Postmodern Film and Fiction Intermediating:

Texture, Spectacle, Theatricality, and Violence in Robert Coover's

Texts

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"…a vast moving darkness and brilliant flickering pictures, new and strange"[1] (*PB* 542)

Abstract

This study recognizes reciprocal interplay of cinematography and literature, which constitute one another in a dynamic process of remediation, while highlighting intermedial reflexivity from screen to paper and how its "cinematic," multifaceted dimensions of imagery, art, movement, technology, and industry interact with paper-based writings of Robert Coover. Embracing the techniques and forms of screen technologies, as well as exposing their ideological constructions and stereotypes, Coover's texts reveal filmlike texture, spectacle, theatricality, and violence, disclosing the disintegration of the confines in-between media, as well as relative non-distinction of the frontier between the real and the mediated, where virtuality imposes as a cultural force and dominates actuality. The study is informed by Paul Virilio's, Jean Baudrillard's, and Gilles Deleuze's accounts on how media and image-manipulation imprison the viewers through means of identification, and how cinematography contributes to the genesis of a new notion of reality.

Keywords: Cinematography, Robert Coover, Reality-Virtuality, Intermediation, Spectacle

Postmodern Film ve Kurmacada Medyalararasılık:
Robert Coover'ın Metinlerinde Doku, Temsil, Teatrallik ve Şiddet

Öz

Bu çalışma, Coover'ın yazılı eserlerinde, ekrandan kağıda medyalararası özdüşünümselliğin ve bunun sonucunda ortaya çıkan imgelem, sanat, devinim, teknoloji ve endüstrinin çok boyutlu, sinematik yansımalarının altını çizerken; sinematografi ve edebiyatın karşılıklı etkileşimine iki türün birbirini geliştirmesini mümkün kılan dinamik bir süreç olarak bakar. Coover, eserlerinde, ekran teknolojilerinin yöntem ve biçimlerinin yanı sıra ideolojik yapı ve klişelerine de dikkat çeker. Sanal olanın kültürel etkisinin hissedildiği ve gerçeklik üstünde hakimiyet kurduğu bu eserler, film türünü andıran doku, temsil, teatrikallik ve şiddet öğeleri ile medyalararası ayrımların ve gerçek ile sanal olan arasındaki sınırların ortadan kalkışına işaret eder. Çalışma Paul Virilio, Jean Baudrillard ve Gilles Deleuze'ün medya ve imgelerin manipüle edilerek izleyicileri kimliksel özdeşleşim üzerinden esir alışı üzerine düşüncelerinden ve sinematografinin yeni bir gerçeklik anlayışının ortaya çıkışına sağladığı katkıdan yola çıkar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sinematografi, Robert Coover, Gerçeklik-Sanallık, Medyalararasılık, Temsil

Introduction

As Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin have illustrated, modern mass media do not simply discard earlier media forms for a new set of aesthetic and cultural precepts, instead, they borrow from them, as well as refashioning them, confirming that all media interpenetrate mutually, constituting one another in an on-going dynamic process of animation and remediation (14-15). One of the most striking effects of these correspondences and transformations within and in-between media is the erosion of their boundaries and the fading of the confines between what we consider reality and what we think of as virtual or mediated.

This article inspects Robert Coover's texts in terms of intermediation between cinematic screen and paper page, where cinematography intrudes into the real world and literature, generating its own imprint and the reality-virtuality tension. It tries to respond to two sets of questions. First, how does remediation and specifically interactions of screen technologies work in postmodern fiction, in the texts of Robert Coover? In what way do cinematography and its exuberant amplitude of imagery, technology and industry interact with the verbal dexterity of Coover's prose? Second, what is the significance and the outcome of these mediations and the specific imprint of cinema on culture and individual mindset? How do intrusions of the multifaceted visual or more precisely "cinematic" inform Coover's paper-based writings and erode the boundary between the actual and the virtual, the real and the mediated? Could one say that such a text performs in a "cinematic" manner?

In this analysis, "cinematic" is understood as a multifaceted property of the visual and the verbal, unfolding as a fluid, moving, and progressive mediation that always materializes as a unique concept, is always within the specific con/text, and is not a given category. Since observation, sight, and generally the postmodern world does not belong to absolute Newtonian space, and the frontier between reality and virtuality is blurred, the concept of "space-time" is used in this paper to describe a variety of worlds, zones, and realms that these mutual mediations and animations create. There is an underlying assumption that a relative event-space is process-dependent and does not treat space and time as isolated but as interlaced entities (just as the real and the virtual intermingle so do space and time) in a four-dimensional space-time.

