



THE
OFFICIAL
WORLD

MARK SELTZER

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MARK SELTZER

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
DURHAM AND LONDON 2016

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Heather Hensley

Typeset in Minion Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Seltzer, Mark, [date] author.

The official world / Mark Seltzer.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8223-6086-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8223-6100-8 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8223-7445-9 (e-book)

1. Suspense fiction—History and criticism. 2. Crime in popular culture.

3. Crime in mass media. 4. Literature and society. I. Title.

PN3448.S86S45 2016

809.3'872—dc23 2015031594

Cover art: Naoko Tanaka, *Absolute Helligkeit*, 2012. Still image of the performance. Courtesy of the artist.

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INTRODUCTION TO
THE OFFICIAL WORLD

“Superman is, after all, an alien life form,” the horror genre writer Clive Barker notes in his introduction to Neil Gaiman’s graphic novel *The Doll’s House*: “He’s simply the acceptable face of invading realities.” He may have noted too that the acceptable face that an invading alien life form takes—in a type of world that consists of both itself and an unremitting commentary on itself—is that of a mild-mannered reporter on the *Daily Planet*.¹

In the pages that follow I mean to set out the pedagogical principles of such a self-reporting world, and the type of society it stages: a self-inciting, self-legislating, and self-depictive form of life that I redescribe as “the official world.”

The globe and the reporter. The syncing of the two makes for what the historian of the Renaissance Jacob Burkhardt describes as the modern age’s two great concurrent discoveries: “the discovery of the world and man.”² And that makes for a two-sided discovery, alter and ego: the opening to the great outside, the great outdoors, and to the interior, a new continent of self-reflection—and so its self-reporting.

We might take the broad view on this, one coextensive with the long modernity: the advent of the world as worldview, and so a world recast by the presence of alternatives.³ As Niklas Luhmann puts it, “It would be difficult to deny that in our present historical circumstances we are very concerned about not simply what modern society is but how it observes and describes itself and its environment.”⁴ Such an observation has by now achieved the undeniability of self-evidence. It is, as George Spencer-Brown puts it, “the form in which our way of talking about our ordinary living experience can



Figure 1.1. The Self-Reporting World in Person.

be seen to be cradled.”⁵ But what exactly then is it evidence of? What is the character of a modern society that consists of both itself and its continuous autodescription? Bound to its self-description, the “cradle rocks over an abyss”—self-suspended from moment to moment.⁶ These forms of suspend-
edness and their zoned spaces—at once gamelike, violent, yet extremely formal—are elements of an official world.

What I want to set out here are some relatively recent examples of the form of a social-systemic organization that metastasized across the five-hundred-year range of what has alternatively been called the age of discovery, the age of globalization, and the bourgeois half-millennium: an age coming to realization, or to term, in the epoch of social systems and its anthropotechnics—or art with humans.⁷ The term “anthropotechnics” has been used for some time to describe human-technical assemblages, particularly in accounts of robotics and automaton actions. The larger use concerns practices and forms of life (we can think here of Wittgenstein’s language games or Foucault’s power-discourse games) that enter into what the American suspense writer Patricia Highsmith calls “games for the living.” This art with humans, these repeated practices and ego-technics, these informalized games mark out the grids, outlines, and practice zones of the official world: its form games.

There is an extended arc to the anthropotechnic turn, and to the putting into place of the improbable prospect of an autotrophic planet: its imperatives and its repeating exercises; its precincts, circuits, and observation zones; its ways of relating the immanence of the system to its environment; and so of soliciting, and processing, what I will describe as news from the outside. The crux of the matter is that the theoretical object, the globe, includes but goes beyond the aesthetic geometry of round things. It includes—as Peter Sloterdijk has traced in rich detail—its shape, its history, and its turning: the provisions of a world of compulsive, repeatable, and reversible movements; interiors and projections; ventures and returns, or revenues.

We are familiar too by now with the passage from the age of globalization to the global age. To the present that runs, as the sports idiom has it, in the added or “injury time” of the modern epoch: the repeated repeating of a social world-system.

This is the crystallization of a synchronous world, and its depictive media. It is now alternatively depicted, for example, as the “pristine culture of capitalism” or as the “Anthropocene.” These may be seen as alternating descriptions of a real subsumption, either a synchronized or a trumped world, and hence a periodization in the idiom of the capitalist sublime. That begins to indicate the reincarnative character of a self-organized world and its serial forms of life and death and life.

