy, insecure young woman who is walking through a cave with her lover as part of a guided group tour. As the group makes its way through the total darkness, she is unable to see her lover at all. When they emerge into the light, her lover is gone and in his place is a blind, feeble stranger who is completely dependent upon her. The postmodern element is present in the way Campbell demonstrates, even before the event, how everyone’s perceptions are dependent on how they need to negotiate their social positions. Nothing seems to depend on “what really happened.” Even the protagonist’s own destruction stems from her inability to negotiate a position within consensus reality, not from her confrontation with the impossible as such. The implication is that the reader will believe or not believe according to his or her own position within social power structures: it’s a matter of sympathy or derision.

High/low and fantasy/realism are only two of many binary categories that the fantastic and postmodernism problematize. The notion of categories is itself at issue. As Baudrillard points out, distinctions in the postmodern era have become less clear: “simulation threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false,’ between ‘real’ and imaginary’” (344). The fantastic’s attack on categorization and boundaries can take a variety of forms. According to Vax, it undoes the rational/irrational binary. Even though the fantastic deals with the impossible, the best fantastic texts are classic in their rationality. According to Malrieu, the nature of both the protagonist and the fantastic phenomenon (if it is a sentient being) is hybrid. Neither is fully human or inhuman.
Neither is truly living or dead. The fantastic is an exploration of these particular boundaries (87). Hélène Cixous, in her reading of Freud’s work on the uncanny, also sees the undoing of the living/dead binary as the source of the uneasiness created by the fantastic mode: it is the idea of being in “a dubious state” that is unsettling. This is certainly one of the main categorical issues at the heart of any vampire fiction. The vampire is neither alive nor dead. The victim continues to exist but ceases to be herself. This is the issue explored by a film such as Nadja (1994). As a vampire, Nadja is neither alive nor dead, but when she ceases to be a vampire, she suffers the same fate as her victims. She continues to exist, but she is no longer herself. She is still caught between existence and non-existence – thus, her final question: “Are you there, Nadja? Is it me?” Her dubious state is reflected in the confusion of pronouns; does she think of herself as “you” or “me”? Or both? This conflation of subject and other will be taken up again later.

Other theorists who see categorical breakdown at the heart of the fantastic are Rosemary Jackson, who sees this as subversive, eroding “the pillars of society by undoing categorical structures” (176), and Amy Ransom, who sees the fantastic as the transgression of the limits between matter and mind (20). Brown sees these transgressions and breakdowns as dynamic. Within the fantastic text, there is a continuous movement between the active and passive which makes it impossible to distinguish between them. That is, the reading subject feels the uncanny effect but is also the one generating the effect through interpretation. The awareness of one’s interpretive role, might, one would think, counteract the fantastic effect, but the uneasy position of being responsible for the interpretation while not in possession of the “facts” (for there
are none, as such) is part of what creates the uncanny effect. Thus, active and passive, process and effect, are blurred. Another binary which is challenged is that of excess and subtraction. Fantastic texts demonstrate the notion of excess thematically and structurally. Life exceeds the limits of death. The text pushes things too far. At the same time, our frames of reference and ways of knowing are gradually withdrawn. We experience excess and lack simultaneously (Brown 18). As Brown points out, even Freud’s conception of the unheimlich implies the breakdown of categorical differences because it means simultaneously what one keeps secret and hidden and what is strange. It conflates the notions near and far and, by implication, self and other. This boundary, between self and other, is probably the most relevant of all to both postmodernism and the fantastic.

Causality and the Coherent Subject: A Discussion of “Der Brandstifter”

The notion of the coherent subject is definitely at issue in both modes of narrative. In contesting the humanist/modern tradition of identity-formation and definition, postmodernism certainly does not spare the notion of the coherent subject any more than it does the notion of an accessible referent (Hutcheon, Poetics 46). Parody, as a postmodern strategy of choice, by turning to other art forms, contests the notion of the authorial subject as a coherent and “continuous source of signification” (Hutcheon, Parody 4-5). Parody’s repetition contests the notion of the individual and unique source of meaning which was previously considered to be the product of the coherent subject. By focusing attention on how one text’s interpretation relies upon knowledge of other
texts, parodic repetition suggests the ways in which all texts rely to some degree upon their relationships to other texts for meaning. In this way, it becomes clear that meaning cannot be generated from any individual source, whether a text or a coherent subject. This rejection of the coherent subject is not a wholesale rejection of the notion of the subject *per se*. However, some postmodern theorists do see this as an implication of the breakdown of categories in general. Baudrillard sees it as a symptom of the questioning of the notion of causality:

> The whole traditional mode of causality is brought into question: the perspective, deterministic mode, the ‘active,’ critical mode, the analytical mode – the distinction between cause and effect, between active and passive, between subject and object, between ends and means (365).

Baudrillard’s concerns are the theme of the story “Der Brandstifter” (1968) by Armin Ayren. The protagonist experiences a failure of the principle of causality. Along with the failing of causality goes his sense of his own agency and, with that, his status as subject. As we shall see, a close reading of this fantastic text demonstrates how the strategy of breaking down the cause/effect binary triggers both a postmodern, intellectual response and a more visceral, fantastic response.

To start, it is important to stress that the link between the fantastic event and a supernatural or alternative causality is at the heart of many theories of the fantastic mode. In his introduction to Tolstoy’s *The Vampire*, Vladimir Solovyev describes this relationship as follows:

> The real interest of the fantastic in literature is contained in the belief that everything that happens in the world, and especially everything that
happens in the life of man – except that for which the cause is proximate and obvious – still depends on some other kind of causation (qtd. in Tomashevsky 83).

It is difficult, if not impossible, to find a theory of the fantastic which refutes this general statement. Even Tzvetan Todorov’s famous moment of reader hesitation is created by a choice between natural and supernatural causes. It is fascinating, therefore, to find a fantastic story like Armin Ayren’s “Der Brandstifter” which not only follows Solovyev’s rule but thematizes it. Unlike narratives that only imply another kind of causation through the thematic representation of, say, vampires or aliens, “Der Brandstifter” takes on causality directly, making it the theme of the story by temporarily replacing it with the principle of synchronicity. The protagonist, Robert, is plagued by a series of fires which ignite for no apparent reason beyond the unlikely co-presence of Robert and all of the required elements of ignition. This co-presence is more than simple coincidence, however. The link between Robert and the fires requires a principle which implies greater connectedness than is implied by coincidence. In his foreword to the I Ching, Carl Jung uses the notion of Entsprechung or synchronicity to describe this principle of connectedness. In Baynes’ translation of Jung’s foreword, he glosses Jung’s explanation with the following definition of synchronicity which suggests the nature of its role in “Der Brandstifter”:

The synchronistic view … tries to produce an equally meaningful picture of coincidence. How does it happen that A’, B’, C’, D’, etc. appear all in the same moment and in the same place? It happens in the first place because the physical events A’ and B’ are of the same quality as the
psychic events C’ and D’, and further because all are the exponents of one and the same momentary situation. The situation is assumed to represent a legible or understandable picture (xxiv-xxv).

This provides an explanation of how Robert’s presence, typically while he is in a stressed mental state, contributes to the fires. The physical and psychic events are of the same quality. However, there are two major differences between what occurs in the story and simple synchronicity. First of all, “the physical events A’ and B’” of Jung’s description still refer to normal events, such as falling yarrow sticks or the tossing of coins, which are governed by physical laws. The fires are unusual events which seem to occur in contradiction to at least the laws of chance. The second difference is that synchronicity, like causality, should operate universally. In “Der Brandstifter,” only Robert’s experiences seem to be operating synchronistically. Everyone else lives in the world of causation. This raises the question “Why?” which brings us back to causal logic again.

Causality is not just problematized in terms of the fires. Robert’s romantic relationship with Claudia is fraught with little flare-ups “ohne vernünftigen Anlass” (“without rational cause”; 12). Naturally, Robert’s presence is a key factor in these disasters as well. More importantly, he is also the primary victim of both the fires and the arguments. Even while the relationship is intact, it is Robert who suffers from the disagreements: “Wäre es nicht besser…nicht mehr daran zu denken? Ja, wenn ihm das gelänge. Sie konnte es offenbar. Er nicht” (“Would it not be better…to stop thinking about it? Yes, if only he could. She obviously could. Not him”; 14). Both the fires and Claudia’s habit of putting him in the wrong seem to have a punitive function. Again, one wonders why. One explanation is Robert’s chronic sense of guilt regarding Claudia and
his schoolwork. However, if one suggests that his guilt creates a psychic need for punishment which somehow triggers the fires, the line of reasoning has returned again to cause and effect. It would appear that for these moments of synchronicity to achieve any sort of meaning for Robert or the reader, synchronicity must be regarded in terms of its own logic. Coincidences alone, which are meaningless by nature, are not enough to create a fantastic effect. It is only when one suggests that there is some unknown logic causing a shift from causality to synchronicity for one specific individual that the fantastic effect fully emerges. That is, if one considers the fires which plague Robert in terms of an alternate causality which is somehow linked to their psychic appropriateness, it becomes clear that the fires are more than coincidence and are the result of some force beyond the experience of the characters or the reader. In order to appreciate the nature of this unknown force or alternative logic, it is necessary to return for a moment to Todorov’s theory of the fantastic.

When Todorov proposed his structuralist approach to the fantastic, he believed he was defining a specific phenomenon of the nineteenth century. He limited the category not only because of the generic traits of the nineteenth-century version of the fantastic, but also because of the cultural constraints that produced that particular body of work. In defining the fantastic, Todorov points out quite correctly that “the fantastic is concerned to describe desire in its excessive forms as well as its various transformations or, one may say, its perversions” (138). He then goes on to argue that “psychoanalysis has replaced (and thereby made useless) the literature of the fantastic….The themes of fantastic literature have become, literally, the very themes of the psychological investigations of the last fifty years” (160). This alleged uselessness is belied, however, by the resurgence
in recent decades of the fantastic mode, complete with Todorovian hesitation and
ambiguity. Ironically, it is Todorov himself who provides an explanation of how the
fantastic still has such appeal in a world where psychoanalysis is so firmly entrenched.
After claiming that a change in the human psyche has revoked the censorship which
previously made the fantastic necessary, he admits that this “does not mean that the
advent of psychoanalysis has destroyed the taboos; they have simply been shifted” (160).
Not surprisingly, psychoanalysis has not destroyed the fantastic either; the source of the
effect has simply been shifted. Todorov’s model allows us to see how this has happened.

Todorov’s three defining qualities of a fantastic story are that the reader hesitates
between a natural and a supernatural explanation of the events; that this hesitation may
also be experienced by the protagonist and, thereby, become one of the themes of the
work; and that the reader must not regard the work as poetic or allegorical. Each of these
conditions refers to a different aspect of the text. The first refers to the story events, or
“visions.” The second refers to both the syntactical and semantic conditions of the text:
syntactical because it implies the protagonist’s awareness of the events as they fit into the
whole of the narrative, semantic because of the thematization of hesitation. The third
condition refers to a choice between modes of reading (33).

One can see that in this scheme the taboos which motivated the fantastic mode of
the nineteenth century would be most closely related to the events and the syntactical
aspects of the text. Both the “visions” and the characters’ reactions to them form the
main interest of those texts. In more recent texts, however, the interest is neither in the
taboos nor in the fantastic events which invoke them. In our post-Freud existence, it is
the discourse about those events that carries the main interest of the fantastic text.
Included in the notion of discourse is the reader’s choice between modes of reading. While Todorov was content to say that the modes of allegory and poetry must be rejected, the critic of recent fantastic literature must regard the text’s ability to create a hesitation between modes of reading as a key factor in the fantastic effect. In fact, many recent fantastic works combine styles in such a way that the reader is continuously shifting back and forth between modes. For example, many postmodern writers combine parody with the fantastic in such a way that the fantastic effect is achieved through the reader’s hesitation between reading and being self-conscious about analyzing his or her role as a reader. This self-consciousness creates a hyperawareness of the reader’s own reactions which, in turn, freezes the reader’s ability to react naturally and produces a form of reader hesitation. Another way in which twentieth-century fantastic texts emphasize the discursive element is by thematizing discourse in much the same way that nineteenth-century texts thematize hesitation – through the protagonist’s experiences. Again, Ayren’s “Der Brandstifter” serves as a good example of both of these tactics. Its fantastic elements are so subtle that the reader could conceivably read the text as realistic. The most effective reading keeps the reader alternating between the realistic and the fantastic. Also, interpretation is thematized through Robert’s encounters with carnival traditions and dream sequences and through such discursive elements as the act of writing and his conversations with Claudia. Interestingly enough, these are exactly the elements which demonstrate the unknown causal logic, referred to earlier, which appears to be governing Robert’s life and the fires.

Carnival functions in at least two ways in this story. As an episode in the plot, carnival includes those events that occur between Robert’s decision to go to the party
alone and his arrest upon returning home in the early morning. As a symbolic representation of the logic governing Robert’s life, the carnival spirit appears throughout the story. According to Bakhtin, the function of carnival is “…to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths…” It offers the chance “…to enter a completely new order of things” (34). In light of this and the dominance of coincidence in the story, the events of the carnival episode seem somehow inappropriate. Disregarding for a moment carnival’s compliance with physical laws, one is tempted to suggest that in a world where causality is the established truth, nothing would be more carnivalesque than a spate of coincidences. This is exactly the opposite of what happens, however. The carnival events are given causal explanations. Robert’s choice of costume is not just a whim. It is the result of his new nickname and his friend Florian’s suggestion that they start an arson club. Robert’s social transformation is the natural result of being out without Claudia. Most significantly, Robert’s guilt, for the first time, is rooted in an actual offence. For once he knows what it is that makes him feel guilty. Ironically, when Claudia learns of his transgression, she does not blame him for the thing of which he is guilty, going out without her, but for the offence he put himself in jeopardy to avoid, being too secretive (36). Though both her forgiveness and accusation are the reverse of what one expects, they are not part of the carnival episode. Perhaps this is the whole point. Carnival is the only time in the story when cause and effect function normally. There is no bizarre, inexplicable fire which triggers Robert’s arrest. He is arrested because of the tangible, physical evidence scattered about in his room. It would seem that synchronicity is the prevailing truth in this fictional world while normal causality is its reversal. The problem with such an
interpretation is that it does not explain the baffled reactions of the police or of Robert. There is an option, however.

From the story’s setting, one can assume that specifically Swabian carnival traditions are of significance here. Most important is the tradition of marking the commencement of carnival by lighting a large tree on fire (Mezger 355). If the carnival spirit manifested itself when the roof timbers of Robert’s apartment caught fire, this would explain the reversal of the established truth of causality throughout the story. It would also explain the temporary return of causal logic during the conscious celebration of carnival because this would be a reversal within a reversal. Obviously, this would also imply a completely new and separate manifestation of carnival. It would be self-generating, operating outside the laws of physics, and functioning at the level of the individual rather than the community. To call it carnival is to reduce carnival to a set of symbols or possibly even a trope. However, it is a very useful set of symbols.

An example of this reversal of carnival symbols is the soot which Robert uses to darken his face. In the Christian tradition, covering oneself with ashes denotes guilt and repentance. Carnival is supposed to be a time of temporary freedom from the moral judgements of the church. Thus, this symbolism is inappropriate for carnival and more indicative of Robert’s guilt complex, which could be considered the prevailing norm. Another interesting reversal is Robert’s costume. It is exactly the opposite of the traditional Swabian Feuerteufel (“fire devil”) costume. Robert wears a black robe and hat with red gloves and stockings (25). A Feuerteufel is usually dressed mainly in red and yellow with dark gloves and stockings (Wintermantel 106, 124). This change in costume is especially important if one considers Robert’s behaviour at the Fastnachtsball (“Shrove
Tuesday celebrations”). As the provider of so much entertainment and laughter, Robert quite literally plays the fool. Bakhtin explains the special significance of the fool’s costume:

The clown was first disguised as a king, but once his reign had come to an end his costume was changed, “travestied,” to turn him once more into a clown. The abuse and thrashing are equivalent to a change of costume, to a metamorphosis…. (197)

If one accepts that the Fastnachtsball is a reversal of the carnivalesque logic prevailing throughout the rest of the story, then the artistically creative, socially successful Robert in his arsonist costume does not just return to his repressed personality after the celebrations. The reversal of his costume would make him a Feuerteufel as well. It also means that his current, well-ordered lifestyle as a chemistry student who is engaged to be married must be temporary as well. In the meantime, what could more effectively drag him back into his current denial of his creative energies than a purging dose of guilt and the travesty of a false arrest?

The abuse which awaits Robert at the end of the Fastnachtsball is only symbolic, however. It marks the end of the conscious observance of carnival. As Bakhtin notes, though, “[a]buse is death” (197). Just as it is a real, spontaneous fire which marks the commencement of this other manifestation of carnival symbolism, it is a real death which marks the end. It should be noted that no cause is ever provided for either the first fire or for Robert’s death. An explanation is not needed. Both events are discursive requirements of this very literal carnival manifestation. For the reversal of the governing logic to be more than symbolic, the observance of the traditions must also be more than
symbolic. In short, one could argue that a literal manifestation of carnival is at least partly responsible for a reversal in the logic of Robert’s world. What this implies is that a socially constructed discursive system has taken on a life of its own and is actively creating events rather than just interpreting them. This change in the role of discourse is explored further in the dream sequence.

Unlike the carnival symbolism, which seems to be taking an active role in Robert’s life, his dream is quite separate from his conscious life. Of course, there is a psychic connection to his experiences, but his dream neither causes any event nor contributes to any coincidence. We do not even see Robert reacting mentally to the dream upon waking. Though the dream could be excluded from a plot summary, it provides useful information about both Robert and the nature of the logic governing events in his life. Before any attempt is made to glean that information from the dream, perhaps a justification for attempting a psychoanalytical interpretation is in order. First, this dream is not a product of the unconscious of a fictive character but of the conscious mind of the author. One assumes that the necessary inferences can be made by any reader with sufficient curiosity. The justification for a specifically psychoanalytical reading is the abundance of typically Freudian symbolism written into the dream. The inclusion of trains in a dream sequence cannot help but provoke a Freudian analysis (see Freud 241). All of this aside, the best justification for psychoanalytically analyzing Robert’s dream is that it is a way to make some interesting connections between the various aspects of Robert’s life and the need for the fires.

According to Jung, a basic premise of dream theory is that every dream has a function and “dass diese Funktion des Traumes eine psychologische Balanciering
bedeutet, eine Ausgleichung, die zum geordneten Handeln unbedingt erforderlich ist”
(“that this function of dreams denotes a psychological balancing, a settling of accounts
which is absolutely necessary for normal behaviour”; I Ching 109). In Freud, this
principle’s counterpart is Wunscherfüllung (“wish fulfillment”; 86). Both concepts
express the same general idea: a dream both expresses a psychic need and provides a
means of relief. Freud also suggests that dreams signify causality through sequence
(215). A dream in two parts usually means that the first part expresses a cause while the
second part demonstrates the effect. Robert’s dream can be divided into two sections
which differ in location, symbolism, and emotional effect. The first part of the dream
takes place outdoors where Robert is trying to write his Abitur (“exam”). This is a
typical examination-anxiety dream because it deals with a previous exam that Robert
obviously passed easily. Examination dreams are significant in two ways. First, they
imply a reproach. Freud interprets it like this: “Du bist jetzt schon so alt, schon so weit
im Leben, und machst noch immer solche Dummheiten, Kindereien” (“You are already
so old, so far into your life, yet you are still capable of such foolishness, childishness”;
189). This is certainly in line with Robert’s usual sense of guilt. Exam dreams are also
significant because they are essentially anxiety dreams. For Freud, it is doctrine that “die
Angstträume Träume sexuellen Inhaltes sind, deren zugehörige Libido eine Verwandlung
in Angst erfahren hat” (“anxiety dreams are sexual dreams in which the associated libido
has been translated into anxiety”; 113). This, as we learn, applies to Robert’s dream as
well. According to Freudian symbolism, landscape often represents female genitalia
(249). In the first part of this dream, Robert finds himself unable to balance his books on
his lap because the leg of his chair keeps sinking into the damp earth of a molehill (32).
He also cannot concentrate because trains keep speeding through this damp, distracting landscape. Both the imagery and his anxious mood describe perfectly the guilt and frustration created by Robert’s attempt to balance school and romance. He is not willing to go without Claudia’s affection, yet she really does distract him from his work. In his musings on this topic, there is a hint that she is creating more than just time pressure. She hovers “als seien sie schon verheiratet” ("as though they were already married"); 22).

This recalls one of his earlier observations. While at home visiting his parents, Robert looks out over the plowed fields “mit korrekt gezogenen Furchen” (“with perfectly rilled furrows”). In them he sees “Ordnung, Mass, das Begreifliche und das Gute … wie sein künftiges Leben” (“order, measurement, the sensible and the good...like his future life”; 12). That future includes marrying Claudia. It would seem that the anxiety produced by his relationship with Claudia is not just his fear of academic failure. He is also struggling against a foreordained, much too ordinary future.

If we continue with Freud’s theory of causality, the second half of the dream signifies what must or should happen in response to the first half. In this part, Robert leaves the landscape behind and is able to work in a less distracting environment. Upon hearing the exam question, he is instantly relieved of all his anxiety. The topic which brings this relief is fire. Perhaps it is appealing to him because it provides an opportunity to be creative and imaginative. This is a topic for anyone “wer Phantasie hatte” (“who had imagination”; 33), but not for those “mit musterhaften Dispositionen” (“with model dispositions”; 34). One wonders how he feels about the chemistry which he studies ostensibly because chemists can find good jobs (12). Another aspect of Robert’s delight with the topic is that it has nothing to do with fire’s destructive force. He leaves it to the
others to describe crackling joists, piles of debris, and singed moustaches. Robert’s growing elation and his enthusiasm for the writing process itself bring to mind William Blake’s view of hellfire as a manifestation of the creative energies of the imagination (Blake 150). Or, more appropriate to the imagery of the story, he seems to sense fire’s carnivalesque role as a means of making way for the new. It is “der Hintergrund für subtile seelische Konflikte” (“the background for subtle spiritual conflicts”; 35). By replacing the earlier rhetoric questions, the topic of fire provides an escape from “Ordnung, Mass, das Begreifliche und das Gute.” It opens an entrance into a different reality. Right before he wakes, Robert is dreaming that he is writing the story of the Abitur he has just dreamed. He is writing himself, creating himself as “ein Talent … ein Genie” (“a talent...a genius”; 35). The last moments of the dream do not just provide characterization: this is the plot in miniature. Robert is being recreated through a discursive act in the same way that, in his waking hours, his well-ordered life is being rewritten by a carnivalesque manifestation of synchronicity.

According to Freud, dream content is governed by the principles of condensation and displacement (191, 208). Condensation interchanges things which are similar in nature. Displacement links things which are related by contiguity. In language, the counterparts to these concepts are metaphor and metonymy. Like metaphor and metonymy, condensation and displacement are discursive entities. Just as it is the language of dreams that governs what is or is not dreamed, it is written language which provides Robert with a means of becoming a creative genius. Unfortunately, the creative power of discourse is not at Robert’s command in his waking life. When carnival is not
somehow manifesting itself as inexplicable fires, Robert’s life is defined by a complete lack of control over the discourse of his and Claudia’s relationship.

Robert and Claudia’s romance is the backdrop against which the coincidences take place. At first, the arguments appear to be the psychic motivation for the fires. There seems to be a straightforward association between Robert’s sense of guilt over this constant friction and the ignition of the fires. The first fire occurs on the night Robert leaves Tübingen for the holidays. He goes without Claudia because they have just had an argument. The second fire occurs after their temporary separation. He has just delayed approaching her to resume their relationship because he wants to spend one more evening out with his friends. Guilt is a factor in both situations. This explanation does not work for the last fire, however. After Claudia breaks up with him, Robert tells her that their parting comes as a relief, “[w]ie eine bittere, aber wirksame, Medizin” (“like a bitter but effective medicine”; 37). The idea which relieves him most is that Claudia has found someone else. Clearly he feels relieved of his guilt. Yet, it is as he contemplates this new state of affairs that he realizes that the idea of arson is suddenly not so alien to him. He can almost justify it, or, rather, it feels appropriate. One is reminded for a moment of the “real” Robert who appeared at the Fastnachtsball. He does not pursue the idea of lighting a fire though. The final fire is ignited despite his conscious decision not to light it and despite the fact that he is feeling pain, not guilt. If anything, he may be feeling a surplus of punishment. The fire cannot simply be meaningless, however. For the final fire to create the fantastic effect it does, there must be a link between Robert’s psyche and the event.
Robert’s anxiety over his relationship with Claudia is not just caused by her always casting him in the guilty role. He fears that the friction will escalate. In fact, it is as predictable as the uniform furrows in the field. “Er brauchte nur an seine Eltern zu denken” (“He need only think of his own parents”; 13). Because their relationship is becoming like that of his parents, Robert sees himself taking on the role of his father. The next stage will be gradual decline and, eventually, death. Robert is already observing this in his father: “Ja, er wurde alt” (“He was certainly getting old”; 16). The arguments, like Claudia’s continual presence, are part of this morbid, yet well-ordered, future against which he rebels in his dream. They are part of a role which he does not want to play. Losing Claudia marks the beginning of his metamorphosis. He begins the process suggested by his dream. He rewrites himself. The process starts with an awareness of change: “Vielleicht war er ein anderer geworden” (“Maybe he was becoming someone else”; 37). It continues with an analysis of the new role in which he has been cast. Are the police right? Is he “ein wenig umgänglicher, unfreundlicher Mensch?” (“an unpleasant, unfriendly man?”; 39). He can no longer imagine himself as an old man looking out over those furrows. The world of “Ordnung, Mass, das Begreifliche und das Gute” no longer feels like home to him. By lighting the match to start the last fire, he even explores the option of really being an arsonist. Ultimately, he proves incapable of escaping his role of his own volition. He rejects suicide because he lacks the necessary theatrical temperament. He also chooses at the last moment not to touch the match to the chemicals. He does not take the cue from his dream; nor does he follow the promptings of carnival. When he literally turns his back on arson, he becomes reimmersed in the world he seemed to want to escape. Immediately before his decision
to start life over, there is a mention of young women and schoolchildren which provokes a specific response to that decision: “Ein[-] neue[r] Anfang” (“a new start”) means a new woman, a new career, a house, children… (44). In this light, it is not just a coincidence that the fire starts at the same moment he makes this choice. This fire is not symbolic punishment in response to his guilt. It is a physical representation of his need to escape. In retrospect, one can see this need to escape figuring alongside the guilt in the first fires as well. What makes the fires frightening is that, while they occur in response to Robert’s mental state, they do not respond to his conscious will. Not only does he choose not to light the fire, he also chooses to return to the world of straight and uniform furrows. Unfortunately for him, the logic governing the fires demands that he not return.

The nature of this logic is demonstrated by the link that connects carnival, dream, and Robert and Claudia’s arguments. All three are modes of discourse in which the nature of the discursive system shapes how reality is experienced. In Robert and Claudia’s romance, this relationship between discourse and experience is interpretive. “What really happened” disappears, while Claudia’s interpretation becomes the reality. To avoid feeling that she may have made a mistake, Claudia simply creates a new meaning for an event. In one instance, Claudia justifies their separation by quoting a proverb (2). She sees life imitating discourse. This relationship between discourse and events is typical of normal experience. It is only the extent to which Claudia controls her reality through interpretation that makes it noteworthy.

In dream, events are selected by the dream language itself. Condensation and displacement govern what will be seen and heard by the dreamer. This reverses the role of language in waking life in which it interprets the events experienced. Admittedly, this
is a simplistic view of the role of language, but a person can live a lifetime without ever being aware of the limitations of this view, let alone experiencing a complete failure of the system as Robert does. Like dream, carnival is an alternate reality in which discourse governs events. The difference between dream and carnival is that dream logic is not under the dreamer’s conscious control, while carnival conventions are consciously determined by the participants. Consider what would happen if dream logic entered the realm of waking life while remaining out of the participant’s conscious control. What would result from the literal precedence of meaning over event?

In *The Pursuit of Signs*, Jonathan Culler argues that in any narrative there are two irreconcilable logics. One logic assumes “that a description of events presupposes the prior existence, albeit fictive, of those events” (171). These events form a “nontextual given” and everything in the text’s discourse is “a way of interpreting, valuing, and presenting this nontextual substratum” (172). In other words, events determine meaning and discourse. The other logic states that the force of meaning or the need for narrative coherence can create a demand for a particular event. “Here meaning is not the effect of a prior event but its cause” (174). That is to say, meaning and discourse determine events. Because a narrative is a consciously created construct, the truth of this observation is clear. Events are chosen in order to develop various aspects of the text such as theme or character development. But do both of these mutually exclusive logics function in everyday life? They certainly do when we narrativize our lives as Claudia does. Culler demonstrates this point with Nietzsche’s example of the mosquito bite. Causal logic says that the mosquito bite comes first and the pain comes second. This may not be what happens though. It is just as logical to say that the pain makes one look
for a cause. “It is the effect that causes us to produce a cause; a tropological operation then reorders the sequence pain-mosquito as mosquito-pain. This latter sequence is the product of discursive forces, but we treat it as a given, as the true order” (183). This problematization of causation only occurs when the event is narrativized. As Culler himself points out, this does not mean that we can do away with causation. It only means that narratives sometimes “identify their own tropological production” (184). If this reversal of causation were to extend to the physical realm, it would extend the boundaries of narrative itself. Our very lives would be tropologically produced. This is what makes “Der Brandstifter” fantastic. It poses the question: “What if our physical environment were governed by a narrative logic which demands that the forces of meaning and discourse somehow create their own appropriate events?” This is, after all, what is happening to Robert. The fires and his death are all caused by the requirements of discourse. The first fire is a fitting symbol of his guilt, and as a carnivalesque image, it is an appropriate signal for the reign of this other logic to begin. In response to this discursive need, the fire simply comes into being. Robert’s death also occurs under the force of meaning. As a symbol, it marks the end of carnival. As an episode in the plot, it provides closure. The relationship between the discursive forces and the unexplained events is being oversimplified here to make a point. The logic which requires this sudden shift from causality to synchronicity is the same narrative logic which says that meaning dictates events. Robert is the victim of narrativization. It is not simply that he is at the mercy of an author as any other character is. He experiences these lapses in causality as we would. He is as much at a loss to explain the sudden prevalence of synchronicity as we would be. Ultimately, it is this identification with Robert that leaves the reader
pondering his or her own reality. As difficult as it is to find meaning in the random events of our lives, how much more traumatic would it be to be plagued by the events which most meaningfully represent our psychic states?

The significance of this extended analysis of “Der Brandstifter” is that the intellectual effort required to work through the roles played by synchronicity and causality, carnival, dream symbolism, and any other discursive factors which provide ambiguous clues as to “what really happened” does not negate the visceral impact of Robert’s death. The chill created as one sympathizes with Robert’s predicament creeps upon one slowly as one realizes the nature of his experience, but it is real nevertheless. A failure of causality triggers the erasure of Robert’s status as subject. The fantastic element is not a vampire, ghost, or alien, but the practical experience at the physical level of an abstract postmodern theory articulated by Baudrillard – namely that subject formation relies in part upon a consensual notion of causality.

While postmodern theory tends to allow some notion of the subject to continue to function, even if challenged, the fantastic’s attack on the subject tends to be more complete. The subject either is lost or merges completely with the other or the object. Subjectivity and objectivity become blurred. The results affect everything because this binary is the basis of language itself and language is the building stuff of our reality. Or, as Brown says, “[s]i le statut de l’objet est ébranlé, c’est tout l’univers qui est ébranlé, et le sujet, étant indissociable d’une comprehension intelligente de l’univers et de la permanence de l’objet se trouve attaqué dans ses fondements mêmes” (“if the status of the object is weakened, then the whole universe is weakened, and the subject, being indissociable from an intelligent comprehension of the universe and the permanence of
the object, finds itself attacked at its very foundation”; 100). Problematizing either the object or the subject in its permanence and coherence automatically problematizes its other.

For Malrieu, the fantastic problematizing of the self/other binary consists of the gradual change in the protagonist from a normal subject to something other. The experience of the impossible creates in the protagonist a shift from his notion of self to identification with the fantastic phenomenon. He literally becomes the other (69). For Brown, the self/other binary is undone in fantastic texts by the immediacy of communication when others’ thoughts seem to come from within. When this happens, it is as if another controls one’s own agency (71). Ransom see all of these variations on the self/other collapse as illustrative of the “anxiety about a self-structure problematized by contemporary events and ideas” (20). In the nineteenth century, these events and ideas would have had to do with biological and psychological contributions to the definition of humanity. Now, the postmodern crisis of the notion of a coherent subject both creates and reflects changes to our self-structuring. The postmodern fantastic narrative adapts to this change of emphasis from biological/psychological definitions of humanity to the philosophical questioning of the coherent subject. It does so, in part, by using parody to contest the notion of the coherent subject, as Hutcheon suggests it can, by demonstrating that meaning comes from various sources other than the unique, meaning-generating subject. Fantastic parody is thus suited to exploring the illusory nature of the boundary between self and other and the many ways in which this boundary can be breached.
Boundaries and Authenticity: A Discussion of The X-Files

One of the most famously ambiguous fantastic texts of the late twentieth century is *The X-Files* (1993-2002). The structure of this television series allowed it to explore single-episode ambiguities relating to one-time events, while creating a number of series-long ambiguities relating to the main characters’ lives and ongoing mysteries. Unanswered mysteries piled up from season to season, resisting closure while becoming ever more convoluted. One of the most extended and convoluted plot-lines involved Dana Scully’s illness and its connection to a possibly government-sanctioned alien hybridization program. This plot-line offers an excellent example of how the fantastic draws self and other together by making the notion of changes to our self-structure quite literal. By comparing a traditional fantastic text, *Dracula* (1897), to a postmodern fantastic one like *The X-Files*, one can see both that the self/other boundary has always been a theme of the fantastic and that the overtly discursive, even parodic, way in which the postmodern fantastic deals with this boundary in no way diminishes its disturbing nature.

As a way into the first of these analyses, having made use of Freudian and Jungian notions to develop the failure of causality in “Der Brandstifter,” I will now turn to Lacan to explore the nature of the self/other conflation, or in more Lacanian terms, the subject/object conflation. Two theorists who apply Lacanian theory to fantastic texts are Mladen Dolar and Joan Copjec. They argue that the unspoken object of fantastic literature is unspoken not because it is repressed, as Todorov and Freud suggest, but because it is unspeakable. That is, it lies outside of the symbolic realm of language. It is
what Lacan refers to as the real, that which cannot be signified. According to Joan Copjec, the symbolic order is what shields us from the terrifying real. “But in order for the symbolic to evict the real and thereby establish itself, …it is necessary to say that the real is absented… [and] the symbolic… must include a negation of what it is not.” But if the real cannot be signified, how is its absence from language to be stated? Copjec’s answer is a useful one in terms of the continued presence of fantastic narratives: the real’s negation in the symbolic order of language takes place through repetition, “through the signifier’s repeated attempt – and failure – to designate itself. The signifier’s difference from itself, its radical inability to signify itself, causes it to turn in circles around the real that is lacking in it. It is in this way – in the circumscription of the real – that its non-existence or its negation is signified within the symbolic” (28). In other words, this repeated circumscription of the real is what maintains language’s “real-free” status and thereby allows it to shield us from the real, and this repeated circumscription of the real, Copjec and Dolar both argue, is precisely what is at issue in fantastic narratives.

When one juxtaposes Lacan, vampires, and hybrid aliens, one is tempted (by Copjec’s analysis of the terrifying object of fantastic narratives as the Lacanian real) to make an equation between the real and the vampire or the real and the alien since vampires and aliens are the apparent causes of anxiety in these texts. To do so would be to miss the point, however, since both vampires and aliens are signified by the text while the real cannot be. To understand their relation to the real, it is necessary to consider how the Lacanian subject is formed. A crucial developmental phase is what Lacan describes metaphorically as the mirror stage. An infant would see its image in the mirror as a coordinated whole which is at odds with its own uncoordinated body. This contrast is at
first felt as a rivalry. In order to resolve the tension of this rivalry, the infant identifies with the image. When the child assumes its image as its own, it experiences a moment of joy as it anticipates a degree of mastery over its own body which it does not yet have. This joy then gives way to anxiety and depression when the child compares its image with the even more masterful one of its mother. This misrecognition is the site where the subject becomes alienated from him- or herself. This first step towards the entrance into the symbolic order of language is achieved at the cost of no longer being one with oneself. The one who recognizes is not the same as the one who is recognized. The difference is referred to by Lacan as the loss of the objet petit a. According to Mladen Dolar, “it is this loss of the object a that opens ‘objective’ reality, the possibility of subject-object relations, but since its loss is the condition of knowledge of ‘objective’ reality, it cannot itself become an object of knowledge” (13). This is the real which Copjec posits as the unspeakable object of the fantastic. The real exists apart from the boundaries between self and other, subject and object, and this is why Ken Gelder can say: “The fantastic in fact draws Self and Other together, showing the boundaries between them to be fragile and easily traversed. In the fantastic, the Self is thus ontologically destabilised by an Other which, far from being different, turns out instead to be disconcertingly familiar” (43). The familiarity is disconcerting because approaching the object a too closely threatens the boundary between subject and object that makes meaning, or the entire symbolic order, possible. Vampires and aliens, far from being the content of the real, are representations of the failure of those boundaries which function in language, or the symbolic, to shield us from the real. In other words,
vampires and aliens occupy the site where we encounter the breakdown between self and other, a necessary boundary for the maintenance of one’s image of oneself as subject.