Colonization, Consumption, and the Social Control of Screen Technologies: The Fading Boundary between the Fictive and the Real

It must be noted that representations of cinematography (and television) in postmodern texts introduce a second ontological level of radically different kinds in the world of fiction, multiplying or splitting the primary ontological plane. Immersed in mediation, postmodern literature uses cinematic techniques, evoking camera

movement, a variety of shots, cuts, and montage to mobilize print-space, thus animating both form and content. Brian McHale speaks of the screen as an ontological pluralizer that mirrors the "ontological pluralization" of literature itself, the multiplicity of space-times that all appear real (*Constructing Postmodernism* 134). Borrowing from new technologies of representation and imaging, but also repurposing and refashioning cinematography and television, Coover demonstrates the repercussions of intermediation as a cultural force and foregrounds literature's performativity, its ability to accommodate the "cinematic" and transform and animate fiction. His observation is that screen technologies exercise extreme power because they are omnipresent and the message they transmit is never intact but instead—"the medium is the message" (McLuhan 7). He also elaborates on how the screen gives power to the military-industrial-entertainment complex, the forces behind the screen that are pulling the strings, and even to lonesome individuals who can "appropriate some of the authority of social surveillance through imitation of it" (Winokur).

In his literary works, Coover displays the American national experience as largely fashioned according to media representations, forcing their standards of cultural values and ideologies onto citizens. Screen technologies disseminate popular stereotypes so that ideological constructions of reality transform artificiality into reality, creating a space-time of illusion, where consumer values and rapidly changing trends shape human consciousness. As McLuhan has noted, media technologies could condition the behavior of a whole nation (30).

The overpowering media (including newspapers) administer news as commodities to be quickly consumed and disregarded. In Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977) and "The Babysitter" (1969), the commodities make space for ever interesting new information on the hour. The speed with which a piece of information circulates, revamps, and gets overshadowed by another chunk of news, hinders the characters (and the public in general) from digesting the information, lacking synthesis of the news items. Even though contemporary mass media make economic and cultural realities much more transparent, it is a false transparency for they are not more intelligible: "the real structures of production and social relations remain illegible" (Baudrillard, *Selected Writings* 21). Historical consciousness and continuity are concealed by the military-industrial-entertainment complex and non-stop 24-hour news, which produce "only disorienting, alienating

effects, rendering it in turn ever more susceptible to manipulation" (Johnston, "Machinic Vision" 32), and by a human tendency to "trade our responsibility for a comfortable masochism or diverting spectacle" (Moore 138). Coover's collection of stories, *A Night at the Movies* (1987), represents our society as principally "a consumer society that, with its gargantuan appetites, is in danger of consuming its own cultural bases of existence," for individual tastes and beliefs disintegrate in the face of a mass-produced, homogenized culture (Zamora 53).

The hegemony of media also serves as a framework of social control, implementing its own ideologically tainted reality, which is depicted in Coover's *The Public Burning*, *A Night at the Movies*, and "The Babysitter," while postmodern authors keep asking how we can know what is real without becoming trapped in the false conceptions of the real. A few carnivalesque, surreal, and slapstick scenes in *The Public Burning* stage false conceptions of reality associated with media's ascendancy, including the one where a moviegoer, after seeing a 3-D horror movie, forgets to take his cardboard glasses off and staggers onto the street, vividly disoriented, and joins frenzied crowds who rush to the festivities tied to the Rosenbergs' execution. The dreamlike farce and the character's inability to escape the reality of the horror movie reflects the control that media have over the American public and their fear because, "ever since the new hydrogen-bomb tests at Eniwetok: yes, the final spectacle, the one and only atomic holocaust" (*PB* 286), Americans have been in a "panic" (*PB* 287), "expressing the madness of the country's psychological state" (Walsh 335). The electrocution of the Rosenbergs, Molly Hite argues, "was a stunning overreaction to a purported crime—passing the 'secret' of the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union—for which there was little direct evidence," illustrating "the elliptical and sometimes transparently fabricated nature of the prosecution's case" (85), while the media frenzy relied on the fear of communism and called upon the historical imperatives of the nation, coaching American folk consciousness.