These are depictions of a self-turned earth. Here is the novelist Cormac McCarthy on it: “Across the pieced land they watched a man turning the earth with an ox yoked by its horns to a singlehanded plow. The plow was of a type that was old in Egypt and was little more than a treeroot. They mounted up and rode on.”⁸ An extraordinary condensation of history, history as natural history, marks these contracted lines—and the species that singlehandedly if violently yokes them together, and, collaterally, watches that. This is a small diorama of the Anthropocene, one serving to indicate then that this term, the Anthropocene, less tells a new story than correlates an old one to the observation and depiction that enter into it. That correlationism has now arrived as its own theme—in this case, as the prerequisite of the form of the novel itself.⁹

The correlation of world and worldview has now, across a range of fields—disciplines apparently are still seen as pieced plots of earth—come into view and so into question. It shows a reality and watches it being made: a picture of motion, it (like a motion picture) realizes what it stages and shows that.¹⁰ Such a coming into view appears as a turn taken in the history of a self-turned and self-observed planet—a series of turns I will be calling “the turn

turn.”¹¹ In McCarthy’s fiction of such a “crossing,” this is an overturned and so uprooted world: one on the move and made for people with plans, and upwardly mobile, on the move up and on. There is encrypted here the great shift from vertical to upward mobility as the practice of modernity. It is as if one can daily turn the earth beneath one’s own feet.¹²

This epoch is what I have worked to describe, over the last several years, as the official world. The range-finding episodes set out in these pages are commentaries on some of the demarcation zones and practices, ascetics and aesthetics, of the official world. The intent is that this concept may then step-by-step accrue some indication of what Alexander Kluge has described as “the precision of rough ideas.”¹³

The Premises of the Official World

The argument of this book can be stated simply: a modern world comes to itself by staging its own conditions. A modern world is a self-conditioning and self-reporting one. If, prior to the nineteenth century, society could not describe itself, now it cannot stop describing itself—in an attempt to keep up with what it is at every moment bringing about.¹⁴

Or, as the great science-fiction writer Stanislaw Lem neatly put it: “In the Eolithic age there were no seminars on whether to invent the Paleolithic.”¹⁵ A modern society—which is to say, a continuously self-monitoring, auto-updating, and modernizing one—is what Emile Durkheim (inaugurating modern sociology, and so indicating a society on the way to self-description) described as an “almost *sui generis*” society. The autotropic character of that world makes up what Durkheim also would call a social fact.

It is necessary to set out these common, and, for the most part, well-known observations, since the conditions I mean to describe in these chapters—conditions at once familiar and surreal—depend on the background reality they, from moment to moment, hold in animated suspense. That reality is a complex infrastructure stabilized by its own tensions—like one of its iconic architectural forms, the suspension bridge.

There are three general premises to this argument.

First, if a modern world comes to itself by staging its own conditions, it must consist both of itself and its self-description, denotation, or registration. A modern society, to the extent that it is modern, takes note of itself as it goes along. It posits what Roland Barthes calls the now “most ordinary exercise of our language, which is commentary.”¹⁶ In doing so, it curates a world.

Second, if a modern world is a self-reporting one, a modern society must be bound to what Max Weber, early on, described as the self-documenting

qualities and self-descriptive techniques that are the defining attributes of the second modernization. The modern world is an official world not merely in its administrative *a priori*, and not merely in the spreading of self-administration across the zones that make up the near-continuum of the modern social field. The administrative *a priori* consists in the bending of the will to know the real to the will to produce the real. The official world not merely denotes itself as it goes. Its operations, beyond that, mean that taking note of the fact is a fact-producing act.¹⁷ If it stops commenting on itself, it dies.

Third, the model for this self-staging world is then the modern work of art. We know that the modern work of art interrogates itself with an unremitting and unsparing intensity as to its own nature and singularity. We know too that this leads thinking in a circle, by leading art back to the expression of its own conditions. The work of art thus epitomizes an autonomous, reflexive, and so self-epitomizing world.¹⁸

But reflexivity today is cheap. I am tempted to say, “It’s free.” Hence to the extent that it does so, the work of art is then both exceptional and exemplary in what we can call the epoch of social systems. It is exceptional in its autonomous relation to, as they say, the “outside” world. It is exemplary in that it provides the very model of the autonomization of that world, its stand-alone, internalized, and demarcated character.¹⁹ In this way, the artwork not merely makes the world appear in the world, but too unceasingly marks that it does so.²⁰ It openly displays its own principle of production. The modern social system and its demarcation zones—like the modern work of art—perform their own unity (see part II).²¹

The artwork stages what it does, and, in doing so, enacts what it shows. Staging and acting (as in motion pictures) oscillate, each in turn interrupting and taking the place of the other. This resembles a magic trick, a self-exposed one: “There is no reality if one cannot ask about there being one.”²² The self-exposition is part of the routine, undoing in effect the privilege routinely accorded to reflexivity. Yet the routinization of disenchantment has (with apologies to Weber) its own charisma. The self-exposed trick requires, for its analysis, less an archaeology of knowledge than, as it were, an archaeology of knowingness. It is necessary then to look at the aesthetic and social function of these routines. To look not least, for example, at the social function of one of the practical working models of what the microsociologist Erving Goffman calls “our indoor social life”: the practical joke (see part IV).

This self-staging opens to view the paradoxical status of the *sui generis* artwork in the company of contemporary social systems: modeling each other, they produce a reality in suspense. But—and crucially—this means

that the systemic, reciprocal, and repercussive character of action in the official world then poses a basic difficulty of interpretation and perception, and so of aesthetics (as a science of the a prioris of perception).