Todorov referred to this boundary as the limit between ‘I’ and ‘not-I’. Hélène Cixous, as mentioned earlier, sees the crucial boundaries as being between human and nonhuman and between alive and dead. For her, the uncanny lies in the concept of *between*: “What is intolerable is that the Ghost [or Vampire…] erases the limit which exists between two states, neither alive nor dead…. [T]here is no reversal from one term to another. Hence, the horror: you could be dead while living, you can be in a dubious state” (qtd. in Donald 108). These boundaries are only a few of the many traversed in a traditional fantastic text like *Dracula*. This novel has become so much a part of the western world’s collective imagination that many of us may feel we know the text without having read it. Nonetheless, a brief and necessarily oversimplified summary of the plot may be useful. Count Dracula travels from Transylvania to England where he begins to vampirize the women of a particular social circle. His first victim is Lucy Westenra, who happens to be the object of much male attention. Three of her suitors and a vampire specialist, Dr. Van Helsing, attempt to save her by supplementing her waning blood supply through transfusions of their own blood. She succumbs, however, and becomes a vampire. This same Crew of Light, as Van Helsing calls his band of merry men, the men who would be Lucy’s saviours, then hunt her down in the graveyard at night and drive a stake through her heart in a disturbing scene which many critics agree can be read as a symbolic gang rape. Dracula then turns his attention to Mina Harker, Lucy’s best friend. By this time, Jonathan, Mina’s husband, has joined the Crew of Light in their struggle against the vampire. One night, alerted to Dracula’s presence, the men
break into the Harkers’ bedroom to witness Mina sucking blood from a wound in Dracula’s chest while her husband sleeps nearby. Horrified, they mobilise in a final effort to destroy the vampire’s lairs in England, pursue him across Europe back to his castle, and eventually kill him. Mina’s role is twofold. As a secretary, she records every event on her typewriter and makes multiple copies of the record in order to organise their campaign against the vampire. Also, because she is partially vampirized, she has a psychic link with Dracula which allows them to hunt him down. The novel ends with Dracula dead and Mina giving birth to Jonathan’s son, who is named, significantly, after all of the members of the Crew of Light. This final event only underscores the fact that what is “at stake” in this novel is a struggle for access to the women as sites of reproduction. It is this struggle around which the various boundary issues adhere. A vampire itself is neither dead nor alive, but it is also neither human nor nonhuman, since it uses the human form to reproduce. Also the circulation of blood between humans and vampires blurs the line between individuals. More than one of Lucy’s suitors notes that the transfusions make them as good as married since their blood is commingled. Yet, the vampire has just as much access to this marriage relation and uses it even more efficiently to reproduce itself. In fact, the scenes in which blood is exchanged are all highly sexually charged. The novel is, in fact, what Maurice Richardson refers to as “sexually inclusive” – in his words “a kind of incestuous, necrophilious, oral-anal-sadistic, all-in wrestling match” (qtd. in Gelder 69). In the various relationships between vampires and humans, the boundary between genders often dissolves. What’s more, in the struggle over Mina’s reproductive potential, the concepts of reproduction and production become conflated. In human reproduction, nothing is exactly reproduced.
The result is the production of an original. In vampire reproduction, the vampire truly reproduces itself in an endless series of copies which ensure its continuity – much like the duplicates Mina makes on her typewriter. Just as Mina’s words become the defining quality of each page, the trait of vampirism is stamped upon each individual it encounters. In fact, it is these duplicates that create the one anxiety which the Crew of Light cannot lay to rest even after the vampire is dead. Harker’s final lament is that “there is hardly one authentic document! Nothing but a mass of typewriting.” Certainly, the inability to tell the real from an image of the real, so similar to the infant’s misrecognition of its own image in the mirror as its real self, is a powerful source of anxiety. Harker’s anxiety over the inauthenticity of their documents is not that he cannot tell the authentic from the inauthentic, but that the authentic is lacking. Without it, how does one compare the inauthentic? Where is the standard of the genuine? In the absence of the real, the image, or even the symbol, can take its place. Because Harker finds no authentic original, these copies function as simulacra, and as anyone who has read Baudrillard knows, the dissolution of the boundary between original and copy which is embodied in the concept of the simulacra is attended, in fact, by a great deal of anxiety. I would argue that it is this postmodern boundary transgression which is at the heart of the anxiety produced by the X-Files plot-line concerning alien hybridization.

Another extremely simplified plot summary: Scully learns that she has an inoperable brain tumor. Over the course of the episode “Memento Mori” (1997), Scully and Mulder learn that other women, claiming to be her fellow abductees, have died from similar tumors while under the care of a certain doctor. Scully also receives treatment from this doctor for a time, until Mulder, who has assembled his own all-male techno-
wizard crew of light to save Scully, discovers that this doctor was part of a fertility clinic which also treated some of these same women for infertility. Following this lead further, Mulder discovers a group of hybrid alien clones who are trying to stop the cloning project which produced them. They tell Mulder that the same process which was used to extract the eggs from the human females used in the project is what is causing the brain tumors. When Mulder asks why they wish to destroy the project, the alien’s reply, which refers to the human female test subjects, is exquisitely eerie: “They are our mothers.” This display of affection, the desire to avenge a wrong done to these women, is uncanny precisely because it breaks down the barrier between human and nonhuman. What else could be so disturbing about a wholesome-looking, intelligent, young man who obviously loves his mom? Only that his mom is human and he’s not – or is he? Again, as in Stoker’s novel, Mulder and his crew of light are involved in a struggle over who controls these women’s reproductive capacities. Again, the usurpers of the reproductive resource are not produced but reproduced. They are clones and clones of clones. Like vampires, they form an endless chain of copies. And, they can only be killed by a stab wound with a small silver stake – sound familiar? The point of weakness has significantly moved from the heart to the brain stem – these are products of technology, not bloodlust. However, these hybrids have even more in common with vampires in their role as boundary transgressors. Neither human nor nonhuman, they are also neither dead nor alive. Or, at least, that is the illusion. They appear to be killed, but they keep coming back. But how does authenticity play into this kind of copying? There is no Dracula, no ur-vampire of which the others are copies. There must have been an original created from a human egg and an alien – something – but this original is inaccessible, possibly not even a sentient
life form, maybe only a mass of cells … which brings us back to Scully’s cancer – a mass of cells which forms yet another copy of the alien threat. At one point, Scully says: “This is the evil of cancer – that it starts as an invader but soon becomes one with the invaded, forcing you to destroy it but only at the risk of destroying yourself.” Indeed, part of the uncanniness of this episode is that the enemy – cancer – is within her, while she is also within the perceived enemy – the aliens – in the form of genetic material. Self and Other are drawn dangerously close together. The boundary is in jeopardy.

One final parallel between the texts is the image of the woman writing. Many X-Files episodes begin or end with Scully entering data at her computer – an up-to-date version of Mina Harker at her typewriter, building up her defence against the real with a barrier of words. If Harker thought Mina’s duplicates were inauthentic, what would he think of Scully’s cyber record? But this is not how Scully defends against her own cancer. Confronted with her own illness, that fragile boundary between alive and dead, she begins a hand-written journal – an authentic document by Harker’s standards. Perhaps there are only so many boundaries which can be transgressed before it all becomes too much. Caught in the middle, as she is, between alive and dead, human and nonhuman, perhaps Scully finds the withdrawal from technological simulacra to be a comforting one.

I am fascinated by how often I find postmodern references to the pleasure of these kinds of boundary breachings. In Donna Haraway’s “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” she describes “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries and responsibility in their construction” (150). James Donald calls for a politics that “would be aware of …the pleasures of confusion of boundaries, and so also sensitive to the need for responsibility
in the aspiration towards community that always remains to be brought into being” (121). A delight in boundary confusion is certainly one of the hallmarks of the postmodern, but psychoanalytic theory makes it clear that boundaries in general are a source of anxiety as well. According to David Glover, “[a]nxiety around the question of boundaries is always also a demand that there be a boundary” (71). Haraway’s and Donald’s calls for responsibility in the construction of new boundaries would seem implicitly to support this observation. Thus, the pleasure of transgressed boundaries gives way to the anxiety that a boundary – some boundary – be maintained. In fantastic texts, boundaries between subject and object, I and not-I, real and imaginary, real and symbolic, the very boundaries which allow for meaning, are the ones at issue. While postmodern concerns with boundaries can be intellectually pleasurable, fantastic transgressions are anxious, threatening moments. Consider the concluding scene of this particular episode of The X-Files.

In the tradition of The X-Files, “Memento Mori” concludes with an image rather than a neat summary conclusion. I noted earlier that Dracula was a sexually inclusive text about lust and passion. Compare that to The X-Files. Even though both are about reproduction, the only allusion to sexual penetration in The X-Files is a brief flashback when Scully remembers a surgical drill being lowered towards her forehead: disturbing, but rather sterile, if I can use the word in that context. The pleasure of boundary confusions exists for the viewer who enjoys the uncanniness of the story, but the characters themselves act out only the anxieties about boundaries. In the closing scene, Scully disappears down the hospital corridor. As she does, Mulder pulls a test tube from his pocket, looks at it pensively, perhaps even with concern, and returns it to his pocket.
It contains Scully’s unfertilized eggs. What more vivid depiction could there be of victory in the battle over reproduction than Mulder holding the eggs of the woman he cares for in the palm of his hand, so to speak? But where is the pleasure?

When the postmodern fantastic loads the notion of transgressing the self/other boundary with so much anxiety that even sex, that most pleasurable form of boundary blurring, becomes a sterile, anxious affair, then clearly it is speaking to more than repression of or a shift in the sexual mores of a society. One of the most significant triggers of anxiety surrounding postmodern self-structures is the notion of undifferentiation or the loss of discreteness. This goes beyond the simple blurring of the self/other boundary.

Baudrillard, for example, sees non-distinction as a quality of simulation characteristic of the postmodern era: “there is only a nebula indecipherable into its simple elements, indecipherable as to its truth” (366). The loss of distinction between elements, which is what permits categorization, is what prevents meaning. In fantastic texts, this undifferentiation stems not only from the blending of subject and object but also from the blending of contradictory states. The inability to choose among interpretations because numerous legitimate yet contradictory interpretations exist in the text has the effect of blending contrary states into one single state of mind. This aspect shared by both the fantastic and parody will be taken up later. It is, however, part of what Brown sees as undifferentiation. The refusal to choose, the desire for both explanations at once, the state of being à cheval between two states of mind, suggests that the binary approach, which operates by distinctness and discreteness, should be replaced by analogy. Stated another way, when the exclusive either/or binary becomes the more inclusive both/and
binary, regarding relationships according to their linkages rather than their exclusions becomes more useful. Brown uses the word unicité to refer to this non-differentiation which permits infinite variety, “des identités mais sans coupures, sans limites, sans frictions, sans alternance obligatoire” (“identities without divisions, without limits, without points of friction, without the obligatory alternation”; 82). Other theorists of the fantastic are also aware of this advantage to fantastic non-differentiation. Ransom refers to it as a return to the nirvanic state of undifferentiation, though she does not discount the anxiety it triggers (34). Jackson equates this moment of undifferentiation with Lacan’s notion of the zero point of entropy, complete union with the other, which is the subject’s “profoundest desire” (77). Not surprisingly, this positive, potentially transformative notion of non-differentiation finds its echo in postmodern theory as well. One well-known example would be Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” mentioned earlier.

A notion that is related to non-differentiation is the concept of reconfiguration. The idea of analogy which Brown suggests is at the heart of the fantastic mode permits the formation of new connections between things. As Rabkin says, “[t]he fantastic takes words and reconfigures their semantic ranges, puts them in new contexts, creates new grapholects for them, and in so doing, liberates us” (26). One can make the connection between postmodern and fantastic reconfiguration via Bakhtin’s notion of carnival, particularly the carnival-grotesque. The grotesque image is one which plays with limits, accentuates body parts which represent the boundary between inner and outer, and represents the dynamic nature of being by avoiding stasis (so, birth and death are represented simultaneously). According to Bakhtin, the grotesque form permits “the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement” (34). One
author whose work demonstrates the relation of reconfiguration to both the fantastic and the postmodern is H. C. Artmann. His word for this reconfiguration is *Kombinationsvermögen*, the ability to make connections among things. He tries to allow his readers the maximum amount of freedom by avoiding linear plots, and by including lists, adding disparate footnotes, etc. Connectedness is everything and, ultimately, this connectedness extends to the impossible, the literal telescoping of the protagonist and the antagonist into one. Artmann’s work will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five, but it is useful, at this point, to see that the telescoping of separate identities into one is a postmodern fantastic theme which transcends geographical as well as philosophical boundaries, and its pervasiveness can easily be traced to the aforementioned emphasis on reconfiguration.

Finally, the problematization of perception is a hallmark strategy of the fantastic. It is also part of the postmodern discussion of reality construction: “Postmodern fiction, while not denying the existence of that experiential world, contests its availability to us: how do we know that world? We know it only through its texts” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 154). Perception and representation are drawn very close together. As the fantastic text undoes our usual ways of knowing (by using conditional and subjunctive verb tenses and expressions like “as though” and by providing ambiguous information), it parallels that withholding of certainty by thematizing issues of perception – usually vision (Jackson 43, Malrieu 96-7). Also, in a fantastic text, there is no ur-story outside of its narrative manifestations. There is no “what really happened” outside of the words of the text. This is an anxiety-producing strategy of both the fantastic and the postmodern.
The relationship between the sign (the words of the text) and the referent (what “really” happened) is thus problematized for both the postmodern and the fantastic. As Hutcheon notes: “[M]any postmodern strategies are openly premised on a challenge to the realist notion of representation that presumes the transparency of the medium and thus the direct and natural link between sign and referent or between word and world….” (Politics 34). Postmodernism’s strategy is to draw attention to the artificiality of the relationship between the sign and referent while acknowledging that both sign and referent retain their ability to convey meaning: “This is the ambivalent politics of postmodern representation” (Hutcheon, Politics 34). Rosemary Jackson sees a similar ambivalence in the fantastic:

A reluctance, or an inability, to present definitive versions of ‘truth’ or ‘reality’ makes of the modern fantastic a literature which draws attention to its own practice as a linguistic system. Structured upon contradiction and ambivalence, the fantastic traces in that which cannot be said… it makes explicit the problems of establishing ‘reality’ and ‘meaning’ through a literary text (37).

Thus both discursive modes suggest a similar ambivalence towards the problematic relationship between the sign and the referent.

In view of the number of similarities between the two modes of discourse, it is important to keep in mind the points at which the fantastic and the postmodern diverge. The most important difference is in the ontological status of the referent. While the postmodern questions the objectivity of the link “between word and world,” the world still enjoys a different status than the demon or space alien signified by the fantastic text.
Even if one accepts that seeing is not as objective as common-sense logic would make it seem, there is still a difference between objects of the same kind as those which can be perceived “directly,” such as humans, and those which must always be mediated by a text, such as aliens. As Rosemary Jackson notes, the fantastic is “discourse without an object” (40). There are more similarities than differences between the two modes, however. By demonstrating the arbitrariness of the link between words and their referents, both postmodern and fantastic texts are able to shift a large part of the meaning-making process onto the reader (or viewer). In conjunction with these linguistic ambiguities, they also incorporate indeterminacies regarding narration and point of view. The result of this overlap between fantastic and postmodern strategies is actually beneficial to the fantastic effect. A reader familiar with the conventions of both modes of discourse will naturally hesitate between readings: “Is this fantastic, or is it a postmodern parody of the fantastic?” Whether one makes a choice or claims it is a moot point, the response itself changes the interpretation of the text.

Subjectivity, Objectivity, and Problematized Perception: A Discussion of “José Chung’s ‘It Came from Outer Space’”

To further complicate the reception of the fantastic text, there is also the medium to consider. Television and the cinema create the illusion of being very transparent media in that the link between the sign and referent seems to be direct. However, in his
description of this aspect of the visual media, Christian Metz indicates how constructed this effect really is: “…films can be divided into the ‘realistic’ and the ‘nonrealistic’ if one wishes, but the filmic vehicle’s power to make real, to realize, is common to both genres…” (5). The words make real and realize would indicate that television and the cinema mediate reality in much the same way language does. That is, their codes are constructs through which referents are interpreted as they are presented. The multiplicity of meanings inherent in a cinematic or televised text is increased by the number of tracks on which information can be conveyed. While a reader is confronted only with the printed word, a television viewer is receiving information in the form of visual images, voices/words, music, sounds, and printed text. It could be argued that the provision of visual and audio images actually limits the viewer’s imagination. This certainly can be true when the various tracks complement one another, providing a complete and satisfying package. However, when the tracks contradict one another, conflicting messages can be presented simultaneously, forcing the viewer to expand the possible range of interpretations. If one is considering a televised text, like The X-Files, one must also consider that television, like any other medium, also reflects the ideologies of a variety of narrative voices. With television, however, “narrative voices” does not refer to the narrators inscribed in the text itself but to the forces behind the production of the text. Christian Metz refers to these voices as though they are a unified and consistent source: “…some ‘master of ceremonies,’ some ‘grand image-maker’ (grand imagier) who… is first and foremost the film itself as a linguistic object…, or more precisely a sort of ‘potential linguistic focus’…situated somewhere behind the film…” (21). Perhaps Metz describes this force in the singular because he is describing the viewer’s impression that
there must be “a speaker.” In contrast, Robert Stam, in *Subversive Pleasures*, cites
Enzenberger’s more down-to-earth view that television is “a ‘leaky medium’ corporately
controlled but pressured by popular desire and dependent upon what the corporate world
might consider ‘politically unreliable’ creative talent to satisfy its insatiable demand for
programming” (220).

It is precisely this variety of narrative voices that a program like *The X-Files*
plays upon. The words “government denies knowledge” flashed across the screen during
the title sequence, constant references to hidden FBI agendas, the complete lack of
support Mulder receives because his work is supposedly marginal (and, therefore,
subversive)—these all indicate that *The X-Files* is constituted on the premise that it is
itself a radical message. However, by dealing overtly with the problems of expressing
opposition to a dominant ideology through a medium supposedly controlled by a
dominant ideology, *The X-Files* creates a *mise en abîme* effect. The hesitation this
creates for the viewer is further complicated by the mixed messages received on the
various tracks, confusing layers of embedded narrative, and ambiguous references to the
actual world which can blur the boundary between the fictional world and the actual
world of the viewer.

While all of these strategies are present to varying degrees in most episodes of
*The X-Files*, one episode is particularly rife with textual games, which makes it
especially useful for demonstrating how these games function. In “José Chung’s ‘It
Came from Outer Space’” (1996), an author, Chung, is researching a book on alien
abductions. During his interview with Scully, they both recount their own and others’
accounts of the events surrounding what could have been an alien abduction, an air force
cover-up, a case of date rape, or some combination of the above. The episode begins with Chrissie and Harold on a date in Harold’s car. As they are parked out on a lonely road, they appear to be abducted by grey aliens. A line repairman is also in the vicinity. His version of the story includes grey aliens who are accosted by a red alien with whom the line repairman, Rocky, remembers speaking. The red alien identifies himself as Lord Kimbot. As the story progresses, via Scully’s unusually unreliable recounting of events to the equally unreliable author José Chung, the viewer learns that Chrissie recalls the episode as date rape, Harold recalls being abducted by greys, and Rocky recalls visiting the earth’s core with Lord Kimbot. While Detective Manners (who has none – suggesting he has been ironically named by his creator) investigates the date rape, Mulder investigates the abduction. Through the use of lie detectors and hypnosis, the two investigators, in Chung’s recounting of events, conflate Chrissie’s hypnosis sessions with alien interrogations, Harold’s abduction with the military incarceration of Harold and the greys (who may have been air force pilots), and various other story elements, both imagined and intentionally fabricated, possibly by Chung. Throughout the episode, mysterious men in black keep appearing, claiming that nobody has seen or experienced what they claim to have seen or experienced. Clearly, this is a story about problems of perception, the artificiality of the relationship between sign and referent, the power of suggestion, and the politics of narrative strategies.

One of the reasons the fantastic works so well on television is that both the mode and the medium are concerned with visual imagery. As both Todorov and Jackson have pointed out, fantastic texts tend to thematize problems of perception by centering fantastic events on primarily visual objects such as paintings, mirrors and eyes. This is
certainly true of the “José Chung” episode since one of its motifs is television itself. It goes about problematizing perception with an awareness that vision is just another form of narrativization and that problems of vision are inextricably bound up with problems of narrative (speaking, as Metz does, as though the text itself is the grand imagier). Despite the mysterious man in black’s accusation that “[our] scientists have yet to discover… how the human brain processes two-dimensional retinal images into the three-dimensional phenomenon known as perception” (“José Chung”), Teresa de Lauretis provides a description of the process of perception which is quite satisfactory for our purposes here: “Different parts of the retina project through the optic nerves to different parts of the visual cortex and of the brain stem…, producing two maps of the visual world or rather a discontinuous map…” (54). She points out that the word “map” is significant because a map is not a copy but a symbolic representation. We understand the symbols because we have learned that a message from a particular part of the visual cortex is caused by a specific form of stimulation. In other words, “perception works by a set of learned responses.” Since these responses adjust to new information, “perception is not merely patterned response but active anticipation” (54). We fill in the gaps according to “contextual expectations” (62). It would seem that the man in black is right after all. While he may be stretching our “scientific illiteracy” somewhat out of proportion, it does seem rather brazen to declare: “Seeing is believing.” It would appear that seeing is no less subjective than the ways in which we process language and narrative, going about, as we sometimes do, mentally finishing other people’s sentences and filling in Iserian gaps. The X-Files demonstrates the degree to which our perceptions are context-dependent in numerous ways, two of which will be discussed here.
First, by simultaneously presenting contradictory information tracks, one scene in particular demonstrates how other sensory input can actually change what we see. At the beginning of Scully’s narrative, she describes how Chrissie was found the morning after her “abduction” with her clothes on inside-out and backwards. As Scully is saying this, we see Chrissie sitting in the car looking rather dazed, playing with the buttons on her blouse. Her clothes are not on backwards, and a close-up of the buttons proves that they are not inside-out. This is not necessarily what we perceive, however. I only noticed the inconsistency on a second viewing. This prompted an informal experiment which turned up some interesting results. After viewing the scene once, most viewers agreed that her clothes were not on backwards but insisted that they were inside-out. Their logic proves the power of conventions and expectations. The argument runs as follows: the close-up was meant to demonstrate that the clothes were inside-out; therefore, if they were not inside-out, there would not have been a close-up. This challenge from a contradictory track is a subtle one because, if it works, it goes unnoticed. However, unlike films which we view in a theatre, separated from one another by darkness and the rule of silence, television is usually viewed in a social atmosphere. Not all viewers were taken in by the close-up, so one can assume that every now and then some X-phile is prompted to point out the inconsistency. Once a viewer is aware of the inconsistency, however, another problem arises.

One has to choose between Scully’s version and the camera’s. Again, conventions do not seem to operate as they should. In her study of voice-over narration, Sarah Kozloff points out that “…when words and images absolutely contradict each other, the images seem always to be the truth-tellers, and filmmakers will go to certain
lengths to protect their image track’s reliability” (114). However, regular viewers know that Scully is the voice of reliability and objectivity on The X-Files. Even more to the point is the fact that most viewers like Scully. While there have been numerous studies on how socio-economic factors affect television interpretation, it is only recently that studies have been conducted to prove the common-sense notion that ambiguous television messages are interpreted according to viewers’ “relationships” with different characters (Livingstone). Viewers who like and trust Scully are willing to set aside the convention that the image is right. The instinct to trust her is strengthened by the fact that the viewer receives Scully’s “version of the truth” via her own voice. More than images or printed words, sounds create a sense of unity or connection, even intimacy (Kozloff 128). Thus, while it seems more “logical” to believe the visual image, one hesitates to do so. The general rule that the image speaks the truth loses out temporarily to the specific X-Files convention that Scully can be trusted.

The loss is only temporary, however. By the end of the episode, it becomes clear that the viewer’s faith in images is not the only convention being used to deceive. Scully’s reliability is also being manipulated to create false impressions of objective truth. I will return to this notion shortly when I discuss the embedding of narratives. For now, it is enough to note that contradictory tracks force the viewer to move interpretation to the psychological and emotional plane. This is important because, while fantastic events are generally considered to be events that contradict reason, the fantastic text is one which engages the reader or viewer psychologically and emotionally, not just rationally. Television is well-suited for creating this kind of engagement between viewer and text because it does not always use logic to arrive at meaning. The fusing of different
information tracks means that the structures of formal logic, wherein a syllogism is based on a single premise, need not apply. As Fiske points out, the aim of television is not the production of a rational conclusion but “fully satisfactory and plausible meaning” (112).

For viewers of The X-Files, this tension between logic and psychological responses to Scully and Mulder often creates a hesitation to make interpretations. While Scully is the voice of reason and Mulder represents a willingness to believe in the unknown, they are equally likeable and dependable. Whichever one has the viewer’s attention also tends to have the power to be very convincing. Although Mulder’s narrative voice is absent in this episode, except indirectly through Scully, this tension is maintained through another example of contradictory information tracks. While Scully is talking to Mr. Chung, looking non-plussed and rolling her eyes to punctuate her narrative with cynicism, her face is framed by a poster in the background. It shows a picture of a UFO and the words “I want to believe.” While the UFO is usually off-screen, Scully’s face and the words “I want to believe” are often closely juxtaposed. This combination is clearest and closest when Scully is saying: “Well, Mulder’s had his share of peculiar notions. He’s not inclined to dismiss anything outright.” By delivering this mixed message, the text continues to create this hesitation between “rational” and “irrational” explanations, even in Mulder’s absence. While the information on these two tracks is not logically contradictory, it does serve to destabilize the viewer’s perspective by reminding the viewer that the message is skewed by the absence of Mulder’s version of the events. This reminder to consider the context is just one way in which the text emphasizes that the value of any evidence is relative and subjective.
A second way in which “José Chung” plays with context is through tautology. The repetition of scenarios, such as Detective Manners’ intrusions into Mulder and Scully’s discussions, creates a Flintstones effect. One sees the actors running through the same scene over and over again. Another example is the identical positioning of Scully and Mulder and the two detectives in the scenes in which Harold is questioned. The same thing happens again with the positions of the observers of Chrissie’s hypnosis, the aliens, and the air force men. Detective Manners’ counterparts even appear with coffee cups, the alien included. While the similarities in the hypnosis scenes create uncertainty as to which scene was the original and which ones were created by suggestion, the combination of all of these repetitions has the effect of pointing to the program’s constructedness. Just as the repetition of background in The Flintstones screams “Low budget!”, these repetitions are an intentional reminder that choices of camera angle and scene composition have less to do with the representation of “reality” than with technical considerations such as lighting or the shape of the room. This is not to say that these particular similarities are purely the result of technical constraints. The structural parallels serve to emphasize the unreliability of eyewitness accounts by demonstrating how one event can be remembered different ways or how similar events can be conflated into one memory. In order to draw attention to this fact, however, the scenes must be similar enough to draw attention to how they are constructed. This self-consciousness or reflexivity would seem to undercut the fantastic effect. Instead, it contributes to the effect by creating a hesitation between modes of viewing. Again, the question of whether or not it is intended as parody adds to the viewer’s uncertainty.
Another kind of repetition which points the reader to problems of context is in the dialogue. Several phrases are repeated in various contexts to very different effects. One particular repetition of dialogue creates a **mise en abîme** effect. The simple question, “How the hell should I know?” moves the fantastic event further away with each repetition. When Harold says it to Chrissie, it means that the unknown has intruded into his reality. When one of the air force pilots, Jack Schaeffer, in his role as an alien, says it, it creates a new dividing line between the natural and the supernatural. The grey aliens cease to be aliens and become part of the natural order when a “more alien” alien appears. The supernatural is relativized when the fictive nature of their supernatural status becomes apparent. In effect, they become victims when they get caught up in a “real” version of their own fiction. However, Rocky’s screenplay version of Lord Kimbot’s appearance and also Jack Schaeffer’s suggestion that everyone involved was hypnotized make all three aliens part of a fiction which is framed, not by a more supernatural explanation of events, but by the real world which Harold and Chrissie inhabit. All three levels – Harold and Chrissie’s abduction by the greys, the greys’ abduction by Lord Kimbot, and the air force cover-up – fit into each other in such a way that the original event recedes indefinitely. All that remains of the “event,” which is appropriately absent, is a variety of narratives. Thus, when Mr. Chung asks “what really happened,” Mulder’s response – “How the hell should I know?” – is not an admission of defeat but an awareness of the implications of all narrative acts (28). The original, or the “real,” is never accessible except through the narrativized process of perception. As Mr. Chung would say, “[t]ruth is as subjective as reality” (3). Mulder is simply proving Mr. Chung’s own point. In fact, it would seem that Mulder has a better grasp on this concept
than Mr. Chung does. Mulder’s request that the book not be written implies that he is aware of the gap between words and meaning. The conventions of discourse about aliens (“I know this sounds crazy, but…”) are inadequate because the codes themselves negate the possibility of serious consideration. Mulder’s desire to avoid discourse, whether in interview or book form, is understandable because it makes the “event” recede even further. Fred Inglis describes this effect in terms of the hermeneutic circle: “I recount an action in order to interpret it; the motion is circular (the hermeneutic circle) but in returning to the same point in front of the action, I have translated it” (189). What Mr. Chung understands better than Mulder does, however, is the inevitability of this process: the book will be written.

Another repeated phrase is the hypnotist’s first few words. This phrase is repeated word for word: “You are feeling very sleepy, very relaxed….” It occurs both times Chrissie is hypnotized by the hypnotherapist and also when she is hypnotized by the air force doctor. This has the same effect as the repetition of the placement of actors in those scenes. It makes it difficult to ascertain which scene represents the original hypnosis experience. When Alex Trebek repeats these same words to Mulder, however, things become very confusing. Does this link the men in black with the air force men? Which aspects of Mulder’s experience that evening are implanted memories? Would this include his conversation with Jack Schaeffer? Also, if he was hypnotized, why does he remember the men in black at all? Equally important, however, are the questions this phrase raises about the reception of the text in general. Hypnotism is like fiction in that the production of the words creates a scenario in which they are true. Mr. Chung points out this similarity to Scully: “Still, as a storyteller, I’m fascinated how a person’s sense
of consciousness can be so transformed by nothing more magical than listening to words… mere words!” Every time the hypnotist’s phrase is repeated, the viewer is reminded of the whole range of caveats associated with it. The narratives produced by these words are no different than fiction in their power to change one’s “sense of consciousness.” The narrative being produced by the television viewer as he or she watches is as subject to suggestion as the one created by Chrissie. How appropriately ironic that Alex Trebek, television’s arbiter of right and wrong answers, is the one to remind the viewer of that fact.

A final example of repetition of dialogue further demonstrates how context-dependent meaning is, but it also shows how problems of context are related to the confusion created by the convoluted embedding of narratives. When Scully asks Harold if he and Chrissie had had sex, he replies: “If her father finds out, I’m a dead man.” In this context, the expression sounds natural. The phrase is used again by the man in black who visits Rocky. He warns Rocky that if he tells anyone about seeing a UFO, he is “a dead man.” The next lines – “You can’t threaten me. I just did” – turn this threat into something like schoolyard posturing. It does not ring true. It undermines Rocky’s credibility. The next time these words are used, they completely destroy the narrator’s reliability. Scully uses them to threaten Blaine. This segment is told by Mr. Chung as Blaine supposedly told it to him. When Scully objects that she never said that, Mr. Chung checks his notes and verifies that “he claimed you threatened him” (18). While Blaine’s credibility suffers the most from this alleged departure from character on Scully’s part, Mr. Chung’s credibility suffers too. He is the one who chose the exact wording, and it echoes the words Scully supposedly used to describe the other scenes.
Things begin to unravel. Once the viewer realizes that this expression is a favourite of Mr. Chung’s, every time it is used, it makes the viewer wonder who is really narrating. Mulder supposedly threatens Blaine again with the exact same words. Mr. Chung’s signature shows up again in the diner scene. When the air force officers appear, Schaeffer’s laconic response is: “Well, looks like I’m a dead man.” By this time, the expression is so overused that it is almost meaningless. Ironically, this time, it is true. While the degree of threat the expression conveys varies with who says it and how it is said, the severity of the threat also diminishes as it becomes a mark of the story’s own fictionality. As an example of bad writing, it directs the viewer’s attention back to the process of production again. It creates a parodic tone which turns the narrative into a shared joke between the creators and viewers. Its final, literal use, however, reasserts the sense that something is going on other than narrative games. The viewer returns to the process of “serious” interpretation.

Clearly, this process of interpretation is greatly affected by one’s impression of who is speaking. The identification of the narrative stance in this episode is often ambiguous. Mr. Chung’s moralizing sequence at the end of the episode has several different effects on the viewer’s sense of perspective. First, because the voice-over at the end of an X-Files episode, if it occurs, is usually spoken by Mulder, Mr. Chung’s voice emphasizes Mulder’s absence. One feels something important has been left out, even though Mulder’s unwillingness to interpret events is documented in the narrative. Also, Mr. Chung’s moralizing has the effect of providing false closure. He turns the events into an allegory of humanity’s search for connection and unity. Of course, allegory puts a quick end to the fantastic effect. By moralizing this way, Mr. Chung also reaffirms the
status quo. He starts with the most radical response to the “alien narrative”: Blaine’s quest for a completely different system far from the pressures of finding a job. He then moves on to the negotiated responses which take the alien issue as a springboard for changes to the existing system. Rocky’s quest for money is an attempt to change his own relationship to the system. Chrissie’s environmental concerns are somewhat broader and more noble. Harold’s non-response, however, supports the dominant ideology. There is nothing subversive about the need to be loved, which Mr. Chung presents as normal and universal.

Apart from the affirmation of the status quo, Mr. Chung’s moralizing has a third, rather deceptive effect. In every other scene, the viewer sees him gathering information for his book. It is only this last sequence that shows him forming a narrative out of the “facts.” This would indicate that the rest of the episode is orchestrated by an off-screen narrator different from Mr. Chung. Yet, Mr. Chung’s contribution to the rest of the show’s structure is questionable. As has already been pointed out, his signature “dead man” expression shows up throughout the episode. There are other indications of his input as well. For example, in the final sequence, he changes Scully’s and Mulder’s names to Diana Lesky and Reynard Muldrake. He does not change any of the other characters’ names. This would indicate that the sequences in which they are called by the same names which appear in the book must also come from the book. This is a problem, though, because these names are used by Scully in the same interview scenes in which she refers to Mulder by his usual name. This is yet another ambivalent message. It does allow for some interesting speculation, though. If the entire episode is based on Mr. Chung’s book, and not vice versa, this would explain some of Scully’s behaviour which
is arguably out of character. Normally, one does not imagine her in the role of an adoring fan. Also, although Gillian Anderson, the woman who portrays Scully, is an attractive person, her beauty is never made an issue in the show. The sight of Scully smiling self-consciously in response to Mr. Chung’s patronizing “brainy beauty” remark just does not seem right. Nor does her bleeping of Detective Manners’ colourful dialogue.

It is difficult to say what the relationship is between Mr. Chung and the off-screen narrating entity (whether it is Metz’s grand imagier or Enzenberger’s conglomeration of influences), but this relationship does have both its supporting and contradictory aspects. The manifest content of the narratives seems to support Mr. Chung’s concluding sequence which suggests that Scully is just another federal employee looking out for her own interests and that Mulder is psychologically unbalanced. The method by which this content is presented, however, contradicts Mr. Chung’s conclusion by constantly pointing out that narration is both subjective and conventionalized. Mr. Chung’s opinions are undermined as the concept of perspective itself is problematized by the use of unconventional camera angles and ironic visual images.

It is important to have an idea of the lay-out of the embedded narratives in order to see how they undermine each other. Even if one accepts that Mr. Chung is the narrative source of the whole episode, there is still an off-screen narrator who presents Mr. Chung’s story. This presence is most felt in the contradictory elements of Mr. Chung’s narrative. Within the main frame of the episode, Mr. Chung also recounts to Scully two embedded stories: some of Blaine’s version of the events and the cook’s description of the diner scene. Scully narrates her and Mulder’s experiences which include the stories of Harold, Chrissie, Rocky, and Blaine, as well as Mulder’s
experiences in Scully’s absence. These experiences include finding Jack Schaeffer, speaking with him at the diner, and meeting the men in black at Scully’s motel room. The important thing to note in this structure is that the two clearest contradictions of Scully’s and Mulder’s stories are in Mr. Chung’s versions of events: Scully’s alleged threats against Blaine and the cook’s claim that Mulder ate alone and behaved strangely. This last contradiction is framed by references to the cook as Mr. Chung’s “dear friend.” Also, when Mr. Chung reacts suspiciously to Scully’s claim that she does not remember Mulder coming to her motel room, his reaction implies that he feels the same way about Scully’s story as Scully felt about Harold and Chrissie’s. Missing time is a handy alibi. The inclusion of these elements in the main narrative supports Mr. Chung’s final observations on Mulder and Scully. However, the viewer’s instinct to trust the show’s regulars is just too strong to be overridden. Ultimately, this embedding of contradictory narratives just proves that Mulder does have a good grasp on what is happening. His distrust of narrative as a means of signifying reality is validated by the way the narratives obstruct and mediate the bits of evidence that are supplied. For example, one of the most significant pieces of proof that there was a third alien, whatever its nature, is Jack Schaeffer’s last line: “Who? Lord Kimbot?” These words are part of the most mediated conversation in the whole narrative. Schaeffer’s story is told to Mulder, who may or may not have been hypnotized, who tells it to Scully who tells Mr. Chung in an interview that may be partly fabricated to support his moralizing conclusion. As the narrative is passed along by each character, it is also unavoidably changed. The behind-the-scenes narrator provides the viewer with clues that this process also occurs at the level of the show’s production. This narrative entity makes its presence felt by ironically undercutting Mr.
Chung’s version of the events. By demonstrating how problematic perception is, it shows how it too shapes the narrative to suit itself.

While games with perspective are played throughout the episode, two of the three most obvious ones occur during Mr. Chung’s recounting of the versions he has heard. Blaine’s account is quite entertaining, due in part to humour that comes from a source other than Blaine or Mr. Chung. As Blaine talks about his experience, the visual track moves from a shot of his apartment to a shot of Blaine out in the fields on the night of the sighting. As Blaine’s voice quite seriously states that he was looking for UFOs and “just hoping to stumble across one,” we see his flashlight fly up into the air and hear a yelp. The next shot shows Blaine on the ground, having stumbled across an alien. The relationship between the words and the image creates a moment of humour of which Blaine and Mr. Chung are unaware. As Kozloff notes, any discrepancy, especially if it is ironic, between the image and the voice-over always points the viewer to a narrative source outside of the narrative itself (115, 125). A second way in which this external narrator intrudes is through the laying bare of camera angle conventions. It has been argued that an effective way of creating hesitation in a fantastic film is by alternating impersonal shots with point of view shots (Nash 34). This creates a dialectic between objectivity and subjectivity which allows the viewer to experience with the character the same problems of vision and perception.