Weinstein notes how "[b]uilding on the 3-D sequence from *The Public Burning*," Coover's writing continues to engage in "the most popular art of our time—film, […] to show that the fabulous technical possibilities of film (dissolve, panning, cutting, montage) have […] their verbal counterparts" (260). The texture of Coover's narrative features gestural eloquence, which delivers his characters' sight gags, dance, vaudeville, and other uncharted vistas verbally, so

that it feels, Weinstein opines, as if the readers "were being helped, through Coover's language vision, to special lenses, to a picture of higher definition, to a more articulated and refined awareness of what our eyes process" (261). In an interview, Coover states that he "wanted to learn the language of film […]. Not the aesthetics of it, but the technical language used in making films, […] to look at the world through a lens" (qtd. in Bass 298). Indeed, Coover's bizarre, at times nauseating, and yet captivating scenes, particularly the ones saturated with cinematic taxonomy and *seeing*—the techniques, forms, and contents of cinematography—keep readers engaged, even to a point where "[t]he reader is nudged into the role of […] a voyeur" (Pughe 175). Numerous erotic close-ups in *Gerald's Party* (1985) fall under that category for they often include a cameraman, a director, or a photographer who orchestrates the characters and "occasionally joined in" (*GP* 78). The guests watch old videotapes "'[f]ull of sex and violence'" (*GP* 241), which besides the bedazzlement of the spectacle, reflects and even duplicates the character's restrained condition, their objectification and receptiveness to the colonization by the virtual.

The abundance of cinematic compositions, techniques, taxonomy, and images, straightforward and ambiguous in *A Night at the Movies*, "The Babysitter," *The Public Burning*, *Gerald's Party*, and *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre: Directors' Cut* (2002), reveals two aspects of screen technologies. First, these texts show how the projections of the virtual are encouraging the characters to act in a predisposed manner, which hinders their "sensory-motor" range (Deleuze, *Cinema 1* 121). Coover's protagonists are overcome by ideological and political causes disseminated through the screen. The consumers of entertainment are figuratively trapped by means of identification, so that virtuality both procreates and even monopolizes reality (Virilio, *The Vision Machine* 63). Second, these "brilliant flickering pictures, new and strange" (*PB* 542), mirror our complex, accelerated, fluid, indeterminate, and process-dependent reality, theorized by physicists such as Einstein, Planck, Bohr, and Heisenberg. They generate a postmodern space-time that unravels as nonlinear, fragmented, accidental, consumption-oriented, and disposable, delineating "the pluralistic and anarchistic ontological landscape of advanced industrial cultures" (McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* 38).

Thus, modern mass media amplify the ontological indeterminacy of objects in the world and augment vagueness. The

representational scheme and vague language inform the ontological structure that the given object shows itself to have in particular circumstances (Hyde 150), whereas screen technologies intensify the object's transience and ambiguity while offering the apparent factuality of virtual images (through the perceptual act). Virilio explains that cinematic representation raises "the problem of the paradoxically real nature of 'virtual' imagery" because our nervous systems record ocular perception, which means that our "retinal retention" is also "mental retention of images," concluding that, "virtuality [is] dominating actuality and turning the very concept of reality on its head;" hence the relative con/fusion of the factual and the virtual (*The Vision Machine* 61; 63).

Similarly, first Henri Bergson, and then Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard, ascribed ontological connotations to the virtual and acknowledged that the distinction between the real and the mediated is no longer feasible for the real appears always already mediated. As Bergson clarified, "the form of a possible" seems pre-existent to the real, although it cannot be represented before it becomes real, and the real is never fully realized for it accommodates the virtual (23; 118). For Bergson, life operates within the virtual-actual circuit. Deleuze embraces the dynamical systems theory, renouncing the idea of the possible as an empty form and opts for the virtual, which "is not opposed to the real; it possesses a full reality by itself. The process it undergoes is that of actualization" (*Difference and Repetition* 211). In his view, systems self-organize, tending toward the virtual or the actual. Baudrillard, who is even more radical, argues that in a world where images, symbols and signs of simulation dominate, simulacra have replaced all reality, and we inhabit the perceived reality or hyperreality, where the subject "becomes a pure screen, a pure absorption and re-absorption surface of the influent networks" (*America* 27).

Accordingly, Coover's texts challenge his characters (and readers) with ontological and epistemological questions, as he infuses them with experimentation and indeterminacy, utilizing cinema as an agency which conveys the discoveries and metaphors tied to the human condition. His texts display "images [that] define a new kind of reality in a world which seems to have entirely lost all substance, anchoring, or reference points, except in relation to other images or what are also conceived as images" (Johnston, "Post-Cinematic" 96). The truth is, Coover points out, informed by modern physics, that our world is in

constant flux, gravid with mutability, discontinuity, and fragmentation, which makes it difficult to distinguish the fictive from the real, also because "representation is short-circuited by the realization that there is no reality independent of mediation" (Hayles, "Saving" 779). Thus, the film-saturated space-time that looms at the juncture of cinema and fiction within Coover's texts projects the realm where the real and the virtual, although distinct, are indiscernible (Deleuze, *Cinema 2* 68-69).