That difficulty may be framed in these terms. The reflexive character of the demarcation zones that make up the official world has a singular, and peculiar, independence from, or even indifference to, aesthetic and philosophical expressions of the theory of reflection. Reflexivity without interiority, and operating on its own. That adapts, in effect, the most basic and rudimentary lesson of cybernetics—that reflexivity is a property of matter, not a privilege of human cognition—and applies it to itself.²³

That generalization of reflection is only part of the difficulty. A reflexivity without interiority means this: an externalized reflexivity that posits a coming together, or assembly, of individuals outside themselves. The American novelist Theodore Dreiser traced it early on, in his first novel, *Sister Carrie* (1900). This estranged or extraverted reflection consists in “little audible links, chaining together great inaudible feelings or purposes”: like the links of a chain letter or the phatic (channel-checking) function of an incessant twittering.

It is necessary to reconsider the significance of this compulsive exteriority of purposes and feelings. The most ordinary exercise of continuous commentary is visible not least in academico-professional circles: the semi-auditory clattering of thousands of keyboards set in motion, across the academic archipelago of lectures and seminars, by a contagious, self-promotional stenographic fervor. Twitters sent up like the little paper ribbons of writing tied to the latticework outside Shinto shrines, and some Zen temples, in Japan—appeals sent up to the great outside.²⁴ (It may be possible to see the rotational system of the academic conference—the extreme narrowness of professional citation circles, its self-repeating imperatives, its papers and name-tags—as the professional rezoning of a reincarnative form of life, via practices of compulsory, or compulsive, self-boosterism.)

A renewed ascetics of self-boosterism has emerged, one designed for the upwardly, if not exactly the vertically, mobile. Its ego-technic devices—rechristened social media—realign ascetic practices of the self to a self-promotional zeal. This pristine form of professionalism has affinities with the life-counseling industry that burgeoned in the mid-twentieth-century United States. It has affinities (it will be seen) with movements like Scientology and its streamlined corporatist spin-offs (with a wide following among corporate middle-managerial types open to, as one of these programs describes it, “Miracles Around Money”). The Weberian work ethic redesigned for self-designers is a fundamental attribute of the realized official world, an ongoing

refashioning of ascetic practices of vertical mobility for calisthenics in upward mobility. (Yet the new asceticism—no pain, no gain, in repeated sets—retains a spiritual residue of devotionism, in the form of an exteriorized and impersonal self-devotion. Or, as my solar cult fitness center Equinox puts it, “It’s Not Fitness, It’s Life.” I will return to what “it” is.) Self-boosterism is a formal property of an autotropic and self-stimulative world. This type of world is one not merely in a continual state of suspense—the milieu of “men in space,” to borrow the title of Tom McCarthy’s first novel—but in stricto sensu self-suspended. (Superman, it may be recalled, did not at first fly; he leaped.)

These circuits are, among many others, versions of the stranger-intimacies of contemporary social systems, and the feelings and purposes incited and carried by their ego-technic media. This in turn enters into the collective autism that Sartre, describing the function of seriality in modern society, called the practico-inert.²⁵

The presupposition of exteriority is crucial here. That is the case not merely because any immune system, from moment to moment—acting in a world of effects—is perpetually marking the distinction between what it is and what is external to it, and so perpetually attuned to news from the outside.²⁶ It might be said then that, stated simply, the official world does not have a boundary; it is a boundary. Or, put differently, a system needs a limit. The reflex question then, “What is ‘outside’ the official world?” is the question that it, from moment to moment to moment, puts to itself.

Its operations consist in renewing, recording, filing, retrieving, reenacting it. The intramuralized world knows, that is, that it has another side, an outside, and must reckon with this paradox at every moment. As in the extremely formal conditions in the playing out of a game, it is necessary to frame, demarcate, and report it—and in this sense see through it and reflect on it—in order to play the game, and to mark its distinction from the world that it, at the very same time, models.²⁷

Here appears one of the great paradoxes in what the microsociologist Erving Goffman calls (in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*) our “indoor social life” and its reenactive institutions. The paradox is this: that the strict internality of self-organizing systems allows for, or requires, the objective exteriorization of act and value. The second is the paradoxical function of the first. This is, in sum, the externalization of action, and the exteriorization of valuation, that marks the intramural or enclaved form of social-systemic operations. That externalization of act and value extends from its initial trial period, utilitarianism, around 1800. It is generalized through the formalization practices, and so application, of the principles of scientific or systemic

management and the control revolution, around 1900. It disseminates across the social field, via second-order systems theory and practice, from the mid-twentieth century forward. The expansion and realization of its action zones is one marker of the transition from a modern age (which knows this) and a modern world (which enacts it, controlling its own climate). It includes, among its many presentation media, the social-semantic function of the novel and its popular genre forms—not least, it will be seen, the forms and practices of the suspense novel.

Suspendedness

My literary examples are drawn in larger part from the “suspense” mode and its autogenic, self-stressed, and suspended worlds. Suspense as world and as worldview: its serial reenactments, compulsive mobilities, and lethal but reincarnative drives. My interest, however, is less in the genre than in the reenactive practices it generically models and presupposes, and puts in perpetual, and turbulent, motion.