This episode of The X-Files calls into question our ability to even discern the boundary between objective and subjective perspectives. It does this by playing with the convention of the over-the-shoulder shot. This shot, which focuses on the person speaking yet shows the back of the person being spoken to in the foreground, is supposed
to represent the point of view of the foregrounded character. It turns out, in several
scenes, that the camera’s angle in these shots actually represents Alex Trebek’s point of
view. The viewer interprets the over-the-shoulder shot as one normally would until
Alex’s arm reaches out from the position of the camera and touches the shoulder of the
person in the foreground. Normally, a viewer never gets the actual perspective of a
character but only a conventionalized representation of it. This brings us to the third
example of this problematization of perspective. Once again, it occurs in one of Mr.
Chung’s accounts. As Chung describes the cook’s version of how Mulder came into the
diner, ordered and identified himself, we see Mulder enter, order, and look right into the
camera and hold up his ID. As the scene continues, we realize that the cook was in the
camera’s position. Without the over-the-shoulder convention, this is how the cook’s
point of view would appear to a viewer. Although it is more accurate, it seems unnatural.
Rather than creating a link with the cook’s perspective, it draws the viewer into the scene
in an uncomfortable way. The viewer feels that Mulder is looking not at the cook but at
the viewer. The illusion of eye contact with a character distorts the boundary between the
text and the viewer that supposedly permits the viewer’s objectivity. The fleeting sense
that Mulder, the character, is aware of his audience points again to the constructedness of
the scene, but it also creates a sense of complicity for the viewer. By undermining, even
briefly, the viewer’s objectivity, the text suggests, once again, that the viewer also
retranslates the text simply by viewing it. This typically postmodern take on observation
will be analyzed in much more detail in my discussion of the relationship of modern
physics to the postmodern fantastic in Chapter Five. At this point, however, it is useful to
note that the constructedness of narrative points to its status as process rather than object.
This notion of meaning as process rather than object points once again to the fragility of the boundary between subject and object. If what one perceives to be an object is really a process, can the same not also be said for what one perceives to be the subject? As Brown points out, one cannot disassociate subject and object; if one is shaken, so is the other.

In addition to demonstrating the impossibility of absolute objectivity (and thereby the impossibility of absolute subjectivity), the illusion of Mulder’s eye contact with the viewer is also an example of the final source of viewer hesitation: the distortion of boundaries in general. Problems of context and perspective contribute to the uncertainties of the meaning-making process because they demonstrate how narratives change the “reality” they describe. The undermining of the boundary between the text and the viewer’s reality, however, demonstrates how the process of narrativizing also affects the nature of the viewer. While the viewer may feel that he or she is shaping the narrative by choosing between interpretive options, these choices also affect the viewer’s sense of self. The X-Files consistently appeals to its audience to become actively involved in this process of mutual reinterpretation. It does this by foregrounding the processes of reception and production, reminding the viewer that he or she is not just watching The X-Files but watching television. The program does not allow the viewer to draw a boundary around the show that separates it from the real life experience of television viewing. In Reading Television, Fiske and Hartley equate the credits and the title sequence of a normal television program with what the anthropologist Leach calls “boundary rituals.” These rituals serve to mark the transition from one social state to another “in order to emphasize the distinction” (166). The implication is that different
rules apply to different states of being. By making the credits and titles part of the narrative, “José Chung” questions the validity of these boundaries between the text and the viewer’s world. De Lauretis comments on the prevalence of this strategy in postmodern films in general: “The problem is, the very terms of the reality-illusion dichotomy have been displaced…. Boundaries are very much in question and the old rites of passage no longer avail” (45). Although television’s codes differ from those of literature, all discourse is affected by the role of narrativizing in the creation of meaning. The problematic link between our perceptions and the objects we perceive, or between our narratives and the events which they describe, exists both within and apart from the television program. To emphasize the subjective nature of perception in general, “José Chung” directs the viewer’s attention away from the program to television itself and from television to the viewer.

This postmodern fantastic minimizing of The X-Files’ natural boundaries is accomplished mostly through intertextual references. These lead the viewer to all kinds of related discourses which suggest connections between one’s reception of The X-Files, one’s responses to the media, and one’s perception of the world in general and one’s role in it. This episode is full of references to the whole science fiction and fantasy industry. Mr. Chung’s non-fiction science fiction, the documentary spoof of Unsolved Mysteries (1987-2002), and Blaine’s testimonial to the character-building qualities of “Dungeons and Dragons” all present a rather condescending view of the fantasy consumer (a category that includes consumers of the fantastic – a distinction seldom made in the popular media). At the same time, the advertisements run with this episode were for such programs as The Outer Limits (1995-2002) and Mysterious Island (1961). These were
broadcast during *The X-Files* probably because the network identified *X-Files* viewers as fantasy consumers. Like the mixed messages regarding plot interpretation, this leaves the viewer hesitating. It also sets up a connection between the viewer’s interpretation of the plot and the viewer’s concept of self. The implication of the condescending tone is that believers in the supernatural belong to a less than discerning element of society. The effect is the same as Mr. Chung’s moralizing support of the status quo. It encourages the viewer to identify with his skepticism. At the same time, the desire to identify with Mulder and his subversive status is equally strong. The fact that Mulder’s perspective is marginalized throughout this episode only makes its subversiveness more attractive. An example of how his marginalized representation of subjectivity and alterity still makes its presence felt in this episode is the proliferation of posters. Blaine’s walls are covered. Chrissie decorates her room with Greenpeace and Amnesty International posters. There is also the UFO poster which shows up every time the scene shifts to Scully’s interview with Mr. Chung.

For a regular viewer of *The X-Files*, these posters are a reminder of the one poster which shows up in almost every other episode except this one: Mulder’s poster of the slogan “The truth is out there.” This motto alone clouds the margins between the contents of the program, the television show as a product, and the viewer’s reception of both. Not only is this Mulder’s motto, it is the show’s motto. It appears in the title sequence. Every time the camera scans across a poster, it triggers a series of connections which lead to the title sequence – the supposed boundary between *The X-Files* and television. There is a difference of context between Mulder’s poster and the title sequence, however. While the poster might imply that the truth is at large in Mulder’s
world and can somehow be discovered, the title sequence implies something very different. In the title, the words are not mediated through a poster which exists in a fictional world. They are positioned on the screen much like credits or advertising messages. The words “out there” apply to the world outside the television set, not Mulder’s world. They occur immediately after a close-up image of an eye opening. The message could be similar to what Mulder tries to tell Mr. Chung. We decide what is true, but we rely on our perceptions to make that choice. Since our perceptions are maps or representations rather than copies, reality is always mediated by our own subjective responses to the world around us. Perhaps this is not the only kind of truth that is out there, however. As Stanley Fish has remarked: “Ye shall know that truth is not what it seems and that truth shall set you free” (qtd. in Hutcheon, Poetics 13). It could be that this is the truth at the heart of the fantastic mode’s appeal, as well as the postmodern’s.

As Rosemary Jackson has pointed out, the themes of fantastic literature “have been constantly re-worked, re-written, and re-covered to serve rather than to subvert the dominant ideology…. An understanding of the subversive function of fantastic literature emerges from structuralist rather than from merely thematic readings of texts” (175). Jackson’s binary distinction between structure and theme is exactly the kind of binary the fantastic likes to break down. Since Todorov’s work on the fantastic, hesitation, which Todorov himself describes as a structural element of the text, becomes equally thematic. Todorov describes hesitation as thematic any time the protagonist hesitates (33). In a postmodern text, such as The X-Files, the viewer’s hesitation is thematized also, because the viewer is inscribed in the text. This particular episode, “José Chung,” demonstrates how hesitation, as a theme, is used to serve the dominant ideology while, as a structural
element, it subverts by questioning the possibility of objectivity and, thereby, authority. One might recall that the most telling evidence of a third alien’s existence occurs in the most mediated conversation in the text. This same conversation also warns the viewer how hesitation is being used to defend the status quo. Schaeffer explains that the air force uses spaceships to do reconnaissance because, when faced with something alien and unfamiliar, the enemy hesitates. Hesitation makes one vulnerable because it prevents action. This is the reason people naturally attempt to resolve ambiguities: they create vulnerability. This makes Mr. Chung’s artificial closure appealing. By allegorizing, he negates the fantastic effect and allows the viewer to be distracted from the unresolved plot. The message he chooses as an allegorical interpretation is one that supports the status quo. An unwary viewer might accept it with relief. However, closure is not for everyone. As Scully remarks to Mr. Chung, this episode provides more closure than most of their cases.

Yet, The X-Files’ popularity did not suffer from this lack. While closure may be intellectually satisfying, it stifles one’s freedom to interpret, to explore a variety of responses to the text, and “to stay within process, the infinite play of meanings” (Gledhill 41). A program like The X-Files, a discourse without an object, allows a great amount of freedom to explore perspectives and, subsequently, one’s sense of self. J.P. Telotte observes that “such films massage the psyche, stimulating its growth and development in order that it might better see itself and find its place in the larger scheme of life and death” (5). Thus, hesitation, as a structural hermeneutic rejection of closure, can be seen as freedom rather than uncertainty. The reader or viewer of fantastic texts is “freed from enslavement not only to the empirical, but also to his own set patterns of thought and
imagination” (Hutcheon, Narcissistic 139). In this sense, Stanley Fish is quite right: the realization that truth is not what it seems is indeed freeing.

As with so many postmodern fantastic texts, the opposite is also true. In “José Chung’s ‘It Came from Outer Space,’” reliability isn’t even an issue, and yet our habit of constructing meaning does not permit us to simply walk away. If anything, this unreliability, like the indeterminacy and uncertainty triggered by the text, prolongs the meaning-making process by holding us captive, by continuing the meaning-making game after the text is read/viewed.

Compare this to what happens in a post-postmodern text like Fringe (2008) which pays lip service to postmodern conventions but does not truly invite hesitation. Fringe, which can be regarded, in many respects, as the next X-Files, has many elements in common with its precursor. The main characters are FBI agents assigned to investigate a series of paranormal phenomena known as “the pattern.” The department, marginalized by its assignment, is known as “Fringe,” just as Mulder’s assignment is known as the X-files. One agent is more believing than her partner. The other partner’s inability to grasp the scope of the situation stems from having less direct experience with the paranormal events, not from skepticism. His faith in his partner is unwavering, however. He too believes. In fact, everyone believes. The truth is not “out there.” It is imminent and essentially discoverable. While the series follows the same pattern of single-episode mysteries building up a series-long, convoluted “conspiracy,” the question of whether or not anything is paranormal or open to scientific interpretation is not developed. The most trusted scientist, Walter Bishop, an ally of Olivia Dunham, the believing FBI agent, discovers in the first season that, prior to a bout of mental illness, he wrote a manifesto,
Zerstörung durch Fortschritte der Technologie (Destruction by the Advancement of Technology), which outlines the existence of parallel universes and which thus explains what would otherwise be impossible events. Also, as a reclusive Harvard genius, Bishop has a long track record of proving what was previously thought to be impossible to be possible with the application of genius and rigorous scientific method. The message is that the hitherto impossible is, in fact, the realm of science.

The opening title sequence suggests the same thing. While natural images of leaves and tree frogs and flowers flash upon the screen, various words and phrases also appear and disappear: teleportation, psychokinesis, suspended animation, nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, precognition, dark matter, cybernetics, and transmogrification. Watching carefully, one also note that the imprint of a human hand which appears along with the leaves, flowers, and frogs, has six fingers – not normal, but not paranormal either. The effect is a mixture of the scientifically possible – nanotechnology, cybernetics, artificial intelligence, and suspended animation; the theoretical – dark matter; and the paranormal – teleportation, psychokinesis, and precognition. The paranormal elements happen to be exactly those that are currently gaining ground as legitimate subjects of serious scientific research. We are a long way from the aliens, vampires, ghosts, and folktale nightmares of The X-Files. Also, while Fringe pretends to draw attention to its constructedness by placing place names in 3D directly into the landscape, this solitary strategy is ineffective because it is unsupported by any other self-conscious discursive strategies. It becomes as easy to ignore as the documentary convention of typewritten place names across the bottom of the screen. Discursive hesitation is not thematized. The viewer is to accept unquestioningly, to
suspend disbelief and enjoy the show. While Mulder and Scully experienced hesitation as they tried out interpretations, Dunham, Bishop, and Charlie Francis do not. In one telling scene, Charlie Francis, Dunham’s partner, explains his frustration with the Fringe’s role in the FBI. He begins: “the truth is….” “Yes,” Dunham replies, “what is the truth?” While every X-Files fan who has tuned in to this promising replacement mentally fills in the words “out there,” Francis replies: “The truth is… we’re obsolete” (Fringe). There is no longer a need for the investigative act. The discursive freedom opened up by postmodern and fantastic hesitation has been made obsolete. The postmodern fantastic protagonists who hesitated before the impossible have been replaced by post-postmodern detectives who are relieved to turn to the new science for concrete answers. There are parallel universes. Now get with the tour. The freedom created by postmodern and fantastic strategies has been traded for the security of answers. This is troubling, and not without parallel in other areas of post-postmodern life. Even more troubling is that the thrills once provided by the shifting of the ground rules on which one stood are provided in Fringe by gore and violence. While The X-Files had its share of discursively-necessary gory detail, Fringe relies on it for effect. If the uncertainty of boundaries is cause for anxiety, the loss of that uncertainty and the loss of the freedom that goes with it are even more distressing.

The point is, however, that uncertainty is a defining strategy that is crucial to the effectiveness of both postmodern and fantastic texts. Thus, for both the postmodern and the fantastic, uncertainty is a given. Linda Hutcheon asserts postmodern uncertainty quite emphatically: “The one thing which the provisional, contradictory postmodernist enterprise is not is ‘confidently’ anything” (Poetics 19). As for the fantastic, Malrieu
links the appearance of the fantastic to times of social transition. When society no longer meets the individual’s needs, the individual is left to his or her own resources – “c’est seul que l’homme doit assurer son salut” (“it is alone that man must work out his salvation”; 31). The individual can no longer depend on the collective to take charge. The fantastic expresses the individual’s uncertainty in an intellectual crisis that appears to have no solution (Malrieu 33). For both Vax and Brown, the significance of this uncertainty is that it is immobilizing (Vax 168; Brown 7, 22). There is no appropriate response. In fact, however, both the postmodern and the fantastic can be seen as space-clearing gestures. They contest current frames of reference but offer nothing to replace what is swept away. In the case of the postmodern, what remains is provisional but functional. Its constructedness, its lack of priority over other frames of reference, is made apparent. In the case of the fantastic, nothing remains but the illusion of what had been a “given.” According to Malrieu, the fantastic attacks all ideologies, all frames of reference, and all modes of thought to reveal that they are illusions and lies (84). This difference is related to the notion of power. Postmodern truths are provisional and multiple because they are related to the negotiation of power within our society. By pushing uncertainty and contradiction to the realm of the impossible, to an area outside of language, the fantastic makes everyone equally powerless. The strategy of uncertainty is the same. Impossibility makes the implications different. The fantastic pushes outside of language in that it attempts to describe something for which there are no adequate words. Fantastic phenomena are usually unnamed for this reason. Postmodern texts can make this un-name-ability humorous; consider Artmann’s Dr. Unspeakable or, taking the opposite tack, *Twin Peaks’* mysterious Bob. Even the blue-eyed José Chung, who is
clearly neither Hispanic nor Asian, is an example of this, suggesting that the true villain of the fantastic text is the author himself. The postmodern, however, does not attempt to indicate something outside of language in the same way. It is, on the contrary, quite self-consciously anchored in and constituted by language.

While the end results differ, the postmodern and fantastic strategies for creating this uncertainty are indeed quite similar. Some have already been mentioned: ambiguous verb tenses, unreliable or multiple narrators, etc. The most common strategy, however, is the most obviously definitive of the fantastic, if one considers the definitions of various theorists back to Todorov and beyond: the co-existence of contradictory explanations. Shlomith Rimmon-Kennan’s description of the fantastic as two stories told by one text (Brooke-Rose 227) parallels Linda Hutcheon’s description of parody as one signifier with two signifieds. While the fantastic relies on the plurality of interpretations, the parodic postmodern relies on the plurality of truths. In both cases, these truths can be contradictory. While Hutcheon sees paradox as the typically postmodern trope (Poetics 47, 184), Rosemary Jackson sees oxymoron as the typically fantastic trope (21).

According to Vax, however, virtually everything about the fantastic is rooted in paradox (Conclusion). Since both share this indeterminacy, obviously indeterminacy (or ambiguity or hesitation between possibilities) is not the defining characteristic of the fantastic. The defining characteristic is indeterminacy in conjunction with the resulting hesitation which is directly attributable to the confrontation of the protagonist and, thereby, the reader/viewer with the impossible. The difference which impossibility makes is the difference between the intellectual reaction to postmodern discourse and the visceral reaction to fantastic discourse. This is the major problem of potential
compatibility of the postmodern and fantastic modes. Intellectualizing is usually fatal to any emotional response. Thought can distract from sensation. Thus the strategies are compatible in their similarities, but they are theoretically contradictory in their desired responses. This co-presence of compatibility and conflict is exactly the kind of contradiction both modes thrive on, however. I began by saying that the ways in which the postmodern and fantastic contradict each other can be turned to serve both purposes. This is because contradiction itself is a key strategy of both modes. The way in which it works is best explained using the notion of play. This is where game theory becomes a useful tool in the analysis of postmodern fantastic strategies.
Chapter Three

Game Theory and the Fantastic

The parallels between fantastic narratives and games are many, and they occur at various stages of the interpretive process, and pertain to different aspects, both diegetic and non-diegetic, of games as well as texts. Before launching into a description of these shared qualities, it might be useful to return to the beginning of my definition of the fantastic. I suggested that the fantastic moment, by occupying a boundary position between the real and the unreal or between possible and impossible, allows the reader to occupy a space where language, the realm of opposites, demonstrates an insufficiency which points to something beyond itself. This space “between” is associated in some mystic traditions with the moment of transcendence. If one recalls the Mask of Eternity in the Shiva cave at Elephanta, what allows that mask to represent eternity is that it is located in a space between opposites. Eternity cannot be apprehended directly because it is apart from the realm of language, the realm of opposites; one cannot describe it but only locate it in that space or moment “between” (notice that time and space become interchangeable in this context; the significance of this detail will become clearer as I proceed to a discussion of quantum theory’s application to the fantastic in a subsequent chapter). The fantastic’s main significance is not in the nature of the fantastic phenomenon nor even in the nature of the impossibility, though those signify in interesting ways, but in the fantastic’s ability to reside “between.” Compare this to Eugen Fink’s description of play:
...the immanent purpose of play is not subordinate to the ultimate purpose served by all other human activity. Play has only internal purpose, unrelated to anything external to itself.

In the autonomy of play action there appears a possibility of human timelessness in time. Time is then experienced, not as a precipitate rush of successive moments, but as the one full moment that is, so to speak, a glimpse of eternity (21; italics in original).

But how do play and the fantastic both occupy this “between” space? Certainly if eternity resides there, there is more than enough room for both, but in what manner do they co-reside? Is the fantastic simply a game? Does it function as it does because it permits us to play? Is play simply a metaphor to describe the movement of the fantastic back and forth between opposite interpretations? Or, are they unrelated yet isomorphous? How does the immanence of play relate to the potentially transcendent effect of fantastic texts? To answer these questions, it is useful to consider the main tenets of game theory and look closely at how they relate to fantastic narratives at each stage of game theory’s development.

It was Todorov who formulated the first primarily aesthetic theory of the fantastic, as we have seen. One of the reasons the fantastic resists definition, he argues, is because of its aesthetic element. Only a few years prior to Todorov’s ground-breaking work on the fantastic, Johan Huizinga wrote Homo Ludens, the first significant twentieth-century systematic approach to the supra-biological aspects of play. As for the preceding treatments of play, Huizinga asserts, “[t]hey attack play direct with the quantitative
methods of experimental science without first paying attention to its profoundly aesthetic quality. As a rule, they leave the primary quality of play, as such, virtually untouched” (3). That both play and the fantastic are primarily aesthetic is the basis of one of the most important parallels between the two modes. An aesthetic experience requires that one approach the experience with a certain attitude in order for the experience to unfold. For Todorov, this means that the reader must identify with the character who encounters the fantastic phenomenon in order to also experience the moment of fantastic hesitation. For Huizinga, this means that the player must also approach the game in a specific way. Huizinga’s four qualities of play, while they all appear to be descriptive of play itself, all have very definite implications for the player and his or her requisite attitude. The first is obvious. Play is voluntary: “[p]lay to order is not play” (Huizinga 7). So, clearly, the player must be willing. The reason play must be voluntary is in part because of its second quality. Play is not ordinary: “[i]t is a stepping out of ‘real’ life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (8). So, while the fantastic involves an intrusion of the impossible into a world that operates by the rules of our world, play involves an extrusion of certain chosen elements of our world into another sphere which operates by its own rules. In the case of the game world, the new disposition includes rules of convention, not physical laws as in fantastic intrusions, but in both cases, the transgression of the boundary between spheres or worlds has the potential to dissolve the rules by which these worlds operate. Clearly, this second characteristic of the game implies a choice or at least awareness by the player that he or she is entering another mode of being.
Huizinga relates play’s status within a delimited sphere to the notion of “only pretending” which “betrays a consciousness of the inferiority of play compared with ‘seriousness’” (8). While the hegemony of seriousness over play has not survived the postmodern era unscathed, the notion that the player is conscious of a change in status of his or her actions is useful. This awareness is the source of the first “between” state one finds is game theory. While the player realizes that he or she is “only pretending,” suggesting a state opposed to seriousness, the seriousness with which one plays offsets this realization. While playing, the player moves back and forth between seriousness and play: “Play turns to seriousness and seriousness to play” (8). While the supposition that play is not serious falls into disfavour with a number of theorists responding to Huizinga’s work (Gadamer, Caillois), Huizinga is on the right path in recognizing that the player must move back and forth between opposing attitudes toward play in order for play to function.

Thirdly, play is “’played out’ within certain limits of time and space” (9). This suggests that the player must understand the temporal and spatial boundaries of the game. The player must understand where and when to adopt the play attitude. Boundaries are a part of all games; players know that they are “out of bounds” when they leave the soccer pitch, when the curtain falls, or when Mom calls, “Bedtime!” The nature of the game dictates the nature of the boundary, but while some are spatial, all are temporal. Huizinga also sees the temporal aspects of repetition and alternation as contributive to game playing, as part of a game’s inner structure. This is relevant to the back-and-forth movement which I see as the key link between play and the fantastic. Repetition is the back-and-forth movement from beginning to end to beginning again. Repetition is, in
essence, the mode by which the game is kept “in play.” When movement ceases, the
game is over. So, the third quality is that play is delimited by spatial and temporal
boundaries and is “played out” within those boundaries through repetition and
alternation.

Fourthly, Huizinga sees play as order. He describes it as “a limited perfection” in
“the confusion of life.” Any deviation from order robs play of its character and “spoils
the game” (10). I have been making connections between Huizinga’s characteristics of
play and the attitudes they require of the player. It is this connection to attitude that I
have identified as the source of play’s aesthetic nature. Huizinga himself saw “the
affinity of order and play” (10) as the reason play is aesthetic. There are several readily
apparent problems with this notion, however. First of all, not all play is ordered. For
example, a day at a water park is mostly about vertigo, or what Caillois refers to as ilinx,
the loss of one’s sense of up and down or one’s proprioception, the way one orders the
world in its relation to one’s own body. Even when play is about rules, some kinds of
play are about the creative breaking of rules. Postmodern narrative strategies, for
example, are about inscribing and then breaking with conventions (rules), but postmodern
texts are notoriously ludic. Finally, Huizinga’s assertion of the aesthetic value of the
orderliness of games is somewhat contradicted by his next observation that tension plays
an important part in play: “tension means uncertainty, chanciness; a striving to decide
the issue and so end it” (10). As anyone who prefers to watch the match rather than just
read about the results on the sports page can attest, the aesthetic value of the game is in
the uncertainty, not the orderly conclusion, the issue being decided. Once the issue is
decided, the game is over, the to-and-fro has ended, and one is tossed back into the
ordinary sphere of experience. The aesthetic value in play, as in the fantastic, lies in the uncertainty, the movement between certainties that cannot be halted without stopping the game. Indeed, Huizinga’s own analysis of play moves away from the notion of order towards uncertainty as the play spirit: “To dare, to take risks, to bear uncertainty, to endure tension – these are the essence of the play spirit. Tension adds to the importance of the game and, as it increases, enables the player to forget that he is only playing” (51).

Thus, Huizinga contributes some key notions that make game theory pertinent to an understanding of the experience of fantastic narratives. First, he suggests that play is aesthetic. Players, like readers of the fantastic, must adopt specific attitudes. Secondly, he points out that play is about boundaries. While the fantastic is about positioning oneself on a boundary between opposites, play is about repetition within boundaries. As will become clearer, the to-and-fro of play repetition has much in common with the fantastic’s ability to keep its reader at the boundary, uncommitted to any one of the available opposing interpretations of the text. Finally, Huizinga demonstrates the importance of uncertainty to the play spirit. He even makes the connection between the uncertainty of the game and the appeal of the ambiguity of language. He sees the Greek sophist as the exemplar of this aspect of language: “One of the special favourites of the sophists was the antilogia or double reasoning. Apart from giving free rein to play this form allowed them to hint at the perpetual ambiguity of every judgement made by the human mind: one can put a thing like this or like that” (152). Thus playing with words is indeed a game, both an aesthetic pursuit and a competition. The applications to the ambiguity of fantastic texts are clear. Once ambiguity arises in the text, as Sherlock Holmes would say, “[t]he game is afoot!” In fact, Huizinga suggests that reasoning itself
is governed by play rules: “May it not be that in all logic…there is always a tacit understanding to take the validity of the terms and concepts for granted as one does the pieces on a chess board?” (152-3). He does not pursue this deep question to its end. However, the fantastic, as a mode, does suggest that he has a point. To what degree are our perceptions framed by terms and concepts that we take for granted? Is the moment of impossibility simply a disruption of our modes of perception which we would otherwise use as we would use puzzle pieces to create a coherent image?

Huizinga’s work paved the way for a number of theorists who chose to pursue the connection between play and literature even further. Hans-Georg Gadamer was among the first to respond to Huizinga’s approach to play. In Truth and Method, he adds to Huizinga’s notion that seriousness and the play spirit alternate as opposing modes of engagement. Seriousness, he suggests, does not lead the player away from play, “but only seriousness in playing makes the play wholly play” (92). Gadamer finds the simultaneity of seriousness and the play spirit to be an obstacle to the definition of play. The player cannot know the nature of play while being of two minds; the player can only experience the aesthetic effects of play. So it is with the fantastic. The attitude of the reader is also divided; he or she must identify with the protagonist in order to play the fantastic game seriously and thereby experience its effect, but another aspect of the reader must be aware of the game, evaluating its adherence to rules and conventions, parrying the twists of convention with interpretive thrusts of his or her own.

The split attitude permits the effect to unfold, but what is the nature of the construct which generates the effect? In the case of play, Gadamer finds the transferred meanings of the word “play” to be indicative of our instinctual understanding of what
play really is. Using such examples as “the play of light,” “the play of forces,” or even “the play of a component in a bearing-case,” Gadamer concludes that “what is intended is the to-and-fro movement which is not tied to any goal which would bring it to an end” (93). This definition of play resonates strongly with a number of aspects of the fantastic’s moment of hesitation. The fantastic endures as long as the end goal of deciding between interpretations is delayed. To delay that moment, the reader must oscillate between valid interpretations. In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fantastic texts, there are usually two opposing choices. For example, one may choose between a visit from the devil or “just a dream.” In postmodern fantastic texts, there may be a variety of interpretations which fold into each other as narrative levels collapse into one another or fail to jibe at all, as we saw in *Stranger than Fiction* or *The X-Files*.

What is interesting about Gadamer’s description of play as to-and-fro movement is that he does not see it as a means to a decisive end, as Huizinga does. For Gadamer, the end of play is only a temporal necessity. Playing is not a means of deciding who wins. Winning is a way of deciding when play will end: “The movement backwards and forwards is obviously so central for the definition of a game that it is not important who or what performs this movement. …It is the game that is played – it is irrelevant whether or not there is a subject who plays. The play is the performance of the movement as such” (93).

At this point a distinction must be made. While Huizinga’s description of play suggests that a player must adopt certain attitudes in order to play, Gadamer is suggesting that a subject is not even necessary for play to occur: “the actual subject of play is obviously not the subjectivity of an individual who among other activities also plays, but
instead the play itself” (93). Gadamer goes on to describe the to-and-fro motion of play as a movement without goal and also without effort. It follows of itself. Thus, the player does not create the movement, which would take effort and initiative, but simply experiences play as the absence of strain, as the player is absorbed into the game: “…all playing is a being-played. The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game tends to master the players” (95). This movement from subject to object is revisited repeatedly by Gadamer. He states: “Whoever ‘tries’ is in fact the one who is tried” (95). So, the attitudes one must adopt in order to play are actually necessary so that one is willing to be played – an even more convincing argument for the voluntary nature of play. Since the experience of a fantastic text is usually that of a single-player game, Gadamer’s final observation regarding the player as object is particularly notable: “The real subject of the game (this is shown in precisely those experiences in which there is only a single player) is not the player, but instead the game itself. The game is what holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there” (95-6).

This describes quite accurately what is happening to the reader of a fantastic narrative. He or she is drawn into the interpretive game by the to-and-fro movement between possibility and impossibility and is held there by the game until the necessity to resolve the narrative behaves like a temporal boundary of the play world and either the reader or the text “wins.” Of course, in some postmodern texts which resist closure or in skillfully ambiguous texts like The Turn of the Screw, which never resolve anything, a tie can always be called. Thus Gadamer contributes some useful insights into the applicability of game theory to fantastic hesitation. The to-and-fro movement is key to
understanding the relationships between fantastic hesitation and postmodern interpretive hesitation. The player’s shift from subject to object is also a valid and useful observation. One cannot help but observe, however, that subject and object compose exactly the kind of binary opposition that both fantastic and postmodern strategies like to dissolve. There is a difference, however minimal, between a playful to-and-fro movement between opposite poles and the state of being “between.” As one can learn from watching a tightrope walker, rapid side-to-side movements are sometimes the only way to balance “between.” Helene Diaz Brown discusses this movement between subject and object in much more detail, but before moving on to her discussion of subject as object in the fantastic, it is useful to briefly recount the contributions to game theory of Caillois and Ehrmann.

Roger Caillois, the same theorist who analyzed the fantastic in *Images, Images*, wrote *Man, Play, and Games*. In it, he retraces much of the same territory as Huizinga, insisting on the voluntary nature of play, its separateness from ordinary life, and its reliance on uncertainty to achieve its effect. The value in Caillois’ work, as it pertains to the fantastic, is his categorization of play. The fantastic likes to disturb boundaries. It is telling, therefore, to see just how the fantastic “disturbs” Caillois’s categories. One division Caillois makes is between ruled games and make-believe. Games like chess, polo, or bocce are played by rules which do not literally conform to any activity in “real” life. Therefore, they are played “for real.” However, when play consists of imitating real life, the game is played “as if.” Caillois, though he is a theorist of the fantastic, insists that all games are ultimately one or the other. They cannot be played “for real” and “as if.” Children who do not know the rules for chess, for example, cannot play “for real,” so
they pretend to play chess “as if” (9). If, in order to play the fantastic game, however,
one must identify with the protagonist, one is processing the story events “as if” one is in
the protagonist’s shoes. If one is sorting through the narrative layers and weighing the
uses of convention in order to interpret story events, one is playing the interpretive game
by the rules “for real.” For both the visceral and intellectual effects to be achieved, as in
the postmodern fantastic, one must play simultaneously “as if” and “for real.” This is yet
another way of describing the bouncing back and forth between modes that I described in
Chapter Two.

Another categorization of play involves Caillois’s four kinds of games: agon, any
combat with an artificially created equality of chance; alea, any game of chance over
which the player has no control; mimicry, or make-believe; and ilinx, the attempt to
destroy one’s own stability of perception (14-23). The fantastic mode, as play, is unusual
in that it embodies qualities of three of the four categories. The competitive aspect of
agon is present in the reader’s desire to outwit the text, to understand “what really
happened.” Mimicry describes the reader’s identification with the protagonist. Caillois
specifically suggests that identification “constitutes mimicry related to that of the reader
with the hero of the novel and that of the moviegoer with the film star” (22). Finally, the
moment of fantastic hesitation when all interpretations fail and there is no appropriate
response is akin to the loss of stability of perception, ilinx, which Caillois describes as a
“surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with sovereign
brusqueness” (23). Again, the movement back and forth between agon, mimicry, and
ilinx is another way of describing the to-and-fro of play that holds the player in the game.
The movement is the play that acts upon the player. Caillois goes on to suggest that agon
and mimicry are acts of the will, while alea and ilinx are a submission to destiny or sensation. Here we can again see the movement between active (agon and mimicry) and passive (ilinx) which corresponds to the movement back and forth between subject and object suggested by Gadamer’s work. Finally, Caillois notes that “[g]ames lead to habits and create reflexes” (83). This aspect of play, competence without purpose, sheds some light on the appeal of the fantastic text. If one cannot win by knowing with certainty “what really happened,” why play at all? Play “is like education of the body, character, or mind, without the goal’s being predetermined…. For it does not teach facts, but rather develops aptitudes” (167). What those aptitudes may be is yet an open question, but subject formation is certainly suggested by the subject/object opposition that “comes into play.” I will return to this idea after a brief look at a critic who places the work of Huizinga and Caillois into a poststructuralist context.

Jacques Ehrmann, in “Homo Ludens Revisited,” takes on several of the binary oppositions suggested by both Huizinga and Caillois. First, he suggests that both theorists indicate an uneasiness with terms like “real” and “ordinary” by placing them in quotation marks (a habit which I have continued in my own discussion to indicate that the terms are problematic), but neither author makes an attempt to analyze what is meant by “real”: “…we are criticizing these authors chiefly and most seriously for considering ‘reality,’ the ‘real,’ as a given component of the problem, as a referent needing no discussion….They define play in opposition to, on the basis of, or in relation to this so-called reality” (33).

Ehrmann takes the position that reality has no content outside of its manifestation in such activities as play. Therefore, play is real life. In my opinion, this position
certainly explains the malleability of Caillois’s notion of mimicry. Caillois, while he
distinguishes play from real life, does not distinguish the make-believe mimicry of
children playing house, a representation of “real” life, from the mimicry of the reader
who identifies with a fictive protagonist whose representation of “real” life may be
conventional at best. This kind of lapse in categorization is possible because for Caillois,
as for Huizinga, play is defined privatively as non-serious, non-ordinary, and un-real.
Thus, when one is playing “as if,” the opposing side must, by definition, be more serious
and more real, even if it is a fiction about vampires and werewolves. Clearly, the
opposition between play and seriousness or between play and reality does break down,
and Ehrmann is right to observe that to “define play is at the same time and in the same
movement to define reality and to define culture” (55). While most of Ehrmann’s
evaluation of Caillois and Huizinga is directed at the ideological stance which permits
them to evaluate play as opposed to work or play as opposed to seriousness, with work
and seriousness given the greater value, Ehrmann’s conclusion is especially useful: “They
forgot that players may be played; that, as an object in the game, the player can be its
stakes (enjeu) and its toy (jouet)” (55).

Ehrmann’s observations do not negate the very useful contributions Huizinga and
Caillois have made to game theory. Players must be willing in order to experience the
aesthetic effects of play. Play does operate by rules that do not necessarily apply to other
modes of being (even if those other modes are not “reality”). There are different modes
of play, but like most categories, their boundaries are contestable. Ehrmann’s
observations place these notions into a different ideological context, but the to-and-fro
nature of play still acts to move the game forward. Ehrmann’s criticisms remind me of
the debate surrounding the nature of the fictional world in which a fantastic narrative can occur. While Vax, Todorov, and Caillois insisted that the world must operate by the same physics as ours, Rabkin pointed out that the expectations of the protagonist and the protagonist’s response to what he or she perceives as impossibility is what determines what is fantastic. The nature of the “real” or “ordinary” is not as important as the protagonist’s awareness of encountering what he or she perceives as impossible. So, too, Ehrmann’s redefinition of the relationship between play and reality is useful for explaining discrepancies in Huizinga’s and Caillois’s work, but the attitude of the player stays the same. The player, like the protagonist encountering the impossible, and especially like the reader (playing at fiction) who identifies with that protagonist, is of two minds. The player plays “as if” and “for real” just as the protagonist oscillates between “This is impossible!” and “This would be possible if I am, in fact, dreaming/hallucinating/the victim of a trick, etc.” That said, Ehrmann’s conclusions provide a helpful stepping stone to the work of Helene Diaz Brown who looks specifically at what happens to the subject who plays at fantastic fiction. Ehrmann’s conclusions are eightfold, but I will list here the four that are most pertinent to fantastic narratives and their interpretation.

1. “All reality is caught up in the play of the concepts which designate it. Reality is thus not capable of being objectified, nor subjectified.”

2. “Each text contains in itself its own reality, which in essence…is put into play by the words which make it up.”
3. “The player, like the speaker – that is, each of us – is at once the subject and the object of the play. …The subjectivity-objectivity dualism is abolished because it is inoperative.”

4. “Play is articulation, opening and closing of and through language”

(56)
The first and third conclusions both suggest that play abolishes the subjectivity-objectivity dualism. This is reminiscent of Eugen Fink’s assertion with which I opened this chapter – that play action provides “a glimpse of eternity.” If play were to allow one to exist apart from subjectivity and objectivity, that would be a transcendent experience indeed; however, I would suggest that subjectivity and objectivity are not abolished but merely balanced by a rapid back-and-forth movement. As one oscillates to-and-fro between them, as one plays and is played, one can perhaps experience a moment “between” similar to the “between-ness” of eternity as depicted in the Shiva cave. The fleeting nature of that “glimpse of eternity” is suggested by the fourth conclusion – play is an “opening and closing” of and through language. Brown gives us a fuller analysis of the subject/object duality in play which will then permit another understanding of the opening and closing of language via psychoanalysis.