Filmlike Texture, Spectacle, Theatricality, and Violence:

How Virtuality Dominates Actuality

Following Baudrillard's and Virilio's views of information technology and media as enablers of a space-time of illusion and virtuality in which subjects absorb and become saturated with the proliferation of consumer values, commodities, and media ideologies, this section focuses on how pluralized rhythms of contemporary society project on screens and reflect in Coover's paper-based writings and onto the screens of consciousness (human reality), yielding in Baudrillard's words the "sign value" revolution (*Selected Writings* 57-60) or in Virilio's terminology,—displaying the "accelerated virtualization" of the globalized world (*The Information Bomb* 16). The screen has become an interface which features an emergent postmodern condition of the overexposed world, where an individual is overpowered by the play of signs, images, information, and spectacles, losing agency and control over the object, becoming a media-saturated spectator who suffers the deprivation of the real.

The military-industrial-entertainment complex promptly uses the coercive qualities of the screen, drawing on amusement, desire, consumerism, and ideology. Michel Foucault's panoptical subject—the spectator—is metaphorically imprisoned for s/he identifies with filmic modes of behavior and thought, (un)consciously internalizing the instructions from the screen (195-228). Because Western culture thrives on consumerism, competition, corporate culture, and self-reliance, it is not surprising that Hollywood exploits these topics and emphasizes action sequences, spectacle, and violence, using special effects to increase marketability and consumerism, while postmodern fiction utilizes and digests these topics from a critical point of view.

With these developments, cinema has indeed fortified as an advocate of architectonic dissolution (Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* 64-66), transferring not just the materiality of three-dimensional space into the immateriality of two-dimensional wall-screen (Virilio, *The Lost Dimension* 73), but instigating dematerialization and disappearance of the notion of narrative unity and its organizing principles. Stanley Solomon points to postmodern cinema as a prime example of the disintegration of classic narrative in the Aristotelian sense, referring to films such as *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977):

> The narrative elements in such films are chronologically arranged incidents that, given the premises, could happen but have no tragic or comic necessity for happening—the causes stemming not from story but from an available mixed bag of general emotions, special effects, and faith in production values. (65)

The very same remark makes sense in context of the narrative of Coover's short stories and his novels *Gerald's Party, Ghost Town* (1998)*,* and *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre,* for the narrative has lost its determining role and can no longer be seen as the central organizing process. The arbitrary nature of textual arrangements in these texts resembles a series of collages with an abrupt transition from one image to another (mimicking film cuts), or occasional gradual transitions from one sequence to another (characterized by film dissolves), as the texts "keep […] metamorphing and rearranging" themselves, so that the first and the last page are only "accidentally" there (Vanderhaeghe 166).

Numerous episodes that occur in Coover's short fiction "The Elevator" (1969) underline this principle, featuring the play of possibilities that could happen during an elevator ride with a specter of impossible events, appearing as incidents of the same scene that splits repeatedly into multiple bifurcations. Adopting screening techniques, Coover modifies the form of the text so that the sections in the story do not follow each other in any apparent causal or temporal order, emerging as splices of individual juxtaposed or sequential shots of the same subject taken from different angles (jump cuts). Each scene focuses on the main character, Martin, who rides the elevator to his office, where he is either bullied by his co-workers or he seduces a girl he likes. On one occasion while the elevator falls, a mix of highly improbable and even impossible scenarios unfolds, such as his meeting

with Death and his reverie of being glorified for the size of his genitals, where "several fantasy lines are continued without being concluded" (Evenson 85). The reader can attempt to sort some of the scenes chronologically, but most of them are mutually exclusive permutations of the same elevator ride. Some events remain logically incongruous, pressing vertical impetus (also in sync with the movement of the elevator ride) via startling juxtaposition and rapid cutting, as opposed to the conventional horizontal narrative progression. All variations are allowed to exist as possibilities, and not one is insisted upon as the primary or actual one as opposed to the rest that are fictitious.

All Coover's stories and most of his novels remediate film, photography, or video, showing how screen-based media influence the structure and meaning of literature and how the boundary between media, as well as the one between the fictive and the real, fades away. The method of presentation in Coover's texts is clearly informed by the "cinematic:" "The process is similar to watching film rushes of the same scene shot several times from different angles, the action moving slowly forward in spurts and sputters because of so many retakes" (McCaffrey 73). The variations of the same scene in "The Elevator," "The Babysitter," and *Ghost Town* alter as if following camera movement, while the contrasting shots add emotional effect, and rapidly changing angles and scenes generate unease. Thus, Coover's fiction is refashioned and invigorated through a variety of cinematographic techniques such as cross-cutting, lighting, montage, and jump cuts to produce a startling effect.