The form of the suspense novel becomes in our time a self-supporting argument for these autotropic processes, and for staging the protocols, practices, and spaces of the official world. Suspense fiction is the voice of this autogenic, self-stressed, and suspended state at its purest. It is a genre premised on a psychosemantics that we might call the mood of systems. That is, if we bear in mind—given the segmented differentiation of the disparate systems that make up a multiverse world—that (as Emerson expressed it) “our moods do not believe in each other.”²⁸

Self-stress, compulsive mobility, the ascetics of projective externalization, and the aesthetics of exploding persons and things: these are the modal forms of the daily planet today and indicators of the violence it induces and subjects itself to. This is why it becomes plausible to see the exigencies of an overdeveloped and overcommunicative, and so a doomed, planet to be treatable as mood disorders. Say, melancholia in Lars von Trier; or recreational psychopathy in J. G. Ballard’s fiction; or fugue in Ballard’s brilliant reenactor, Tom McCarthy; or necronautical fury in the catastrophic-modernization novels of the Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima; or, all of these, in the apprehensively violent and autistic Cold War novels of the American suspense writer Patricia Highsmith.

The suspense novel stages “precarious life”—the phrase is from Highsmith’s first novel, *Strangers on a Train*. Suspense fiction, that is, erects stages for the countless secondary worlds, the reflexive action-and-reaction zones, that make up the official world. Its performative dimension is autotropic

violence: self-induced, serial, and reenactive. This is a Cold War form of violence suspended in its premonition and induced in its preemption. Its demarcation zones everywhere operate under what Highsmith calls “the weight of officialism.” Suspendedness is its primary aesthetic category. It is not for nothing that the great dream of Guy Haines, the architect turned killer in *Strangers*, is to build a white suspension bridge. It is, we are meant to see, a bridge to nowhere: a structure held in place and supported by its own tensions, and nothing else.

For this reason, Highsmith’s pathographies of the official world will serve as something of a throughput, albeit an intermittent one, in these chapters. Highsmith’s work is a border case, but so a border-delineating one: a way of drawing the chalk-white outlines of the reenactment zones that make up the operations of an official world.

The Human Pyramid

Suspendedness and its practices then. Consider this moment in Highsmith’s best-known novel, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. The novel’s action pivots on the observation of a “game.” That game involves the body-to-body building of a “human pyramid” and it is this scene that stimulates Tom’s first killing (the first in a series, setting off a series of suspense novels).

Tom watched with interest as a human pyramid was building, feet braced on bulging thighs, hands gripping forearms. He could hear their “Allez!” and their “Un-deux!” . . . “Look!” Tom said. “There goes the top!” He stood still to watch the smallest one, a boy of about seventeen, as he was boosted to the shoulders of the centre man in the three top men. He stood poised, his arms open, as if receiving applause. “Bravo!” Tom shouted.

Tom looked at Dickie. Dickie was looking at a couple of men sitting near by on the beach.

“Ten thousand saw I at a glance, nodding their heads in sprightly dance,” Dickie said sourly to Tom.²⁹

The human pyramid—as a game, a spectacle, and a form—is a living diagram, no doubt one both timeless and timely. It has here a precise meaning. It is—via a geometry of bodies akin to pornographic action—a paradigm of a modern social order or, more exactly, the perception of that order in sensuous terms.³⁰

The pyramid involves, above all, a shift from person to position, and their exact correlation—again, a defining principle of the second modernity. Here one sees the arranged and stacked cubicles of individuals, sorted into the

functions that make them up, interlocked to form the parts of a self-braced whole. This is the thrilled spectacle of persons as the effect of mechanic or formal assemblages, segmented, specialized, collated, each one in position in that its position defines what it is.

The administrative a priori is reenacted in game form. The office building—the skyscraper—evokes (as Rem Koolhaas observes, in *Delirious New York*) stacks of money.³¹ It evokes too (as C. Wright Mills observes, in “White Collar”) stacks of files: “Each office within the skyscraper is a segment of the enormous file.”³² The stacked pyramidal form here also, in the unfolding of this passage, eroticizes a failure of self-difference, in the aggregate, as a failure of sexual difference. (This makes for a series of substitutions—propped on the schoolboy quotation from Wordsworth’s “Daffodils”—such that that numerous self-sameness ignites the charge of sex-sameness.) It is, in short, impossible to consider excitation in Highsmith, among others, apart from her modeling of a sociality premised on the performative principles of action in the systems epoch. And impossible to consider that systems epoch in turn apart from its achievement of self-conditioned and self-evaluated form and its self-observed observation.

A metastasized officialism. It may be, as Adorno put it, that the system is the belly-turned-mind. Yet one finds here something like the reverse side, the somatization of the system. It is a model, an exercise, a performance, and a worldview instrument. Its premise: autogenic stress as a form of life.

The suspense novel—the form of the human pyramid is the very model of suspense, the suspension of bodies in the name of some superior form—stages that suspense. It provides a narrative of ungovernable copying and the self-incited, physical thrill of risk taking and serial games of self-endangerment. It is not merely that Tom is everywhere “still pretending, uncontrollably.”³³ The novel does the same. Ripley’s games—in the border zones of bodily controllability and its panic/thrill—are then the formal conditions for novel reading and analogues of it: these forms of copying are copied into each other.