Brown’s work on subjectivity in fantastic texts draws directly on the notion of back-and-forth movement. She points out that, alone, the uncertainty triggered by ambiguous story events cannot explain the aesthetic effect of a fantastic text, or one could experience the fantastic effect only once if the uncertainty is resolved within the text. A second reading would not permit the same kind of uncertainty. Brown suggests that the uncertainty is triggered not just by the story events but also by the language of the
fantastic text which triggers a variety of back-and-forth movements. For example, fantastic texts often describe phenomena which invoke a sense of excess. Creatures and situations are “super”-natural and “extra”-ordinary. Characters are “overwhelmed.” At the same time, there is no name for what is experienced, or there is something missing from normal experience, such as distance in communication or the visibility of an entity. In this way, excess and lack coexist in the text and the reader is moving constantly between the two extremes:

Le fantastique laisse sur l’impression qu’il y a quelque chose en plus, un surplus qui ne se laisse pas saisir, cet excès révélant en somme un manque fundamental….L’idée d’excès se rapproche ainsi, de façon paradoxe en apparence, de le notion de perte (23).

The fantastic leaves one with the impression that there is something more, a surplus which cannot be grasped, this excess revealing, in short, a fundamental lack….The idea of excess thus approaches, in an apparently paradoxical fashion, the notion of loss.

Excess thus represents a loss of control or a loss of one’s ability to master the situation through understanding. Excess and loss form one kind of back-and-forth movement which, for Brown, more than any story event, is the source of uncertainty:

Le texte fantastique joue devant le lecteur ce va-et-vient incessant entre le “trop” et le “pas assez.”… Les rapports du fantastique avec l’acquisition des connaissances font en effet ressortir un schema additive qui évolue vers la perte et la soustraction (24).
The fantastic text plays for the reader this incessant back-and-forth between “too much” and “not enough.” The relationships between the fantastic and the acquisition of knowledge in effect emphasize a pattern of addition which evolves towards loss and subtraction.

Note that it is the text that plays this back-and-forth game. The reader, as a player, experiences the to-and-fro movement both actively and passively. While playing, the reader moves back and forth between accumulating knowledge about the phenomenon and realizing that the phenomenon is unknowable. The reader is also played by the text as the text bounces the reader back and forth between excess and loss.

The movement between actively playing the fantastic game and passively being played by the text is at the heart of the fantastic process. Brown describes this fantastic process using two words with double senses: sujet and effet.

Le terme “sujet” recouvre lui-même deux orientations d’action: l’une active – c’est le cas du sujet qui accomplit une action verbale – et l’autre passive – comme on le voit dans l’expression “le roi et son sujets,” ou bien dans l’expression “il est sujet à.” Remarquons ici que l’idée d’un effet produit implique un sujet passif (4; italics in original).

The term “subject” has two overlapping orientations of action: one active – as in the case of the subject who enacts a verb – and another passive – as one sees in the expression “the king and his subjects,” or also in the expression, “he is subject to.” Note here that the idea of a produced effect implies a passive subject.
As for the word *effet*, one tends to think of the effect that is produced by the fantastic text – hesitation, fear, disequilibrium. For Brown, *effet* also has active and passive aspects. The passive effect is exactly the kind of produced effect just described. The active aspect of effect is heard in such expressions as *prendre effet* (take effect), *faire effet* (have an effect), or *faire de l’effet* (to affect): “Cette vision dynamique de la notion d’effet sous-entend l’idée d’un processus en cours – ce qui nous permettra de parler d’effet *générateur*” (“This dynamic vision of the notion of *effet* underlies the idea of an ongoing process – which allows us to speak of a generative effect”; 5, italics in original). For Brown, the experience of the fantastic text is one in which the passive subject, who is immobilized by the produced effect, through a back-and-forth movement between excess and lack, gradually “plays” the two sides into one game. Thus, the passive subject, by being played but also by playing, becomes the active subject. The *effet produit* becomes the *effet générateur*. The hesitation and uncertainty give way to the active to-and-fro movement which constitutes/generates play. Brown sees this ludic movement as a move from duality, the co-presence of binary opposites, to what she calls *unicité*, oneness (6). *Unicité* doesn’t signify uniformity but non-differentiation, which permits infinite variety, “des identités, mais sans coupures, sans limites, sans frictions, sans alternance obligatoire” (“identities, but seamless, limitless, frictionless, without obligatory alternation”; 82). This sounds very much like the “one with everything” variety of transcendence that accompanies some mystical notions of eternity. It also describes a kind of immanence that may link the mystical experience to the immanence of play described by Fink. A problematic relationship between the apparently transcendent
agenda of the fantastic and the immanence of the play experience is clearly “at play.” For now, I am content to let it play because the game is not yet over.

My argument is that these movements between excess and loss, active and passive, feeling the fantastic effect and generating the fantastic effect through ludic movement are all of the same nature as Gadamer’s notion of play. The game is played by the subject, but the subject is also played by the game. The subject is bounced back and forth between actively interpreting the text and passively feeling the lack of conclusive interpretation. While I disagree with Brown that the text moves toward a resolution of the dualities she describes, her concept of unicité could well describe the brief moments between opposite modes when one is in neither camp. Her descriptions of excess and loss and the active and passive roles of the subject are also very useful indeed. For one thing, they suggest yet another way that the player is played. Gadamer insists on the absence of strain as a defining aspect of play. One need only be willing to play in order to be subsumed into the game and be played. According to Brown, the active movement between excess and lack, active and passive, is about the drive to master the game. Both have a point. One is, in fact, bounced back and forth between Gadamer’s absence of strain and Brown’s sense of striving to master the game.

Brown also points out another link between the fantastic and eternity that comes about through an understanding of the fantastic as play. A subtle distinction between Todorovian hesitation when confronted by impossibility and the continual co-presence of incompatible contraries arises when one views the fantastic experience as a game in which the pleasure derives from being continually bounced back and forth between contraries, not from winning the interpretive game. In this view of play, once again,
playing is not about winning; winning is about marking a temporal end to the real objective – playing.

Brown states quite clearly that she does not believe that the fantastic effect is created by the moment of hesitation between two explanations, one natural and one supernatural, as Todorov suggests (30). She believes that the effect resides in the coexistence of two possibilities, where neither one nor the other is excluded (79). The reason Brown argues against the moment of hesitation and for the continuous co-existence of incompatible contraries is that she also sees the fantastic effect as a suspension of the reign of dualities or of language or representation per se. It is linked to eternity rather than temporality:

La notion de choix entre deux éléments – l’un ou l’autre – est ainsi liée à l’analyse et à la représentation, qui relèvent elles-même de catégories d’ordre temporel. Il était donc totalement logique que le fantastique s’en prenne à la temporalité dans ses attaques contre le réel…. Il n’y a, en somme, plus d’instant (79-80).

(The idea of choice between two elements – one or the other – is thus linked to analysis and representation, which are themselves a matter of temporality. It is therefore totally logical that the fantastic should challenge temporality in its attacks on reality…. There is, in short, no longer a moment.)

Time itself is undermined in the fantastic so there cannot be just a moment of hesitation. The refusal to choose is also a rejection of temporality. Like many theorists of the fantastic since Freud, Brown eventually turns to psychoanalytical terminology to make
her point. The refusal to choose, she argues, the desire for both at once, is what makes the fantastic, in Lacanian terms, part of the real, not the imaginary (81). That is, the fantastic, which only exists within discourse, paradoxically points to an experience outside of language. Not surprisingly, the loss of discreteness or distinction which happens when one tries to stay eternally suspended between binaries is problematic for the subject who operates by being distinct from the object or, in psychoanalytical terms, by being distinct from the other.

It was Malrieu who observed that in fantastic texts the protagonist is often, like the phenomenon, either multiple or partial or hybrid. Brown agrees: “Le texte fantastique manifeste en générale une multiplication du sujet, représentée par une metamorphose ou une scission du sujet” (“The fantastic text generally manifests a multiplication of the subject represented by a metamorphosis or a splitting of the subject”; 93). This multiplication extends to the playing reader as well. It is summed up nicely by Caillois when he quotes Mme du Deffand: “‘Croyez-vous aux fantômes? – Non, mais j’en ai peur’” (“Do you believe in ghosts? – No, but I’m afraid of them!”; Images 26). The subject who plays is not the same as the subject who knows that he or she plays. Again, Brown likes to play with words. When je becomes part of jeu, when the I enters the game and does not stay conserved on the sidelines, the fantastic produces its effect. That is, when the intellectual interpreter becomes afraid of something unbelievable, becomes multiple by being both the unbeliever and the one who is afraid, the fantastic effect emerges: “Le fantastique consisterai ainsi, surtout, en une mise en jeu du sujet” (“The fantastic thus consists above all else in putting the subject into play”; 98, italics in original). As Brown points out, any story that questions our ability to distinguish reality
from fiction poses the problem of the subject. If the fiction is a game, and the *je* is part of the *jeu*, am I not also a fiction?

Finally, another blow to the received notion of the subject is that the rejection of binary opposites removes the boundaries between I and not-I. The fantastic text attacks exactly those borders which ordinarily delimit the subject. The rejection of discontinuity robs the subject of his or her distinctive character. The fantastic effect is linked to the destabilization of the subject, which is why it appears as an emotion – anxiety or fear. The fantastic effect is the targeting of the individual in this particular way. Thus, Brown can say: “C'est pourquoi le sujet-'topic’ du texte fantastique est réellement le sujet-ego, dans tous les cas, et sous toutes les formes possibles” (“This is why the subject-topic of the fantastic text is really the subject-ego, in every case and in every possible form”; 97). All temporal and spatial relationships are dependent on the subject. The concept of “you” depends upon the concept of “I” just as “then” depends upon “now” and “there” depends upon “here.” In Brown’s words, “JE serait en somme le seul garant de sa propre identité: il témoigne de lui-même” (“The I becomes the sole guarantor of its own identity: it is its own witness”; 98). However, the opposite is also true. The notion of I also depends upon you, and my sense of here and now depends upon there and then. Thus, the disruption of you, there or then disrupts the I, here and now. When the fantastic text alters received notions of time and space, it affects the subject’s perception of here and now. When it confounds the apprehension of objects, it changes the constitution of the subject: “En altérant l’espace et le temps, le texte fantastique ébranle en fait la conscience du sujet” (“By altering space and time, the fantastic text in fact shatters the consciousness of the subject”; 101). It is important to note that Brown is not suggesting that the
fantastic attacks the notion of a subject. The subject still exists and still has meaning, just not necessarily the meaning that is normally attributed to it in a positivist, materialist view of the world (103). So why does the fantastic put the subject into question in this way? According to Brown, it is not in order to provide another version of the subject but in order to provoke confusion: “Voilà un jeu purement ‘improductif’ en apparence” (“Here is an apparently purely unproductive game”; 106). The process of questioning the subject is the subject-topic of the fantastic. This is the nature of the game. But who, Brown asks, is the subject who remains to witness this “quasi-death” of the subject? (107) And what, I would ask, is the attraction of such a game?

Brown notes, very usefully, that the fantastic cannot be just a moment of hesitation because the continuous presence of incompatible contraries creates an ongoing process that resists resolution. The to-and-fro movement of play is a refusal to choose. The rejection of choice is a rejection of temporality, a rejection that permits the dissolution of received notions of space and time. This amounts to an attack on the consciousness of the subject who defines self as distinct from other. When “other” changes, “self” changes. Thus, the fantastic is a dynamic process that problematizes the subject but permits the enjoyment of the real – not the real which Huizinga and Caillois opposed to play, but the real of Lacanian psychoanalysis, that which resides outside of language, the realm of the symbolic. Once again, taking yet another route, a theorist of the fantastic arrives at the conclusion that the point of the fantastic is to attempt to experience something directly, something that resists the mediation of language, in order to glimpse the real, or to transcend what psychoanalysts term the imaginary.
When one applies Lacanian ideas to a fantastic text, it becomes clear that the back-and-forth movement of the fantastic text is compatible with several movements Lacan describes in his analysis of the emergence of the subject. Lacanian psychoanalysis also sheds some light on what Ehrmann might mean when he writes: “Play is articulation, opening and closing of and through language” (56). Ehrmann’s statement is a paradoxical one, if examined closely, and the paradox it contains is the same one found at the crux of so many fantastic hesitations. The opening of language through language is not difficult to imagine, but how does the closing of language through language occur? Is this not the difficulty faced by impossible phenomena that seek to emerge discursively by temporarily shutting down the protagonist’s and reader’s very access to discourse, language itself? Psychoanalysis provides some useful notions for framing this paradox.

When Freud set out to define the uncanny in 1919, he provided some key concepts for research in two seemingly distinct areas. Psychoanalytic theorists have found the uncanny to be a useful concept for exploring the nature of the unconscious and the ways in which we can approach it. As we have seen, theorists of fantastic literature have used the uncanny to explain formal aspects of fantastic texts such as the protagonist's and the reader's uncertainty or the coincidence of intimate and familiar elements with the strange and supernatural. A number of Lacanian theorists have turned their attention to fantastic literature to attempt to create connections between Lacan’s development of Freud's uncanny and recent fantastic theory. Among these theorists are Joan Copjec, Mladen Dolar, and Slavoj Žižek, and their work shows how the addition of Lacan's notion of the vel, which will be defined shortly, would further clarify the points already being made regarding the back-and-forth play of the fantastic text. I also hope to create another
bridge between psychoanalysis and fantastic theory by demonstrating how transference explains Todorov's assertion that the unsettling effect of the fantastic text is achieved through the reader's identification with the protagonist, an identification which promotes the to-and-fro movement necessary for the fantastic game to be played. I have chosen Hanns Heinz Ewer’s "Die Spinne" (1908) to illustrate my arguments because it sustains its ambiguity indefinitely by never resolving the uncertainty which creates the uncanny effect. This makes it an example of the fantastic par excellence. Written in 1916, it predates even Freud's work on the uncanny. Yet, in a text which could not possibly have been written in response to psychoanalysis, there are an amazing number of Lacanian concepts illustrated by the twisted relationship between the protagonist and the spider woman who constitutes herself as his double.

As we have seen, Freud describes the uncanny as a special kind of ambiguity: the unheimlich or uncanny is that which is both eerily alien to one's experience and at the same time intimately familiar. While Freud's description of the uncanny suggests that it functions as a psychological phenomenon or as a mode of perception, Lacan allows us to speak in terms of an uncanny object by introducing his own term for the strangely familiar - extimité - that which is both intimate, in the sense of part of oneself, and external. It is not surprising, therefore, that Lacanians have identified the object of uncanny or fantastic literature as the objet a. It is that which occupies an impossible position: both internal and external, it is an object which is not an object but the lack of an object. In other words, it is that which cannot be symbolized – the Real.

Encounters with the objet a trigger anxiety, uncertainty, and hesitation – the hallmarks of fantastic literature – because our comfort zone is in the symbolic realm.
The lack which the objet a represents is a necessary element of the normal insertion of a subject into the symbolic order. The objet a must keep its distance in order to fulfill its role as a lack. When it approaches too closely, it threatens the equilibrium of the symbolic order and triggers anxiety. As Joan Copjec writes: “Rather than an object or its lack, anxiety signals a lack of lack, a failure of the symbolic reality wherein all alienable objects, objects which can be given or taken away, lost and re-found, are constituted and circulate. Somewhat perversely, however, Lacan does refer to this encounter with a ‘lack of lack’ as an encounter with an object: object small a” (26-7).

Mladen Dolar makes the same connection between the approach of the objet a and the loss of coherence of the symbolic order: “What one loses with anxiety is precisely the loss – the loss that made it possible to deal with a coherent reality. ‘Anxiety is the lack of the support of the lack,’ says Lacan; the lack lacks, and this brings about the uncanny” (13).

The real does pose a threat to the symbolic, and therefore to the subject, in the form of the objet a's too-close proximity. The symbolic is not without its defences, however. According to Copjec, the symbolic sets itself up as a "rampart against the real" (28). In order to do this, however, it must evict the real: it must declare the real's impossibility. The paradox of this requirement is obvious. How can the symbolic "include the negation of what it is not" (28)? The real takes place within the symbolic through repetition, "through the signifier's repeated attempt - and failure - to designate itself. The signifier's difference from itself, its radical inability to signify itself, causes it to turn in circles around the real that is lacking in it" (28). Thus, the real is included in the symbolic through circumscription rather than designation.
It is important to note at this point that positing the object of the fantastic narrative as the real or the objet a does not mean that there is a direct equation between the real and, say, vampires, ghosts, or spider women. These creatures, though representative of the real in their resistance to direct apprehension, are, in fact, symbolized while the real cannot be symbolized. What they represent is a problematization of the boundary between subject and object, self and other, which makes the symbolic order possible. They destabilize the difference between self and other by revealing too much of the objet a, by locating it within as well as without. As Ken Gelder puts it, "[t]he fantastic in fact draws Self and Other together, showing the boundaries between them to be fragile and easily traversed. In the fantastic, the Self is thus ontologically destabilized by an Other which, far from being different, turns out instead to be disconcertingly familiar" (43). In this case, the familiar is what is threatening the symbolic order. Fantastic phenomena represent the failure of those boundaries which function in language to shield us from the real. They exemplify the breakdown between self and other, a boundary which is necessary if one wishes to maintain one’s sense of oneself as a subject in the symbolic order. Or, in Slavoj Žižek's words, "we encounter the object where the word fails" (Metastases 178). This is why Dolar can say that psychoanalysis maintains the uncanny as a limit to interpretation: “[I]ts interpretation tries to circumscribe the point where interpretation fails, where no 'more faithful' translation can be made....In other words, psychoanalysis differs from other interpretations [of the uncanny] by its insistence on the formal level of the uncanny rather than on its content” (19-20). The question is not "What do these creatures represent?" but "How do these creatures make our apprehension of them problematic, and
how does this problematized apprehension threaten the boundaries which create our
security in the symbolic order?” This question is complex and can be approached from
many directions. What is clear is that the point at which these boundaries are broached is
the point at which one is suspended between self and other, or between subject and
object, bouncing back and forth between opposite poles in order to both be and know that
one is. This is a game in which much is at stake.

To illustrate some of the ways the uncanny or fantastic breaks down the
boundaries between self and other, I will look at Ewers’s "Die Spinne" in the context of
three key Lacanian concepts: transference, the gaze, and the vel of alienation, or the
lethal factor. What will become clear quite early on is the extent to which these concepts
overlap. For example, all three illustrate very similar things about the relationship of the
objet a to the uncanny.

A brief summary of the story is as follows. A particular hotel room is the site of a
series of inexplicable suicides. Each victim is found to have hanged himself from a rope
attached to a curtain hook. What is peculiar is that none of the victims showed suicidal
tendencies prior to staying in the room, and the hook is low enough that the victims’ feet
could actually touch the floor – in other words, hanging took an act of great will. To re-
establish the hotel’s good reputation, a young man named Braquemont is hired by the
police to stay in the room and monitor anything suspicious in hopes of either solving the
mystery or disproving the room’s influence over the victims. His real motivation, as a
hungry student, is the free room and board. He keeps a diary (a narrative strategy used
often in fantastic texts) in which he recounts the bizarre relationship he develops with the
woman who lives across the alley. He imagines her more than sees her, yet he and
Clarimonde (his name for her) become engaged in a bizarre game of copying each other’s movements. He becomes obsessed with developing more and more complex moves, until one day he realizes that he only thought he was developing the moves; in fact, Clarimonde was leading. He thought he was playing, but he was being played. He realizes that he is helpless to stop mimicking her every move and that she will eventually lead him through the moves of hanging himself from the curtain hook. He imagines her as a beautiful woman spinning, but we have every clue that she is really a spider. He imagines she is across the alley, but we slowly realize that she is inside of him. The reader’s awareness that the interpretive game of the text is also casting a spell makes the story just that much more chilling. While Clarimonde makes literal Gadamer’s assertion that the “game is what holds the player in its spell, draws him into play, and keeps him there” (90), Lacan’s notion of transference describes both Clarimonde’s control of poor Braquemont as well as the text’s spell over the reader.

In his discussion of transference, Lacan says that he describes it in terms of analysis only as a way “of introducing the universality of the concept” (125). Since that claim to universality, numerous critics have applied transference to the relationship between text and reader. Most often, the reader is placed in the position of analyst and the text in the role of the analysand. In Using Lacan, Reading Fiction, James Mellard describes Peter Brooks's argument for seeing transference in a much more complex relationship of reader and text. Brooks suggests that the relationship goes both ways: "as the reader works on the text, it does 'rephrase' his perceptions" because of the effect of the hermeneutic circle (42). To put it another way, if, in an attempt to find out what a story is "really about," the reader turns to a closer reading of the text, does this not make
the text the subject that is supposed to know? This reversal of the usual casting of analyst
and analysand is particularly pertinent to fantastic texts because the question of what
"really" happened, or what the text "knows" but is keeping from the reader, is central to
the fantastic genre.

The notion that both play and the fantastic require a certain attitude of the
player/reader assumes a particular kind of relationship with the text. Taking Todorov’s
requirements, for example, the reader should identify with the protagonist and, therefore,
also feel hesitation. Also, the reader must not approach the text as allegorical or poetic.
Both requirements concern the reader's relationship to the text, and both are answers to
the reader's question of the text, a question which Lacan posits as central to transference:
che vuoi ("what do you want")? In this way, transference is a prerequisite of the fantastic
effect. The reader must desire the text's desire, which is that it be read in a certain way.
Transference also accounts for the primary requirement of hesitation within the text at the
level of the characters. While, in some cases, the protagonist's repulsion appears to be the
opposite of desire, the intrusion of an impossibility almost always triggers a desire to
know. In extreme cases, fear itself creates its own special kind of desire. This is certainly
the case in "Die Spinne," once the spider's effect on Braquemont becomes extreme. His
desire to stay away from the window illustrates perfectly Lacan's assertion that "… not to
want to desire and to desire are the same thing …. Not wanting to desire is wanting not to
desire" (235). In this way, Braquemont is truly caught in the spider's web by the
transference resulting from his desire. If he unsticks himself from the desire for
Clarimonde which draws him to the window, he becomes stuck in the desire not to desire,
which petrifies him and prevents him from leaving. Both manifestations of his desire
create the inertia which drives the transference. The more he fears her, the stronger the transference. Struggling just pulls the web tighter. So it is clear that the protagonist undergoes transference in the face of an intrusion of the impossible and the reader mirrors this transference in his or her relationship to the text (wanting to know what happens, or, if the story is ghastly enough, wanting not to want to know). But how is this transference related to hesitation or the suspension between possibility and impossibility?

In his description of the processes between subject and Other which function in transference, Lacan describes them as circular but not reciprocal. They cannot be reciprocal because the sign is always ambiguous – "it represents something for someone." Thus, "a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier" (207). The subject emerges in the field of the Other (the Other representing both language and another person) only at the cost of fading from the unconscious. Lacan calls this the closing or departure of the unconscious. The language that he uses to describe this process is especially significant for the recasting of the notion of being suspended between opposites. He describes the subject as petrified: “The signifier, producing itself in the field of the Other, makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it functions as a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as subject” (209).

This petrifaction is only a moment in the normal circular processes that constitute the relationship of subject and Other. What would happen, however, if this Other, in the function of another "person," were to occupy the place of the real as fantastic creatures do? The Other could no longer function simultaneously as Other person and symbolic
order. It would have to be both Other-as-person and something circumscribed by Other-as-language. How could the subject emerge in such a field? The circular process breaks down and the subject’s repeated attempts to emerge resemble a back-and-forth movement, somewhat like a cat’s repeated attempts to catch a play of light. The symbolization which attends fantastic creatures is always manifestly provisional. Braquemont knows Clarimonde is a name of his own invention. These creatures illustrate perfectly how there is no Other of the Other. It is no coincidence that Žižek describes the absence of any guarantee of the validity of the symbolic order as an "uncanny fact" (Indivisible 136). These creatures destabilize the symbolic order by emphasizing its gaps and inadequacies and, above all, its provisionality. A subject emerging is such a field must first constitute the Other, even provisionally, before the circular processes can resume. However, since the Other in transference normally functions as "the guarantee of the meaning-to-come" (Indivisible 144), the subject's awareness of his or her own role in the constitution negates this guarantee. Braquemont, encountering a spider woman, knowingly naming her Clarimonde, and giving her qualities of delicacy and femininity against his own judgement of his knowledge, has much in common with the analysand, aware of his or her ability to deceive the analyst. This awareness of one's own contribution to the Other as guarantor of meaning destroys the validity of that meaning. The result is hesitation, an inability to trust oneself or the Other. Not surprisingly, in the intrusion of the fantastic, as in analysis, this is usually only an initial phase (Lacan Four Fundamental Concepts 233). Once overcome, transference can proceed.

In the fantastic, the desire that drives the transference, for both reader and protagonist, is often the desire to validate the signifier that has been posited at the place
of the intrusion of the real. That is, both want to know if the creature really is, for example, a vampire or merely an illusion. More often than not, in satisfying fantastic texts, the reader finds that his or her desire to satisfy the text by playing its game "correctly" is thwarted. It has to be, because desire for and the absence of validated meaning are the essence of the fantastic effect. This is how transference creates the fantastic effect. The essential point is that the fantastic, which is one form of the intrusion of the real, only functions as long as it is not given meaning. It evaporates once it is explained. As Dolar notes, fantastic hesitation or uncertainty coincides with the view "that the real can never be dealt with directly, that it emerges only in an oblique perspective, and that the attempt to grasp it directly makes it vanish" (21). This is why it must be approached indirectly through the temporal pulsation which is the opening and closing of the unconscious in transference, a temporal pulsation which is isomorphous with Ehrmann’s casting of play as articulation, “opening and closing of and through language” (56).

The role of the objet a in the desire which drives transference is clear: “A lack is encountered by the subject in the Other, in the very intimation that the Other makes to him by his discourse. ...[T]o reply to this hold, the subject ... brings the answer of the previous lack, of his own disappearance.... One lack is superimposed upon the other.... It is a lack engendered from the previous time that serves to reply to the lack raised by the following time” (Lacan 214-5). In other words, the objet a answers the desire without fulfilling it. It simply engenders more lack. It does this because it is both pure lack and the imaginary object which fills the lack: "The point, of course, is that there is no lack without the element filling it out… the filler sustains what it dissimulates" (Žižek,
Indivisible 178). The fantastic object is uncanny precisely because it makes this paradox manifest. By resisting symbolization, by simply being without a valid signifier, the fantastic object flaunts its "lack-ness." It does not permit the imaginary filler to sustain its illusion. Braquemont loves Clarimonde, his imaginary objet a, but is terrified by the lack which she fills. Thus, he can claim his fear is of something else, but he cannot name it:

Wieder die Angst, wieder! Ich weiß, ich werde sie ansehen, werde aufstehen, werde mir erhängen: nicht davor fürchte ich mich.... Aber etwas, irgend etwas anderes ist noch da - was hernach kommt. Ich weiß nicht, was es sein wird – aber es kommt.... (203)

(Again the fear, again! I know that I will look at her, will stand up, and will hang myself. That’s not what I’m afraid of…. But there is something, somehow something that is still there – that is coming here. I don’t know what it will be – but it’s coming….)

Not surprisingly, he turns to the symbolic order for help. He knows his only salvation is to write something, "irgend etwas, gleichgültig was ... nur nicht besinnen" ("something, anything …just don’t think about it"; 204). That the fantastic objet a allows its "lack-ness" to show through is not its only horrific feature. As has been noted, the fantastic breaks down the barrier between subject and Other. Žižek provides the key to how this is accomplished by the objet a. He reminds us that the objet a is "radically intersubjective": "objet a is something in me more than myself that the other sees in me" (Metastases 179.,). This inevitably brings us to the gaze.

"The eye and the gaze - this is for us the split in which the drive is manifested at the level of the scopic field" (Lacan 73). In other words, the gaze is a means by which the
subject emerges in the field of the Other. Or, even more simply, "[t]he objet a in the field of the visible is the gaze" (Lacan 105). This is a recasting of an earlier statement that "[t]he gaze may contain in itself the objet a” (76). The point is that the objet a and the gaze can coincide in function and effect. Both are a lack and what fills it, real and imaginary. This is why the gaze qua imaginary filler can function in fantastic texts to impel the protagonist and reader to desire while the gaze qua the real creates the horror of the void. This ambiguous condition of the gaze, its real and imaginary status, is often indicated in fantastic texts by problems of perception, by visual ambiguities. Dracula, for example, can only be apprehended directly. Mirrors and cameras cannot capture his image. The Horla, the monster of Maupassant's creation, is just the opposite. It can only be seen as a form blocking other reflections in a mirror. In “Die Spinne,” Clarimonde's visibility changes with the intensity of the transference. Her image is satisfying to Braquemont when it is veiled and unclear. The role of imagination in this image is clear. Braquemont begins his description with: "Wie sie aussicht – Ja, das weiß ich nicht recht" (“What she looks like – that I don’t really know”; 188). He then gives a description of impossible detail, including the sharpness of her teeth, but finishes with, "Doch fühle ich das alles viel mehr, als ich es wirklich weiß" (“I feel all of this more than I truly know it”; 189). Braquemont's ability to speak of love at this point illustrates Lacan's description of scopic satisfaction: “[W]hat specifies the scopic field and engenders the satisfaction proper to it is the fact that, for structural reasons, the fall of the subject always remains unperceived, for it is reduced to zero. In so far as the gaze, qua objet a, may come to symbolize this lack.... [I]t leaves the subject in ignorance as to what there is beyond the appearance” (76-7).
Thus, by symbolizing the lack, by filling the lack with an imaginary object, the objet a or gaze prevents the subject from becoming aware of the lack. As has been argued above, the problem with fantastic creatures is that they do not permit the imaginary filler to completely hide the lack. Visual impossibilities – invisibility, no reflection, or, in this case, the inexplicable knowledge of visual information – all problematize the boundary between subject and Other which keeps the gaze outside. Visual data which has not been given sense by the symbolic order underscores the fact that there is no Other of the Other. There is no guarantee of meaning. The subject's faith in the Other as the guarantor of meaning-to-come collapses and the subject is faced with meaninglessness. The result, of course, is anxiety. The object as lack is revealing itself, approaching the subject. Dolar describes this process in terms of another visual impossibility: “[I]n the mirror one can see one's eyes, but not the gaze which is the part that is lost. But imagine that one could see one's mirror image close its eyes: that would make the object as gaze appear in the mirror. This is what happens with the double, and the anxiety that the double produces is the surest sign of the appearance of the object” (13).

Copjec makes the dissolution of the boundary between self and Other even clearer when she describes the approach of the objet a as the approach of the extimate, the negation of our non-selves which we carry within us:

Normally, when we are at some remove from it, the extimate object a appears as a lost part of ourselves whose absence prevents us from becoming whole; it is then that it functions as the object-cause of our desire. But when our distance from it is reduced, it no longer appears as a
partial object, but – on the contrary – as a complete body, an almost exact
double of our own, except for the fact that this double is endowed with the
object which we sacrificed in order to become subjects (35).

Both theorists explain the over-proximity of the gaze in terms of the double. The double
serves as an excellent vehicle for the gaze because the gaze *qua* *objet a* is estimate. It is
recognizable as part of oneself when it is seen as part of another self which is oneself.

This is the significance of the game Clarimonde and Braquemont play. Clarimonde is the
object-cause of his desire prior to the game, but she becomes his double through the
doubling of his actions during the game. This triggers his anxiety. The "lack-ness" of the
*objet a* shows through as it approaches him via his double. The anxiety starts shortly after
Clarimonde returns his gaze. The significance of her gaze is that it is a reflection of his
own. They make the same move: "Sie beobachtete mich – und ich sie"("She observed
me – and I her"; 189). Interestingly, in this first mutual action, Braquemont considers her
observation to be first. This perception disappears completely until his horrific discovery
that she has been leading all along. In the meantime, after this initial encounter, he
considers her movements to be reflections of his own. As she mirrors him, her visibility
increases. After he nods at her the first time, he observes: "ich habe es wohl gesehen, wie
sie genickt hat" ("I saw it, how she nodded back at me"; 189). One of their next mutual
actions is to pull back the curtains (190). At the same time, his anxiety appears in the
form of restless sleep (189). As the game progresses, so does his fear. Simultaneously,
his scopic satisfaction begins to wane. He even wonders why he does not just cross the
street to see Clarimonde, but decides that he just cannot imagine it. Behind
the appearance of Clarimonde, he can picture absolutely nothing – “Nur dieses schwarze
undurchdringliche Dunkel" (“Only this black, impenetrable darkness”; 194). The exactness with which he sees Clarimonde as they play their detailed game of rapid and subtle moves increases proportionately as the double becomes ever closer and more powerful. Is the objet a qua imaginary filler intensifying to keep him subdued while the double approaches bearing the objet a qua lack? This would explain the increasing intensity of both his love and fear as well as his ability to name the object-cause of his love but not of his fear. It also explains his horror and acceptance of his own death once he understands the game. The illusion of agency makes the game fun. Once he realizes that she controls him – not just that, but that she controls him from within – the result must be his destruction. Like the reader/player of the text, he both plays and is played. The game has mastered him just as the text has mastered the reader who cannot put it down. The implications for the reader/player will become clearer when one considers Lacan’s vel or lethal factor. For Braquemont, it is sufficient to note that the extimate object has rejoined his being. The not-him is no longer negated within him. Thus, he can no longer constitute himself through separation from what is not himself. It is only appropriate that the spider is found inside him after his death. In fact, the police find no evidence that she was ever anywhere else. What Lacan finds "profoundly unsatisfying" about the look of love is that "[y]ou never look at me from the place from which I see you" (103). Clarimonde and Braquemont demonstrate that the alternative is worse. She does see him from the place from which he sees her. The result is profoundly terrifying.

One final thing to note about the role of vision in the fantastic relates to Žižek's astute observation that the gaze is not necessarily a gaze of power, as some feminist critics have argued. Žižek takes a lesson from Hitchcock and finds that "the gaze does
connote power, yet simultaneously, and at a more fundamental level, it connotes the very opposite of power – impotence – in so far as it involves the position of an immobilized witness who cannot but observe what goes on " (Metastases 73). He then argues that this is a crucial aspect of the experience of the Sublime, "when we find ourselves in the face of some horrifying event whose comprehension exceeds our capacity of representation" (74). Impotence as the inability to comprehend what one cannot but observe – this too is the essence of the uncertainty one finds in the fantastic. As has been argued, in terms of transference, this hesitation can be viewed as the subject's inability to emerge in the field of the Other when the Other itself eludes representation. Both views are valid. In fact, there is a third way of explaining this hesitation that is already suggested by Žižek's notion of impotence as a component of the Sublime experience. The power that is lacking is the power to give sense to what is observed. For this reason, the protagonist's hesitation in fantastic texts is not always a failure to act. The three texts which have been mentioned as cases of problematized vision have another quality in common: they are all at least partially composed of diary entries. They can therefore illustrate how the appearance of the supernatural halts narration. The hesitation takes the form of a failure to tell. For example, whenever Jonathan Harker of Dracula turns in his journal to the Count himself, his writing is cut off or filled with ellipses: “I have only the count to speak with, and he!" (25). The same thing occurs in “Le Horla”: "Il est venu, le... le... comment se nomme-t-il... le..."(“It’s here, the... the... what shall I call it... the...”); 50). In "Die Spinne,” something similar occurs. There is no journal entry for the Friday after the game commences even though, since the suicides always occur on Fridays, this is the most important day of the week (190). Once the game is under way, three consecutive days
have the cursory entry "Den ganzen Tag haben wir gespielt" ("We played all day"; 198). Ronald Schleifer describes these silences as "those charged moments when appearances are breached and the narrative halted" (302). Or, in a play on words, he describes the moment as one of "'unspeakable' apprehension" (307). The presence of the real, because it resists symbolization, always triggers a crisis of meaning – not just its own meaning but all meaning. The objet a qua lack is what allows the symbolic order to function at all. Thus, the hesitation triggered by the presence of the objet a can be described in terms of Lacan's vel of alienation. The vel is Lacan’s description of the very kind of back-and-forth movement which constitutes play, and this is why the seriousness of play had to be established. The binary opposites between which one is suspended in the vel are meaning and being, a serious kind of play indeed.