Many contemporary films have a thin veneer of narrative that unifies action and provides continuity for the audience. Solomon points out how "plot is being replaced by texture," meaning incidents, events, or conversations, including tone and spectacle that resemble traditional narrative (76). Although Coover's *Gerald's Party* has a plot line that orbits around a murder, the novel could be "perceived as a texture of numerous (in)consistent conversations […], with violent events and dead bodies piling up as the evening wears off, parodying detective fiction and mimicking spectacle movies" (Gruic Grmusa and Brillenburg Wurth 192). As Scott Lash declares: "There has been a shift from a realist to a postmodernist cinema, in which spectacle comes heavily to dominate narrative" (325), and the same is truth in postmodern fiction. Many films from the late 1980s and the 1990s such as *The Punisher* (Goldblatt 1989), *Double Impact* (Lettich 1991), and *Fight Club* (Fincher 1999) seem to

build a narrative to fit between their scenes of special effects and violence presented as fetishes and staged as sadomasochistic spectacles. Because postmodern literature draws on and merges with cinematography, spectacle and violence proliferate in contemporary fiction as well. In fact, screen technologies have mobilized print space and made it texture-like as no other media before.

In the previously mentioned 3-D episode in *The Public Burning*, the moviegoer views the hydrogen-bomb tests and the Rosenbergs' execution as "spectacle[s]" (286). Weinstein surmises that the whole book exposes a "frenetic new code of ENTERTAINMENT as the central idiom and script of American life" (241), where Coover criticizes contemporary mass society for being entertainment oriented. Both war and violence draw on spectacle-like methods and technology, where visual representations capture the viewers/consumers (in this case characters and readers) into cinematic, false reality. *Gerald's Party*, *Spanking the Maid* (1982), and "The Babysitter" feature a succession of violent set pieces, often accompanied by perverse, exhibitionist brutality cloaked as a fetish, adding to fragmentation, and resulting in the blurring of the boundary between fiction and reality. Paraphrasing Baudrillard, David Morley remarks how postmodern flirting with the truth breeds a "society of the spectacle, where the real has been replaced by its image, and the image supplanted by the 'simulacrum' which is of course, itself hyperreal" (60).

Coover's novel *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre: Director's Cut* reveals how linearity is substituted by progression of movement, by endless looping and repetition (at times annoying), using film as his favorite trope, with scenes of spectacle-like sadomasochistic orgies, torture, and bacchanal. It is constructed as a pornographic film, mocking the belletristic tradition while featuring the main character Pierre, a porn star, buffoon, and everyman, filmed by his nine muses/directors, entirely defined by designated film roles, his personality rotating from a naughty little boy to an enamored husband and a compliant slave, whatever the avatar of film's trajectory. Pierre's identity is definable only by his "naked sexual organ, always in public view in film and 'reality' (the difference between the two evaporating)" (Hoffmann 638) for there is no scene in Pierre's life that is not, implicitly, a movie.

The subtitle *Directors' Cut* announces the novel's cinematic assembly. The text consists of nine reels instead of chapters where

textual dynamics and articulation shape the literary work around a musical theme "C to C and F again" (*LP* 1). As Vanderhaeghe observes, the novel's "very language is somehow set in motion," playing variations of the melodic composition, with "each reel striking a new cord as it opens and closes," climbing the C major scale (164). The first reel opens with "Cantus," denoting a melody in polyphonic style or "the topmost part in a polyphonic work," and ends with "discant" which implies "note-against-note writing," or the "newly composed voice in a polyphonic complex" (Randel 144-145; 244). The reels continue with subsequent repetition of the same chord so that chapter/ reel 2 starts with "Documentary" and ends with "End," and the next one begins with "Exits" and finishes with "FADEOUT," and the like. The emphasis is on polyphony, on multiple voices that comprise the whole for each individual artist directs her own scheme, playing a dominatrix, a gentle wife, a vulgar cartoonist, and the like (yet, all their names begin with C, presenting repetition and variations of the same theme), puppeteers that direct and determine Pierre's life (in life and in film), where sexual intercourse is presented as a polyphonic texture in a "DEVOUT EFFORT TO ATTAIN TRANSCENDENCY; TO UNIFY THE WORLD'S MAD SCATTER" (*LP* 137).