The analogues at work in moments such as these are technologies of auto-stimulation. Their internalized character makes it possible for the space of the game, the scene of the crime, and the form of the work of art to refer back to each other in circular fashion—and so to provide, as it were, the conditions for the continuous rotation of the elements of a self-induced world.

That presupposes the rotary system of modern, systematically-managed economic processes—and their transfer into aesthetic terms. (Consider the art world’s turn to process and performance over production and objectiv-

ism.) Again and again, in suspense art, everything solid melts into air. But the stage for the autonomous presentation of weightlessness in the shape of expert performance is the logic both of the human pyramid and of “men in space”: in the refined air of a self-conditioned world. (It is the logic of reincarnation stories that, for example, tie together, across great divides, recent films like *Gravity* and *The Master*, or recent novels, it will be seen, like Max Brooks’s *World War Z* and McCarthy’s *Remainder*.)

Here I ask you to attend to one further element in the spectacle of the human pyramid and the worldview it installs. “They must be professionals,” the compulsively imitative and autogenically talented Tom Ripley observes of the acrobats. Yet this is a professionalism that, in its system-immanent terms, looks as hyperproductive, and as uselessly self-referential, as the formation of improbable geometric figures out of acrobatic bodies on a beach.³⁴

We might see this form of professionalism as the realization or bitter end of the spirit of rationalization. Weber, we recall, in “Science as Profession [Vocation]” (*Wissenschaft als Beruf*) described the academic vocation in terms of a systemic blindness to all that is outside. He traced, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the more general and ultimate outcome of this unremitting and blindly internalized activity: its ultimate refinement to, purely and simply, and whatever its ends, “the irrational sense of having done one’s job well.”³⁵

Or, as Robert Ludlum puts it in his suspense novel, *The Bourne Identity*, describing the secret agent and perpetually reborn killer Bourne’s attempts at self-description and self-identification: “It was not professional, and if he had learned anything about himself during the past forty-eight hours it was that he *was* a professional. Of what he had no idea, but the status was not debatable.”³⁶

Disinhibition Training

At this point we might bear in mind that a discipline is also a practice, an immune system, an exercise, a personal training, an asceticism, a course of life that is not exactly a curriculum vitae. A form of life for people with plans, or at least planners. Here is another snapshot of what, via the suspense novel, this irrational discipline in having done one’s job well looks like, in the planetary transition from the ascetics of vertical mobility (transcendence) to that of upward mobility (professionalism).

Robert Ludlum’s *The Bourne Identity*—I will assume you either read the novel or saw the movie—is a suspense story shot through with the energy vitalisms of the global age: recreational psychopathy, state-of-the-art anthropotechnics, and real-sounding neuroscience—along with the performance



Figure 1.2. The Sea of Moods: Suspense as Aesthetic Principle (*The Bourne Identity*, dir. Doug Liman, 2002).



Figure 1.3. The Mood of Systems: Scientology in Action (*The Master*, dir. Paul Thomas Anderson, 2013).

art of exploding things. A suspended world and its acrobatics: with the aesthetics of autogenic stress as a world principle.

Here are two passages from the very start of the novel *The Bourne Identity* (with my italics), in which its aesthetics and its technics meet and fuse:

The trawler plunged into the angry swells of the dark, furious sea like an awkward animal trying desperately to break out of an impenetrable swamp. The waves rose to goliathan heights, crashing into the hull with the power of raw tonnage; the white sprays caught in the night sky cascaded downward over the deck under the force of the night wind. Everywhere there were the sounds of inanimate pain; wood straining against wood, ropes twisting, stretched to the breaking point. The animal was dying.

He felt these things, acknowledging his own panic as he felt them. He could see his own body turning and twisting, arms and feet working frantically against the pressures of the whirlpool. He could feel, think, see, perceive panic and struggle—yet strangely there was peace. It was the calm of the observer, the uninvolved observer, separated from the events. . . . Then another form of panic spread through him. . . . It would happen any second now; he was not sure what it was, but it would happen. . . . It happened. The explosion was massive. . . . Whatever it was, he had won. It happened again. And again.

This is not exactly an allegory of the furious flows of traffic, bodies, communications, money. Nor that inner experience externalized. It is the inner experience of exteriority: an ego-technical program that combines projected pain and psychodispassionate management via its observation. (This is what Scientology programs call “exteriorization”: the disinvolved self-observer as “an aware of awareness unit that functions independently of the physical body.” And this suspense novel, among others, is, we will see, decidedly scientological in orientation.) Here what “it” is is what explodes, like Bourne himself. Hence the compulsive mobilities of the novel, its rapidly successive seascapes and landscapes and cityscapes, its violent eruptions, are at the same time the bioscape of Bourne’s impossibly and repeatedly trained and torn and reborn body.³⁷

Self-Boosterism as Worldview: Paperback Science

These are in effect reincarnation exercises: training, an ascetic practice, in repetitive self-annihilation in the service of serial self-projection. Reincarnative—but in the sense that vertical mobility (enlightenment) yields to upward mobility (professionalism), and the spiritual guide is replaced by the life-counseling industry and the personal trainer. (The direct analogues here are Scientology and its spin-offs and the related reprogramming techniques of Cold War experimental neuroscience, on both military and consumption-incitation fronts.)