Lacan describes the vel, or lethal factor, as "a choice whose properties depend on this, that there is, in the joining, one element that, whatever the choice operating may be, has as its consequence a neither one, nor the other" (211). In terms of being and meaning, this element in the joining is non-meaning. Thus, a subject who chooses being falls into non-meaning. A subject who chooses meaning survives but without the part of non-meaning which is the unconscious. This is a normal part of the circular process which constitutes the relationship of the subject to the Other. As the subject emerges in the field of the Other, in meaning, it fades from the unconscious. This aphanisis is part of the temporal pulsation which Lacan describes as the opening and closing of the unconscious. As long as this pulsation continues, the circular process continues. The subject fades and emerges. The vel of meaning and being as it is played out in a fantastic text creates a crisis because it does not permit a circular process. It is linear. The choice is
a once and for all decision in which the protagonist is damned either way—thus the hesitation, the to-and-fro movement which strives to remain uncommitted to either choice. The question surrounding the fantastic intruder is: "Is this creature explicable, can it be symbolized, or is the symbolic order inadequate?" If the creature simply is, but is inexplicable, the symbolic order is inadequate and the protagonist (and the reader who is deferring judgement of meaning) temporarily falls into non-meaning. If the creature is explained away as an illusion or a dream, meaning prevails, but the gap where the real is hiding in the guise of its imaginary filler (i.e., a vampire or spider woman) is sacrificed to maintain that meaning. The unconscious loses its support. In most fantastic stories, this hesitation between meaning and being gives way and the intrusion is either explained away or it undergoes a gradual symbolization. Vampires, for example, have been symbolized to the point that it is almost impossible to write an uncanny vampire story now. (This explains the disappointed reaction I received when I explained to a colleague my theory that the hybrid aliens of The X-Files are a rewriting of the plot of Dracula: "You mean they're just vampires?") In "Die Spinne," this hesitation between meaning and being does not give way. Instead, it becomes thematized. The two major activities of Braquemont represent his choices: the game represents being, while the diary represents meaning. As in many fantastic stories, the victim's own flaws foreshadow the nature of his own demise. In Braquemont's case, his appreciation for meaning is never very strong. He is aware from the start that his words have no correlation with reality. He is proud that he got the position because he was the only one to present the police with an idea: "Eine nette Idee! Natürlich war es ein Bluff" ("A nice idea! Naturally, it was just a bluff"; 183). He chats with Frau Dubonnet, not because her ideas might have any link with what
happened, but because she entertains him (186). He prefers the meaningless gestures of
the game to his books, to his diary, or even to a conversation with Clarimonde. When he
imagines Clarimonde chatting, he has to laugh "so unmöglich erscheint [ihm] das Bild"
("so unlikely does that prospect appear to him"; 194). He quickly loses control of his own
words. As he lies to the police, he convinces himself: "... ich durchaus überzeugt war, daß
ich die Wahrheit sage. Und daß ich es jetzt noch fast so fühle – entgegen meinem
besseren Wissen" ("I was so convinced that I was telling the truth. And I still almost
believe it – against my better judgement"; 197). His diary also escapes him: "Hm, dies
Tagebuch ist wirklich ganz anders geworden, als ich es mir vorstellte. ...Kann ich dafür?"
("Hm, this diary has become something different from what I imagined. ...Can I help
it?"; 193). Braquemont gets caught up in being without meaning. He slips into
non-meaning. His last attempt to save himself from meaninglessness is doomed. He turns
to his diary to defend himself from the real. As Copjec argues, this is the function of the
symbolic – to build a barrier against the real. However, Braquemont's last-minute
attempt to choose meaning is ineffectual because he chooses manifestly arbitrary rather
than meaningful signifiers as his sanctuary. The diary becomes a version of the game as
he scribbles his name, the most arbitrary signifier in language, over and over. He writes
just as he plays the game: "Nur schnell, nur nicht besinnen" ("Only quickly, only without
thinking"; 204).

It is appropriate that Braquemont phrases his descent into meaninglessness in
terms of his love for Clarimonde – especially the kind of distant adoration which
excludes any idea of contact. This is courtly love. Clarimonde's lack of specific character
traits, her idealization by Braquemont, the arbitrariness of her demands on him via the
game – these all are traits of the Lady of courtly love. Žižek agrees with Lacan's observation that such a Lady is a terrifying, inhuman partner: “This coincidence of absolute, inscrutable Otherness and pure machine is what confers on the Lady her uncanny, monstrous character.... This traumatic Otherness is what Lacan designates by means of the Freudian das Ding, the Thing – the Real that 'always returns to its place', the hard kernel that resists symbolization” (Metastases 90). More concisely, she is "an apathetic void imposing senseless, arbitrary ordeals" (102). Normally such an Object is created by circumscription, detours, deferral, or even what Žižek calls temporal anamorphosis: "the Object is attainable only by way of an incessant postponement, as its absent point of reference" (95). However, as Braquemont points out, this is different than the love described in books. He has not elevated Clarimonde to the position of the Object by creating obstacles. She occupies that position without his co-operation. He does not even suppose that he wants to sleep with her – the "official" desire of courtly love. He only wants to serve her: "Ich bin da, um zu tun, was sie will, Clarimonde, die ich liebe in kostlichster Angst" (“I am there to do what she wants, Clarimonde, whom I love in exquisite fear”; 201). This illustrates perfectly Lacan's choice of the master and slave as "the two most obvious supports" to justify the term vel of alienation (219). The vel of freedom and life results in the same form of alienation as the vel of meaning and being. If one chooses either, one loses both. This lethal factor, the choice between freedom and death, becomes even more pertinent when one considers Lacan's assertion that "what the subject has to free himself of is the aphanisic effect" (219). Consider also that "there is an emergence of the subject at the level of meaning only from its aphanisis in the Other locus" (221). Freedom from aphanisis therefore must mean freedom from subjectivity,
from being captivated by/captive to the symbolic order. This is why Žižek can say that "we never are free, it is only afterwards that we discover how we have been free" (Looking Awry 222). Freedom is symbolically constituted after the act. During this symbolic constitution, the subject is not free because, according to Lacan, the subject is petrified, unable to act, when it is a subject, i.e., reduced to a signifier (207). Thus, these are the options: be free or know that you have been free. This is reminiscent of Gadamer’s assertion that the player cannot know the nature of play while playing (92). During play, one can only experience. It is after the game that one can describe it. Braquemont's struggle to cease playing can be expressed in precisely these terms: when he knows he is free, he loses his freedom. When Clarimonde, the imaginary object filling the void, disappears for a moment, Braquemont sees the void. With the objet a as the object-cause of his desire gone, he is free. Once he realizes this, he is no longer able to act: "Dann wußte ich: wenn ich jetzt hinausgehe, bin ich gerettet, und ich empfand wohl, ich konnte jetzt gehen. Trotzdem ging ich nicht" (“Then I understood that if I were to leave, I would be saved, and I discovered that I could still leave. All the same, I didn’t go”; 200). Clarimonde, like the master of Lacan's vel, gives Braquemont the choice: your freedom or your life. If he leaves, he loses jouissance. If he stays, he loses his life. He stays because the only freedom he has is to choose death (Lacan 213). Thus, Braquemont goes back to the window, back to the Other, the gaze, the objet a. He follows his desire. As Lacan states, the way of desire is the only way out of the vel of alienation (218). Because for Braquemont this vel is not part of a circular process but is linear in nature, the way out is literally lethal. Braquemont can only await the inevitable collapse of meaning. He is as likely to resist his desire as the reader is likely to stop reading before
the end, to resist the desire to know. Both are caught in the vel of meaning and being. If
the text provides too much meaning, explains the uncanny away, the reader's object-cause
of desire disappears and so does the subject constituted as the reader of this text. If the
text resists meaning, if it, like Clarimonde, simply is, the reader is captured/captivated by
the lack in the text. Meaning is eluded but the subject constituted as the reader of this
text is unable to withdraw from the objet a in the text. Both the reader and the protagonist
experience the uncanny effect because the vel posits the notions of life without meaning
or freedom without the symbolic means to apprehend it. Though she does not draw upon
the notion of the vel, Copjec is referring to exactly this kind of unbearable option when
she describes the uncanny as the anxiety produced by "pure existence without sense"
(40).

Normally, "the price we have to pay for access to meaning is the exclusion of
existence" – “the impossible-real kernel resisting symbolization” (Žižek, Looking Awry
137,136). The uncanny reverses that observation by emphasizing that the price we have
to pay for access to the real is the exclusion of meaning. The choice that the protagonist
and the reader share is whether to accept or reject the real’s intrusion. We are drawn
repeatedly to this vel by transference, by the need to experience the opening and closing
of the unconscious. For the protagonist, the results are more dire, but, as subjects
encountering both the language of the text as well as its gaps, readers are able to
experience the limits of meaning repeatedly in the circular relationship between subject
and Other. In that circle, there is a point when meaning is eluded. In Žižek’s words,
“[m]eaning stumbles upon its boundary and suspends itself in Enjoy-Meant” (Indivisible
75). Our enjoyment of the text resides in the fact that, like poor Braquemont, we are all
left hanging.

“Die Spinne,” a fantastic game/text about a fantastic game, illustrates nicely, via Clarimonde and Braquemont, how the to-and-fro movement between text and reader can function. It also illustrates the back-and-forth movement of uncertainty. As a classic fantastic text, it uses the text’s language and story events to build up uncertainty, just as Brown describes, through the language of excess and lack, obsession and misperception. What happens, though, when a postmodern fantastic text brings game-playing to even more discursive levels? The following chapter looks at three vampire films of the 1990s and how they use a variety of strategies to keep the to-and-fro movement in play.
The interaction of the fantastic and the postmodern elicits the same kind of back-and-forth movement that motivates the progress of any truly fantastic text. Various pitfalls can attend this interaction, however. Both the fantastic and postmodern modes are resistant to definition, as we have seen, which makes it tempting to ascribe fantastic aesthetic effects to postmodern strategies and vice versa. As for the fantastic, requirements for this narrative mode have included a supernatural intrusion into normative reality (Vax, Caillois), an elicited state of uncertainty or hesitation in the face of an impossibility (Todorov), and the evocation of a liminal or paraxial position alongside the real that is neither real nor unreal (Jackson, Bessière). It has even been suggested that the mode's resistance to definition is a demonstration of its subversive power: it represents the subversion of all categories, a problematization of the objective apprehension of experience (Jackson 176). Or even consider my own definition from Chapter One:

In response to a philosophical climate in which the individual is aware of the need to rely on his or her own interpretation of experience in order to form a reality, there arises a narrative mode in which the reader is forced, through the presence of ambiguously used motifs and conventions and through an identification with a character also undergoing an ambiguous experience of the apparently impossible, to hesitate between possible and impossible interpretations of a story event or events.
Indeed, regardless of specific definitions, most theorists would agree that this questioning of our apprehension of our world – of such notions as objectivity and reality – is at the center of the fantastic's power to fascinate. Such a general definition is certainly useful as a way of differentiating nineteenth-century fantastic literature from the realism of the modern novel. However, as a way of discerning fantastic qualities in postmodern narrative, its shortcomings are readily apparent.

Like the fantastic, postmodern narrative is concerned with problems of objectivity. It, too, problematizes the notion of reality. It, too, is resistant to definition – possibly for the same subversive reasons. While the fantastic introduces the impossible as a means of destabilizing our notions of normative reality, postmodern narrative can be typified as a discourse which destabilizes by foregrounding the limitations of coded discourse. Postmodernism’s use of such strategies as reconfiguration, parody, and reflexivity draws attention to the constructedness of discourse. The relationship between sign and referent is undermined as words and images are reworked in new and sometimes contradictory contexts. Whether one criticizes this technique as pastiche (Jameson), mourns the loss of truth in the non-distinction of the simulacrum (Baudrillard), or recognizes the transformative potential of parody (Hutcheon), it is undeniable that postmodern discourse is very much about a reflexive recontextualizing of words and images. This attention to context has provided a means of rethinking issues such as the notion of a coherent and essential subject, the relationship between dominant and marginal discourses, and the representation of the repressed or absent in our culture.

Because the fantastic is also concerned with the marginal, the repressed, and the fragmented subject, this recontextualizing aspect of postmodern discourse would seem to
work to the advantage of the fantastic mode. However, this is often not the case. While it might be an oversimplification to say that the fantastic problematizes the objective apprehension of reality, while the postmodern problematizes the objective representation of reality, this distinction does indicate an essential difference. The traditional fantastic mode downplays its discursive nature in order to diminish the distinction between the book or film and real life. This is why, depending on one's sleep requirements, a good ghost story either should or definitely should not be read alone at night. Reflexive postmodern narrative, on the other hand, is about representation. It plays up its discursive nature. It foregrounds the issues of power and politics inherent in discourse. The implications for the fantastic effect can be dire. After all, does one really expect an ironically recontextualized vampire with a feminist political agenda to still leave bite marks? Unfortunately, the answer is often “no,” but it is not always “no.”

Conventional wisdom has always deemed parody to be fatal to the traditional fantastic text. This is because the fantastic relies on an emotional, or at least visceral, involvement, while parody has an intellectually distancing effect. Yet, parody is precisely what is entailed in this postmodern process of recontextualization (Hutcheon, Parody 15). So how is it that parody and the fantastic do often exist side by side in the same postmodern text? One answer is that they both thrive on contradiction. Fantastic uncertainty derives from the textual indications that something both is and is not true. For example, there is every reason to believe that James's governess in The Turn of the Screw is hysterical. There is also every reason to believe that she is haunted by ghosts. Parody, meanwhile, can be simultaneously complicit and transgressive in relation to a dominant discourse (Hutcheon 74). It can be both conservative and revolutionary (97). Since both
modes keep the reader or viewer oscillating between contradictory interpretations anyway, it is not too difficult to see how this effect could be extended to a continuous and rapid alternation between fantastic and parodic modes of reception, much like the back-and-forth movement which allows a tightrope walker to remain balanced. Such an alternation could serve both modes since both thrive on the synthesis of contradictory reactions. This kind of alternation is also exactly what constitutes game-playing. What is required to keep this bouncing to-and-fro of the reader/player in motion is the introduction of another element to destabilize the destabilizers, so to speak – something which would not allow either the fantastic or parodic element to take over completely and thereby keep the movement in play. Enter Camp.

While Camp is not the only means of successfully wedding parody to the fantastic, its effectiveness has made it a popular ingredient in many fantastic films. One reason for this may be Camp’s intellectual treatment of the texts that it parodies, a treatment which does not in any way pre-empt an emotional response. Camp draws together intellectual and visceral reactions to texts in a manner which suggests a potentially successful marriage of intellectual postmodernism and the more visceral fantastic. I intend to return to this notion as an aspect of Camp’s double-voicing. A second reason for Camp’s popularity in postmodern fantastic films is that the numerous ways in which it overlaps with both parody and the fantastic allow it to blend in naturally. While some theorists see Camp as a subspecies of parody (Meyer 10-11; Kleinhans 199; Morrill 110), others see it as a mode of discourse which, like the fantastic, allows the marginal and absent to emerge in dominant discourse (Ross 139; Case 9). One general definition of Camp which allows for both approaches and provides a good starting point
for this discussion of Camp is David Bergman's summary of the areas of agreement among Camp theorists. Camp favors "exaggeration, artifice, and extremity." It "exists in tension with popular culture" but "outside the cultural mainstream" and is "affiliated with homosexual culture" (4-5). In order to maintain the elements of exaggeration, extremity, and homosexual affiliation in the notion of Camp, I have decided to treat Camp as a separate category from parody, rather than a subspecies, though the overlap between the two categories is considerable. To understand how Camp interacts with both parody and the fantastic, it is useful to look at four different areas where the theoretical debates surrounding these three modes overlap significantly. First is the question of where Camp/the fantastic effect/parodic meaning inheres. Is it in the authorial intent, the object/text, or the interpreter? Second is the issue of ideology. Is Camp/the fantastic/parody subversive, reifying, or apolitical? Third is the problem of representation. How does Camp/the fantastic/parody relate to the dominant discourse and to the world we live in? How is the marginal or absent represented? Finally, what effect does Camp/the fantastic/parody have on the notion of the subject? Obviously, this division is arbitrary since these issues are inextricable from one another. What I hope will become apparent is that the inter-relatedness and fine distinctions are precisely what allow the viewer of campy fantastic postmodern films to move about easily between modes of reception and become subsumed by the game, playing and being played without effort, as Gadamer would have it.

**Interpretation**

In her ground-breaking essay "Notes on ‘Camp,’" Susan Sontag introduced the
problem of where Camp resides by defining Camp as a sensibility – "a Camp vision, a
Camp way of looking at things" – and then adding that it is also "a quality discoverable in
objects and the behaviour of persons" (277). Thus, according to Sontag, Camp inheres in
the text and in the interpretation but not in the production of the text: "One doesn't need
to know the artist's private intentions. The work tells all" (282). Andrew Ross associates
Sontag's position with a privileging of the interpreter. Her preference for “naïve” Camp,
that which exists "in the eye of the beholder" (277), is particularly biased, according to
Ross, because with “naïve” Camp, "it is the critic and not the producer who takes full
credit for discerning the camp value of an object or text" (145). Mark Booth points out
another problem with Sontag's erasure of the producer of Camp. It ignores the
implications of an audience: "Because camp is predicated on an audience, it is a matter of
self-presentation more than of sensibility" (17). Moe Meyer observes that Sontag's
emphasis on the Camp object and the Camp sensibility is a natural result of her
downplaying of the homosexual aspect of Camp. By removing the producer from the
Camp equation, she deprives the queer producer of Camp of any agency: “The first move
in uncovering and revealing the queer is the removal of the objectivist bias from
interpretations of Camp.... This objectivist bias that reduces people to thinglike status is
used to label Camp as extreme aestheticization and therefore apolitical. The arguments
that defuse Camp ... are based, then, on a denial of agency” (12-13).

This ideological argument will be explored further at a later point. It is sufficient
here to note that, among queer theorists, there is a strong objection to any model of Camp
that denies the agency of the producer of Camp. Not surprisingly, many theorists who
would encourage a consideration of the whole énonciation of Camp have modeled their
theories of Camp on Hutcheon's theory of parody (Meyer 10-11; Kleinhans 199; Morrill 110), a theory which accounts equally for the reception and production, as well as the existence, of parody (Hutcheon 23).

In arguing for a re-evaluation of the role of the authorial position in texts, Hutcheon suggests that parody has played an important role in encouraging such a re-examination (86). I would suggest that the fantastic mode also encourages, even requires, a consideration of this authorial position. Even at the height of the structuralist focus on the text, Todorov, in his explicitly "structuralist approach," could not avoid the issues of reception and production. Of his three requirements, only one is purely textual – that the impossible intrude on normative reality. The second requirement – that this intrusion should trigger hesitation in the protagonist and the reader – is concerned with reception. The third – that the reader not interpret the text allegorically or poetically – is a matter of reception and production. The reader may not infer another intent on the part of the author other than the intent to tell an uncanny, unsettling, fantastic tale. Thus, Camp, postmodern parody, and the fantastic all foreground this relationship between the interpreter and producer of the text. The question one asks of these texts is never, "What do I understand from this?" but "How am I supposed to understand this?" As Hutcheon notes, Barthes's notion of intertextual play is not sufficient for understanding parody because the target of parody is a specific text, not other discourse in general (23). Just as a parody targets a specific text, the fantastic works against a background of specific fantastic texts. Vampires, for example, do not exist in reality. For this reason, vampire stories are always referring not to life but to other vampire stories, and it is against these previous texts that vampire stories are understood. Camp also refers specifically to prior
texts. Ross argues that Camp is the reinvestment of value in discarded cultural artifacts: "The camp effect, then, is created ... when the products of a much earlier mode of production, which has lost its power to dominate cultural meanings, become available in the present for redefinition according to contemporary codes of taste" (139). Meyer sees this redefinition as a way for the marginalized to enter dominant discourse by attaching meaning to "existing structures of signification" (10). Camp sets up new meanings by synthesizing an original text or cultural artifact and its recontextualized version. In other words, it works parodically. Camp is more complex than simple parody, however. The following textual comparison will demonstrate that Camp extends beyond parody’s intellectual synthesis of texts. What is significant to note at this point, however, is that parody, Camp, and the fantastic are all reworkings of previous texts. They all function bitextually (or multitextually), and this fact is one of the guiding principles in their interpretation. It is also why readers/viewers/players of these modes are kept bouncing between texts.

To demonstrate how these bitextual syntheses can work toward very different ends, one need only look at three examples of the vampire film. Ken Russell's *Lair of the White Worm* (1988) is a fun, over-the-top film, very loosely based on Bram Stoker's story of the same title. The threat is not actually a vampire but the priestess of a giant snake god. The victims are vampirized by bites to the neck which transform them into the snake’s minions, so Russell is able to use standard vampire fare to motivate the plot. The film refers to *Dracula* more than to Stoker’s lesser-known tale. The film's rare fantastic moments tend to be overshadowed by the Camp elements. Lady Marsh, the bisexual villainess (there is no question of degendering that word – she is, in fact, a
villainess-s-s-s), wanders around her palatial home in fabulous lingerie quoting Oscar Wilde. The result is a film about horror films which targets their methods of triggering audience reaction by using an overly stylized villainess, dramatic discordant music at moments which turn out to be mundane, and minor characters, like the butler, who behave in a sinister manner but turn out to be insignificant or completely benign. In short, the film revels in the exaggeration and extremity Bergman describes as the Camp style.

A second film is Abel Ferrara's The Addiction (1995). Unlike Russell's film, this is a serious attempt at eliciting the unsettling effect of the fantastic mode. Ferrara's characters are standard vampires – night creatures who feed on blood and shun the sun. There is no significant alteration of the vampire lore popularized by Bram Stoker. This film plays it straight. It is a fine film for many reasons, especially if one is a Lili Taylor or Christopher Walken fan. As an example of the fantastic, however, it is not very successful because it plays it too straight. The soundtrack does not draw attention to itself. The acting rarely signals its own status as performance as in Lair of the White Worm. This kind of downplaying of the discursive nature of the film should work for the fantastic mode, but it does not, in this case, because the subject matter is too standard. It cannot be interpreted as parody because it is repetition without any "critical distance" (Hutcheon 6). What is more, Ferrara cannot resist making moralizing statements about evil. His equation of Nazis and vampires takes him too close to the pitfall of allegory. The parallels with drug addiction push him over the edge. Significantly, the most unsettling scenes are those in which Christopher Walken plays an ancient vampire. His performance is marked as performance. He presents himself as a stylized being of his own creation. He understands the relationship between his self-presentation and the
influence of discourse. Attempting to teach the new vampire Kathleen about hunger, he asks her the ultimate vampire question: "Have you read *Naked Lunch*?" His performance is campy ... but chilling.

The third and most successful of the three films, in terms of eliciting fantastic hesitation, is Michael Almereyda's *Nadja* (1994). It is overtly parodic, referring to several different texts. The main character is based on the title character of a surrealist work by André Bréton. She has the same dramatic manner and style of dress. She spouts nonsensical but highly dramatic avowals such as: "My pain is the pain of fleeting joy."

While Bréton’s Nadja is taken seriously, Almereyda's Nadja is met with bafflement: “I'm not sure I know what that means….” This Nadja also has the Camp props that make her redefinition of the turn-of-the-century femme fatale quite amusing. Her monologues are performed under sparkle balls and accompanied by dance music. At one point, her minion Renfield accompanies her on a harp. She is not any more benign for being campy, however. Like Christopher Walken's vampire, this monster's stylized self-presentation can be chilling. Almereyda, like Ferrara, plays with Stoker's version of vampire lore, but Almereyda never plays it straight. He refers often to *Dracula*, even using character names from the novel, but the references are playful rather than evocative of the original horror. At one point, as Van Helsing and his crew arrive at Nadja's castle in Romania, the characters themselves are confused by their decision to carry a large boat through the Romanian countryside. They cannot explain it, but the viewer can: the trip was made by boat in the novel. Apart from the references to *Dracula* and *Nadja*, Almereyda also refers explicitly to the kinds of connections viewers usually try to ignore. He points out the irony of Peter Fonda's being cast as Van Helsing, defender of the cultural status quo. In
Nadja, the star of *Easy Rider* (1969) is never seen without his rickety, old bicycle and reflective safety gear. His performance is marked as performance and is as flamboyant and extreme as Elina Löwensohn's Nadja. The parody and Camp which infuse this film do not detract from its fantastic effect, however. The parody allows the viewer to activate his or her knowledge of vampire films in order to understand the plot. The Camp element, however, says: “This is a vampire with a difference, and you don't know what that difference will be.” The viewer remains uncertain.

Each of these films synthesizes its own version of the vampire story with elements of *Dracula*. One specific element that all three appropriate is the mirror scene. Stoker initiated the tradition that vampires cannot be seen in mirrors. Each film reacts to this tradition in a way which typifies its particular blend of parody, Camp, and the fantastic. *Lair of the White Worm*, which is predominantly Camp, explicitly ignores the tradition. After learning that he has been bitten and his antidote was ineffective, Angus stands in front of the mirror examining his face. His reflection appears as always. This is a film about the conventions of horror films, so the scene is included. It is not really about vampires, so he does not disappear. *The Addiction*, an attempt at the fantastic which does not reflexively examine the implications of its parodic borrowings, uses the mirror scene without any change to the tradition. After her first "fix," Kathleen covers every mirror in the house to hide the fact that her image has disappeared. The effect on the viewer is minimal because it is too obvious. In *Nadja*, the balance between the fantastic and parody is maintained by the campy treatment of this parodied element and by its inversion. After Lucy's first encounter with Nadja, Nadja simply inverts the tradition by appearing behind Lucy in the bathroom mirror even though she is not there.
The Camp treatment of the mirror motif occurs when Van Helsing is certain that Nadja should have shown up in a mirror in a photograph. He dramatically restages the scene by placing himself where Nadja was in the photo. The camera films him from the point where the photo was taken. It is obvious that he is confused by the physics of mirrors—the angle is wrong and he does not appear either. He also sidles up to vampires to see if they will show up in his reflective sunglasses, another campily redefined prop from Easy Rider. There is never any evidence that the mirror lore is relevant at all. The effect of this subversion of the mirror motif is precisely the kind of contradiction which fuels the fantastic effect. These are vampires, but they are not exactly vampires.

Because of my own bias toward the fantastic, these observations take the fantastic as a starting point which can be downplayed or intensified by Camp and parody. Other perspectives are equally valid. Both Nadja and The Addiction are filmed in black-and-white, a technique which draws attention to their status as constructed discourse but also reduces the clarity of certain scenes. In Nadja, the fantastic or supernatural scenes are digitally blurred to create visual ambiguity. The film also contains numerous jump cuts in which the camera angle is changed more than thirty degrees. These shots prevent the viewer from maintaining the sense of a position within the scene (Morrill 127). Perspective is lost. This technique is used minimally in Lair of the White Worm as well. All of these techniques could be seen as creating fantastic elements which counteract the Camp tone. The important thing is that every mode is continually undercut to keep the viewer bouncing back and forth between modes of reception. Nadja uses this technique most successfully because none of the parodic, Camp, or fantastic elements are given priority. It is a Camp version of Dracula, but it is also a
fantastic version of *Nadja*. It parodies a realist text, *Easy Rider*, along with a surrealist text and a fantastic text. It plays up the double-voicing inherent in each of the three modes while blending them into a veritable chorus.

It is arguable that Camp is what allows these voices to harmonize while remaining distinct. The kinds of double-voicing inherent in parody and the fantastic are quite specific. Postmodern parody, of course, partakes of the kind of strategy described by Charles Jencks as double-coding: “both elite/popular and new/old” (14). The reason Jencks identifies for this double-coding is the need to appeal to two audiences at once, both “the public and a concerned minority” (14). As with all parodies, both *Lair of the White Worm* and *The Addiction* use the new/old double-coding in that they are new responses to an old text, *Dracula*. *Nadja*, however, also suggests a dialectical relationship between the elite and the popular by simultaneously parodying a surrealist text like Bréton’s *Nadja* and a popular narrative like *Easy Rider*. One sees why parody is such a successful postmodern strategy. Its bitextuality makes it compatible with a variety of kinds of double-voicing: elite/popular, new/old, or dominant/marginalized. In the case of a Camp text, which by nature takes on the dominant/marginal binary opposition, the original artifact of the dominant discourse is contained within the parody but is also transformed by it: “Parody is both textual doubling... and differentiation” (Hutcheon 101-2). This allows it to be both "conservative and revolutionary" (26), authorized and transgressive.

The fantastic’s double-voicing is somewhat different. It is based on the co-presence of possible and impossible explanations for uncanny events: "What emerges as the basic trope of fantasy is the *oxymoron*, a figure of speech which holds together
contradictions and sustains them in an impossible unity" (Jackson 21). Camp’s double-voicing is more general. Babuscio sees Camp as "any highly incongruous contrast between an individual or thing and its content or association" (20). The example he gives as the most common incongruity is that of masculine and feminine, which is one binary pair that both Camp and the fantastic like to break down. Of course, Camp resides in the synthesis of these incongruities, not simply in their contrast. That is, the juxtaposition creates a tension in which the Camp inheres (Newton 47). Camp does more than hold together incongruous textual elements, however. It also holds together the mixed reactions to these elements. That is, it uses parody without reducing itself to a form of parody. It extends beyond the primarily intellectual function of parody. Camp allows for an intellectual appraisal of a parodic reference without precluding an emotional identification with the fantastic aspect:

the camp attitude ... embraces both identification and parody – attitudes normally viewed as mutually exclusive – at the same time and as part of the same sensibility. As Richard Dyer has written, the gay sensibility "holds together qualities that are elsewhere felt as antithetical: theatricality and authenticity ... intensity and irony, a fierce assertion of extreme feeling with a deprecating sense of its absurdity” (Feuer 447-48). Thus, Camp can allow for an emotional reaction to the uncanny despite the intellectual reaction triggered by the foregrounding of a film's constructedness by parody. In this way, Camp mimics the fantastic's "undoing [of] categorical structures" by erasing the distinction between visceral and rational reactions to a text (Jackson 176). As Jackson notes, this undoing of categories is a key to the fantastic's subversive potential (176). In
fact, this undoing of categories is precisely what double-voicing is about – to be neither and both. Being neither and both is exactly the kind of suspension between opposites which drives play movement. This subversion of categories, of empirical distinctions, of differentiation, is at the heart of the remaining issues: the authorized and temporary suspension of dominant values, the representation of the absent, and the nature of the campy, postmodern, fantastic subject. In every issue one can see the contribution of this key back-and-forth movement.

**Ideology and the Postmodern Response to Dominant Values**

The debates surrounding the subversive potential of these modes all tend toward the same basic problem – the one suggested by Bakhtin's definition of carnival as the temporary suspension of dominant cultural codes (34): does an authorized transgression have real revolutionary value? All three of these modes contain the dominant cultural values they would subvert and are therefore dependent on dominant discourse for their power to create meaning. How seriously, then, can one take their subversive potential? Camp in particular has had to struggle to reclaim its transgressive properties. Sontag's casting of Camp as an apolitical sensibility has had a significant effect on its value as a political tool (277). Chuck Kleinhans sees Sontag's essay as a neutralizing ploy. By broadening the concept of Camp beyond its queer origins, Sontag paved the way for it to be co-opted and neutralized by heteronormative society (187). As noted previously, Andrew Ross has identified the denial of queer agency as the main result of Sontag's apolitical version of Camp (145). Karl Keller has criticized her essay for having "no sense of Camp as politically-artful-defense-and-assertion…as
extravagant-play-for-serious-ends" (115). Ironically, Ross has argued that this casting of Camp as apolitical may have arisen from its connection with parody: “[I]t was precisely because of this commitment to the mimicry of existing cultural forms and its refusal to advocate wholesale breaks with these same forms, that camp was seen as pre-political and out of step with the dominant ethos of the liberation movements” (161). The irony is that this "mimicry of existing forms" is what makes parody the mode of choice in postmodern discourse and provides it with politically transgressive potential. Not surprisingly, the increase in parodic discourse in the late twentieth century was paralleled by a re-evaluation of Camp as a political strategy: "Camp has become recognized as an example par excellence of a postmodern denaturalization of gender categories" (Morrill 110). Having regained a subversive reputation at least on a par with that of other forms of postmodern parody, Camp also has to answer the question of how complicit transgressions can affect change. Or, as Bergman puts it: "How does one deal with oppression without duplicating the very terms of the oppressor"? (10). One approach to this problem sees Camp's value in its ability to alienate the audience from received standards and ideas through shock (Long 89-90; Babuscio 21). This echoes the Russian Formalist idea of defamiliarization through the laying bare of discursive devices. Another approach sees Camp's value in its recycling of political and cultural artifacts (Kleinhans 199; Ross 151). This prevents the dominant discourse from burying what it would prefer to remain hidden. It also provides the queer subject with access to the dominant discourse through its own artifacts. Meyer sees Camp's subversive potential in its expression of queerness as "an oppositional stance [to] ... the depth model of identity which underwrites the epistemology deployed by the bourgeoisie in their ascendency to and
maintenance of dominant power" (3). As will be argued below, this undermining of the notion of identity has a powerful destabilizing effect. This is also a subversive technique used by the fantastic mode.

A final answer to the question of how Camp is revolutionary is one that it has in common with parody and the fantastic and one that has already been suggested in terms of its double-voicing. It "brings to bear queer logics upon the un-queer hegemony by destabilizing binary relations of ‘difference’" (Morrill 123). In short, it breaks down the binary either/or distinctions which create categories, particularly in terms of gender. Ultimately, however, because these kinds of transgression all occur within dominant discourse, they can only ever create "a momentary suspension" (Morrill 119). However, as has been argued repeatedly in this analysis of the fantastic, momentary suspension is the name of the game.

That said, the fantastic mode faces the same problem of effecting change from within the dominant discourse. As Rosemary Jackson notes, most fantastic literature ultimately neutralizes its own transgressive impulses (9). In fact, most fantastic texts reconfirm the "dominant order by presenting only a vicarious fulfilment of desire" (72). Thus, thematic elements of the fantastic, more often than not, reinforce bourgeois values. Dracula is typical in this regard: the vampire is slain, and Mina returns to her husband's bed and bears him a son. The most potent means by which the fantastic mode can challenge these values is to "threaten ... the syntax or structure by which order is constructed" (Jackson 72). Again, it is the either/or distinction that is at stake here. While Camp breaks down gender distinctions, the fantastic breaks down the barriers between real and unreal, possible and impossible. Again, however, this suspension of categories
can only be temporary: "The centre of the fantastic text tries to break with repression, yet is inevitably constrained by its surrounding frame" (Jackson 122). That is, it is framed in the terms of a dominant discourse. The complicity, or interiority, of all of these subversions does not necessarily negate their effectiveness, however. According to Foucault, "resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (336). Yet, contrary to the Borg philosophy of Star Trek, resistance is seldom futile. Perhaps the most useful observation regarding the necessarily transitory nature of this kind of subversion is that of David Bergman: "cultural codes do alter, and it is impossible to say whether they have changed only through their own internal evolution or through a dialectical operation that involves opposing values" (106). But they do change.

What is interesting about the similarities in the subversive techniques of parody, Camp, and the fantastic is how each mode works to either bolster or negate the subversiveness of all three modes. The Addiction is an excellent example of a fantastic text which reconfirms cultural values. Kathleen allows a priest to expose her to the sun. The film ends with a reborn Kathleen visiting the grave of her dead vampire self in broad daylight. Good wins out over evil. There is no Camp element to undercut this conservative conclusion. Walken's cameo is unfortunately long over. The parodic nature of the text is not treated critically, so Stoker's style of conservative ending is inevitable. The fantastic element provides only vicarious pleasures in the temporary subversion of cultural norms. It typifies what Stallybrass and White refer to as licensed release: it acts as a safety valve and thereby promotes the continuity of dominant values (Bergman 106).

Lair of the White Worm is somewhat more subversive. The Camp elements break down the binary distinction between masculine and feminine. As Paula Graham observes,
“camp is unmistakably sex – and unmistakably deviant sex,” and Lady Marsh’s sexuality is deviant indeed (167). When Lord D’Hampton asks her if she has children, she replies: “Only when there are no men around.” It soon becomes apparent that this is only half the story. The cave paintings in the lair portray the snake’s priestess as a hermaphrodite, like the white worm itself. One might speculate that the size of the phallic accessory she uses for the rite of the virgin sacrifice makes it the counterpart of the ultra-feminine persona she adopts at other times. What it definitely does suggest is that her deviant sexuality is aimed at a straight adolescent male audience. Lord D’Hampton’s reaction (or, rather, his pencil’s reaction) to watching Lady Marsh wrestling with Eve in his dream makes it even clearer who her intended audience is. The fantastic element actually serves the film’s campy subversiveness by spreading deviance around in a way that suggests another audience. Although the heroes, D’Hampton and Angus, are busily pursuing Mary and Eve throughout the story (one can guess how successfully from their names), after Angus is bitten, his attention turns elsewhere. The closing scene consists of Angus and D’Hampton driving through the country to go meet the “girls.” D’Hampton is unaware that Angus has just learned that he has been vampirized because his antidote did not work. He innocently asks if Angus wants to stop for a bite. At that moment, in a move which recalls a stereotypical heterossexual seduction scene, D’Hampton’s hand accidentally brushes Angus’s kilt back from his knee, exposing, not alluring bare skin, but a telling pair of bite marks. Angus’s mischievous expression could be interpreted as hunger or lust as he replies, “Sure, why not?” The most significant aspect of the vampirization is that it transforms the character’s sexuality. The fantastic element, as a plot device, serves the Camp subversion of gender distinctions. The Camp, however,
does not help to break down the real/unreal distinction usually subverted by the fantastic. Nadja’s subversion, on the other hand, is more complex.

The Camp redefinition of gender definitely plays a part in Nadja. The parodic recycling of other texts is even more unsettling, however, because it juxtaposes these contradictory texts and inverts them at the same time. Easy Rider, which was transgressive in its aim, is contradicted here by Fonda’s Van Helsing. He is now defending society against transgressors. Dracula, which reconfirmed bourgeois values, takes a deviant turn when the vampire survives to marry her own brother. The novel Nadja, which ends with the protagonist’s musings on how much of Nadja’s persona he has absorbed through their relationship – “Est-ce vous, Nadja?... Est-ce moi-même?” (Bréton 138) – is made literal by the vampire Nadja’s transfusion into Cassandra. The film ends with her asking: “Are you there Nadja? Is it me?” This literalization makes the fantastic integral rather than subordinate to the subversive nature of the parody. However, to really explain how the Camp, parody, and fantastic elements are interrelated, it is necessary to examine how they are all aimed at breaking down the notion of identity, how they keep the subject in play, or the je in jeu, as Brown would say. This aspect of Nadja’s subversiveness is at least partially predicated upon issues of representation and subject formation and the ways in which they are linked through performance.

**Representation**

As "an eminently postmodern form" (Morrill 110), Camp takes part in the debate over the valuation of postmodernism’s recycling of other art forms. Baudrillard’s lament
for lost truth is probably one of the most famous of the negative appraisals of this strategy: “Simulation is master, and nostalgia, the phantasmal parodic rehabilitation of all lost referentials, alone remains.” This announcement arrives fast on the heels of the apparently unironic complaint that “[t]he reality of simulation is unendurable” (372). Camp theorists, on the other hand, see this recycling as a positive thing. It is possible that one’s perceived position within modern discourse has some influence on how one values postmodernism's reworking of that discourse. In terms of queer representation, postmodernism's regard for the recycled, reworked, and recontextualized is useful indeed. Building on Ross's suggestion that Camp is a reinvestment of value in the discarded artifacts of dominant discourse (151), Meyer has argued that Camp is the marginalized queer's only access to representation in dominant discourse. His analysis of this access relies on a distinction between Camp as queer parody and the Pop appropriation of Camp. Camp is queer praxis, while Pop is a dominant reading of queer praxis which actually renders the queer agent invisible by appropriating queer praxis. Pop camp thus becomes the means by which queer signifying codes enter the dominant discourse (13). He compares this drive to appropriate to Alice's failure to wonder who wrote the little tags she finds in Wonderland which say "Eat me." Whatever is offered is unquestioningly received, and this is the queer's point of control over his or her representation in discourse.