Coover challenges his main protagonist with the absence of free will for Pierre obeys the directors' mappings and is imprisoned within the assigned coordinates, unable to control what goes on, playing his part under surveillance. At the same time, he is the victim of his own sexual impulses, always monitored by the camera. Cinema here serves as a perfect engine which transfers the actualities and analogies tied to the human condition. The camera both reflects and replicates Pierre's subordination and vulnerability. Pierre is "caught up in a complex blurring of ontological layers that makes it difficult to locate what's real and what isn't, and—as in all good postmodern tales—this is, of course, partly the point and partly the subject of a critique that's carried within the novel itself" (Burn 7). In a similar manner, the consumers of entertainment are not immune to political and ideological issues disseminated through the screen; cinematography is also an agency of control where spectators are metaphorically imprisoned through mechanisms of identification.

Another filmic, tele-visual or theatrical property that Coover employs in his texts is fictional audience, often a laughing one, such as in "Charlie in the House of Rue" (1987), "Panel Game" (1969), "The

Hat Act" (1969), "A Pedestrian Accident" (1969), *The Public Burning, The Adventures of Lucky Pierre,* and *Gerald's Party*. These fictional audiences prompt the reader to be more aware of the observation as an act of *seeing*, and as Thomas Pughe suggested, associate with voyeurism, especially in *Gerald's Party* (175) where protagonists engage in peeking and lurking and record images of others and themselves during intimate interactions. The scenes are swarmed with cameras, photographs, and videotapes, inviting readers to tag along and scrutinize. Through their investigative gaze, the characters also uncover their desire to take up the authority of social surveillance. These power struggles to control and direct other individuals can be spotted throughout the novel. An example is the reporter who "directing the camera crew, shifting the lights, calling the angles—pulled the others into a circle around Ros" (*GP* 169), the dead actress. Another illustration of the exploitative urge, the wish to manipulate and entice the masses to follow, is Beni's pretense of being stabbed, with "half-chewed blood capsule between his teeth," which results in Gerald's fear for his friend's life and climaxes in the guests'—spectators' crescendo of "laughter and a loud burst of applause," while being monitored by "the lens of the video camera" (255). These scenes reflect contemporary society at large, mirroring coercive forces that employ new technologies as a tool of social surveillance, investigating and instructing human behavior, hidden behind entertainment and spectacle.

Coover uses prescribed models from cinematography, theater, and television, such as games and comedy that are thoroughly permeated in pop culture so that the readers can easily identify with them, immersed in the enterprise that is unfolding on paper, yet reminiscent of scenic projections. One of the stories that draw on a well-known character from cinematography is "Charlie in the House of Rue," premised on Chaplin's vaudeville and pratfalls beyond compare where the texture of gestural eloquence is particularly pronounced as Charlie engages in his buffoon routines. The language abounds in cinematic metaphors. For example, during Charlie's comic interaction with the maid, her behind is "winking at him from behind the fluttering white apron like the negative of a sputtering lightbulb" ("CR" 105). The audience fosters the readers to laugh along with the crowd. As Weber notes, with reference to Plato, laughter breaks "the barriers of property," undermines "the division of public and private space," contagiously spreading in "the iterative movement of corporeal self-abandonment" (39; 224). This underlines the ability of the fictive to

usurp the real. Images and representations that the viewers/readers perceive laughing, transform virtuality into reality for laughter disrupts the stasis of the body, the fictive mobilizes the space of the actual.

"The Hat Act" is linked to popular entertainment and consumerism, and it focuses on the position of allegedly invulnerable spectators, who in their illusory isolation and safety observe the magician's act, driven by the desire to see without being seen. But as already noted, visual media imply that voyeuristic audience is under (in)visible surveillance; Foucault's panopticon deploys information to create the desired spectators, "to constitute us as compliant workers and consumers" (Winokur). Indeed, the spectators passively assimilate information, consuming the act and at the same time become consumed by the hyperreal, which shapes their thoughts and behavior. The only way to withstand the media's infiltration is to deflect one's urges.