The Bourne novels and films are violent thought experiments in recovering, or cognitive-mapping, interior states from the perception of external acts and their effects. The observer of Bourne’s actions, in the novel or in the film version, is always a step or two behind in perceiving and processing what he senses and acts on. But so is he, as his effect on the world searches for its cause. He is literally self-taught: this is autodidactic neuroscience. Paperback scientology. It is in part a lesson in understanding media and



Figure 1.4. The Crystal World: “The Pristine Culture of Capitalism” (*The Bourne Identity*, dir. Doug Liman, 2002).

information flows or floods, the supercommodity of information, data floods on the high seas, as a sea of extroverted moods: the great transformation of substance into flow in worldwide communications, yes, but something more exact and immediate too.³⁸

These personal training regimens combine “massive shocks” and “instruments of hysteria”: an ascetic discipline that is a relentless training in self-disinhibition. That includes a series of what Ludlum calls “exercises”: “verbal exercises,” strength and endurance exercises, and, in effect, worldview exercises.

Central here are exercises in self-stressing and its observation. Or, as Bourne’s personal trainer puts it: “We’re combining two stresses. . . . Whenever you observe a stress situation and you have the time, do your damndest to project yourself into it.” This is the idiom of the life-counseling industry and its practices: the turning of stress to self-persuasive activity, via observation and alert time management, and its re-stressing. It is the idiom of an informalized bureaucratic—or, better, bureaucratish—style, one readapted for the personal training of decidedly professional types.

This is then the hyperactivity of the official world—its ceaseless flows of capital, traffic, information, and bodies—as the lurid seascape of the thriller. (One might instance, in the wake of passages like this opening one, of the resurgent interest in “the weird” now—lurid Lovecraftian horror, for example, China Miéville’s—as a rival genre of the global age, albeit presented as its alternative.) Here too something more: an immersion in the destructive element, via a program of systematic exposure, auditing, and self-clearing. These are the observation and reenactment zones, the solicited stress situations, the accelerative violence that defines such spaces and reincarnates



Figure 1.5. “The Reunification of the World through Money” (*The Bourne Identity*, dir. Doug Liman, 2002).

its reborn actors. Reenactment practices are adjusted for the conversion of what Foucault called “the care of the self” to a literalized self-boosterism. That amounts to the reprogramming of suspense as an ego-technic medium of self-production: a neon technology of autogenesis.³⁹

This is a professional process indifferent to what it processes. There is a fusion of extreme formality and extreme violence, and that fusion enacts and shows an indifference to all but its own ends. It posits a systemic blindness to all but the irrational focus on an undebatably professional job well done. Suspense fiction thus provides a way of modeling an autotropic world—and field-tests, in its strict genre-fictionality, the place of the autonomous artwork in it.

Isotopias

Consider these practice zones from a different angle. If a modern society continuously stages its own conditions, that means it erects countless stages for self-referential presentation and autonomous performance. Let me outline what these staging practices look like and how they work.

The practice zone is neither a utopia nor (in the sense that Foucault gave to the term) a heterotopia: neither a no-place nor an alternative- or other-place. It is instead an isotopia: a self-conditioned reenactment space, among a proliferation of synonymous but formally demarcated spaces.⁴⁰ These make up a strangely functional continuum of self-compelling reenactment sites.

The space of the game, the scene of the crime, and the form of the work of art are today (I've suggested) the ideal-typical models of these reenactment zones. These spaces incorporate technologies that shift, moment to moment, from the backdrop to the stage and back again. They indicate the way in which the official world is not exactly the designation of a space but a way of designating spaces: positions, lines, sites, zones, communication routes, routines, impasses, and bypasses. It is a self-designating way of functioning as a function. So it has its epitomic places—the office, for example. But the office, we know, is not one place among others: stage and backstage at once, it's a switchboard of the social.

The formal dimension of these systems-internal places is crucial. Take, for example, the novelist Henry James's prescient diagnosis of one such isotopia: what he calls, around 1900, the emergence of "the amazing hotel-world." The hotel-world performs what James describes as a triumph of systematic managerialism: "ingenuous joy below and consummate management above." At once superfluous and autonomous, it is a "social order in positively stable equilibrium." Operating "by laws of [its] own," it is a "complete scheme of life," absolutely a "fit to its conditions" and so in "perfect adequacy to itself." The dedifferentiation of private and public life that is its premise expresses "a social indeed positively an aesthetic ideal." Autonomy, self-reference, internality: an aesthetic ideal on its own.⁴¹

What James recognizes in a flash is the specter of what systems theorists might call death by dedifferentiation: the death of the self-distinction of the work of art which, from then on, reenters the artwork as its own theme. Yet what for James centers the crisis of the artwork in the epoch of social systems, and recasts the immanent terms of its autonomy as a "law unto itself," is the "promiscuous" spreading of these quarantine spaces.