While Meyer's argument is convincing, it is not exhaustive. Appropriation is not Camp's only way of acting upon dominant representation. Camp also works to break down the opposition of differences by which language operates. Morrill sees Camp as "the aftermath of the discursive experience of the shattering of representation that occurs
when the queer subject encounters his or her contradiction to the dominant order" (112). The necessary contradictory strategy, or Camp "aftermath," is the signaling of one's absence in the dominant order through a Camp presence. This is accomplished through the re-examination of the dominant binary distinctions that erase the queer subject and reconfirm the straight subject's experience as natural. These include, of course, masculine and feminine, but other binaries such as self and other or tragic and comic also apply. Perhaps one of the most important is the distinction between artifice and nature (Ross 161). As Babuscio observes, "[w]hen the stress on style is 'outrageous' or 'too much,' it results in incongruities: the emphasis shifts from what a thing or person is to what it looks like; from what is being done to how it is being done" (24).

This Camp strategy parallels an important fantastic strategy. The inability of the reader to discern the difference between what something is and what it appears to be is often what creates the fantastic effect of uncertainty and hesitation. Also, as Brown notes in her discussion of the play of the subject in the fantastic, the language of excess or 'too much' contributes to a back-and-forth movement between excess and the lack created by problems of perception—one cannot see what is too present, for example. This problematization of apprehension is one way in which the fantastic gets around the problem of representing something that is absent from our discourse. Like Camp, the fantastic makes explicit the limitations of discourse in establishing meaning "by offering a problematic representation of an empirically real world" (Jackson 37). The digital blurring in Nadja is an example of this strategy. The uncanny effect derives from the synthesis of what is and what is not seen. Jackson's description of fantastic elements as those "which are known only through their absence within a dominant 'realistic' order" is
echoed very closely by Sue-Ellen Case's description of queer desire: it is only perceptible through the recognition of its proscription (25). Case herself connects the dilemma of representation for the queer with the fantastic: "In short, the vampire-like queer casts no reflection because the mirror of dominant representation cannot reflect the presence of same-sex eroticism" (9). For both, the strategy most often adopted to deal with this absence is the problematization of dominant discourse itself by the breaking down of the differences by which language operates. The differences which they target overlap in the areas of masculine/feminine and being/appearance. Another strategy they have in common is the dismantling of the notion of a coherent self. These are related strategies in that representation and difference both play an important role in the construction of notions of self.

**Subject Formation**

Modern notions of a stable, coherent identity underpin so many of the biases of the dominant discourse that any critique of this model of identity is inherently a critique of the dominant culture. In Camp terms, this means that, as an oppositional tactic, "the queer label contains a critique of a more vast and comprehensive system of class-based practices, of which sex gender identity is only a part" (Meyer 3). Jackson sees the fantastic as another such comprehensive critique of cultural practices in its opposition to realism, especially in terms of the unity of character: “The many partial, dual, multiple and dismembered selves throughout literary fantasies violate the most cherished of all human unities: the unity of ‘character’…. ‘Character’ is itself an ideological concept produced in the name of ‘realistic’ representation” (82-83). As she also observes, realism
presents itself as neutral by erasing its artifice. By questioning the naturalness of a unified character, the fantastic undermines this practice. The questioning of realism’s “faith in psychological coherence” is also a critique of the categorization of experience, and as Jackson points out, categories are “the pillars of society” (176). This undoing of categories is related, of course, to the undoing of the differences that permit a subject to function in language. By dismantling difference, the fantastic can “depict a reversal of the subject’s cultural formation” (177). The loss of difference affects two aspects of discourse. In Saussurian terms, language operates through a sign’s difference from its Other. A move toward undifferentiation in general has the potential to undo both of these discursive requirements. Jackson sees the tendency toward entropy in fantastic texts as just such a strategy: the goal of the fantastic is “the arrival at a point of absolute unity of self and other, subject and object, at a zero point of entropy” (77). Bessière sees the role of the fantastic in a similar way. It reminds dominant culture of “the vanity of notions of limit and discrimination…making that vanity its subject” (63). Gelder sees the vampire tale as a particularly undifferentiating strategy in its effacement of cultural and national identities. Dracula, who speaks many languages and is the product “of many brave races” prefigures postmodern vampires “who have ‘removed all barriers[:]… national,… ideological’” (Stoker 28). They are feared both as Other and as the threat of the removal of Otherness (Gelder 13). The fantastic’s subversion of the notion of a coherent subject is usually accomplished through a literal transformation of a subject into something multiple or partial. Parody and Camp represent other strategies for contesting this notion.

Hutcheon suggests that the prevalence of parody in postmodern discourse might reflect “a crisis in the entire notion of the subject as a coherent and continuous source of
signification.” By repeating images, parody “implicitly contests Romantic singularity” (4-5). Singularity gives way to a complexity which allows for “collective participation” and “active performance” on the part of the reader or viewer of parodic art (Hutcheon 99). According to Camp theory, it is just such active performance that allows the participant in postmodern discourse to engage in the process of subject formation.

Camp performance is specifically about the creation of gender identity. According to Judith Butler, “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – and identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (270). Camp explores how that repetition of acts has been mistaken for natural. It partakes in “life-as-theater” (Babuscio 24) by representing gender identities as “roles, not biological birthrights” (Case 291). Gender identity is one of the most basic elements in one’s notion of self. Therefore, the subversive potential for this de-essentializing of gender identity is far-reaching. Viegener sees gender as “an act whose very repetitiveness is the basis for the institutions of heterosexual identity, and the recognition of this iterative act always (already) opens it to parodic decentering” (251). It is no surprise, therefore that the extent to which the three vampire films under discussion undermine the notion of stable identity is directly related to the extent to which they engage in Camp and postmodern parody, despite the literal transformations of the self effected by their fantastic elements.

The Addiction, which falls all too often into the narrative style of a moralizing allegory, is very conservative in its final effect. Although the vampirization often occurs in a female-to-female context, the sexual connotations of this fact are downplayed by the drug addiction analogy – these are pushers, not seducers. Thus, Camp's only foothold in
the film is Christopher Walken's self-styled, flamboyant vampire. While he suggests that identity can be created like a role, the brevity of his appearance prevents the implications of his character from taking hold. What comes through more clearly is Kathleen's inability to follow his advice. She is what she is, and it is beyond her capabilities to participate in the creation of her own vampire identity. What is more, her actions do not seem to have a permanent effect on who she is. After her vampire self is purged by the sun, she still remains. There is an essential self, much like the Catholic notion of the soul (to which Ferrara refers rather directly), which survives everything. This bolsters the conservative denouement of the fantastic element, the destruction of the threat to social norms.

Lair of the White Worm is far more subversive in its treatment of character. Identity is portrayed as an effect rather than a source of discourse. The characters' names dictate their roles. Eve makes an ideal sacrifice because she is an “Eve” and therefore has a history of interaction with serpents lying in wait in trees. D'Hampton sees himself as the hero because the legend of his ancestor's heroism affects his perception of himself. He has a role to play. Lady Marsh's role-playing is much more dramatic as she adopts a series of personae in order to manipulate her victims, switching rapidly between salon wit and damsel in distress as the situation requires. Her Camp treatment of gender identity problematizes its own artificiality. She seduces a boy scout, but ultimately rejects him as a sexual conquest. Her nonchalant willingness to skip the ceremony before Eve's sacrifice indicates that her role-playing is completely artificial and disassociated from her desire, yet her mockery of the Catholic nuns expresses her disdain for those who deny their desire. Her role as seductress is both genuine and artificial. The clearest indication of
discourse's power over identity, however, is Angus's transformation at the end of the film. The snake bite has no effect on him, apart from an initial paralysis, until he is told that his antidote was the wrong one. He succumbs not to the venom but to the power of the vampire tradition that those who are bitten are transformed. This explains his answer to D'Hampton's suggestion that they stop for a bite: “Sure, why not?” He adapts himself to the discursive situation. As noted earlier, this transformation is less a fantastic challenge to identity than a Camp challenge. His gender preference is the most obvious change.

In *Nadja*, where the text successfully maintains the oscillation between modes, the challenges to identity are equally the result of parody, Camp, and the fantastic. The references to *Easy Rider* and *Dracula* make Peter Fonda's character multiple. As a cycling Van Helsing, he is always a combination of the biker and the vampire hunter. In addition, he plays Dracula in the flashbacks which fill in the family's history. His status as an actor is never downplayed. This has two effects: the viewer is reminded that he is playing a role, and the viewer always sees more than one character when watching Fonda. In contrast to Van Helsing, who is always multiple, Nadja is only partial. Her blood lust symbolizes her search for someone who will complete her. She thinks she wants Lucy and Edgar, but it is her literal union with Cassandra that brings her peace. Fonda, whose multiplicity stems from parodic references, and Nadja, whose partiality is literalized by the fantastic, are both depicted in a Camp style. Both engage in exaggerated monologues, dramatic entrances, and eccentric dress. Both have a preference for what Graham might call Camp’s “unmistakably deviant sex” (167), meaning neither is normative in a dominantly heterosexual society. Nadja is overtly indiscriminate in terms of gender preference, and her sexual encounters sometimes lead to significant violence or
bloodshed. Van Helsing's sexuality is more mysterious. He tells Jim that he is not his uncle but his father because he had an affair with Jim's mother. It is never clear, however, how he was considered Jim's uncle in the first place. Is he a brother to Jim's father or mother? The result of these sexual ambiguities is a reconfirmation of the self-styled constructedness of their identities. This only reinforces the de-essentializing effects of their partiality and multiplicity. Ultimately, postmodern parody, the fantastic, and Camp all contribute to the destabilizing of identity in Nadja. The final image of a merged Nadja/Cassandra married to Nadja's brother Edgar does not close off the subversive potential of any of the three modes. By echoing Bréton's closing words ("Est-ce moi-même?"), the film subverts its singularity as a unique work of art. By maintaining the supernatural fusion of two people, it literally subverts the notion of a stable identity, and finally, by allowing Nadja to be joined literally with a man and a woman, it subverts the naturalness of the masculine/feminine distinction.

What these three films demonstrate is that the simultaneous deployment of parody and the fantastic can work, but their co-existence must create a tension that is not easily resolved. They have to work against each other by undercutting the viewer's assumptions about how to interpret the text. Neither a parodic nor a fantastic reception of the text can take over for long. The viewer must be kept moving back and forth between modes, mimicking the to-and-fro movement of play. If this can be accomplished, as in Nadja, the different narrative modes can also support each other. In effect, if each mode is subversive in a similar way, the oscillation created by the contradictions of their juxtaposition does not undercut the subversive effect. The viewer can be kept uncertain about whether the film is meant to have a visceral uncanny effect or if it is meant to
create ironic intellectual distance. The Addiction fails to create this tension because fantastic elements are too familiar to be parodied unironically. The addition of Camp, which supplies that ironic edge to Walken’s performance, is too minimal to affect the conventional use of the vampire motif. Because bloodlust is equated with drug addiction rather than sexual desire, the film falls into an allegorical mode which precludes Camp interpretations of vampirism. Lair of the White Worm is more successful because it does use Camp to control both the parodic and fantastic elements: both are effective at different points in the film, but neither is allowed to take over. The extent to which Camp is used, however, overpowers both the minimal parodic references to Dracula and the horror of the supernatural elements. Nadja is most successful because the Camp element destabilizes the viewer’s reception, but it also holds together contradictory visceral and intellectual reactions by reinforcing rather than overpowering the subversive element of undifferentiation inherent in fantastic entropy and parodic complexity.

We saw earlier that the fantastic text is a synthesis of a supernatural text and a realist text. The result is a visceral reaction of horror, uneasiness, or uncertainty. Parody synthesizes an original text and its recontextualization. The hermeneutic nature of its interpretation creates a more distant intellectual reaction. The value of Camp is its ability to synthesize the fantastic text and the parodic text, suspending the viewer between the uncanny familiarity and emotional involvement of one mode and the intellectual, critical distance of the other. What is clear is that the synthesis of two modes is always at stake in fantastic narratives. Traditionally, that synthesis was a synthesis of realism and the supernatural. In postmodern fantastic texts, that synthesis can be between conventional narration and self-referential narration, between visceral reaction and intellectual
interpretation, or even between conservative and subversive agendas. For it to be fantastic, however, amongst the oppositions must be at least one synthesis of the possible and impossible. Whether or not that synthesis is effective depends upon the degree of uncertainty created by the back-and-forth movement of the reader/viewer/player created by the syntheses of the other elements. To experience the fantastic effect, the reader-subject must be kept in play.

I have now defined the fantastic, discussed its strategies in the context of postmodernism, and explained its effect in the context of game theory. Postmodern theory and game theory go a long way towards explaining the “how” of fantastic narratives. In the next chapter, I will argue that quantum theory sheds some interesting light on “why,” at least as far as the physics of light permits it to go.
Chapter Five

The Fantastic and Modern Physics

“As far as the laws of mathematics refer to reality, they are not certain; and as far as they are certain, they do not refer to reality” -- Albert Einstein (qtd. in Rothman 10).

The path I have been following from fantastic theory through postmodern theory to game theory is not a straight line. In many ways, it mimics the described motion that inheres in postmodern fantastic texts – namely the back-and-forth movement which typifies play, defers meaning-making, and prolongs uncertainty. For example, one can be caught between two definitions of the fantastic that demonstrate the fantastic’s resistance to categorization. If the fantastic and the postmodern share the strategies of problematizing perception, questioning the boundary between subjectivity and objectivity, and deferring or even precluding certainty, do they share a category? Is the fantastic, with its defining quality of physical impossibility, a sub-genre of the more inclusively uncertain postmodern? Is the postmodern text, with its self-conscious positing of textual indeterminacies, a sub-genre of the fantastic – a specific, historical moment in the escalating need to undo fantastic conventions in order to keep readers hesitating and perspectives problematized? Both are arguably true, and, what is more significant, it is only by holding both to be true simultaneously that one gets the most inclusive picture of what has been happening to postmodern fantastic texts since the latter half of the twentieth century.

The back-and-forth movement which permits a reader or viewer of fantastic films or television to prolong uncertainty and remain in that playful space “between” has been
described up to this point as a kind of bouncing back and forth. The metaphor is a useful one; however, tennis is not the only game in town. There are other ways to travel back and forth between two opposing points. A circular motion not only allows one to return repeatedly to the same two opposing points, but a circle is comprised of an infinite number of opposing points and can, therefore, permit numerous back-and-forth movements along one circular trajectory. In the act of interpretation, however, one always arrives at the “same” point again with more information. I argued previously that the fantastic superimposes different categories of play onto the game of interpretation. The competitive play that Caillois calls *agon* is typical of the relationship between reader and text. Who will master whom? At the same time, the vertigo induced by the reader’s inability to find sure footing in an ambiguous text is more typical of *ilinx*. Thus, one can arguably superimpose two play metaphors to describe this experience. In addition to the back-and-forth movement suggested by a game like tennis, once can also imagine the fantastic reader on a fair ride such as a Tilt-a-Whirl where one is spun in a circle to induce vertigo. The rider returns repeatedly to the same point in space (or same opposing points if one considers the movements in half-circles) and thus describes a circular motion. Observed from a point outside the circle, the movement appears identical on each revolution. The subjective experience is different. Upon each revolution, the rider returns to the same point in space with an increased sense of vertigo and a decreased sense of proprioception. The experience of the same point is similar but with a difference. The subjective experience is more like a spiral, another well-rehearsed postmodern metaphor. Thus, the playful movement, depending upon perspective and perception, is simultaneously back-and-forth, circular, and spiral. The important idea
here is that a spiral movement when viewed from above or below appears circular, and a
circular movement when viewed from a ninety-degree angle appears as a linear back-and-
forth movement. Thus, the movement back and forth between opposing uncertainties
does not preclude the presence of other binary oppositions along the same path
(fantastic/parody; conventional reading/parodic reading, etc.); nor does it preclude a
change or growth in the reader’s understanding of the text.

While it might appear that this metaphorical romp into the Euclidean geometry of
the reception of postmodern fantastic texts should segue nicely into a discussion of the
physics of the fantastic, perhaps it is more thematically appropriate to bounce first to an
area that traditionally has been posited as a binary opposite to Euclidean geometry and
other scientific observables – that is, back to that transcendent “between” space of eastern
mysticism.

The significance of the Mask of Eternity is not just its position between the other
two opposing masks. It is true that it sits between representations of opposites, but all
three masks are carved into the wall of a cave. The cave is dark; vision is impaired.
Sounds are distorted. In short, perception is problematized. All three masks exist in this
atmosphere of perceptual distortion, including the oppositional masks representing the
symbolic. The notion that both our perceptions and our comprehension of the symbolic
are as problematic as our apprehension of something beyond the symbolic is the perfect
jumping-off point for a discussion of modern physics and its relevance to fantastic texts.
This is the very point being made by many physicists since the beginning of the quantum
era in physics: despite the exactitude of the measurements of which science is now
capable, despite the apparently unambiguous nature of mathematical terms and equations,
the ultimate defining quality of our universe at its most fundamental level is uncertainty, and the defining trope of modern physics is, in fact, the paradox.

Todorov pointed to the advent of psychoanalysis as the end of the fantastic. The demand for the fantastic mode of narrative comes and goes, possibly in response to the kinds of metaphysical shudders I described in Chapter One. Clearly, it has returned in force post-psychoanalysis. It is easy to see in retrospect how Todorov would have been tempted to see a science as an antidote to the fantastic frame of mind. Yet Todorov’s focus on the state of hesitation, a psychological event, would have made the link to psychoanalysis appear pertinent, and it certainly is, as my previous discussions of *The X-Files* and Lacan or of the uncanny and Freud seek to demonstrate. However, any literary mode that hinges on our beliefs about how our everyday world functions, on what is or is not possible, must also be equally reliant on the current state of the science of physics. When physics is fraught with paradoxes, a metaphysical shudder is to be expected. In the popular imagination, the paradoxes of quantum physics and the orderliness of classical Newtonian physics become confused. If an electron can move backwards in time, is time travel possible? If there is only empty space at the level of subatomic “particles,” can solid objects be rendered immaterial? Post-postmodern fantastic television shows like *Fringe* pose exactly these kinds of questions. The logic of the fantastic hesitation, therefore, shifts to accommodate the shudder. The traditional fantastic moment reads as: “Science says this is impossible. Could I really be seeing this?” The postmodern, post-quantum physics, fantastic moment can conceivably happen differently: “I am seeing this. Could science have made this possible?”
The aspect of quantum physics which has made its way most forcefully into the popular imagination is Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, which shall be described in much greater detail later. The politics and drama surrounding the acceptance of this principle, even among physicists, would make a good fantastic tale itself, with one camp declaring, “It’s impossible!” and the other responding, “But it must be!”⁴ In his analysis of Michael Frayn’s play Copenhagen, Dasenbrock makes the following observation regarding the fate of this currently accepted notion:

The uncertainty principle is frequently cited in contemporary literary theory, almost always in support of postmodern positions about the impossibility of objectivity or certainty in the old sense. Whether this is in fact (if one can use this phrase in this context) a legitimate extension of quantum mechanics is itself a controversial question, one that has become prominent in the so-called science wars of the past decade. (222)

Dasenbrock then goes on to cite the Sokal controversy as a case in point. He also points to anthropologist Bruno Latour’s work as an example of how this appropriation of ideas has been a two-way exchange. Certainly Latour’s rallying cry to fellow scientists, “No reality without representation!” (M. Brown 163), suggests a knowledge of postmodern theory. While an awareness of such a relationship between quantum theory and postmodern theory must underlie any credible application of quantum mechanics to literature, it is not my intention to take part in this particular controversy at this point. An excellent examination of the parallels between modern physics and various aspects of postmodern concerns, such as Saussurean linguistics, can be found in N. Katherine Hayles’s The Cosmic Web which explains them as parts of an interactive “field.” My

⁴ An excellent account of this drama can be found in David Cassidy’s Beyond Uncertainty.
own interests in quantum physics are in regard to its metaphorical relationships to the fantastic and to the form it takes in the popular imagination, the same imagination that is expressed in such popular narratives as *Fringe* or *Medium*.

There are three specific aspects of the relationship between physics and the fantastic that, given my focus here, are worth investigating. First, the ways in which even the popular understanding of modern physics has undone our commonsense assumptions about the nature of our universe and the rules by which it functions are remarkably similar to the unsettling suggestions of a fantastic narrative. Modern physics, like the death-defying vampire, matter-shifting werewolf, or the matter-defying ghost, puts into question the ground rules by which we believe our physical world operates. What are we now to believe is possible or impossible? Many of our notions about causality, materiality, and observation are being relativized or recontextualized.

Secondly, the paradoxical nature of quantum phenomena parallels the postmodern espousal of the paradox as its defining trope. While questions of philosophical influence have been rendered problematic since the advent of postmodern criticism, questions of physical influence are equally problematic for quantum physicists since the work of Einstein, Podolsky, and Rosen. While one can trace a metaphorical relationship between postmodern and quantum problems with the issue of influence, it would be foolhardy (and a paradox!) to claim that one has influenced the other, though clearly, as Dasenbrock and Latour have demonstrated, they are in conversation. Clearly, however, a relationship between the two problems of influence exists. The same is true of paradox. While such theorists as Christine Froula make the connection between quantum physics and deconstruction, Froula is careful to note that physics “*anticipates* the thematics of
Derrida’s [work]” (288, italics mine). In the same spirit, it is possible to note the metaphorical relationships between quantum mechanical paradoxes and the kinds of paradoxes which permeate postmodern and fantastic strategies and which also keep postmodern fantastic texts so unsettling.

Finally, the connection between the back-and-forth movement and the nature of the potentially transcendent “between” state triggered by the fantastic moment also has its counterpart in the world of quantum physics. Numerous physicists and theorists are exploring the connection between quantum uncertainty and eastern mysticism (Wolfe, Capra, Zukav). A connection can be made linking Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, the playfulness of a Buddhist koan, and the back-and-forth movement of the fantastic text. As these connections are traced, a demonstration of the ways in which quantum physical concerns make their way into popular culture and express themselves in the re-imagining of fantastic conventions will be seen to emerge.

To return, then, to the undoing of commonsense notions of reality, the first thing that becomes clear is that modern physics and the fantastic make good bedfellows. The term “modern physics” is used here to include both quantum physics, which deals with microscopic phenomena at the level of quanta, the smallest discrete unit of anything, and Einstein’s relativity, the effects of which are increasingly observable as masses approach the size of planets and speeds approach the speed of light. The list of commonsense notions which are undone by physics will appear quite familiar by this point: like the fantastic, it reworks such notions as causality, objective observation, the solidity of matter, a discrete self, and even absolute space and time. The difference between the two is that the effects described by modern physics are generally only observable at the
microscopic level or as particles’ velocities approach the speed of light, while fantastic
effects become observable to their victims at the relatively slow, macroscopic level at
which we normally function.

Since the fantastic undoing of causality has already been discussed in relation to
Armin Ayren’s “Der Brandstifter,” perhaps the metaphorical relationship to quantum
causality would be a good place to start. I suggested that causality is temporarily, but
repeatedly, supplanted by synchronicity as an organizational principle of the story events
in “Der Brandstifter.” I took my definition of synchronicity from Jung’s introduction to
the I Ching. Jung, a close personal friend of the subatomic particle physicist Wolfgang
Pauli, suggests in his introduction that causality is not the pervasive, all-powerful
principle that classical, Newtonian physicists once believed it to be. He does not explain,
however, how quantum physics problematizes causality, so here follows a delineation of
the nature of causality’s ailment, if not its complete demise.

The problem with subatomic causality stems from the implications of
Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. This principle states that it is impossible to know
with certainty a moving particle’s position and momentum. The problem is not with our
technology or methods; it is an attribute of subatomic particles that position and
momentum cannot both be measured simultaneously. If one knows a particle’s position,
one can know nothing of its momentum and vice versa. This may seem like a minor
problem to a non-physicist, but the implications are far-reaching and the notion of
causality is only one of the uncertainty principle’s victims. As physicist Roger Jones
muses:
Why, after all, should there be any ultimate limit on the ability to measure an electron? Is nature hiding its secrets from us, or isn’t there any nature there to do the hiding? Make no mistake about it – the uncertainty principle is unique and unprecedented in science. (161).

Gary Zukav explains how this limit on knowledge affects causality (112). In order to see something, we require light waves to bounce off the object and return to our eye or whatever observational device we are using. To state things in their simplest terms, with particles the size of electrons, a ray of light bouncing off an electron will permit us to observe it, but the light will hit the electron with enough energy to change its speed and direction. Observing the electron is all it takes to change its motion. Classical Newtonian physics is all based on calculating the past, present, and future movements of a body based on its observed initial location and its momentum (speed and direction). If knowing a subatomic particle’s location results in an unknowable momentum (and vice versa), Newtonian physics cannot be applied at the subatomic level. In short, the scientific foundation for philosophical determinism and for our notion of causality does not apply. Niels Bohr, a pioneer in subatomic physics, wrote that the uncertainty of quantum physics necessitates “a final renunciation of the classical ideal of causality and a radical revision of our attitude toward the problem of physical reality” (60).

The “problem of physical reality” is precisely what is at stake in a fantastic narrative. Apart from causality, which “Der Brandstifter” thematizes in such an unsettling way, fantastic tales also take on problems of perception, a problem of modern physics already suggested by the impossibility of observing an electron without moving it. The act of observation is not just fraught with questions of accuracy but also of
agency. Traditionally, fantastic tales problematized perception by invoking darkness, mist, whispers, or echoes – anything that compromised sight and hearing. A twist to that convention was the suggestion that the protagonist was emotionally or psychologically troubled and apt to misinterpret his or her perceptions. A twentieth-century twist that parallels the quantum mechanical connection between observation and agency is the suggestion that the protagonist actually creates the impossibility through observation. A fine example of this particular horror is Ramsey Campbell’s “End of a Summer’s Day,” which was previously discussed in the context of consensus reality and postmodernism in Chapter Two. The reader is caught between believing that the protagonist’s lover has been replaced by a blind stranger in the darkness of the caves and believing that she is delusional. The woman, who is unable to see her lover while walking through the caves, becomes caught up in analyzing the aspects of her relationship that make her insecure. Upon emerging into the light, she sees that her lover has been replaced by a blind and feeble stranger who is completely dependent upon her. Two things are suggested by the transformation. First, the group, who insists that she was always in the blind stranger’s company, is in charge of consensus reality. The fantastic impossibility is comprised of at least two superimposed realities; the reader must choose between consensus reality, which indicates that the woman is emotionally unstable, and mass delusion, which allows the woman to have experienced a genuine impossibility. This second choice leads to the story’s second suggestion which is that the woman’s close observation of her relationship has actually transformed the nature of her physical reality. The problems of observation that apply at the microscopic level of quantum physics suddenly apply at the macroscopic level – this is the nature of the fantastic impossibility.
The notion that what one sees depends upon how one looks at it does not go far enough to describe the uncertainty principle’s implications for observation. As Henry Stapp writes, “the physical laws represented by quantum theory are not a set of laws governing an independent entity that exists apart from observations” (85). There is no independent entity that exists apart from observations. Or, as Max Born puts it, “if we can never actually determine more than one of the two properties [position and momentum] ... then we are not justified in concluding that the ‘thing’ under examination can actually be described as a particle in the usual sense of the term” (qtd. in Zukav 114).

Not only does the uncertainty principle problematize causality and observation, it does away with the notion of actual particles which make up what we perceive as a universe comprised of matter. Ever since Einstein’s famous equation, \(E=mc^2\), people have been coming to terms with the concept “that mass is nothing but a form of energy” (Capra 63), but the idea that matter can be decomposed into its independently existing smallest units is still persistent today. Since Dirac’s discovery of antimatter, scientists have been able to observe the destruction and creation of particles when enough energy is made available. Pairs of particles and antiparticles can be created from sufficient energy and can be returned to pure energy again through the reverse process. As Capra notes, the “creation of material particles from pure energy is certainly the most spectacular effect of relativity theory” and it is only possible because a “particle can no longer be seen as a static object, but has to be conceived as a dynamic pattern, a process involving the energy which manifests itself as the particle’s mass” (Capra 77).

Henry Stapp states the case in unequivocal terms: “The conclusion here is not the weak conclusion that there might not be a substantive physical world, but rather that there
definitely is not a substantive physical world” (qtd. in Froula 300). So what is this entity that we regard as a particle? Again, Stapp is most succinct: “It is, in essence, a set of relationships that reach outward to other things ...a web of relationships between elements whose meaning arises... from their relationship to the whole” (qtd. in Froula 299).

The metaphorical relationship to the fantastic which is of most interest here is not a parallel thematic exploration, as with causality and observation but the way in which the experiential process of a fantastic narrative mimics the constant movement of matter. Compare Capra’s description of matter to the playful back-and-forth dynamic of the fantastic narrative: “Modern physics, then, pictures matter not at all as passive and inert, but as being in a continuous dancing and vibrating motion whose rhythmic patterns are determined by the molecular, atomic, and nuclear structures” (194).

Helen Diaz Brown posits that the overall back-and-forth dynamic of a fantastic text moves towards what she calls unicité – the interrelationship of everything (a state demonstrated here by the constant disintegrating and reintegrating of subatomic particles). She also notes that it follows that there is no boundary between objects. All is one. The implications for such notions as subjectivity and objectivity are similar to what the fantastic suggests – all is hybrid; everything is made up of bits of everything else. As Malrieu observes, the encounter between protagonist and monster always leaves the protagonist with monstrous qualities. Subject and object lose their distinctions, not just because of the loss of objective observation but because of the loss of the notion of a discrete self. Gary Zukav states the case for physics in an echo of the exact point that
Brown makes regarding the play of the subject in fantastic games – namely that, in the move towards integration and unicité, the passive subject becomes the active subject:

The uncertainty principle rigorously brings us to the realization that there is no [I] which is separate from the world around us.

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The tables have been turned. “The exact sciences” no longer study an objective reality that runs its course regardless of our interest in it or not.... Science, at the level of subatomic events, is no longer “exact,” the distinction between objective and subjective has vanished, and the portals through which the universe manifests itself are, as we once knew a long time ago, those impotent, passive witnesses to its unfolding, the ‘I’s, of which we, insignificant we, are examples (114).

Capra notes that, because the web of relations which constitutes matter must always include the observer, “the properties of any atomic object can only be understood in terms of the object’s interaction with the observer” (68). In essence, the Cartesian boundary between the I and the world has been dissolved. At the subatomic level, all is one. The interrelationships become more consequential than individual manifestations of matter, which are always only temporary. One postmodern fantastic author who has thematized this dance of connections is H.C Artmann. In such works as Dr. U (1979) and “Frankenstein in Sussex,” Artmann borrows from a wide-ranging list of texts to tempt his readers into a connection-making process that he refers to as Kombinationsvermögen. The process of the text is a rollick through bizarre juxtapositions of cultural icons: Frankenstein meets Alice in Wonderland meets Frau Holle meets Frank Zappa. The
point is that everything is connected. Also, everything is in process. Armin Ayren is another author who thematizes process. In Der Baden-Badener Fenstersturz: Thema mit achtzig Variationen (1989), Ayren tells of the “same” impossible event eighty times using eighty different literary genres (it’s eighty-eight if one actually counts – nothing is as it seems). What one realizes quickly is that the event changes depending upon the genre. There is no ur-event outside of our literary observations of it. The event only exists when observed through narrative, and the narrative through which one chooses to observe it changes the event’s direction and momentum. Thus the telling both creates and destroys the event eighty-eight times. Process and interconnection are related ideas, we soon realize. New events are created in the process of colliding with other events. Our observation of these collisions is like the energy it takes to collide the particles/events and make new ones. The process of kombinationsvermögen is what creates the story.

The last commonsense notion to be considered before moving on to the paradoxes which have supplanted classical notions of reality is the notion of absolute space and time. To this point, quantum physics has supplied the metaphors for the kinds of re-imagining of the fantastic/impossible that has been going on in the past century. Absolute space and time, however, fell victim to Einstein’s relativity. The essence of Einstein’s principle of special relativity is simply that the laws of physics are the same for all observers in uniform motion. The implication of this statement is that “time and space are not absolute but are relative to a particular observer” (Wolfson 29). We return again to the significance of the observer.
In quantum terms, even the space-time continuum with which Einstein replaced the notion of absolute space and time is problematic. Stapp’s assertion that “there definitely is not a substantive physical world” (qtd. in Froula 300) has implications for space and time. Space and time are just relative measurements for where and when substantive physical events occur. According to Stapp, the rejection of a substantive physical world includes “the rejection of the idea that external reality resides in, or inheres in, a spacetime continuum. It signalizes the recognition that ‘space,’ like color, lies in the mind of the beholder” (Stapp 66). It is in this context that Herbert Rosendorfer re-imagines Bram Stoker’s Dracula in Der Ruinenbaumeister (1991). Rosendorfer’s novel is structured much like matter. It is comprised of numerous stories that can be repeatedly divided into smaller component stories until one feels that one has arrived at one of the many basic stories which make up the matter of the text. At the “basic story” level, however, one finds that what is there is nothing solid but a process of interconnections which the reader must make in order to create the experience of story. In the midst of Der Ruinenbaumeister, one finds the story of Mirandolina, which can be read as a re-imagining of Dracula, if one is willing to engage in Kombinationsvermögen.

Mirandolina’s tale is a classic fantastic tale in that it begins with a truth claim of sorts and proceeds through an introduction of an isolated, unusual protagonist to his encounter with uncanny events and ends with the horror of his helplessness in the face of the impossible. As a typical postmodern text, however, Mirandolina’s tale is more about storytelling than about the story itself. She up-ends the classic truth claim by saying “...ich finde, daß eine Geschichte um so besser ist, je mehr man davon wegläßt. ’Das Leben schreibt einen Roman’, sagt man gemeinhin” (Ruinenbaumeister 156; “I find a
story is better the more one leaves out. Truth, they say, is stranger than fiction” Architect 156). She is not above manipulating events for the sake of the story; in fact, that is the whole point. Even the accepted truth of a well-worn axiom is made questionable by the skeptical “sagt man gemeinhin” (“they say”). Clearly, truth is not the issue here. Truth, Mirandolina tells us, must be worked on until the fiction is revealed. She is reversing the reading process of fantastic texts in which one tries to decide what really happened – in which the fiction must be worked on until the truth is revealed. Like the absent substantive particle at the heart of matter, the truth is less important than the fictional process of interrelationships which creates the illusion that the particle of truth exists. Just as the energy of a particle creates the illusion of solidity, the energy of Mirandolina’s story, which keeps the reader bouncing back and forth between her story and the rest of Der Ruinenbaumeister or between Brankovic and Dracula, creates the illusion that behind Mirandolina’s fiction there is a grain of truth, or at least an answer to “what really happened.”

Mirandolina’s story not only mimics our current conception of subatomic matter by its structure, it also thematizes many of the qualities of subatomic matter by re-imagining the monster not as a vampire but as a macroscopic manifestation of microscopic phenomena. First, she creates parallels between the “monster,” Brankovic, and Dracula. Brankovic is a wealthy eccentric who lives in a remote castle. He speaks to wolves who grudgingly obey him. He has the strength of twelve men. He never eats but is often seen drinking a blood-red beverage which he keeps in a locked cabinet. Brankovic is seen climbing the stone towers of his castle like a fly on a wall. He even

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5 Throughout this discussion of Rosendorfer, page numbers following German text refer to Rosendorfer’s Der Ruinenbaumeister and page numbers following English translations refer to Mitchell’s translation, The Architect of Ruins.
shuns sunlight, though we never learn if it would be destructive. The atmosphere of the story is decidedly Gothic, complete with moaning winds, loose shutters, ghosts, and locked towers. The nature of the impossibility in fantastic tales is always physical; the physics of this tale’s impossibility turns out to be of Einsteinian proportions. Brankovic is not feeding on the protagonist’s blood; he is stealing young Abegg’s creativity. Brankovic’s sister attempts to explain to Abegg how this is done by invoking relativity. She uses the metaphor of a fly, claiming that flies experience time differently because their perceptions register movement at a different speed:

Bedenken Sie, wenn einer Fliege alles und jedes scheinbar zehnmal langsamer vor sich zu gehen scheint, die Bewegung Ihrer Hand und die Bewegung der Sonne, was ist dann der Effekt? Die Fliege lebt in ihrer eigenen Vorstellung zehnmal so lang, wie sie wirklich lebt. Aber was heißt ‘wirklich’ – die Fliegen haben eben eine andere Zeit als wir, vielmehr als Sie, Felix Abegg und Ihresgleichen. (190)

Just try to imagine: if everything seems to happen ten times more slowly, from the movement of your hand to the movement of the sun, what will the affect of that be? A fly imagines it lives ten times longer than it really lives. But what does ‘really’ mean – flies inhabit a different time than we do; or rather, than you and your kind. (186)

This kind of distortion of time based on the speed of movement also distorts observations of space. Time and space are two aspects of the space-time continuum after all. The space which separates Abegg from Brankovic and his sister, who move at a relatively different speed and experience time differently (they are several hundred years
old – like most vampires), is equally relative and easily manipulated by Brankovic and his sister. They appear to steal Abegg’s very thoughts by occupying the space of his mind. The connections to the mathematics of relative space and time are odd ones, but the text suggests these connections should be made. When Felix confronts Brankovic with a hunting rifle, the sound of the shot is “disproportionate,” a word which appears in italics in the text itself, and “der Raum schien durcheinanderzuwirbeln, schien... in Bruchteilen von Sekunden Jahrhunderte zu durchschnellen” (193; “...space seems to dissolve into chaos and... to rush through centuries in a fraction of a second” 189). Note that it is space, not time, that is rushing through centuries. The relativity connection is clearly marked. When time and space reorient themselves, Brankovic is still alive and smiling, but a bullet has torn through the book he was holding. “Glauben Sie, es trug nur zufällig den Titel ‘Die Handschrift von Saragossa’?” (193; “Do you think it was mere chance that it was The Saragossa Manuscript? 189). In addition to being one of the texts used by Todorov to demonstrate his theory of the fantastic, this novel also lends itself to Kombinationsvermögen. Written in the late 1700s by Jan Potocki, The Saragossa Manuscript is itself, like Mirandolina’s story, a bizarre combination of magic, mystery, and mathematics. Again the mathematical reading of Brankovic’s uncanny nature is indicated. Potocki, himself, is also suggested by the presence of his novel, and he was as unusual as his work. In 1815, he allegedly committed suicide by shooting himself in the head with a silver bullet especially blessed by his chaplain for that purpose. Is that not how one kills a vampire? The two readings of Brankovic are held in balance. Is he a mathematical anomaly or a vampire? Or is a vampire really a warping of space and time? The implications are stimulating... and paralyzing.
We do not learn poor Abegg’s ultimate fate because Mirandolina finishes her story by simply stopping the telling. “Keine Geschichte ist wirklich zu Ende, habe ich vorhin gesagt, jede ist nur Teil einer größern Geschichte und besteht aus erzählten oder verschwiegenen kleinen Geschichten. Und in jeder von ihnen, ob man will oder nicht, erzählt man wortlos all die Schatten der anderen mit” (197; “I said before that no story is ever really finished, each one is part of a larger story and consists of smaller stories, some of which are told, others passed over in silence. And whenever you tell any one of the stories, whether you intend it or not, you include the shadow of all the others” 193). So stories are structured like matter, smaller particles comprising the larger ones, every particle the shadow of other particles, weaving an interrelated unity – “die Geschichte der Geschichten” (197; “the story of stories” 193). Subatomic physics and relativity provide useful metaphors for both the themes of postmodern fantastic narratives and such structural elements as the resistance to closure or the use of mise-en-abîme. The metaphorical connections far outnumber the few that have been suggested here, but the aim of this analysis is not an exhaustive one but simply the establishment of the notion that such a connection exists and is an interesting one to pursue. Of equal interest and value to this analysis of the fantastic is the prevalence of typically postmodern paradoxes in quantum physics.