Situated in a small town theater, rather than on the screen, "The Hat Act" unravels in front of an auditorium, revealing a tremendously critical audience, evocative of our space-time of consumerism (even inhumanity), our need for entertainment, and ever new prestigious goods. It presents a highly improbable plot that conflicts with the readers' expectations where the magician is decapitated in the process of his act, while the audience gets frantic, cheering and applauding: "Magician's eyes pop like bubbles from their sockets. *Laughter and applause*" ("HA" 249). As Weber notes, the spectacle "seeks simultaneously to assuage and exacerbate anxieties of all sorts by providing images on which they can be projected, ostensibly comprehended, and, above all, *removed"* (334). The viewers, with their "self-dissimulation and self-delusion," are encouraged to enjoy, *"forget the past,"* have their distress relieved, and project their fears onto an image of the other, triumphing in the other's liquidation (8; 335). The same principle is present in *The Public Burning,* where the crowds cheer for the executions, reminiscent of carnivalesque theater and, "like one of those trick images in a 3-D movie" (641), together with "the political and journalistic hullabaloo" (Weinstein 254), reveal "the American penchant for rose-tinted glasses" (Gallo 43) for all the public wants is to enjoy, release the fear, and experience catharsis.

Each successive trick in "The Hat Act" brings an increase in violence, while the "magic" is further performed by the lovely assistant and volunteers from the audience, implying optional participation and

crossing of the "reality—fiction" borders. A similar transgression occurs in *Gerald's Party* when "Zack Quagg, the playwright-director, […] once in a performance […] stepped down into the audience and slapped" Gerald's wife "with a dead fish" (141), or when in a Dionysian drama about Lot's wife the audience was invited and then "join[ed] in […] to lick the salt" off of the actress's body (35). "The Hat Act" proceeds as the magician is surprisingly recovered from the "lovely assistant's shorts" (251) and then she gets dismembered while her body parts and clothes incite cheering from the crowd, depending on their erotic value. Here Coover pushes his critique of postmodern space-time to extreme where audiences and readers encourage barbaric acts. The consumers of entertainment command satisfaction of their urges or they boo and even destroy the fiction-maker as the magician is mutilated by two large men displeased with his act. The performance becomes a downright spectacle, which serves as a mere gambit for pornography and violence, widely spread resources of cinema and television transmissions. Above all, the story speaks of Coover's concern with human values, exposing human bodies as consumption commodities, where individual identity is shifting off the center of ontological gravity, following subsequent virtualization and actualization principles (as is dramatized in *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre* as well).

Coover's "The Phantom of the Movie Place" (1987) involves just a lonely projectionist who alters from an active spectator to an involuntary, marionette actor in an old-fashioned movie theater. The recluse watches the same repertoire repeatedly. His space-time is completely excluded from the outside, "real" world where even the audience is absent. To make his viewing more interesting, he creates "his own split-screen effects, montages, superimpositions" (22), revolutionizing a projection technique that enables him to watch assorted films simultaneously. He "collages the films together, allowing the different genres to collide" (Evenson 180), so that,

> a galloping cowboy gets in the way of some slapstick comedians and, as the films separate out, arrives at the shootout with custard on his face; or the dying heroine, emerging from montage with a circus feature, finds herself swinging by her stricken limbs from a trapeze, the arms of her weeping lover in the other frame now hugging an elephant's leg. ("PMP" 23)

This opens a whole new space-time for him, his world expands, and even though this generates a "liberating" potential, he senses "there's something corrupt, maybe even dangerous, about this collapsing of boundaries" (23).

On one occasion, while collapsing the confines between a "Broadway girlie show" (25) and a Western, the chorus-line artist vanishes and does not reappear again. From then on, it seems that the projectionist's invention, the multi-layered film space, has been released from the bondage of the screen, and it percolated his own space, the movie palace. The liberated movie characters, aristocrats, mummies, wonder dogs, gold diggers, and cartoon pigs, mingle with the projectionist who is soon unable to distinguish himself from them, terrified by "a cold metallic hand in his pants" (34), which he later recognizes as his own. "What's frightening," one of the filmic characters explains is "discovering that what you think you see only because *you* want to see it […] *sees you*" (33), reminding the readers that the coercive forces of the screen collect information about the projectionist and use it to gradually take over so that the virtual world hijacks the actual. When the projectionist hears a guillotine blade fall, he protests: "I don't belong here!" but is dragged to the foot of the guillotine with the rest of the characters (36). The beheading might imply the ending of the haunting creatures for: "It's all in your mind […] so we're cutting it off" (36), and the literal death of the projectionist in the movie.

Coover's "The Phantom of the Movie Place" is the text that reveals the most extreme erosion of the barrier between film and (textual character's) physical reality. While trying "to bridge" the "distance between the eye and its object" (17), the projectionist created a perfect setting for the virtual to usurp the actual, allowing the object to gain the privileged position as the subject gets stripped of its superior access to truth, in Baudrillard's sense (*Simulacra and Simulation*). The story demonstrates how an imaginary or fictive space-time imposes itself on the protagonist and projects the characteristics of actual space-time where the projectionist oscillates between the physical reality and the cinematic, as "milieus slide by like dream cloths" ("PMP" 35), and he is barely able to distinguish "these abominable parvenus of iconic transactions" (36).