What above all makes the hotel-world "at this supreme pitch" a copy of a social and an aesthetic ideal is the manner in which it becomes a "synonym for civilization." This is for James the real "effect of violence in the whole communication": the achievement, or promiscuous spreading, of synonymy across social scenes, the "fruit bearing action of the American example" generalized "all the world over." The basic achievement and so the real crisis, represented by the hotel-world, is the emergence and spreading of synonymous conditions across differentiated and thus comparable institutions. The hotel is a crystal palace in a crystallizing world.

Siegfried Kracauer, writing two decades after James, extends the analysis, in his remarkable essay on the hotel lobby, and, in doing so, brings it into more proximate relation to our concerns. Here Kracauer pointedly quotes

a passage from a detective novel. That's because the hotel lobby becomes, in the modern form of that genre, the counterpart of the scene of the crime. It is a space of suspended action—a space of promiscuity, stranger intimacy, and violence held in abeyance. It is a space of a synthetic civility: what Goffman will call “civil inattention” as the “surface character of public order.”⁴²

The scene of the crime and the hotel lobby are in effect counterpart administrative-managerial zones. In the self-depicting terms of the detective story: “once again it is confirmed that a large hotel is a world unto itself and that this world is like the rest of the larger world.” In this way, it becomes possible, for Kracauer, to locate the aesthetic purposiveness without purpose that would seek and find itself in the hotel-world. It is a world unto itself, but to the very extent that it is so, a world like the rest of a scalable world. This is the crystallized space of repetitive and reenactive motion in what James elsewhere in *The American Scene* calls the extraordinary American “rotary system” of synonymous productions. That rotational system—premised on the continuous oscillation of act and representation—defines systematic management in the workplace.⁴³ But it defines too the sites that repeat it, in unofficial or recreational or game form. And it shapes or pressures the performativity of the work of art substituting process for product. As Kracauer expresses it, “the aesthetic that has become an end in itself pulls up its own roots.” And the aesthetic pulling itself up by its own roots may then transplant itself anywhere. It makes possible what may be described as the autonomization of everything (see part V).

Take the general staging areas for reenactment that make up these isotopias. These are hyperproductive regions of compulsive motion. But they are also then iconic stations of suspended animation: at once hyperactive and inertial—like the human pyramid, a crystalized action frozen in the moment.

The academic discipline, and its rotational conference circuits, would be one working model of that. (Barbarism, we know, begins at home.) Parking structures—in the union of compulsive motion and suspended animation—another. Their correlation is one of the microsociologist Goffman's subjects, and it is a central fixation of the novelist J. G. Ballard. Ballard, an author “obsessed by car parks,” is one of the great cartographers of the crystal worlds, concrete islands, high-rises, gated microclimates, no-go areas, and vast office assemblages of the late twentieth century, and their violence-pupation. There are scores of references to car parks in *Super-Cannes*, almost as many in the two other volumes (*Cocaine Nights*, *Millennium People*) of his late trilogy on situationist officialism and its internally solicited violence,

from weekend fascism to corporate-recreational psychopathy. Airports, hotel lobbies, unemployment offices, shopping malls, motorways, laboratories, the proliferation of double white transit lines, yellow police tape, and “the long-term car park.” *Super-Cannes*: “I thought you were writing a social history of the car park. I should. It’s like Los Angeles, the car parks tend to find you, wherever you are.”⁴⁴

Here one finds too the coupling of the practico-inert—a rotational and reenactment system—and the incitations to violence that everywhere enter into Ballard’s demarcation zones and atrocity exhibitions: “The city was a vast and stationary carousel, forever boarded by millions of would-be passengers who took their seats, waited and then dismounted. I thought of the bomb cutting through another temple of enlightenment, silencing the endless murmur of cafeteria conversation. Despite myself, I felt a surge of excitement and complicity.”⁴⁵ This is the setting for the tanned surrealists in transit through Ballard’s acceleratively lethal reenactment spaces, the outmoded space explorers overexposed to “news from the sun.”⁴⁶ The stationary carousel emerges as an icon of the official world. The carousel is already, for Patricia Highsmith, in her first novel, *Strangers on a Train* (1950)—and even more emphatically in Hitchcock’s film version of it (1951)—the working model of this inertial motion and for the irrational, self-induced violence that goes with it.⁴⁷ This is the rotary form of an official world intent on its own ends.

Highsmith’s Pathographies

Patricia Highsmith’s work epitomizes the official world. It is transfixed by the forms of violence and forms of art proper to such a world. It starkly outlines its overlit zones of action and reenactment. The relentlessly brilliant, and relentlessly narrow-cast, stagings of an autotropic order of things makes for the “strange air of captivity,” the “precarious life,” and the “flavour of the unearthly”—I take all three phrases from *Strangers on a Train* (the first novel Highsmith published under her own name)—that define an official world, and draw white boundary lines along its edges.