Sometimes referred to as quantum weirdness, the appearance of paradoxes in quantum theory has the same effect as the fantastic moment in fantastic narratives. One hesitates to say that it triggers uncertainty because the kind of weirdness quantum paradoxes create is very different from Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. As unsettling as it is to learn that there is an essential limit to our ability to know, that concept is
relatively unambiguous in terms of its representation and interpretation. The kind of quantum weirdness one confronts because of quantum paradoxes is impossible to represent completely and accurately, partly because, as Capra notes, there is “no macroscopic analogue” (69), but also because of the nature of language itself. It has been suggested, in fact, that quantum theory has fuelled “the skepticism that... contemporary writers bring to language and representation in general” (Coale 431). Niels Bohr explains why: “Our perceptions have trapped our imaginations in a classical world where quantum events do not apply” (Bolles 270). The problem is not just with our perceptions but with the result that “[e]very word in the language refers to our ordinary perception” (Bohr, qtd. in Coale 431). Like the fantastic, quantum weirdness is a problem of perceptions compounded by the absence of language which could convey those problematized perceptions. Both perception and representation falter when confronted by the paradoxes of quantum weirdness or the postmodern fantastic moment. An attempt to signal the kinds of paradoxes which inhere in quantum physics will further demonstrate the relationship between quantum paradoxes and those of the fantastic.

As Capra points out, “[i]n atomic physics, many of the paradoxical situations are connected with the dual nature of light” (46). By dual nature, Capra means that light has been proven to be both a wave and a particle. That light behaves like waves has been well-known because of the way light diffracts when it bends around an obstacle like water waves bending around a rock on a lake’s surface. It was Einstein who proved that light is also particles, or photons, which can knock an electron out of its trajectory (as we saw with the problem of observation which is basic to Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle). This is the initial paradox which spawned others. The duality of light is a
problem that goes beyond simple naming. Physicists have coined a term that describes it—“wavicle” (Wolf, passim), but the words to describe a wavicle so that it can be imagined do not exist. A particle exists at a single point in space. A wave is diffused over a large area. A particle can be treated as matter, but a wave is not matter but the movement of matter. One simply cannot picture what light is. Quantum theory makes no “...concessions to visualization” (Capra 145). Moreover, this dual nature of light applies to all subatomic particles. All matter and energy at the quantum level have both a wave nature and a particle nature. However, one can only observe one aspect of a wavicle’s nature at a time. If one treats it as a particle, it behaves as a particle. If one sets up an experiment to observe its wave nature, it behaves as a wave. The observer establishes the nature of a quantum phenomenon by how he or she chooses to observe it.

This brings us to the observer effect, another quantum effect which cannot be represented. In a quantum system, there are superimposed a number of possibilities for an outcome. When a measurement or observation is made, all of these superimposed possibilities are reduced to a single state. Physicists refer to this as the reduction of the wave packet or the collapse of the wave function. How this comes about, however, is unknown. As Fred Wolf writes, “there is at present no physical mathematical way to model the process. It takes place in a completely nonphysical manner” (Dreaming 161). The reason there can be no understanding of how this happens, Wolf goes on to say, is because quantum physics is “based on a mathematical framework of unobservable entities” (161), the most fundamental of which is the quantum wave function, a mathematical function represented by a complex number (meaning both real and imaginary!). The quantum wave function’s dual nature, real and imaginary, means it is
unobservable. Another paradoxical aspect of the wave function is that, in order for a quantum probability function to specify the likelihood of a specific event, it must be multiplied by another wave that runs backward through time. These two counter-streaming waves are multiplied to arrive at what physicist John Cramer calls a transactional interpretation. The implication is that future events generate backward-running quantum wave functions. The result is that forward-moving quantum wave functions and backward-running quantum wave functions must meet: “The significant thing of it all, besides its bizarreness, is that two events are required before there is actually one event” (Wolf, *Dreaming* 164). Physicists like Fred Wolf who are interested in the nature of consciousness have suggested that this “offer-echo quantum-physical mechanism” is what constitutes consciousness. In summary, the dual nature of light requires the observer effect. The observation dictates the observed aspect of light: particle or wave. The observer effect also requires an explanation of what happens to other possibilities at the moment of observation, the collapse of the wave function. From there, we arrive at the paradoxical need for backward and forward running waves to create the single event. This is only one path leading from the duality of light. More paradoxes can be found down other paths.

The paradoxical nature of the wavicle is not just in how one observes it. It is inherent in it. This is shown in an experiment where light is passed though two slits to form a diffraction pattern on a distant surface. If the light is so dim that it is passed through one photon at a time, the same diffraction pattern typical of waves will still gradually build up. However, if one covers up one slit or the other each time a photon passes through, the two-slit diffraction pattern does not build up. Both slits must be open
when a single photon passes through one or the other slit in order for the diffraction pattern to emerge on the distant surface. The only explanation for this phenomenon is that each single photon “must somehow sense both slits, like a wave, even though it is recorded on the [distant surface] like a particle” (Rothman 179). This is not a matter of a particle being carried on a wave. Each particle behaves like a wave. This is beyond visualization. It also suggests a relationship between particles somewhat like instantaneous communication, and by that one must mean faster than light, something which is regarded as a physical impossibility. This brings us to the “EPR”-type paradoxes. In 1935, Einstein, Podolsky, and Rosen wrote a paper that indicated a new and unexpected aspect of nature— “an apparent need, at some deep level, for strong instantaneous actions over large distances” (Stapp 5). This conclusion arises from quantum theory predictions in special experimental conditions where experimenters perform simultaneous observations in separated spaces within a single extended system. The pair of measurements indicates a connection between the outcomes. The original intention of the EPR paper was to prove that no instantaneous action at a distance is possible. The results were the opposite. It triggered a debate that was resolved in 1964 by Bell’s theorem, a complex mathematical construct which is widely regarded as indecipherable to non-physicists. Bell proved that the strange connectedness of physically separated quantum phenomena is not an accidental feature of quantum physics but that “at a deep and fundamental level, the ‘separate parts’ of the universe are connected in an intimate and immediate way” (Zukav 283). The double-slit experiment is only one example of this phenomenon. As Henry Stapp notes, “EPR-type paradoxes are not just freak anomalies in quantum theory: they pervade the theory” (8). As
paradoxical as it may seem, “faster-than-light (or backward-in-time) information transfer is in any case demanded by the statistical rules themselves” (Stapp 95). The other possible implication is that the notion of separate parts is actually illusory. In physics-speak, one would say that locality fails or that the principle of local causes fails. David Bohm states the case in more accessible terms: “one is led to a new notion of unbroken wholeness which denies the classical idea of analyzability of the world into separately and independently existent parts” (qtd. in Zukav 297). No wonder causality is problematized. No wonder play, that pleasant and instinctual activity through which we can experience an altered “between” perspective, is about movement back and forth between categories or opposing sides. It may represent an instinctive need to reify categories or separate parts, or it may be a means by which the human intellect can be led to confront the illusory nature of real categories or separate parts.

Before traveling too far down this path of philosophical implications, however, it would be wise to reassert the pervasiveness of paradox, in general, in quantum theory. Three pertinent and specific paradoxes have been outlined here, but countless others arise as one considers various implications of quantum theory. Bohr’s principle of complementarity, that “waves and particles represent complementary aspects of the same phenomenon” (Rothman 181), is the basic quantum paradox. One aspect always excludes the other but both are necessary to the nature of light. The sheer number of paradoxes in quantum theory suggests that it is our assumptions about what comprises exclusive binary opposites that are the basis of our inability to perceive the logic of these paradoxes. Zukav’s explanation for why this is so is elucidating in regards to both physics and the fantastic: “Whenever we bump into the limits of our self-imposed
cognitive reality, the result is always paradox” (136). Just a few more examples, which cannot possibly be discussed here in any great detail, demonstrate how limited our “self-imposed cognitive reality” must be. For example, quantum field theory juxtaposes two irreconcilable concepts – the quantum, a small piece of matter, and a field, a whole area of matter or energy (Zukav 200). While quantum theory predicts probabilities with an accuracy that proves its validity, one can never say that an atomic particle exists at a certain location or that it does not. The particle does not change its position, but it also does not stay at rest. One cannot describe a particle “in terms of fixed opposite concepts” (Capra 154). The relationship of the behaviour of subatomic particles to the behaviour of fantastic phenomena is at least isomorphous in regard to this one aspect of their status, or equally their non-status. The resistance to descriptions which rely upon binary opposition is troubling for those who wish to describe what they have learned about these phenomena, one “real” and the other “imaginary.” The orthodox view of quantum theory is that, just like the real and imaginary mathematical quantum wave function, the physical world is both matter-like and idea-like (Zukav 81). Also, because of the observer effect, “the ‘in here – out there’ distinction may not exist!” (Zukav 92). What is “out there” may only exist “in here.” In quantum mathematical formulations, nothing is either “this” or “that.” “This” and “that” are always superimposed such that the result is a coherent superposition which is neither “this” nor “that.” Zukav argues that this mathematical aspect of quantum physics mimics experience. While our thinking “illusorily limits us to a perspective of either/or,” experience usually provides other alternatives (271). Thus, quantum physics espouses such paradoxes as massless particles, quantum fields and wavicles. As Capra states:
Examples of the unification of opposite concepts in modern physics can be found at the subatomic level, where particles are both destructible and indestructible; where matter is both continuous and discontinuous, and force and matter are but different aspects of the same phenomenon. In all these examples ...it turns out that the framework of opposite concepts, derived from our everyday experience, is too narrow for the world of subatomic particles” (Capra 149).

Even the Heisenberg uncertainty principle results in paradox. Our observations disturb, or possibly even create, the physical world, so we cannot be passive observers. We are active even when we think we are passive. Any attempt to understand the world creates a new situation which requires further observation. We are caught in another paradox. The sound of one hand clapping has never been louder.

Gary Zukav very boldly states that “[t]he major contribution of quantum mechanics to western thought... may be its impact on the artificial categories by which we structure our perceptions, since ossified structures of perception are the prisons in which we unknowingly become prisoners” (200). Clearly, the agenda of modern physics fits well with the strategies of postmodern writing which self-consciously transgresses categorization. It also fits well with the fantastic that is consistently resistant to categories, boundaries, or any “structure of perception” which allows the protagonist to see the monster as other, object, out there, unreal, impossible, or belonging to any category which prevents it from being "I." Finally, the paradoxical nature of quantum physics points to a reason why one might be driven to rehearse the playful back-and-forth movement inherent in games like the interpretation of fantastic narrative. The need to
transgress categorical limits may be an inherent aspect of our drive to understand the world around us.

But how do quantum paradoxes appear in fantastic texts? In a general way, they apply metaphorically to any transgression of the illusory boundaries between artificial binary opposites.6 The wavicle can serve as a metaphor for any situation where one is simultaneously subject and object, singular and hybrid, dead and alive, or active and passive. Since the emergence of quantum physical concepts in the popular imagination, however, one finds more and more examples of quantum paradoxes being thematized. A fine example of this kind of fantastic narrative is David Lynch’s *Lost Highway* (1997). It thematizes the three major paradoxes which appear at the beginning of this discussion: namely, the dual aspect of matter; the transactional interpretation, in which both backward-running and forward-running quantum waves are required to meet in order for there to be an event; and EPR-type paradoxes, which seem to require faster-than-light communication which indicates, in turn, that separate parts of the universe are not separate at all.

David Lynch once noted in an interview that *Lost Highway* is structured like a Möbius strip; one arrives at the opposite side of the point from which one departs by appearing to travel forward along a single path. He also suggests that it is the story of parallel identity crises (Lynch). All of this may be true, but a clearer description of what it is is found in its title. How can a highway be lost? This film is about paradox.

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6 This metaphorical relationship between quantum paradoxes and the postmodern reconsideration of binary opposites supports the notion that, despite the fact that the majority of scientists refer to quantum theory as modern physics, the uncertainty principle and chaos theory are actually “manifestations of Post-Modern science” (Jencks 58).
The film begins with a moving point of view illuminated by a car’s headlights. We are moving down an old two-lane highway. This point of view returns throughout the film, reminding us that we are moving down a path which is itself lost. The headlights fade to darkness from which emerges the image of a man sitting on his bed smoking. This is Fred Madison. He hears the doorbell ring, goes to the intercom, and hears a voice say: “Dick Laurent is dead.” This is the moment the opposite side of which we will return to at the end of the film. In between “then” and “now,” we will see Fred and his wife, Renée, victimized by an unknown observer who leaves videotapes. On these videotapes, we also see Fred and Renée sleeping, filmed from an impossible angle, Fred “waking” to observe the observer (which he does not recall), and Fred apparently brutally murdering Renée (which he also does not recall). The overall effect of these scenes is to suggest that Fred, like Renée, is the victim of the observer who somehow makes the murder true by observing it, a nod to the quantum mechanical observer effect. After Fred is arrested, while on death row, he suddenly becomes Pete Dayton, a garage mechanic, who now has no recollection of how he came to be on death row. He is released. At work at the garage, he meets Alice, who looks exactly like Renée except she is now blonde rather than brunette and she looks much younger. Alice draws Pete into an affair in order to manipulate him into killing her boyfriend, Mr. Eddy. First, they kill another wealthy acquaintance to get the money to run away together. When they go to fence what they have stolen, they are directed to a cabin out in the desert where things become even stranger. As they wait for their fence, they start to make love on the ground in the light of the car’s headlights. Alice suddenly gets up and leaves. Pete stands up in the glare of the headlights where we can see that he is now Fred. Fred escapes from the
desert and finds himself in a hotel, which Pete visited in what seemed like a dream sequence, where he encounters Renée with Dick Laurent who turns out to be Mr. Eddy. Fred appears to kill Dick Laurent, but the murder may have been committed by a Mystery Man who moves about instantaneously in time and space. However it happens, Fred is left holding the gun. He drives up to his own house, rings the doorbell, and says into the intercom, “Dick Laurent is dead.” We have arrived at the beginning at the end. In amongst these already bizarre story events, we meet the Mystery Man, who can be in two places at once and can move between locations instantaneously. We also see characters like Pete Dayton and his parents struggling with apparent time warps and/or invisible events. People fail to see people who are there or hear people who are not there. This is all done very subtly with alternating point of view shots. Renée and Alice appear and disappear in a photograph. Pete Dayton’s parents, who saw what happened the night he “became Fred” cannot say what happened because, even though they saw it, they cannot say what it was that they saw. The film is fraught with paradoxes that defy description because “this” is always superimposed on “that.” One can, however, break down the paradoxes into the three previously mentioned.

The dual nature of matter finds its expression in the dual nature of Fred/Pete and Renée/Alice. Fred is Pete in that they occupy the same space simultaneously. When Fred is himself, he exhibits only the attributes of Fred. When he is Pete, he can only be described as Pete. They are mutually exclusive, yet to understand the story line they must be treated as one entity. In the same way, Renée and Alice are two complementary aspects of one phenomenon.
Secondly, the initial scene, which seems to trigger the murders of Dick Laurent and Renée, is actually the result of their murders. The structure of the plot mimics the requirements of the transactional interpretation of quantum waves. An event in the future must send waves backward in time to meet the forward-moving waves of the initiating event in order for there to be any event at all. Dick Laurent is only dead because Fred told himself that Dick Laurent is dead.

Finally, the Mystery Man, who moves at faster-than-light speeds and occupies two locations at once, provides the clue as to how Renée can be Alice and Fred can be Pete. Like the EPR-paradox, which results in Bell’s theorem, the Mystery Man leaves no doubt that “the ‘separate parts’ of the universe are connected in an intimate and immediate way” (Zukav 283). Renée is Alice and Fred is Pete because all is one unbroken whole. In *Lost Highway*, the appearance of subatomic phenomena at the macroscopic level is truly uncanny in the sense that Freud gives to the word: it is both hidden and manifest and also both familiar and strange. The film ends with a close-up of Fred. His face is contorted into a scream. Microscopic phenomena are meant to stay microscopic. When the Mystery Man behaves like an electron, he becomes strange and frightening. From this perspective, the implied unity of the universe appears quite troubling. When one ponders the paradoxes of quantum phenomena within their proper context, however, the unity of everything is not so appalling.

Zukav’s notion that the experiences which bring us to the limits of our “self-imposed cognitive reality” always result in paradox is the key idea which links physics to the postmodern fantastic text. In the classical fantastic text, the basic paradox is supplied by Caillois’s summary of the reader’s state of mind – “I don’t believe in ghosts, but I am
afraid of them.” It is the juxtaposition of contradictory intellectual and visceral experiences. Or, paradox exists as described by Freud’s description of the uncanny: the fantastic phenomenon is simultaneously hidden and exposed, strange and familiar. The postmodern fantastic text makes this kind of paradox structural. The text may be a parody at the same time that it makes truth claims. The television show Fringe, for example, attempts the same kind of conspiracy atmosphere that fed The X-Files’ cult following, but it simultaneously signals its relationship to The X-Files through similar title sequences and stock characters. This suggests that Fringe is a response to another fiction more than it is a response to reality, yet it still has its fantastic moments. Postmodern fantastic texts, such as Lost Highway, can also thematize paradoxes by having characters experience paradox as the fantastic phenomenon itself. One can be both Pete and Fred. One can travel forward to arrive in the past. One can be both here and there. In all of these fantastic takes on paradox, postmodern or otherwise, the problem is the juxtaposition of binary opposites and the need to not decide between them, to experience them both without experiencing either at the expense of the other.

The weirdness which occurs when one compares physics paradoxes to fantastic paradoxes is that this juxtaposition creates yet another paradox. The fantastic undoes the binary opposition of possible and impossible. Physics, which has no other purpose than to describe the universe as it is, now posits that the universe, at the microscopic level, what we once thought was its most basic level, is indescribable, and this is the description it supplies. What are the implications for the possible/impossible paradox of fantastic narratives? Even in the everyday realm of the possible, the possible turns out to be
impossible. One can see how the binary oppositions which create these paradoxes have come to be suspect, both in physics and postmodern criticism.

At the end of chapter four, I noted that postmodern theory and game theory have much to say about how the fantastic functions. Modern physics, I suggested, might have something to teach us about why the fantastic mode is compelling. Why do readers return to that unsettling moment of hesitation? Why do the “best” fantastic tales prolong that hesitation? Why does the suspension between binary opposites suggest a desirable state? Could it be that being “unsettled” is more meaningful than being “settled”? Is motion not the natural state of all matter?

A number of physicists such as Fred Wolf and Gary Zukav and postmodern theorists like Christine Froula have seen the connection between the unsettling aspects of quantum physics and eastern mysticism. The same type of connection between the fantastic and eastern mysticism has been suggested in this analysis by repeated visits to the Mask of Eternity in the Shiva Cave at Elephanta. With the similarities between quantum paradoxes and fantastic paradoxes well-established, it is now possible to turn to another tie that binds quantum theory and the fantastic to eastern mysticism, the recurring problem which arises in the fantastic, in postmodern criticism, and in physics and which tends to result in paradox – namely, the problem of representation. The impossibility of representing any phenomenon that resides outside of the symbolic realm of binary opposites is rendered in a variety of ways in the fantastic. To review just a few, there is the problem of naming the phenomenon. Phenomena either remain nameless, like Frankenstein’s monster, have names that signal their un-nameability, like H.C. Artmann’s Dr. U (for Unspeakable), or, in a postmodern text like Lynch’s Twin Peaks, up-end the
un-nameable convention with a monster named Bob. Another signal of the difficulty of representation is the ellipsis or the sudden break in dialogue. Finally, in postmodern texts, there is the self-conscious grappling with representation’s failings. Pete Dayton’s parents in *Lost Highway*, who witness “what really happened,” simply choose to remain silent.

In physics, this failure of representation is signaled not by the absence of mathematical formulas that work – quantum physics has plenty of those – but by the inability of physicists to describe or interpret those formulas. In Heisenberg’s own words, “we have no idea in what language we must speak about processes inside the atom....I assume that the mathematical scheme works, but no link with the traditional language has been established so far” (qtd. in Froula 296). Even visualizations fail because of the absence of “macroscopic analogues” – that is, our everyday world fails to provide metaphors or analogies. This failure of representation, in both physics and the fantastic, is the faltering of language which eastern mystics attempt to teach through the use of the **koan**.

A **koan** is a nonsensical riddle with paradoxical content that cannot be solved by thinking. The whole point is to stop the thought process in order to prepare the student for an experience of reality that transcends the experience of verbal binary oppositions. The most famous **koan** is, of course: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” The goal is to create a sustained mental impasse in which all becomes uncertainty. The reason quantum physicists experience this impasse is because they are encountering phenomena that have no macroscopic analogues, no metaphorical equivalents in the world of our normal perceptions. There is no language for the experience. The use of language relies
upon a shared competence. An experience with no adequate analogy or metaphor cannot be shared except by a shared direct experience of the phenomenon. Language temporarily falters, and paradox emerges. It is the same quality of experience as when a fantastic protagonist encounters a phenomenon like Maupassant’s Horla – “it... but he...!” It is, but it cannot be. Again, the question arises – why do people seek this mental impasse, this gap in representation? Eastern mystics would say that it is the only way to experience anything in a non-verbal way, which is the whole point of being. In The Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna advises: “be in truth eternal, beyond earthly opposites” (qtd in Capra 145). Or, as D.T. Suzuki writes, “[t]he fundamental idea of Buddhism is to pass beyond the world of opposites... and to realize the spiritual world of non-distinction” (qtd. in Capra 146).

The Buddhist notion of polar opposites, so very different from the west’s binary notion of good vs. evil, is that they are always two aspects of the same phenomenon. One cannot exist without the other, though one excludes the other just as light is both a wave and a particle although a wave cannot be a particle. Niels Bohr, the formulator of this complementarity principle, adopted the Yin Yang symbol as his family crest for this very reason. The eastern view of opposites as complementary permits an understanding of the nature of light. In this eastern paradigm, the virtuous person does not strive for the victory of good over evil but for the balance between good and evil: “This notion of dynamic balance is essential to the way in which the unity of opposites is experienced in Eastern mysticism: It is never a static identity, but always a dynamic interplay between two extremes” (Capra 146, italics mine).

The dynamic unity of polar opposites is a back-and-forth movement, but it is also circular. As noted earlier, the circular movement between polar opposites, when viewed
from a 90° angle or projected onto a screen from the side, appears as a back-and-forth movement. By reversing this process and thinking about back-and-forth movements as actually circular, one has an image of the eastern view of the dynamic unity of opposites. By moving between them in a circular motion, one demonstrates that they are both aspects of the same phenomenon: “That the ‘that’ and the ‘this’ cease to be opposites is the very essence of Tao. Only the essence, an axis as it were, is the centre of the circle responding to the endless changes” (Chuang-tzu, qtd. in Capra 114).

Thus, the mental impasse of quantum physics, the suspension between opposites, the moment of fantastic hesitation – these all partake of the same strategy for the dynamic unification of binary opposites. Helene Diaz Brown’s description of the subject in play, moving towards unification through the bouncing movement between subject and object or active and passive, is another way of describing the same phenomenon.

In 1922, the young student Werner Heisenberg asked his then professor Niels Bohr how we can ever hope to understand atoms if we have no language to describe them. Bohr’s answer is a useful one, not only in terms of quantum physics but also in regard to any pursuit of sustained uncertainty: “I think we may yet be able to do so. But in the process we may have to learn what the word ‘understanding’ really means” (qtd. in Zukav 201). According to eastern mysticism, understanding means moving beyond paradox to a non-verbal state of awareness. The movement beyond paradox is a movement that redefines binary opposites as a unity and allows one to experience the interconnectedness of everything.

On that note, it is time to move on to the interconnectedness of the preceding chapters. Mark Danielewski’s House of Leaves (2000) demonstrates how each of the
theories discussed to this point has something unique to offer to an understanding of a fantastic text. Each highlights a different aspect of the same phenomenon, making all of the readings complementary readings. At the same time, each reading is its own phenomenon, a fact that the publishers of House of Leaves went to great trouble and expense to point out. Chapter Six revisits each theory in the context of this postmodern, fantastic romp through the physics of impossibility and the impossibility of physics.
Chapter Six

House of Leaves:
The Whole Fantastic, Postmodern, Playful, Quantum Experience

House of Leaves by Mark Z. Danielewski is a narrative that runs in so many directions at once that at no given point in the text can a reader be certain of his or her own position in relation to a beginning, a middle, or an end. When Johnny Truant describes his attempt to return to his beginnings – “I had no idea where I was in relation to what had once existed” (505) – or Will Navidson describes his endless freefall through his own house – “I’ve been falling down for so long it feels like floating up to me” (473) – the reader cannot help but empathize. This single vertiginous aspect of the experience of House of Leaves is the invitation which calls fantastic, postmodern, game and quantum theories all to the analytical table. As I picture these four analytical strategies gathered to feast on House of Leaves, I cannot help but think of the parable in which a visitor to hell witnesses a banquet where hungry and frustrated guests are forced to try to eat with three-foot-long spoons that prevent them from ever satisfying their hunger. A subsequent visit to heaven demonstrates the one minor change which allows everyone to be happy, satisfied, and successful. These strategies can only succeed if they feed each other.

For House of Leaves to be a fantastic text, it needs to fulfill certain requirements. Chapter One describes the fantastic mode in the following way:

In response to a philosophical climate in which the individual is aware of the need to rely on his or her own interpretation of experience in order to
form a reality, there arises a narrative mode in which the reader is forced, through the presence of ambiguously used motifs and conventions and through an identification with a character also undergoing an ambiguous experience of the apparently impossible, to hesitate between possible and impossible interpretations of a story event or events. (28)

The reader must identify with a character experiencing the impossible and, thereby, “hesitate between possible and impossible story events.” This hesitation is triggered by “ambiguously used motifs and conventions.” These qualities certainly inhere in House of Leaves, but the text’s status as an experimental novel also suggests that the overturning of fantastic conventions will be textual, having to do with its status as a book, as well as thematic. The sheer scope of the text and the excess of detail serve to make the repeatedly up-ended conventions too difficult to track. As a text that is about documentation as much as storytelling, House of Leaves achieves much of its mind-boggling effect from information overload. A brief look at the text’s structure explains why this is so.

House of Leaves repeatedly refers to its own inaccuracies. Almost every narrator refers at some point to his or her own unreliability. To describe the text is to fall into the same habit. The following description of the text’s narrative layers is both true and inaccurate, but only in the discussion of the postmodern aspects of the text is it necessary to explain why this is so. The text, or at least part of it, is a labyrinth, and, as the narrator Zampanò observes, to escape such a structure, “[w]e must be quick and anything but exhaustive” (115). The text is created from layers of responses to a film called The Navidson Record. In the description of the film, the reader meets the film’s narrator,
Will Navidson, a respected photojournalist. His forté, of course, is documentation. Navidson and his partner, Karen Green, and their two children move into a new home. One day, Will and Karen return from a brief holiday to discover a new space in their house. A new closet, measuring about 4’ by 5’, exists between their bedroom and the children’s. No other spaces seem to have changed. This brings about a spate of measurings and re-measurings which ultimately culminate in the realization that the house is ¼” bigger on the inside than on the outside. Here is the impossibility. The characters respond with appropriate uncertainty and hesitation as they experience horror after horror, as they see the new closet expand to a hallway which moves from place to place in the house, as they explore the hallway and suffer its whims, and as they lose friends and family to the void within the hallway. The reader experiences hesitation in response to the strange labyrinth, but the reader does not necessarily derive all of his or her hesitation from identification with Will and Karen. Neither is a sympathetic character, but the larger problem is the manner in which their story is told. The reader, of course, cannot see the film. It is described to the reader by the narrator Zampanò. Zampanò, one learns, has also never seen the film because he is blind. He also undercuts the momentum of the narrative with constant asides such as a discussion of the mythical/physical import of echoes, Karen Green’s medical records, or the academic response to the film (apparently graduate students find it suitable material for dissertations). These asides, which prolong uncertainty but also diminish identification with the characters, also undercut his reliability as seriously as does his blindness (which the reader is tempted to disbelieve because his discussions of camera angle and lighting are so compelling). For example, two different theorists’ works are introduced with a
clear admission that they have never been read. The fictional Mia Haven’s article is framed by the words “...as her treatment is difficult to find and purportedly exceeds 180 pages, it is only possible to summarize the contents here” (398). At the same time, Zampanò’s asides include accurate descriptions of Heidegger’s definition of the unheimlich as well as Harold Bloom’s analysis of Freud’s unheimlich (359). For the uninitiated, these asides function at the same level as the non-existent ones he “summarizes.” Zampanò’s main tactic, however, is overdocumentation. His approach to scholarship is more aesthetic than factual (much like the fantastic’s approach to “what really happened”), and he admits as much (in a footnote, of course): “[Pollit’s analysis] is a remarkable example of brilliant scholarship and exemplary synthesis of research and thought.... Unfortunately almost everything he concludes is wrong” (21, note 26). Being wrong does not diminish the value of the scholarship. The same can be said of Zampanò’s own highly entertaining footnotes. Like the magician, however, he entertains by misdirecting our attention.

Zampanò’s is only the first layer of narration outside of the film. Zampanò himself dies, and Johnny Truant, while rifling through Zampanò’s personal effects for valuables, comes across the unfinished collection of artefacts that would become Zampanò’s narration. For Truant, this box of artefacts comprises the impossibility or, more aptly for Truant, the “monster” or the “other”: “I know a moment came when I felt certain its resolute blackness was capable of anything, maybe even slashing out, tearing up the floor, murdering Zampanò, murdering us, maybe even murdering you. And then the moment passed.... So I took it home” (xvii-xviii). At this point, Zampanò had just been found dead in his apartment. Also found were six-inch gouges clawed into the floor
but no marks on Zampanò’s body, every opening to the apartment sealed off, and measuring tapes attached to every surface. Just as the impossibility moves from *The Navidson Record* to Zampanò’s narrative, the unreliable narration also moves from Zampanò to Truant. Even in describing Zampanò’s apartment, when he claims to be trying his best, Truant cannot say what he actually saw: “Which still isn’t entirely accurate, though don’t be misled into thinking I’m not trying to be accurate” (xvi) or, “But that’s probably wrong too” (xvi). Truant’s contribution to the Navidson story is mostly a series of long, inter-related accounts of his own drug-induced hallucinations, sexual exploits, and gradual emotional breakdown, which he associates with his exposure to Zampanò’s narrative. He threatens the reader with the observation that the reader is holding his manuscript just as he held Zampanò’s, and the reader will suffer for it as he did: “...you’ll watch yourself dismantle every assurance you ever lived by. You’ll stand aside as a great complexity intrudes, tearing apart, piece by piece, all of your carefully conceived denials, whether deliberate or unconscious” (xxiii). Thus, the monster moves to the level of Truant’s manuscript, and the unreliability, in lock-step one level from the impossibility, comes to rest at the level of the reader. The horror moves gradually outwards through levels of unreliable narration until it reaches the actual reader who eventually becomes the monster itself: “you’ve got... to face the thing you most dread... the creature you truly are, the creature we all are, buried in the nameless black of a name” (xxiii).

This is a classic fantastic dynamic – the approach of the monster through narrative layers. The suggestion that the horror is the book itself is reminiscent of Koji Suzuki’s *Ring* or Elizabeth Kostova’s *The Historian*, narratives discussed earlier in reference to
Freud’s unheimlich. In both of those texts, however, there is a single threat that uses narrative as a means of attack. In Ring there is a virus. In The Historian, the monster is Dracula. In House of Leaves, the monster is the house itself, the house of leaves, the leaves of the book, the book in one’s hands. It is not a monster which intrudes, according to Truant; rather, it is complexity which intrudes, and its intrusion is suggested by the “pause” symbol one finds on the inside of both the front and back covers of the book itself. Its intrusion is into another narrative, the reader’s life, which is paused and then resumed as one begins and finishes the text. Where exactly the text begins and ends, however, is never clear. The boundary between the fiction within and the reality without is blurred by further layers of editing, publishing, and printing, all of which show signs of being tampered with by the force of the fiction within. For example, in a footnote on page four, the reader is introduced to “The Editors” who explain that Zampanò’s notes are in Courier font while Truant’s are in Times. They fail to mention the name of their own font. These editors are also contributing to the meaning of the text. At one point, they correct a typo with no explanation of their authority to do so – a typo that summarizes the essence of the experience of Zampanò’s/ Truant’s/ the reader’s horror. Zampanò’s manuscript reads: “Whatever comes for those who are never seen again has come from him, and Jed can do nothing...” (151). The footnote, attached to the word “from,” reads, in the editors’ font: “Typo. Should read ‘for’.” Given Truant’s warning that we must face the creature that we all are, and given the valid argument of such theorists as Vax who claim that it is the fearful victim who creates the terror, this is a typo of great import indeed. These editors are as unreliable as Truant and Zampanò; it is arguably more accurate to continue to read “from.” Why do the editors correct this
particular typo? Truant either corrects or at least notes the others (373, 401, 539). Like the unreliable narrators at every other level of the story, these editors clearly have their own agenda.

One effect that these unreliable editors have is to lead the reader further outwards, towards the covers of the text and all the “reliable” information they must contain. In the credits at the back of the book, a legal aspect of any text which quotes from other texts, as this one does copiously, the reader will find the following credit hidden among the “legitimate” ones: “Special thanks to the Talmor Zedactor Depositary for providing a VHS of ‘Exploration #4’” (708). “Exploration #4” is one of Navidson’s non-existent films of the house. The publication information is also complicit. Also, though House of Leaves is a first edition, something which is important to one’s understanding of the complexity of its structure, the words “First Edition” are in red font and crossed out, as are all of the words in the text which Truant felt Zampanò wanted to be deleted. The words “Second Edition” appear in black font on the title page along with the equally fictional “by Zampanò” and “with introduction and notes by Johnny Truant.” The publishers are complicit in the game of deception as well. The blurb on the inside jacket claims House of Leaves began as “a badly bundled heap of paper, parts of which would occasionally surface on the Internet.” This is Truant’s claim. Where does the fiction end? Might one also question the words “A Novel” on the front cover? This path clearly leads to the road of postmodern self-consciousness, but as in any escape from a labyrinth, backtracking is sometimes necessary. Before venturing too far down the postmodern path, a return to the discussion of fantastic conventions may be useful in confirming House of Leaves’s fantastic status for those who still hesitate.
Closely related to the convention of unreliable narration is the fantastic truth claim. Clearly, narrators who undercut their own reliability are unlikely to produce anything like a legitimate truth claim, but this convention is precisely what is at stake in the kinds of games being played on the jacket cover or publication page. An ambiguous truth claim is a potent tool for prolonging hesitation, and a quick visit to any *House of Leaves* chat forum on the internet will readily prove the efficacy of this kind of truth “hint.”

Since each level of narration suggests its own take on impossibility, the truth claims in *House of Leaves* refer to different aspects of the text. The “original” impossibility, or even the most embedded impossibility if one views the structure of the text as a sort of mise-en-abîme, is the ¼” difference which makes the inside of the house larger than the outside. To confirm this aspect of the story, we have Navidson’s reputation as a photojournalist, his brother’s years of experience as a builder, and the advice of an engineering professor at UVA to document the accuracy of the measurement. This appearance of reliability is undercut by several observations. Zampanò suggests that the first version of Navidson’s documentary, a short film entitled “The Five and a Half Minute Hallway,” is “a five and a half minute optical illusion barely exceeding the abilities of any NYU film school graduate. The problem, of course, was the accompanying statement that claimed all of it was true” (4). The reliability of Navidson’s truth claim is further undercut by Truant who tells the reader, before even beginning Zampanò’s account of the film, that “The Five and a Half Minute Hallway” does not exist (xix). According to Truant’s disclaimer, most of Zampanò’s commentary is also fictitious. Truant claims to have contacted the famous people quoted by Zampanò,
none of whom had ever heard of Will Navidson or Zampanò. Even the books cited in the
footnotes are a combination of real and fictitious, as Truant accurately points out. Truant
concludes his disclaimer by pointing out his own mistakes and those by Zampanò which
he failed to notice and noting that “there’s suddenly a whole lot here not to take too
seriously” (xx). Yet, the novel is a record of fictitious and real people doing just that.
The over-documentation, the “faux” academic approach to every detail, the superfluity of
detail all add up to create a sort of group mentality in which the reader is meant to get
captured. It works. Another visit to a House of Leaves chat forum finds real people
searching libraries for clues to sources. The reader is told that it is not true, but
ultimately it does not matter. The textual element with which the reader identifies is the
fictive group response to the film. Do I believe in The Navidson Record? “Non, mais
j’en ai peur.” Truant sums this up best: “See, the irony is it makes no difference that the
documentary at the heart of this book is fiction....The consequences are the same” (xx).