In her most recently published book, *Postprint* (2021), Kate Hayles notes regarding American university presses which

are developing online publishing venues (such as the University of Minnesota's Manifold platform, yet another multimedia friendly zone), that they allow "curation, remixing, and recombination" as potent scholarly activities for they even offer the readers to contribute with "comments, links, and annotations" (127; 123). In a similar manner, Coover's (and the projectionist's) self-organized creatures and "parvenus of iconic transactions" ("PMP" 36) are a never-ending recombinant or mashup of the projectionist's world and that of multiple filmic ecologies, offering what Mark Amerika calls "the remix," which may well be the defining cultural form of our age (2011).

Conclusion

Cinematography was the first medium to display virtual realities in motion, interfering with literature and the actual world, and producing highly original domains that alter existing notions of space, time, reality, embodiment, and identity. Following modernists such as John Dos Passos and James Joyce who adopted cinematographic techniques (including flashback, montage, and rapid cutting) to convey simultaneous cinematic consciousness, Coover's fiction employs motion picture technology, its art and industry, mimicking film critically and modifying it with yet another twist, reinforced by experimental literary techniques, such as intermittent story-pieces. Cinematic techniques have invigorated and animated Coover's writing, allowing for the projection of simultaneity (within the bounds of linear constraints) of storylines, recollections, conversations, impressions, and incidents. Shaped by the intermediation of the screen and the page, his texts—such as "The Babysitter," "The Elevator," and *Ghost Town*— exemplify multi-branched narratives that describe mutually exclusive versions of the same scenes with contradictory details. Coover's stories in turn help mold electronic literature for they "are often identified as precursors to electronic hypertexts" (Hayles, "Intermediation" 111), which substantiates the idea that all media permeate and influence one another.

The multiple and mutually exclusive ontological pluralities exposed in Coover's texts systematically prevent privileged instants of epiphany and are a defining feature of postmodern fiction. Coover's texts deploy, praise, and criticize these transformations and mutual

mediations of film and literature, drawing attention to the crisis of representation that can be traced to the ascendancy of cinematography, but also to the new richness of the animated page. With cinema as a dominant cultural metaphor, complexities are revealed fusing the actual and the virtual that illuminate ontological instability among real, cinematic, hallucinated, and oneiric.

Cradled in the idea that all media modify one another in a series of feedback loops, sustaining transition to otherness in which something is always retained, this paper stresses the ability of screen technologies to instigate literature's performativity, its capacity to adopt, change, and animate. It also acknowledges visual media's omnipresence, which facilitates shared, mediated consciousness, forcing its standards of cultural values onto the public, disseminating popular stereotypes and entertainment while eroding the boundary between the fictive and the real. The analysis of filmic imagery, techniques, and forms within the chosen texts demonstrates how cinematography mobilizes Coover's literature and adds to the disintegration of a classic narrative style, emphasizing the rapid sequence of scenes and spectacle that operate mostly through violence, as the characters face identity crisis and fragmentation. These highly mediated texts focus on structures/textures of incidents, events, and conversations that substitute for plots and/or overpower the readers with the proliferation and non-conclusiveness of plots, and feature laughing and even violent audiences that play along, cheer, and separate the barrier between public and private space, juxtaposing reality and fiction.

The concept of movement operates as a trajectory of innovation and as a possible channel for meaning-making processes as utilized cinematic concepts and compositions generate, "a vast moving darkness and brilliant flickering pictures, new and strange" (*PB* 542), in tune with our process-dependent, dynamic space-time, where randomness is the prevalent ontology. Merging cinema, fiction, and life, acknowledges the fading of the boundary between the real and the fictive.

Notes

[1] Coover's novels *The Public Burning, Gerald's Party,* and *The Adventures of Lucky Pierre: Directors' Cut* are respectively abbreviated as *PB*, *GP,* and *LP* when citing from these texts. His stories "The Hat Act," "The Elevator," "A Pedestrian Accident,"

"Panel Game," and "The Babysitter" are collected in the volume *Pricksongs and Descants*. Coover's "The Phantom of the Movie Place" and "Charlie in the House of Rue" are collected in his collection of stories *A Night at the Movies*. Subsequent references to "The Hat Act" are marked as "HA", those referring to "Charlie in the House of Rue" are marked as "CR", while "The Phantom of the Movie Place" is abbreviated to "PMP".

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