Highsmith’s novels and stories are fixated on the invading realities of species life on the daily planet—albeit the life of a species apparently intent on putting an end to itself, and doing so, as Highsmith puts it, “under the weight of officialism.” Highsmith’s fascination, not unlike J. G. Ballard’s, but generically very different, is the form of self-compelling violence in what Ballard calls “a crystal world” and what Highsmith calls “a world like an isin-glass ball”: a “glass cell.”⁴⁸

One of the staging areas of the official world is news from the outside. The primacy of the outside, as Peter Sloterdijk expresses it, “provides the

axiom of the human sciences.”⁴⁹ The great outside is its object. But this is subjected to a principle of interiority. The central drive of the official world is “to transpose the outside world into a magical immanence.”⁵⁰ If a self-reporting world depends on reports on the outside, it depends not least on what the philosopher of science Thomas Nagel calls “the magical flavor of popular presentations of fundamental scientific discoveries.”⁵¹ The deliberately overanimated quality of a range of popular adaptations of science for humanities types enters into, and shapes, this magicked situation (and forms no doubt part of its charisma).⁵² The allure of the great outside takes on administrative-institutional form. The refined air of these staging arenas of social life is the state of the contemporary tendency “to make nature and culture jointly into indoors affairs.”⁵³

This is the indoors climate of Highsmith’s suspense fiction. “The name ‘Patricia Highsmith,’” for Slavoj Žižek, “designates a sacred territory: she is the One whose place among writers is that which Spinoza held for Gilles Deleuze (a ‘Christ among philosophers’).” That territory is the self-stressed official world and its primary reenactment spaces: the scene of the crime, the space of the game, and the form of the work of art. Each designates the other, in the continuous rotation of a daily planet. These small worlds are, it turns out, scale models—diverse practice systems—of the systems epoch, but at the same time working models in it. They are not analogies to it, but analogues of it. They are, as it were, scale models of the modern social system, which is then, in effect, a life-size model of itself.

For these reasons, if Highsmith’s work is the strange attractor of these pages, my primary attention is to what that work epitomizes and makes graphic and perspicuous. The intent, in part via the medium of Highsmith’s suspense fiction, is to delineate the constituents of an official world. The objective in doing so is, step by step, to cast that world in relief, or to recast it in the presence of alternative, or warring, or ending worlds.

The premise of this book then is that the official world is realized in its ongoing description of its own conditions, which it then applies to itself. But the redescription of the process must then take that into account. Reflexivity, we know, is a defining attribute of modernity (a “reflexive modernity”). This means that the traps of autodescription are unavoidable in accounting for this type of society. Reflexivity or self-reference is not—to adapt Max Weber’s way of expressing it—a streetcar one can step off from at the next corner if one does not like where it is going. It is not as if one were granted a legal self-exemption from the general condition one describes.

The traps of autodescription are unavoidable, but they are also nonlethal. Self-reference is not exactly the opposite of reference: it is a form of reference.

For this reason, there is more than a little melodrama in the recent return to reference from self-reference—for example, in a recent “speculative realism,” the call of the wild, or at least, the weird, and to “the great outdoors” or “the outside world”—to the world as it looks without us. At the same time, there is no doubt a real fatigue with self-reference. The sense of a *Leerlaufen*, or empty running-in-place, and the plangency of zombie deconstruction (the eternal recurrence of its clichés, rotated from topic to topic, post to post). One might say of it what has been said of the city of Hong Kong: it looks like the future but there the future looks old.

No doubt the bending of reference to self-reference is one of the defining attributes of a self-legislative world (see part II). It is a part of the operating system of the official world: a social fact. It is also the defining property of the work of art in the epoch of social systems (see part V). Hence one reason for turning to the artwork—in this case, primarily, the art of fiction—in redescribing this world is that there is a distinct function of fictionality in securing this state of things as matter of fact (see part IV).

Hence, too, in the opening parts of this study, I want to set out some of the landmarks on this terrain. These landmarks include Highsmith’s novels, *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, and the microworlds they model. Such microworlds include the office (the architectural office, for example, in which worlds are drafted and modeled into existence); the theme park (the Kingdom of Fun, a collection of well-demarcated repeating zones—the merry-go-round, the tunnel of love, the shooting gallery, and so on—small worlds after all); the train car, a rotating and repeating place without a place; the game space (which Hitchcock literalizes, in the real-time tennis game, in his film version of *Strangers*); the scene of the crime and the returns to it; and, not least, the artwork.

Games, forensics, and the work of art everywhere indicate each other in Highsmith’s fiction: they are prototypes of a unified and autistic world (see part III). These violent and reflexive zones are fractally self-similar (the emergence of comparable conditions in diverse systems is a defining attribute of modernity). And each, in turn, forms, as Highsmith puts it, “its own world, like a horrible little work of art.”⁵⁴

Stated a bit differently, these are sacrosanct precincts in which “each line, each figure, every angle—the ink itself vibrates with an almost intolerable violence.”⁵⁵ These extremely formal spaces, or suspension zones, of rehearsal and reenactment incarnate the epoch of social systems. They mark the internality, autonomy, self-referentiality, and staged character of, say, the Cold War game worlds of Herman Kahn; or the floodlit interaction spaces of in-