One must note, however, that it is not just the impossible house at the heart of the
documentary – this ¼” – which is the “the monster.” This particular impossibility is
strangely wedded to a mysterious growl heard inside the hallway/labyrinth. The strange
deaths of members of the exploration expeditions indicate that there may be a monster,
but no evidence is ever documented that there is one. Again, this all occurs within the
fictive Navidson Record, but the debate surrounding the growl is one that the reader
understands. This debate is presented as a classic moment of fantastic hesitation; thus,
the traditional protagonist’s hesitation has been replaced with an account of academia’s
interpretive response – a hesitation with which the reader can readily identify: “Lantern
C. Pitch a[ ]d Kadina Ashbeckie stand on opposite ends of the spectrum, one favoring an
actual monster, the other opting for a ratio[...]l explanation. Neither one, however, succeeds in [...] a definitive interpretation” (335). The gaps in the text represent places where Truant claims ash has fallen on the manuscript. They serve both as an unexplored reference to the point in The Navidson Record when Will Navidson reads House of Leaves by the light of its own burning pages – more of this impossibility later – and as a nod to Wolfgang Iser and every other theorist who has ever noted the interpretive gaps filled in by reader response. It is a reminder, like Mirandolina’s disclaimer in Der Ruinenbaumeister, that every good story leaves things out. Even more than that, the gaps are a very visual reminder that fantastic hesitation, regardless of its academic veneer in this case, is the result of an absence at the heart of the symbolic. There is no “what really happened” in the story; at best, the story wraps itself around a space where “what really happened” pretends to be.

The fantastic hesitation suggested by this academic debate functions through identification with the interpretive group (from fictive academics to overly zealous chat forum members), but it also functions by superimposing two opposite strategies. The gaps point to absence of information, while over-documentation suggests too much information. A footnote on the same page as the description of the Pitch/Ashbeckie debate directs the reader to another text on “the perils of disbelief” (335 note 293). The obviously fictive names, which allude to light, sight, fire, and ash, all thematically attached to the experience of the house’s total lack of light, and the suggestion that this part of the manuscript was being read at one point by the light of a fire function in opposition to each other. The “reliability “of academic authenticity is being held up as proof even as it is undercut. The suggestion that this manuscript may have been the one
that Navidson read in the darkness of the labyrinth by burning the manuscript itself is undercut by the realization that, according to the manuscript, he did, in fact, burn the entire manuscript in order to read it (467). The mixed signals are classic in their ambiguity at a point in the text when one wishes to know what really happened. Thus, the truth claim, as a convention, appears as academic debate, and then disappears into ambiguity. The connection between the overturning of conventional truth claims and the way in which the text’s fictionality overflows the bounds of the body of text to appear in the publication information and on the jacket cover is a connection visited by Zampanò in one of his lengthier digressions in the heart of Chapter Nine.

Chapter Nine of *House of Leaves* is structured like a labyrinth. The layout mimics the Escher-esque qualities of the house itself. Following footnotes can lead down paths so tangled as to be almost impossible to retrace. Turning from one page to the next, the reader is never certain that a pivotal point has not been bypassed or overlooked in the tumble of information. The pages contain “windows” full of architectural information, the reverse sides of which show the “back” view of the words. Some of these windows are framed by words that can only be read with a mirror and are propped up by columns of text or footnotes. One footnote, number 167, which lists numerous literary hauntings, appropriately refers only to itself and appears in four columns over four pages which repeatedly change direction to form a sort of Möbius strip. If this chapter were a film, one would say that the production values are very high indeed. Yet, the content of the main text is a discussion of how high production values reduce an audience’s willingness to believe in the content of a film. Cinéma vérité is presented as being the opposite end of the production value spectrum. We are told this is Will Navidson’s method – “a
refusal to tamper with life as it presents itself” (139). Zampanò makes a clear connection between production values and the audience’s faith in the filmmaker’s “authenticity.” Higher values mean less faith. Lower values mean more faith. The reader of House of Leaves is caught between the purportedly low production values of The Navidson Record, which does not exist, and the high production values of House of Leaves, which does exist but claims truthfully that The Navidson Record does not. The paradox is summed up by Zampanò’s reference to MIT professor William Mitchell and his work The Reconfigured Eye, both of which are not fictive: “Ironically, the very technology that instructs us to mistrust the image also creates the means by which to credit it” (qtd. in Danielewski 144). Ultimately, one realizes that the production values, like the truth claim to which they contribute or from which they detract, can be yet another convention to be manipulated. Zampanò’s constructed commentary points to the power of conventions to misdirect: “As Sonny Beauregard quipped: ‘Were it not for the fact that this is a supreme gothic tale, we’d have bought the whole thing hook-line-and-sinker’” (147). Conventions help readers to decide. The reader’s choice is what is at stake: “As Murphy Gruner might have observed: ‘Rumpled vs. Slick. Your choice’” (147, note 193). Therein lies yet another link between the fantastic element and the postmodern structure – “Your choice.” Still, this window to the postmodern is just a glimpse down a path yet to come. The fantastic path has yet more to offer.

Apart from the layers of unreliable narration and ambiguous truth claims, the fantastic also relies on two more conventions – the problem of naming and the isolation of the protagonist. House of Leaves revels in both. If the possibility of impossibility travels through the tangential relations among the house, the House of Leaves, the leaves
of the book, and the book itself, to the reader, then the problem of naming must travel with it. The house is never called anything but “the house,” but the word “house” always appears in blue, much like an e-mail address in a computer-generated text. The suggestion is that it is only a virtual address; it only exists discursively. Yet, this blue marker is used for houses that do exist; it is used any time the word “house” or its equivalent in French, Latin, or German occurs. It does not matter if it refers to a publishing house in a fictive footnote or Random House on the back cover; it is always blue. In the index, “house” (blue) has a long list of entries while “house” (black) has the single entry “...DNE,” which one assumes means “does not exist,” though, truthfully, that is only an assumption. The same blue/black pattern appears for maison, haus, and domus. By crossing between languages and between houses that do and do not exist outside of the discursive experience of this novel, the blueness of “house” suggests a troubling relationship between words and things. The blue print of the word “house” suggests that the word itself is the blueprint for the house, for any house. It takes part in a wider semiotic debate without settling anything. In short, the reader’s perception of the house is problematized by its “naming.”

Zampanò, the victim of the film (but not the victim within the film), is the “other” who unsettles Johnny Truant. Truant is plagued by a fear of the growl of the house which he attaches to the claw marks in Zampanò’s apartment, but it is Zampanò himself whom Truant blames for his own altered state, and it is Zampanò who takes over Johnny Truant’s reality. Like Zampanò, Johnny barricades himself in his apartment, attaches measuring tapes to every surface, and isolates himself from everything but the manuscript. This replaying of the hybridization of monster and victim, so typical of the
best fantastic tales, marks Zampanò as the monster in the Zampanò/Truant dynamic. So what is un-nameable about Zampanò? First, there is no evidence that this is his name; Truant never finds any ID or proof of any kind that Zampanò is “An-Actual-&-Accounted-For person” (xii). Truant speculates that the name is made up, “a nom de plume or – my personal favorite – a nom de guerre” (xii). Though Truant is an articulate and culturally literate person, he does not speculate further. This is just the sort of interpretive game that the reader is invited to play throughout this text. Zampanò is a blind film critic. From where would he take his name? Fellini’s _La Strada_, perhaps?

Fellini’s Zampanò is indeed a monster who also ends up isolated, perhaps repentant, but truly alone. Truant’s Zampanò is ultimately abandoned by even his cats. His real name is apparently kept from the reader, if he even has one, and the name he is given is only intended to trouble the reader’s perceptions of him. The possibility that his name is thematically appropriate suggests an allegorical reading, which would negate the fantastic effect, but the text functions perfectly well without the suggestion of allegory if the allusion goes unnoticed.

Next in the progression of monsters is Johnny Truant himself. Like Maupassant’s _Horla_, Truant has a name which invokes absence. He also occupies the place of the monster when the fantastic impossibility moves from the Zampanò/Truant dynamic to the Truant/reader dynamic. Truant himself traces the movement of the “other” from _The Navidson Record_ to Zampanò to himself to the reader when he imagines Zampanò’s box of clippings “murdering Zampanò, murdering us, maybe even murdering you” (xvii). He also imagines the reader, the nameless “you” as a creator of the text who will pass it along to the next level when the nameless reader becomes the monster – “the creature
you truly are, the creature we all are, buried in the nameless black of a name” (xxiii). His imagining of this shift of the reader from victim to monster is quite real to him: “With a little luck, you’ll dismiss this labor, react as Zampanò had hoped, call it needlessly complicated, pointlessly obtuse, prolix – your word – ridiculously conceived...” (xxii, italics mine). As the word “prolix” is put into the reader’s mouth, the dynamic shifts. Truant’s imaginings about the reader become somehow reified. This shift is a problem for the reader, however. The reader knows “prolix” is Truant’s word. What else might be? Truant confesses that he also puts words into Zampanò’s mouth, so to speak:

Zampanò only wrote “heater.” The word “water” back there – I added that.

Now there’s an admission, eh?

Hey, not fair, you cry.

Hey, hey, fuck you, I say. (16)

In fact, Truant, more than the house, more than Zampanò, is the pervasive presence in the text. This “truant presence,” a paradox in itself, is the most intrusive aspect of the text. As the text “progresses,” Truant becomes increasingly self-absorbed. The appendices attached to The Navidson Record are primarily about Truant and only occasionally about Zampanò and Navidson. Also, it is in these appendices that the reader finds the clearest suggestion that Truant is also a nom de plume – or as he would probably prefer – a nom de guerre. One letter from his mentally ill mother, which she may or may not have written – her writing style mimics the same degree of articulate cultural sophistication as one finds in Johnny’s writing – is dated 1988, when Johnny would have been a child. It is a limerick which begins, “The papers all say that ‘JOHNNY IS TRUANT!’” (631).
Truant’s name is thematically apt, and it is likely assumed. As with the isolated monster, Zampanò, the metaphorical name directs the reader towards an allegorical reading. Johnny’s friend, who introduced him to Zampanò’s story and, thereby, to The Navidson Record, is named Lude. Again, an apt name for a playboy. If one associates Lude too closely with Truant’s ability to play, one falls into allegory and the whole enterprise becomes psychological rather than fantastic. Yet, if one simply misses the allegorical names, one misses the realization that these monsters are as un-nameable, indefinite, and elusive as any other fantastic phenomena. One also has the option of recognizing the allegorical names but attributing them to meddling editors who may or may not have meddled with the “facts” of the story. What to make of the allegorical names becomes its own point of hesitation and thereby contributes to the fantastic effect. Also, the critical analysis that Zampanò quotes sometimes suggests metaphorical readings. These almost always come across as absurd, Jeffrey Neblett’s “The Illusion of Intimacy and Depth” from The Ladies’ Home Journal being an example (84, note 92). A metaphorical reading places the reader at risk of being perceived as equally absurd. Thus, the naming of the monster[s] leaves the reader in an ambiguous “in between” position, which is as fantastic as it needs to be.

The final fantastic convention which is pertinent to House of Leaves’ status as a fantastic text is the isolation of the protagonist. At each level of the monster/victim dynamic, the text provides a protagonist who is already isolated from society, but who becomes increasingly isolated as the experience progresses. At the house/Navidson level of the film, one finds Navidson, the respected photojournalist, whose nomadic life has literally isolated him from his own family. It is his reputation that makes him singular,
however. Karen asks him: “Why does it have to be the great Will Navidson who goes to the rescue?” Zampanò provides the answer: “because he is the great Will Navidson” (101). Navidson enters the house repeatedly, each time experiencing greater and greater isolation until, finally, as he freefalls alone through empty space, he muses: “Maybe that is the something here. The only thing here. My end” (472).

Zampanò’s experience of *The Navidson Record* shifts the monster/victim dynamic to the film vs. Zampanò. Zampanò, like his Fellini-esque namesake, is an isolated creature to begin with. His blindness reduces the scope of his world, but his experience of the film, whatever that consists of, literally isolates him within the perfectly measured walls of his apartment. Even his cats finally forsake him, as noted earlier. Zampanò claims, or rather claims that fictional experts claim, that other viewers of the film suffer similarly. Those who also read and write about the film sometimes suffer “anything from sleep disturbances to sexual dysfunction to poor rapport with others” (407).

Truant, who never sees the film because, as he points out, it does not exist, suffers the same symptoms. He also barricades himself in his room. He gives up his night life and his sexual exploits (296). He cannot sleep. A stripper, who had been his last obsession before he lost interest in everything but his own isolation/obsession tells him, more accurately than she knows: “If you want my opinion, you just need to get out of the house” (106). Even at this distant remove, this non-existent house isolates its victims before annihilating them. Truant, who does not suffer Zampanò’s ambiguous but final end, still ceases to be:
...I realize what I should of said – in the spirit of the dark; in the spirit of the staircase –

“Known some call is air am.”

Which is to say –

“I am not what I used to be.” (72)

Though the darkness here is black tattoo ink and the staircase is at the tattoo studio where Johnny works, all darkness is the darkness of the house and all stairs are the stairs of the house. The qualities of the house pervade any other site with those qualities just as the blue print of “house” becomes the blueprint for any house. Isolation spreads through all of the discursive levels. As each victim becomes, in turn, less reliable as the narrative shifts from respected photojournalist to blind film critic to psychologically unstable tattoo studio assistant, the isolation also becomes more and more tangible. As it shifts from the literal isolation of Navidson to the self-imposed isolation of Zampanò, to the psychological isolation of the abandoned child Johnny Truant, it loses none of its potency. The reader, the least defined, unnamed “you” at the next level becomes simultaneously the most unreliable and the most isolated link in the chain. Unsettling indeed.

A literal impossibility, unreliable and convoluted narration, un-nameable monsters, and isolated protagonists are all elements of a great fantastic read. However, a text as self-conscious as House of Leaves provides its own reasons for being read as a fantastic text. Apart from the overt suggestions provided by repeated discussion of the unheimlich, and a reference to M. R. James’ “Number 13” (502) – a classic, fantastic story about an expanding house, House of Leaves asks to be read as fantastic by the ways
in which it resists a fantastic reading. Navidson concludes his fantastic film with a shot of a Halloween parade. “In these final shots,” Zampanò writes, “Navidson gives a wink to the genre his work will always resist but invariably join” (527). In fact, it is by resisting the genre, that fantastic texts do join it. This is what the overturning of conventions is about. The same can be said for House of Leaves. A close look at the self-conscious, postmodern construction of the text will demonstrate the back-and-forth dynamic that feeds the fantastic effect by resisting it.

The structure of House of Leaves is as slippery as the structure of the house at its heart. It presents itself as a hallway, but those who enter that hallway soon find it expanding, snaking into labyrinthine paths, absorbing trail markers, opening into caverns, descending into an abyss, becoming a hellish, bottomless pit. The description of the text as layers of narratives which move inexorably toward the reader is true, but it is important to note again that it is also inaccurate. There is much evidence in the text to suggest that the novel is structured like the house because it is the house. The title is the first clue. House of Leaves, with no definite article to suggest that this is a book about a particular house, comes across more like a label than a title. One can picture it on display in an ESL classroom labeled like all the other items in the room – “window,” “desk,” “chalkboard,” “House of Leaves,” “door,” “hallway”.... The book is the house of leaves just as the leaves of the book are also a pile of leaves to be blown by the winds, traveling and landing haphazardly. Readers are encouraged to read them in any order. Direction is misdirection anyway. Different editions place the appendices in different orders or scattered throughout the text. Under “A Note On This Edition” on the publication page, one is made aware of a full-colour edition, a two-colour edition, a black and white
edition, and an incomplete edition, in which elements “may be missing.” Clearly, the book is meant to be as changeable as the house so that one can never feel that one has experienced it exhaustively. There is no closure; uncertainty is indefinitely prolonged.

Because *House of Leaves* is structured in such an unstructured way, it, of course, draws attention to its own constructedness in a very postmodern way. By using a mise-en-abîme pattern, in which the house recedes indefinitely in layers of narrative or pursues the reader indefinitely to any number of removes from the non-existent film, the text resists the closure which might resolve the fantastic hesitation. The mise-en-abîme pattern is not the only shape the text takes, however. That description alone is inaccurate. Like *Lost Highway*, it is also a Möbius strip. Like Fred, Johnny Truant finds himself in impossible positions in relation to the timing of story events. He also experiences lost time, but the more unsettling suggestion is that his future actions are creating his present and his past. He finds himself within a story that he has written. This relationship between the writer and the text simultaneously feeds the impossibility and provides a counter-fantastic metaphorical reading, which is closely related to the counter-fantastic psychological reading. All of this requires a closer look at Johnny Truant, the pervasive absence.

Truant describes his obsession with *The Navidson Record* and his relationship with Zampanò, whom he never met, in a way that suggests that he is reading the manuscript and absorbing Zampanò, but a later reference to the intimacy of this relationship suggests that Zampanò is an aspect of Truant: “He’s trapped inside me, and what’s more he’s fading, I can hear him just drifting off...” (338). There is no reason not to read Truant’s obsession with the manuscript as if he is writing it rather than reading it.
When the reader arrives at the appendices, which can be at any time, it becomes clear that the writer of the Pelican poems (named after Truant’s pen which gets the credit for “writing” them – troubling the notion of the “writer” even further) and the creator of Truant’s mother’s poetic avowals is more than capable of compiling Zampanò’s amusingly academic manuscript. The chemically-enhanced tattoo studio assistant prone to obscenities is only one of the many personae the reader sees Truant adopt. Characters who experience the house speculate that their presence is what triggers the changes in its structure. Its changes can be psychologically appropriate. They create it as much as they experience it. The same is true of Truant’s experience of Zampanò’s manuscript. When Truant loses time, “lost in the twist of so many dangerous sentences” (xviii), the reader does not know if Truant is reading or writing. Truant, even in his least articulate persona as Truant, presents himself essentially as a storyteller. He refers to his ability to weave an interesting story out of anything as “Verbal Ecstasy” (12, note 18). He uses it to charm women. Lude, his companion in this game of seduction, feeds him random phrases which he turns into tall tales. When Truant feigns an unwillingness to tell a story, Lude interjects: “No, Hoss, you’re wrong.... You must” (12). “You must” – the answer to the enigmatic question nestled between the introduction and *The Navidson Record*: “Muss es sein?” (“Must it be?”). Like most enigmas in *House of Leaves*, this one leads down as many different paths as one has the time and inclination to explore. My favourite is the allusion to Beethoven’s “String Quartet No. 16.” In the margins of his original notation for this quartet, Beethoven scribbled, “Muss es sein?” In the margins of the piece’s conclusion, “Der Schwer gefaßte Entschluß” (“The Difficult Resolution”), he answered, “Es muss sein!” (“It must!”). In *House of Leaves*, the
question appears to refer to the events of *The Navidson Record*. It suggests a query as to its validity. So many researchers, scholars, public personalities have responded to this film – *es muss sein!* Lude’s encouragement of Truant’s storytelling suggests another possibility. Must the entire text, from the introduction to the appendices, come into existence at all? Given Truant’s storytelling obsession, “*es muss sein!*” His obsession is not Zampanò’s manuscript, but *House of Leaves*, and he explores it from inside and outside, from every perspective and remove, just as Navidson explores the house. As already noted, the reader is made aware that Truant puts words into Zampanò’s mouth just as he puts words into the reader’s. There is no defined boundary that marks a point where Truant has come this far but no further. The problem with this reading of the text is that every layer of story in it, if told by Truant, is an attempt to ignore what really happened:

...do you really want to know what happened there? In my experience, most people don’t. They usually look away. My stories actually help them look away.

Maybe they even help me look away.

But I guess that’s nothing new. We all create stories to protect ourselves.

(20)

So, Truant is a damaged soul who tells stories in order to look away. The reader learns that Truant’s scarred arms are the result of an accident in which boiling oil was spilled on him when he was a young child. His mother, possibly in an attempt to save him more pain, tries to choke him to death. Or perhaps she does not; perhaps she is only wiping away his tears. When she is forcibly taken away from him, he remembers the moment as
a five and a half minute scream – the roar he has been remembering, which turns out to be a “sad call” (517). Thus, the “Five and a Half Minute Hallway” from The Navidson Record and the growl of the house are conflated into Truant’s painful memories. In the Pelican poem, “More than a café – un verre d’eau,” Pelican, whom Truant’s mother or perhaps Truant himself says is actually Truant, taps on the wall three times – “tap! tap! tap!” (580). This conflates him with Navidson who also uses three taps on the wall as a call for help. It is no wonder, then, that as he travels towards his childhood home, he finds “hints of Zampanò’s history by which [he means] Navidson” (501). Every layer is a story he tells to protect himself. But is that all? The mother is a pretty good story too. She is taken to an asylum called the Whalestoe. Whales do not have toes. Perhaps the asylum did not have his mother either. The psychological reading becomes as impossible to sort or define as the fantastic reading. If the house is a metaphor, it provides no more answers as to its nature than if it were a fantastic phenomenon, which we are told it is not by a storyteller who deceives to protect.

Ultimately, the fantastic reading and the counter-fantastic, metaphorical, psychological reading are simultaneously compatible and contradictory because House of Leaves, which toys with questions of what really happened, is not about what really happened at all. It is about telling, reading, imagining, and experiencing narrative. This explains the Möbius strip structure. It is true to say that The Navidson Record sits at the heart of House of Leaves, and the impossibility of that narrative moves toward the reader through Zampanò to Truant to the Editors to the reader. The house is one impossibility in The Navidson Record. The other is this. During “Exploration #5,” Navidson does his best to cope with freefall, darkness, and vertigo: “he turns his attention to the last possible
activity, the only book in his possession: *House of Leaves*” (465). Navidson runs out of light and reads by burning matches. He realizes he will run out of matches and so begins burning the book as well. His rate of reading starts to fall behind the rate of burn, perhaps because his reading is getting slower, or “maybe the words in the book have been arranged in such a way as to make them practically impossible to read” (467). This is surely the same *House of Leaves* with its labyrinthine Chapter Nine and “freefalling” Chapter Twenty. Yet, it is destroyed in Chapter Twenty, “leaving nothing behind but invisible traces already dismantled in the dark” (467).

Thus, the primary protagonist, Will Navidson, like Harold Krick in *Stranger than Fiction*, experiences the text from the inside and outside. If his knowledge of how the book ends has any effect upon him, we are never told. While *Stranger than Fiction* is almost entirely about a protagonist’s reaction to being written, here the reaction is bypassed completely. Only the effect on the book is noted – it ceases to be, like everything else that encounters the impossibility of the house. In *Stranger than Fiction*, it was the author’s reaction to encountering her creation in her own plane of existence that provided the fantastic effect. In *House of Leaves*, the “author,” Truant, also encounters his creation, but he is still writing. After hearing a band sing “I live at the end of a Five and a Half Minute Hallway,” Truant chats with the band members who say the lyrics were inspired by a book found on the internet. One musician hands Truant a copy of the book. Its title page reads, “*House of Leaves*, by Zampanò, with introduction and notes by Johnny Truant, Circle Round a Stone Publication, First Edition” (513). Truant, who seems to record in his journal every detail about his experience with Zampanò’s text, which is entitled *The Navidson Record* and not *House of Leaves*, has never mentioned
publishing it on the internet. This is news to him too. It appears to resolve itself somewhat in the fact that the copy of House of Leaves in the reader’s hands says “Second Edition” on the title page and is published by Pantheon Books, not Circle Round a Stone, but that title page is false. One might recall that the publication page has the information “First Edition” recorded under erasure (the repeated references to Derrida make this terminology apropos). The appearance of the internet story on the inside jacket cover just serves to confuse things more. Also, Appendix II claims that only the “following additional material” was added to the second edition (567), which would mean that the story of the band is in the first edition (which, of course, it was since there is only one edition). The unreliable editors who randomly change typos also have a say in this debate. In the foreword, they claim that the first edition was privately distributed and did not include the second and third appendices or Chapter Twenty-one. The hesitation, or confusion, this creates is reflected in Truant’s reaction: “I didn’t know whether to feel angry for being so out of the loop or sad for having done something I didn’t entirely understand or maybe just happy about it all” (514). In the face of this bizarre textual impossibility, Truant feels emotional ambivalence, a strange shadow of the fantastic hesitation that stops the protagonist or reader in his or her tracks. In a Möbius strip, “out of the loop” is a strange place to be. In fact, it is no place at all. In addition to being a story about story telling, House of Leaves is a book about not being anywhere. Whether one is neither inside the book nor outside of it, out of the loop or freefalling through Escher-esque space, in House of Leaves, one is never here nor there but always simultaneously somewhere “between” and nowhere at all. The experience is one of vertigo, which brings this analysis around to the notion of play.
If Johnny Truant is the pervasive presence and absence of *House of Leaves*, then Lude’s perception of him is apt. Truant says of Lude: “…he recognizes that I’m game for any mis-step he has in mind” (20). Lude is all about playing, and Johnny is always game. Truant makes it clear, as well, that stories are his game of choice. The drive to play, Truant’s obsession with stories, is a likely referent of the question “Muss es sein?” The answer, it appears, is “Es muss sein!” One must play. Play is a way of making meaning, choosing between options, coping with an absence of meaning, or even coping with either a lack or superfluity of options. *House of Leaves* is an invitation to play, and it offers every kind of game in Caillois’s anatomy of play.

Fantastic tales, I have argued, are unusual in that they break Caillois’s rule that one cannot play both “for real” and “as if.” Games of *agon*, competition, are incompatible with games of mimicry, or pretend. Yet, this is what is required of the reader/viewer of a fantastic narrative. One interprets the clues of the text in an agonistic attempt to conquer the text, yet, in order to feel the fantastic effect, one must identify with or mimic the protagonist and pretend to believe. The back-and-forth movement involved in this process can trigger vertigo, a lack of proprioception that allows one to position oneself in relation to other factors. *House of Leaves* allows the reader to engage in all three of these categories of play and also, to a limited but unprecedented degree, allows the reader to experience *alia*, Caillois’s fourth designation of play which refers to games of chance. The agonistic or interpretive aspect of this novel depends upon which edition one happens to find in one’s possession – this is not always a choice of the reader’s or it may be a choice made randomly. Also, even if one chooses the edition, the suggestion on the publication page that there is an incomplete edition which “may” have
parts missing leaves the reader in an uncertain position. Is it just chance that the reader has certain information and other readers do not? Does this change one’s interpretation? Is there a core unit of information found in every text that permits a core interpretation? Black and white editions have no blue house, though colour editions claim that a black “house” does not exist – “...DNE” (680). The notion that the house itself changes from edition to edition suggests that one’s experience of the text is meant to be as random as any experience of the fictional house. As with the house, the circumstances of its experience contribute to the shape the text takes. As *Stranger than Fiction* demonstrates so clearly when Harold Krick attempts to do nothing that would move the plot of his story forward, characters, authors, and readers are equally incapable of controlling all of the circumstances of the experience of a narrative. *Alia*, an unnamed presence in any interpretive act, is present in *House of Leaves* in an overt and active sort of way. This game is open to every mode of play, but who is playing?

If the enigmatic phrase, “Muss es sein?” queries one’s desire to play, the equally enigmatic dedication, “This is not for you,” becomes problematic indeed. To understand how this anti-dedication might function, apart from simple reverse psychology (which works), it is helpful to look more closely at which games are being played at different points in the text.

*Agon* is clearly relevant in any text that poses the question “What really happened?” *House of Leaves* frames this question over and over in reference to story events at every level of narration. Is there really a house with an expanding interior? Is there really a growling monster that kills Jeb and Holloway? Did Truant really find the manuscript or write it himself? Was there a Zampanò? Did Truant’s mother try to kill
him? Is there a Truant? Who are these editors? The questions move from the house to the film to the manuscript to the appendices until one realizes that the answers to the appendices’ questions already exist for Navidson as he reads *House of Leaves* inside the house. It may even be his psychological state brought about by the reading of the novel which contributes to the shape of the house and his experience of it. Clearly, the interpretive games end in paradox, what one might call intellectual vertigo, and vertigo is precisely what Navidson is experiencing physically as a result of the house. This intellectual vertigo brought about by interpretive games is one entry point by which the reader is able to enter into a game of mimicry, by identifying with Navidson’s vertigo, Zampanò’s fear of losing track of space, Truant’s fear of losing track of time, and even Karen Green’s fear of losing track of other characters. The back-and-forth movement between different levels of the narration and between opposing and irreconcilable interpretations of story events, many of them impossible, is what creates the fantastic hesitation. But who is intended to experience this hesitation, and why? Who is the “you” of the dedication? Is it the same “you” who comes up with the word “prolix”? If so, it is not the reader; it is the imagined reader of Johnny Truant’s invention. Thus, “you” becomes as much a mystery as Truant or Zampanò or the house. Like any monster, the reader becomes hybrid – part real, part imaginary. The truly unsettling effect of *House of Leaves* is exactly this suggestion. All experience is hybrid. All experience is play between the irreconcilable opposites “real” and “imaginary”: “Zampanò knew from the get go that what’s real or isn’t real doesn’t matter here. The consequences are the same” (xx). What *House of Leaves* suggests is that, regardless of what one places under the real category or the imaginary category, experience is the play between them. The play
between opposites is the process which fantastic hesitation brings to the reader’s attention, and it may be that this is the process which underlies more than narrative interpretation.

Modern physics operates under the belief that quantum physics is the most accurate tool for describing the processes that make up the physical universe. The basic unit of calculation for predicting outcomes at the subatomic level is the quantum wave function – a number which is part real and part imaginary. The metaphorical relationship between hybrid numbers and hybrid monsters is not, in itself, too intimidating; however, the number of parallels between subatomic phenomena and various aspects of *House of Leaves* does begin to accumulate into a daunting sum. The novel itself suggests that quantum physics is relevant for it is sprinkled with allusions to modern physics. The “Bister-Frieden-Josephson Criteria” sounds less like terminology from film criticism, which it alleges to be (394), and more like another milestone in quantum physics, like the Einstein-Podolsky-Rosen paper. Princeton’s literary theorist, Andrew Ross, is alleged by Zampanò to have compared the characters of *The Navidson Record* to electrons (364). A cognitive science professor at Indiana University discusses the physical paradox of Zeno’s arrow (356). Einstein and Richard Feynman are both quoted often enough to keep their ideas present in the reader’s mind (e.g., 370, 654). When British playwright, Byron Baleworth, is supposed to have said of the house, “The infinite here is not a matter for science. You’ve created a semiotic dilemma” (356), one cannot help but wonder of the novel if it is not more than a matter for semiotics – that is, also a scientific dilemma. Certainly, several of the quantum physical paradoxes which were used previously to demonstrate the relationship of the fantastic to subatomic “reality” (which means
“uncertainty”) have their counterparts in the structure of this novel. For example, House of Leaves uses a variety of fonts for text, journal entries, different editors, etc. In Chapter Nine, the labyrinth, as the footnotes get further and further from the main text, they become smaller. As smaller and smaller fonts lead the reader into more arcane lists and other deluges of information (e.g. 120-134, note 146), the reader may be tempted to believe that following the path of these footnotes will lead to the basic bit of truth that explains it all. What one finds, ultimately is not a bit of truth but “Truth & Truth” (144, note 187) – “the bifurcation of truth, with an ampersand tossed in for unity” (145, note 189) – which means nothing at all, although it is in the well-researched situation of being in a footnote within a footnote within another footnote which is in a footnote which is under erasure. To find nothing at all at the heart of these smaller subunits is like finding no matter at all at the heart of matter. It is all energy, process. Truant suspects this: “maybe nothing’s all – a pretty meaningless combination of words, ‘nothing’s all,’ but one I like just the same” (xiv).

Another quantum notion that House of Leaves echoes is Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle. It goes beyond fantastic hesitation. At one point, as the team prepares for “Exploration #4,” Jed sums up his navigation problem in terms of momentum and position. Heisenberg’s principle states that, at the subatomic level, one can know momentum or position but never both. Jed’s problem is that the house makes this true for the explorers at the macro level – “How can I know where to go [momentum] when I don’t know where we are [position]? I mean, really, where is that place in relation to here to us, to everything?” (94). Normally, when one is lost, these questions refer to a failure of measurement or technology. As in quantum physics, this particular uncertainty,
however, is an aspect of the thing itself. It does not permit measurement— it absorbs tracking line, moves walls, and expands and contracts space. Immeasurability is its nature. The subatomic principle reaches into everyday awareness.

The ramifications of relativity operate in *House of Leaves* as well. In reference to Will and Karen’s children, Zampanò writes: “They denied the paradox by swallowing it whole.... [C]hildren do not know the laws of the world well enough yet to fear the ramifications of the irreconcilable. There are certainly no primal associations with spatial anomalies” (39). The children have not yet finished constructing their physical reality; therefore, anomalies can be accommodated. The suggestion for adults is quite unsettling. Do I feel fear because of my understanding of constructs rather than my understanding of “reality”? It seems a naive question if one is considering social or political constructs, but the concept of contraction and expansion of space, a notion reconstructed since Einstein’s work in relativity, is more difficult to perceive as constructed. To what degree is one’s experience of space constructed? How does one begin to take responsibility for one’s experience of space? It is uncanny indeed when physical principles that operate at vast distances or at speeds approaching the speed of light reach into one’s awareness at the level of everyday distances and speeds. Since time and space are both related aspects of one space-time continuum, it is natural that similar notions apply to time. Upon reflection, we are comfortable with these expansions and contractions when time is involved. It is axiomatic that “knowledge...shrinks time and space” and “boredom...stretches time and space” (167). We construct without awareness. This is equally unsettling, as is evidenced in the novel by everyone’s fear of losing time (296) or gaining space (305).
Thirdly, the role of the observer in quantum physics is an active role. The observer of subatomic phenomena becomes the perfect analogue for the hybrid monster/victim – or in Brown’s terms, the subject put into play between active and passive roles by the fantastic narrative. The observer effect states that the outcome cannot be separated from the intentions of the observer. Zampanò describes the theory of the architect Sabastiano Pérouse de Montclos regarding the shifting nature of the house:

...the constant refuguration of doorways and walls represents a kind of geological loop in the process of working out all possible forms, most likely ad infinitum, but never settling because, as he states in his conclusion, “unoccupied space will never cease to change simply because nothing forbids it to do so. The continuous internal alterations only prove that such a house is necessarily uninhabited.” (120)

In quantum predictions, every possibility exists until an observer observes, thereby collapsing the quantum wave function and measuring a single outcome. The observation forces the possibilities to take a specific shape. The house forces Navidson and the others to experience everyday reality as a quantum wave function which collapses into their observation of it without their understanding what they are observing or how to go about observing it. Another subatomic principle reaches into everyday reality and creates fear and uncertainty.

Zampanò makes the perfect narrator for this macrocosmic experience of microcosmic realities. As a blind film critic, he casts no light on the events in order to observe them. He does not even require that there be events. He is just as happy to describe possibilities and allow others to “collapse the wave function” with their
observations of his possibilities. The creation of the narrative experience of *House of Leaves* and the quantum physical notion of the observer effect are analogous. Zampanò, like the house, presents possibilities while the playing subject, the subject in play, collapses the possibilities through observation or fails to do so by being uncertain as to what he or she is seeing/ reading/ understanding. The observer effect, which is the key to our experience of physical reality at the most fundamental level, is stymied by the fantastic observer who cannot perceive “what really happened.” Reality is troubled at its most basic starting point by the complexity of the possibilities at hand. The reader “stand[s] aside as a great complexity intrudes” (xxiii). Then, the reader “suddenly realize[s] that things are not how [one] perceived them to be at all” (xxii).

This analysis of *House of Leaves* demonstrates several notions which have been posited regarding the nature of postmodern fantastic texts. First, the definition of the fantastic which requires both the premise of impossibility and reader identification and hesitation is perfectly workable even in the most complex of postmodern texts. In fact, complexity itself allows the fantastic effect to be prolonged by staying unresolved. It also demonstrates how a playful approach neither detracts from the visceral effect nor interferes with the intellectual process of experiencing such a complex text. The back-and-forth movements between interpretations, narrative levels, and reading strategies actually contribute to the prolongation of uncertainty which feeds the fantastic effect. Finally, the introduction of quantum physical notions as the essence of the “monster” itself indicates that the fantastic narrative mode is a useful vehicle for exploring the concepts and fears which most trouble a society during any given metaphysical shudder. The fantastic offers no certainty, but it makes uncertainty less unfamiliar. As Freud
argues, the experience of the uncanny is when the familiar appears as something unfamiliar. The fantastic allows its reader to take uncertainty, which feels unfamiliar, and, through playful back-and-forth repetition, make uncertainty familiar.

Another observation which arises from the juxtaposition of Freud’s notion of the uncanny and quantum physics pertains to the notion of the transcendent. This analysis began with the Mask of Eternity, the suggestion of something which transcends everyday human experience. It ends with subatomic physics, the description of the immanent processes which comprise everyday human experience. The fantastic intrudes as impossibility and complexity, suggesting something other, transcendent, and unfamiliar. When it is analyzed closely and experienced fully, it is possible to see that what appeared strange, arcane and unfamiliar is actually intimate and familiar, the very processes which underlie human experience. To mistake immanence for transcendence is indeed an uncanny experience, and to discover the transcendent to be immanent is the very essence of the fantastic moment.

The End
Works Consulted


Copjec, Joan. “Vampires, Breast-feeding, and Anxiety.” October 58, 24-43.


Dolar, Mladen. “I shall be with you on your wedding night: Lacan and the Uncanny.” October 58, 5-23.


Stranger than Fiction. Dir. Marc Forster. Perf. Will Ferrell, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Dustin


